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constituent red, blue and green photographs taken at the same place at the same time: one of street activity, one of urban nature and one of the changing built environment, are overlayed as elements of the landscape which unfolds in time at different paces

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

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Andrew Brown, 2022, Ilford High Road, Entangled Ilford.

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.

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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Stop the clocks: Enabling practitioners and precarity in pandemic time(s)

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The COVID-19 pandemic introduced new tensions and pressures for universities. While students and staff already experienced time pressures in competitive neoliberalised economies, these strains accelerated during the pandemic. The aim of this autoethnography study was to capture the lived experience of eight practitioners working in teaching, leadership and professional practice within the field of enabling education, across six Australian institutions between 2020–2021. The problem of 'time' emerged as a dominant theme. Without adequate time to balance work and life, sustaining personal and collective wellbeing became precarious. This paper engages with 'precarity' (Butler 2004, 2012) as manifested in workplace anxiety, stress and insecurity experienced by enabling education practitioners. It endeavours to tether these lived experiences to the temporalities of the digital neoliberal university (Bennett & Burke, 2018), particularly through Adam's (1995) concept of the inequitable time economy and its disciplining workplace 'machine time' which is always 'running on and out' (Adam 1995, p. 52) at the expense of marginalised workers. Despite such challenges, the researcher/participants emerged passionate about making a difference to the lives of their students, many of whom are from non-traditional and equity backgrounds. The autoethnographic process itself fostered a new sense of solidarity, resilience and agency.

Stop the clocks:
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Keywords: neoliberalism; precarity; enabling; emotional labour; burnout.

Introduction

While the nature of work in the contemporary Australian university has often been precarious at best (Hil 2012, 2015; O'Sullivan, Rahamathulla & Pawar 2020), successive waves of the Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic over the past two years have created new tensions and pressures for the twenty-first century neoliberalised university, particularly within pathway or enabling programs. Charged with democratic ideals of widening participation whilst also cutting costs and generating revenue, these institutions of learning and social mobility have also inadvertently become places of adversity, workplace stress and worker burnout. Perhaps nowhere in the contemporary Australian university has this precariousness and adversity been felt more than on the fringes of the academy where 'underrepresented and unacknowledged' enabling practitioners who 'do not fit into the usual disciplinary communities' (Bennett et al. 2016, p. 217) are working with non-traditional students in alternative pathway programs. For some, these alternative pathways are viewed as recruitment tools (Motta & Bennett 2018) but for those who work at the coalface in this space, philosophies of care, social justice and student flourishing infiltrate every aspect of their work, re-shaping its purpose as a form of resistance to the ideals of neoliberalism (Jones, Olds & Lisciandro 2020). Enabling students too, stand perhaps precariously and vulnerably at the academy's borders, seeking to gain entrance via alternative pathways. Yet it is rarely acknowledged that transitioning large numbers of these students in multiple learning modes through such difficult borderlands requires intensive, and almost limitless, academic and emotional labour. The combined pressures of neoliberalist outputs, academic and emotional labour, and added pressures of planning for constant and evolving pandemic contingencies create often unacknowledged precarity for enabling practitioners that can lead to teacher burnout, as seen in the findings section of this paper. The pressure to reassure, retain and recruit precarious students, while also adapting to the era of constant disruption, is often felt most acutely by the most precarious of workers in the neoliberal university.

Previous relevant papers authored by the Mental Health Special Interest Group (SIG) within the National Association of Enabling Educators Australia (NAEEA) explored the impact of emotional labour load on enabling practitioners and the links to teacher burnout (Crawford et al. 2018; Olds et al. 2018). With the addition of new co-authors from multiple Australian universities, this paper returns again to inquire after the enabling education or pathways practitioner, seeking to understand the nature of their work during pandemic times. It engages with the idea of 'precarity' (Butler 2004, 2012) as manifest in emotions of workplace anxiety, stress and insecurity experienced by enabling education practitioners in the wake of successive waves of pandemic. The paper also links these lived experiences to the temporalities of the digital neoliberal university (Bennett & Burke 2018), particularly through Adam's (1995) theories on the inequitable and gendered time economy. While Western societies have long been dependent upon, and preoccupied with, the time efficiency, time management and time discipline demanded by (post)industrial capitalist production (Adam 1995; Harvey 1990), workplace clock-time was recently transformed by the pandemic context, particularly for the most precarious workers within contemporary academic capitalism. This paper aims to explore such themes through collective autoethnography, a qualitative method that may be seen as a form of resistance to neoliberalism and a means to capture the rich nuance of eight enabling practitioners working in six institutions across Australia during 2020 and 2021. Alongside other researchers we feel the burden, a psychological malaise from 'the acceleration of our lived experience caused by neoliberalism' (Sugarman & Thrift 2017, p. 808). In this sped up world without limit (Hassan 2009) the collective autoethnography became one strategy for resisting teacher burnout and building collective resilience by clearing the emotional field, validating experience, assisting in the reframing of our experience, and returning us to community.

Moreover, we found that emotions such as fear, frustration, anxiety and guilt can, and should, be discussed freely within our community of practitioners (not papered over) and that such emotional challenges are better addressed as a supportive collective, rather than isolated individuals. Most valuably, this cross-institutional research collaboration taught us to question the systems under which we operate, to explore our ways of being, and to set human limits in the often limitless space of workplace machine time (Adam 1995, p. 52). In this paper we start our discussion with a review of the precarious nature of work within the modern neoliberal university, followed by the compounded precarity caused by a global pandemic and the impact on practitioners, as the historical and socio-cultural context for the current study.

Literature review

Neoliberalism and precarity in the modern university
Neoliberalist policy settings have broadly impacted Western higher education since the 1980s; from freedom to conformity; differentiated to standardised; autonomous to automated. Krejsler writes of the 'the modernizing machine' that 'promulgates a radically different agenda for how universities and academic subjectivities can be conceptualized and enacted' (2013, p. 1157); an agenda in stark contrast to the Humboltian university borne from *Wilhelm von Humboldt's* research-led university, the dominant university model for democratic education in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Since the 1990s, socio-political shifts toward corporate academic capitalism, or 'Universities Inc' (Symes & Hopkins 1994), have prioritised image management and economic efficiency, thus throwing universities, and the knowledge workers within them, into competition for increasingly scarce resources. The postmodern push to work perpetually faster and harder as well as smarter, has brought a new temporality or experience of time which was famously termed postmodern 'time-space' compression, or the socio-cultural product of both globalisation and advanced capitalism. Essentially, neoliberalism's intense pursuit of and preoccupation with intertwined cultures (and cults) of speed, growth and information technology compresses both time and space in the rush to maximise the frequency of economic outputs or service the maximum number of consumers.

The neoliberal ethos that creates a 'precarious academic life … generates a heightened sense of instability, social isolation, anxiety, expendability, disposability and moral failure in people' (Valero, Jørgensen & Brunila 2019, p. 136). For academics, continued employment is dependent on individual performance matching organisational objectives. Pressure to publish, create research income and improve research impact factors to sustain the university's reputation, precariously materialised as unrealistic academic workloads, less teaching time and less time spent with students. Workload Allocation Models (WAMs) have become tools of the time-space compression. The models beholden academics to a mechanised paradigm (Kenny & Fluck 2017) that equate to staff feeling like they are 'treated as a variable input from which maximum productivity is extracted' (Rea 2016, p.10). Unrealistic measures of time are prescribed to tasks based on the perceived economic value, rather than defined by the length of time that is realistically required to satisfactorily complete the task. As Sugarman and Thrift remark, 'in the well-known Marxian analysis, when time is money, the capitalist commodification of labour necessitates that to be continuously competitive, production must increasingly be intensified in a time frame that remains the same' (2017, p. 810). Workload models are behaviour shaping tools that direct academics to intensify output and reduce hours to meet the university's bottom-line rather than engage, create and innovate, or add to their disciplinary cannon. The mechanisms of neoliberalism in universities create temporal, corrosive norms that impact academics materially, psychologically and physically (Shahjahan 2020). In summary, neoliberalism has infiltrated our universities, commodifying education (Kenny & Fluck 2017) and creating a precarious work environment.

Precarity, pandemic times and burnout

Harvey (1990, 2005) could not have predicted the new pressures and problems of globalisation and time-space compression brought by a worldwide pandemic. Nor could he have predicted how contemporary pandemic cultures of increased risk, anxiety, stress and uncertainty would compound existing inequities, competition and time pressures within neoliberalised academic workplaces. During the pandemic, universities had no choice but to close their physical doors to comply with government-mandated snap lockdowns and physical distancing requirements. All domestic and international travel ended abruptly, and all learning was swiftly relocated online. Labelled as a 'fiscal crisis', Australian universities reeled at the loss of income when international students ceased enrolling (Peters et al. 2020, p. 36). This, among other financial challenges and limited support from the Government, resulted in further restructures and redundancies. The media reported job losses of 17,000 in the sector but the National Tertiary Education Union advise it is closer to 40,000 (Littleton & Stanford 2021).

Many were optimistic that the pandemic would be an opportunity to reimagine higher education and move away from a dominant neoliberal discourse (Peters et al. 2020), yet it is argued that this discourse was only strengthened in Australia (Larsen & Emmett 2023) and abroad (Kınıkoğlu & Can 2021). Computer-based technologies, neoliberalism's 'tools of capital acceleration', took centre stage in academic life and the relevance of 'clock-time' was even further degraded in favour of a more limitless 'network time' (Sugarman & Thrift 2017, p. 812). Universities implemented tighter WAMs for remaining staff and provided little time allocation for adapting to the online space, despite research indicating online learning materials require triple time to create, and intentionality is vital to reconceptualise student learning needs in the design process (Gloria & Uttal 2020). Blurring of boundaries around 'network time' forced work into the personal space of staff, increased multi-tasking, and quickened and evaporated time. This was compounded further for those working with non-traditional students who typically possess lower levels of digital literacy and digital access (Hopkins 2021).

The pandemic increased precarity for practitioners. Precarity can be understood as 'an ontological condition of vulnerability' (Kınıkoğlu & Can 2021, p. 818). Butler (2004, 2009), who wrote extensively about social precarity, argued that insecurity and precarity is experienced inequitably, with those in less privileged positions most vulnerable. In academia, 'there are degrees and hierarchies of precariousness' (Kınıkoğlu & Can 2021, p. 820), and uncertainties are 'intertwined with social stratifications based on discipline, age, race, and gender' (p. 819). The often low-level and casualised staff who do most of the teaching of non-traditional students in the neoliberalised university may be the new working 'precariat' of the tertiary sector, at risk of time pressure strain to the point of burnout. Hattam and Weiler (2022) referred to these as 'illegitimate' academics; characterised by feelings of separation and invisibility arising from the type of academic work that they undertake. Job insecurity, teaching heavy workloads, the type of knowledges taught (which currently sit outside of the Australian Qualifications Framework), the high emotional labour required, and deficient framings of enabling students under the neoliberal 'dichotomy of excellence/equity' (Hattam and Weiler 2022, p. 3) likely contribute to staff perceptions of being 'lesser' and further illuminates the precarity inherent in this space.

The notions of neoliberalism and precarity may remain abstract, until the connections between these systems and the impact on the humans in the system are clearly illustrated. Emotional regulation theories such as the self-compassion theory describe individuals as moving between three states, threat, drive and soothe (Gilbert 2010). When sensing a threat, an individual will activate drive systems to alleviate threat. Once the threat has dissipated, the soothe system is required to down regulate the nervous system and return the body to a healthier state of

regulation. The state of threat created by constant competition and job insecurity in neoliberalist academia, and further compounded by years of pandemic-related adversity places demands that leave an individual in constant drive (Hammond 2021). Workplace pressure to be always 'on' (ever faster, flexible and adaptable) and 'available' (adopting on-call service-orientations) increasingly puts academics at risk of burnout. This constant taxing, over sustained periods, can limit an individual's ability to return to a psychologically healthy baseline (Bakker, Demerouti & Verbeke 2004) or to re-establish emotional regulation through engaging the soothing system (Hammond 2021). The extra role performance such as the emotional labour required to 'hold' non-traditional and vulnerable students in transitional spaces, places further demand on enabling academics (Crawford et al. 2018). Additionally, and more concerning, enabling educators, motivated by philosophies of social justice and equity (Jones, Olds & Lisciandro 2019) can encounter fractures in their internal meaning making, a kind of moral injury (Smigelsky et al. 2022) when adequate resources are unavailable to deliver a standard that matches their personal values. When Hochschild (1983) first conceptualised 'emotional labour' she perhaps did not anticipate a time when academics, more than the flight attendants they studied, would be so pressured to manage their own negative emotions in stressful situations while at the same time tending to the emotional needs of large numbers of diverse others online.

Offsetting such risks requires not only appropriate recognition of the workplace demands in enabling fields and a reimagining of workload models, but also opportunities to develop psychological capital within the sector (Olds et al. 2018). Writing about such experiences is useful for the individual as a catalyst for reflection and to achieve greater understanding (Jackson, Firtko & Edenborough 2007). It is imperative, therefore, to explore the common patterns of lived experiences of teaching-intensive enabling education practitioners across multiple institutions in the register of (unequal, classed and gendered) temporality.

Methods

According to Ellis (2004), autoethnography is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe a personal experience which can then be analysed and understood in a larger cultural context. It is a subjective, yet meaningful, qualitative approach that can capture rich descriptions of culture (Geertz 1973, p. 10), uncover narrative truths and give voice to previously marginalised stories (Ellis & Bochner 2000). The sharing of personal stories during research such as this can also be therapeutic, lending itself to a purging of burdens providing validation for pain experienced, reducing isolation and creating agency (Ellis, Adams & Bocher 2011). Following Adam (1995, p. 106), who has called for a feminist deconstruction of clock-time tyranny drawing on a 'multitude of unconventional social science sources ranging from people's personal accounts to poetry', the 'evidence' this paper presents derives from collaborative autoethnographic reflection. Autoethnography is a form of resistance against more mainstream qualitative research and attempts 'to disrupt the binary of art and science' (Ellis & Bochner 2000, p. 283). This approach is therefore fitting for a group of enabling researchers who are united by a shared social-justice ethos. A community ethnography provides scope to capture the nuanced crisis that the COVID-19 pandemic precipitated in many academics and to share the experience of a distinct collective of enabling educators. The researchers/participants in this study demonstrate that autoethnographical research can be 'rigorous, theoretical, analytical, emotional, therapeutic, and inclusive of personal and social phenomena' (Ellis, Adams & Bocher 2011, p.283). Following Butler (2004, p. xvii), we have also pushed 'the limits of the sayable' in our field of enabling education to reach a deeper understanding of how we experience emotional, psychological and physical aspects of workplace precarity during (and after) the pandemic or the COVID-19 catalyst for increased stress, uncertainty and illness.

The data for this study was collected by eight of the nine researchers completing the role of dual participant and researcher. Each participant wrote a 1000-word guided reflection in response to a set of questions, as follows:

1. What are the perceived challenges, costs and benefits for practitioners in enabling education during the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. What personal impacts are experienced by staff in this context?
3. How do you manage the impacts of COVID-19 to maintain: a sense of wellbeing; create healthy work-life boundaries; and maintain high standard, quality teaching and support to students?

Reflections were then collected and de-identified, before being collated into a single document. The nature of collaborative autoethnography demands generative and collective discussions to agree upon meaning (Crawford et al. 2018); therefore, the group of researchers met before the thematic analysis to discuss first impressions and commonalities.

The thematic analysis was completed by following the five-phrase approach as outlined by Lisciandro, Jones and Geerlings (2018). In phase one, qualitative responses were classified into categorical data *where appropriate* using NVivo. A word frequency query was run to determine predominate terms, which were then categorised into loose themes. Synonyms for these terms were used to expand the list of terms. The analysis found that the following twenty words were most frequently used: time, teaching, students, support, working, need, home, learning, feel, enabling, online, leave, health, education, program, fear, life, care, teachers, expectations. A number of loose, overarching themes emerged (not in order of prevalence): work-life balance/work environ, the online learning environment, and wellbeing. In phase two, the responses were then re-read for themed terms and coded. During this stage of analysis, the ninth researcher, who had not participated in previous collaborative discussions, was brought on board to analyse the data to reduce bias. In phase three, the coded data was grouped into more refined key themes. The research assistant and researchers mapped and reviewed themes and coding in phase four, and in phase five the themes were named and prevalence defined. Most poignantly, the resulting data emerged as not only as a collection of guided reflections but evocative personal narratives (Ellis, Adams & Bochner 2011) that could reveal substantial meaningful insight or 'bigger stories' (Ricoeur 1984) if a narrative analysis, in particular looking at structural elements, was also performed. Therefore, the themes and a narrative analysis is unpacked below.

Findings and discussion

The increasing time pressures of the digital neoliberal university took centre stage in the autoethnographic reflections of participant researchers in this study. While enabling educators and their students already experienced growing time pressures in competitive neoliberalised economies, these time-space pressures were accelerated as never before for those practitioners primarily responsible for teaching, transitioning and supporting larger numbers of non-traditional students online during the COVID-19 pandemic. When categorised using NVivo, 'time', used 70 times, was the most frequent term after 'teaching'. Time became a unifying strand that wove throughout the reflections. Starkly evident too were a number of commonalties; all reflections provided commentary on the toxic workplace environment created by neoliberalism and the resulting unreasonable workload models which compressed time and impacted on wellbeing. Rich descriptions were provided of the struggle for a work-life balance and the challenges of working in the online space. It is important to note too that all reflections followed a particular narrative arc that journeyed the participant from a place of conflict and despair to resolution and hope. These themes are discussed in more depth below.

Work environ and balancing life

While the corporatisation of education has influenced university work environments since the 1980s, the reflections in this paper suggest that during the pandemic the neoliberal squeeze became tighter and the margins more inequitable within the wider inequitable time economy (Adam 1995) of academic capitalism. Concerns around inflexible and inequitable online teaching from home, its impact on practitioner job precarity and digital surveillance were threaded throughout participant responses, depicting an emotional environment of anxiety, frustration, guilt, pressure and fear. Much of this anxiety was related to a sense of time pressure, running out of time or not enough time in the working day to satisfy the demands of diverse and often contradictory or competing student and management pressures. As Adam (1995, p. 101) observed, the time economy of the rationalised workplace requires all tasks to be completed in the shortest possible time in order to spend the least amount of money on labour. Enabling education, with its humanistic pedagogies of care and support for diverse, non-traditional students, however, does not sit easily alongside this wider economistic demand for increased, digitised, efficiency and productivity. Moreover, wholistic support for equity groups from increasingly diverse backgrounds does not easily translate into the clock-time tyranny of digital academic capitalism. As Adam (1995) observed, in practice the tyranny of clock-time in the workplace often translates into flexibility *of* workers, not flexibility *for* workers due to perpetual time pressures. As our participants observed below, those who cannot keep up, feel a heightened sense of their own precarity (Butler 2004, 2012) in this inequitable system, especially if they have children or elderly parents at home to care for. In keeping with Butler's (2004, p. 32) insights, we found that human emotional vulnerability is distributed differently and unequally within the neoliberalist workplace during times of crisis.

Hawkins, Manzi and Ojeda (2014) eloquently, albeit alarmingly, expressed that neoliberalised academia encourages productive bodies as opposed to nurturing ones. This was reflected in increased and relentless daily time pressures, a limited and scarce resource, and a juggling act for many of the participants who are attending to work and family commitments. So, for many of the practitioners, it was a struggle to coordinate work and attend to family obligations successfully without guilt, because of the tendency 'to be on the hook for fixing problems from when I woke until when I went to bed' (Participant 4). Additionally, 'while there are some time-saving advantages to working from home, the blending of work and personal spaces also makes it easier for work to encroach on personal time and in some cases harder to maintain an appropriate work-life balance' (Participant 3). Participant 3's comment is represented in what Sugarman and Thrift suggest is a 'malaise of acceleration' when networked users – in this case academics – are 'trapped' in a technology-induced conception of time (2017, p. 821). The acceleration for academics occurred due to the need to take all learning and teaching (as well as all meetings and consultations) online quickly, while being confined to the home. Whilst this 'brought a long overdue corporate mainstream acceptance of the benefits of working from home' (Participant 1), it also brought with it an additional pressure of always being available. In this work environment time became limitless, as the expected work hours shifted from bounded, to flexible and interminable, a paradox succinctly stated by Participant 1: 'whilst we enjoyed the flexibility that Covid-19 forced upon us because not having to drive to work, the work-related flexibility ramped up not being able to draw the line between a work-life balance'. Adam (1995, p. 52) also observed that the punishing 'machine time' of (academic) capitalist production is absolutely 'at odds with the rhythms of the body and the "natural" environment' and that this socio-political construction of time also exacerbates gender inequalities.

All the practitioners in this study were female, working either full-time or part-time, performing multiple care giving roles and were required to work long hours, including weekends and weeknights to complete mounting tasks and attend to unrealistic neoliberal deadlines. Borelli et al. (2017) posit that mothers with feelings of work-family guilt often experience conflict between the tasks in the public and private spheres, and this can compound the mental load of everyday life, which is exemplified in Participant 1's reflection that 'the expectations of enabling educators to do more with less also continue to grow and it is mostly female teaching staff who are stuck in the middle and feel the squeeze most acutely'. The work-life pendulum was not well-balanced during the COVID-19 pandemic, with the weight heavily falling on prioritising work commitments over family caregiving. This, Participant 7 found, led to 'more meetings, there were so many more working groups formed, taking more out of us. It meant that any work I did not complete during the day, meant working after dinner'. The split of time and lack of balance resulted in academics becoming fragmented and abbreviated versions of themselves which had a significant impact on wellbeing. As Sugarman and Thrift write 'we also are becoming fragmented, as constitutive features of our personhood – our selfhood, identities, relationships, and the cultures within which we are constituted – become abbreviated, discontinuous, and less coherent under the constraints of time' (2017, p. 818), thus creating 'a huge emotional toll' that made Participant 3 feel 'deeply uncomfortable for being so completely misaligned with my personal values'.

The pandemic added further job precarity in the already uncertain sphere of higher education, and exacerbated feelings of pressure, hopelessness and fear, which as Manathunga and Bottrell suggests lead to 'work-related stress and burnout' (2019, p. 8). Pressure felt by academics of being perpetually 'on' was compounded by the hyper-competitive, resource-scarce and precarious state of academia where colleagues were losing their jobs. Participant 3 expressed that 'there were many redundancies and casual staff were made scarce. Remaining academics were overloaded and yet almost made to feel lucky to still have a job'. A national study undertaken by the Australian Council of Learned Academies, found that non-permanent academic staff highlight 'uncertain job prospect' as the most challenging part of their work (Yoo 2019, p. 92). The personal experience of job precarity was stated by Participant 5 whose 'application for an ongoing continuous position was not approved. The Covid card was played'. Compassion for colleagues furthered the sense of 'grief and loss' (Participant 8) and as expressed by Participant 6: 'My heart goes out to my fellow sessionals and I KNOW that in enabling programs there are a lot of casual staff. At my previous university the enabling program probably had the highest number/ratio of casual staff.'

As the pandemic closed in around higher education, the 'Covid card' was played in such a way that the benefits of working from home – more time with family, away from toxic workplaces, and less driving – were lost. Not only were these enabling academics working longer hours, while the safety of their home space was being eroded, they additionally felt that this work remained hidden from management and fuelled doubts that leadership had that staff were fulfilling their work obligations. The inequality between academic workers who are secure and those who are comparatively precarious (Butler 2004, 2012) was also enacted through strategies of digital and on campus surveillance, regulation, reward and punishment as evident in incidents described by the participants. The 'working from home' model created a need in participants to be visible, as there was a sense that their 'presence' was being surveyed: 'the worst impact is the lack of trust that is communicated by upper management, doubt about academics working to full capacity at home, and surveillance of our foot traffic on campus' (Participant 8). Foucault (1977) writes that the impact of surveillance is 'to induce in the [employee] a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power. It is argued that, while

neoliberalism enacted surveillance through such artifacts as research outputs and metrics, the pandemic introduced a new panoptic layer of self-surveillance and control over the work environment. While neoliberal pressures of competition, workload models, budget constraints and job precarity created pressurised workplaces pre-pandemic (Larsen & Emmett 2023; Kınıkoğlu & Can 2021), the added pressures brought about by further precarity, working from home and surveillance during the pandemic dropped the final veil. All that remained, or so it seemed to the most precarious of workers, was a panoptic hamster wheel of burnt-out enabling academics spinning their wheels to keep their students, their jobs and the university afloat.

Online learning environment

The issue of the online working environment, and the challenge of having to adjust to it relatively quickly once the pandemic hit, also became apparent throughout the autoethnographic reflections. Many reflections lamented the challenge of inadequate time and training when transferring learning online. Participants were given very little notice when asked to adapt their face-to-face classes and activities to online ones, once again something not adequately captured in the mechanised paradigm (Kenny & Fluck 2017) of WAMs, despite research indicating this task is labour intensive and significant training is required to do this effectively (Gloria & Uttal 2020). Participant 3 commented on the challenge of, first of all familiarising herself in a short time frame with the unfamiliar technology of Zoom/Collaborate, and then of being 'perplexed by the sea of silent students who never once turned on their mic or camera'. Additionally, participants mentioned the challenge of engaging and developing a rapport with students in an online context, given that the students are neither physically present with the tutor or each other.

There was a lack of time and knowledge to create 'connected learning' spaces (Jones & Olds 2019, p. 114). The pandemic disallowed time for academics to learn the brave world of online learning, as its own unique teaching and learning space, which requires a specific knowledge of not only enabling but digital pedagogy. As Jones and Olds (2019) suggest, 'the isolation felt by many online students requires more supplementary activities to reduce isolation, create connection and communicate and scaffold outcomes' (p. 115), all which take time and knowledge to create. For those who had not taught in this space before, the move to teaching online revealed the difficulty in creating dynamic spaces where students felt safe to engage and participate. Participant 2 highlighted that many students in online classes chose 'to stay silent and just lurk'; and when listening to a recorded group session she was 'shocked to discover in the play-back that the students were mostly ignoring each other, something I have never seen happen in an actual embodied face to face group on campus where students tend to intuitively build real and supportive relationships among themselves'. These encounters proved demoralising for practitioners, with histories of strong engagement in face-to-face classrooms, adding further to feelings of disempowerment.

Wellbeing

The precarious work environment and lack of life balance created by neoliberalism and further compounded by the pandemic, placed participants in a constant state of threat and drive (Hammond 2021) where 'No one is safe' and this 'became the theme of both work and COVID'. (Participant 1). The surveillance, job insecurity, isolation, time pressures and lack of trust that characterised the work environment during the pandemic heightened this vulnerability and disempowerment, at a cost to staff wellbeing as 'we were scared, down to our very core, of losing hours, losing income or losing our jobs altogether' (Participant 6). This working environment impacted the wellbeing of these enabling educators, which was already at risk in pre-pandemic times (Crawford et al. 2018; Olds et al. 2018).

Practitioners were vulnerable to poor mental, emotional and physical health, as manifested through workplace anxiety, stress and insecurity. Most alarming was the extensive use of words such as exhausted or fatigued. 'Guilt', 'frustrations', 'fear', 'anxiety/anxious', 'worried', 'overwhelm', 'anger', 'uncertainty', 'exhausting' and 'tired, featured extensively and repetitively throughout the reflections. indicating participants were in a state of threat and fatigue (Hammond 2021). One participant stated 'it was all so very physically and emotionally taxing' (Participant 7) and another stated 'my physical and mental health have declined' (Participant 8). According to Maslach, Schaufeli and Leiter's (2001) theory of burnout, exhaustion is a key catalyst and component. Participants commented that the emotional labour required in caring for and supporting vulnerable students impacted their wellbeing, for example Participant 7 shared that 'My own mental health and wellbeing was compromised from hearing their stories and attempts at suicide'. Descriptions of physical impacts included feeling worn out, gaining weight, experiencing 'early menopause' and other physical symptoms such as 'heart-racing', 'a physical churning', being 'tensed up' and 'not able to switch off from work'.

The reflections provide numerous examples of this emotional labour and compromised wellbeing being absorbed and silenced by practitioners for fear of being seen as negative or incompetent, and/or being punished. One participant commented that the endless digital work caused 'headaches and other health problems' that no one was prepared to raise with the university because they knew that job losses were coming. Participant 1 also reflected on the experience of masking negative emotions for fear of retribution:

> Every woman I know well in my workplace has had some experience of feeling overwhelmed, frustrated, angry or resentful but we counsel ourselves and each other to hide it and try to keep smiling. People who are perceived as negative are not wanted in workplaces … if they express their own feelings, feelings of frustration, fear or anger for example, they will certainly pay for it one way or another.

A number of practitioners also mentioned feelings of 'shame' and 'guilt' being leveraged to ensure that demands of work and the job of 'caring' for students continued to take priority over their own wellbeing and the gendered experience of vulnerability and precariousness in this context: 'I felt I had little choice but to prioritise work over family and self-care to meet unrealistic deadlines, rather than to risk being seen as incompetent or unreliable as a woman and a mother in the workplace' (Participant 3). Participant 1 lamented that 'No one wants to hear about the price we pay along the way for putting ourselves and our own needs last'. Grief too was noted, as 'Leadership never acknowledged the grief and loss, and survivors' guilt that was felt by staff' (Participant 8), when colleagues were made redundant.

Alongside compromised wellbeing, the reflections included evidence of coping strategies and soothing systems being engaged. This included instilling 'strong boundaries', leaning on colleagues for support, engaging in physical activity, eating well, spending time in nature and with family and friends, and returning to a belief system that provides existential meaning (Jackson, Firkto & Edinborough 2007). Many noted that writing through the struggle became therapeutic as they were able to capture the nuance of the experience and the externalisation of the pain provided room for reflection. Participant 5 commented that: 'Reflection has enabled me to see the situation from a macro perspective and remind myself of my values.' Through reading the reflections and in discussions as a group, individuals were able to find company in the shared experience and this in turn reduced isolation. Participant 1 noted:

> I have found a great deal of solace and solidarity from joining this group of enabling educator researchers who have a special interest in mental health and have made me feel that I am not alone. This group is one of the most positive things to come out of the COVID19 experience for me and suggests the way forward.

This naming and witnessing are powerful (Ellis, Adams & Bocher 2011). Jackson, Firtko and Edenborough (2007) note that personal resilience is grown through the building of positive and nurturing professional relationships. We found this writing and sharing of our stories and feelings of vulnerability and precarity (emotions heighted during pandemic crisis) also enabled us, as enabling educators, to build a sense of solidarity and security within the group space. If, as Adam (1995) has observed, encounters with illness and death may ironically enable those affected to critically reflect on the value of time, then the pandemic experience might be productive as well as oppressive if it brings forth more conscious reflection on the way precarious practitioners experience clock-time in the neoliberal university.

A narrative arc in personal stories of time and precarity

Narratives can be analysed for common structural elements, and it is the adherence to predictable structures that help locate our truths in 'bigger stories' (Ricoeur 1984). The structural elements present in the personal narratives/reflections in this research followed an affective trajectory, or narrative arc, including staging, progression and cognitive tension (Boyd, Blackburn & Pennebaker 2020). The responses typically began with a setting of scene (staging) '2021 seems a little like ground hog day, but the one where things haven't become so bad that Bill Murray starts trying to end his life' (Participant 2). The reflections then offered multiple descriptions of a rampant neoliberal workplace that limited ways of being (progression) and created or compounded vulnerability and precarity in enabling educators existing on the fringes of the academy during a time of mass layoffs and casualisation (Kınıkoğlu & Can 2021). Participant 5 stated 'I witnessed my co-workers hastily raking through their days in fright.' The cognitive tension was evident in the middle of the reflections where descriptions of individuals adjusting to the new norms created by the pandemic were apparent: 'And there it is, the uncertainty and demand and failure to meet all the changing boundaries and expectations that others set for us' (Participant 2). Then, however the narratives reveal each individual, once having named not just the problem but the emotions created, coming to terms with the cognitive tension. Armed with some understanding of the situation, the researchers then told of being able to turn to exploring ways of remedying the tension. All narratives offered coping and soothing strategies for responding in crisis. Strategies are vital for the borderland, 'illegitimate academics' (Hattam & Weiler 2022) for they offer some control where agency has been previously limited (Olds et al. 2018). Without agency, burnout can occur (Tinni, Pietarinen & Pyhältö 2016). Present too, as the narratives concluded, was a begrudging acceptance that while there is much that these fringe dwelling practitioners (Bennett et al., 2016) could do in these spaces, there is a finite amount that individuals can do, within current limiting university structures, before their wellbeing is affected. Vitally this community of supportive, reflective practitioners provided a place of safety whilst moving through the turmoil and towards acceptance. It is communities of this nature that need to be celebrated and nurtured in the enabling spaces.

The autoethnographical reflections revealed personal meanings of time, or temporality, which reach beyond the even ticking of clock-time, to expose the uneven, gendered experiences of time-space compression made by power disparities within academic capitalism. The richer, deeper, qualitative data of autoethnographic reflection also revealed some inconvenient truths about what happens to the self and self-care in digital spaces where there are seemingly no limits

to information labour and no sense of 'clocking off'. Similarly, these personal stories chart the emotional landscape around a shortage of time to perform as expected in care giving roles at home and work, sometimes resulting in feelings of shame, guilt, fatigue and emotional exhaustion.

Conclusion

It is important to acknowledge that these very personal stories and practitioner insights from qualitative study of a small sample of autoethnographic reflections are limited in scope and are not necessarily true for all enabling educators elsewhere in Australian universities. The autoethnographic nature of this study, however, served to illuminate a number of common challenges facing enabling educators during pandemic times and united a group of practitioners across six Australian institutions, reducing alienation and boosting psychological capital (Olds et al. 2018).

The study also revealed a hidden paradox of the democratised, digital university. While equity and access are core values of the (post)modern university, the academic and emotional labourers who make these values a lived reality in their everyday practice of enabling education are themselves frequently left feeling undervalued, exhausted or 'out of time.' These stories also expose contradictions within the 'caring' cultures of the enabling education sector, which too often overlooks the wellbeing and human fragility of its most vulnerable academic 'care' workers, and the human limits to their (emotional and academic) labour. While an 'ethic of care' is indeed key to supporting successful transitions in enabling pedagogies (Motta & Bennett 2018), it is equally important that this emotional labour does not cost the wellbeing of the care providers who occupy a precarious space within the academic workforce. The hothouse atmosphere of the pandemic years serves, at least, as an illuminating prism through which to view other risks and tensions of the neoliberalised university and perhaps even a trigger for disruption of dominant time-tyranny and the perpetual growth and speed demanded by economistic interpretations of value in Australian universities.

While the time of strict snap lockdowns may be over, the pandemic era and its challenges remain. Moreover, these candid learnings about labour from hard working enabling practitioners on the ground are particularly illuminating about the operation of power in the neoliberal university and the future for its most precarious workers in a time of mass casualisation and mass layoffs. These personal stories also reveal optimism, hope and ongoing commitment to making a difference in the lives of their non-traditional students from underrepresented backgrounds. As with other times of transition and change, there is perhaps some grieving for what is lost (a call to 'stop the clocks') as well as some hope for the future as we move forward through renewed solidarity and collaboration.

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"The sand's going to run out at any minute": A collaborative autoethnography of class, gender and precarity in academia

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Andrew Brown, 2022, Song and Dance, Film Still.

This article contributes to feminist debates that seek to shed light on the politics of the contemporary neoliberal academy, contributing insights into experiences of early career academics on teaching-only contracts. Through collaborative autoethnography it explores configurations and intersections of the temporal with precarity, class and gender. We draw upon experience(s) of navigating academia as early career academics, reflecting on our journeys from doctoral study to and through the academic labour market, from fixed-term precarious contracts through to securing 'permanent' full-time academic contracts. We focus on ways in which temporalities have served as a structuring force in our working and personal lives, shaping experiences of navigating academia on both a micro and macro scale. We grapple with themes such as everyday experiences of time, precarious timelines, 'working against the clock', 'staying afloat' and 'finding the time'. We further consider way(s) in which our experiences have been further compounded by socio-historical positions, attending to intersections of class and gender given our differing class backgrounds, circumstances, life stage and the timeline of history and biography.

Cover image:

'The sand's going to run out at any minute': A collaborative autoethnography of class, gender and precarity in academia

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This article contributes to feminist debates that seek to shed light on the politics of the contemporary neoliberal academy, contributing insights into experiences of early career academics on teaching-only contracts. Through collaborative autoethnography it explores configurations and intersections of the temporal with precarity, class and gender. We draw upon experience(s) of navigating academia as early career academics, reflecting on our journeys from doctoral study to and through the academic labour market, from fixed-term precarious contracts through to securing 'permanent' full-time academic contracts. We focus on ways in which temporalities have served as a structuring force in our working and personal lives, shaping experiences of navigating academia on both a micro and macro scale. We grapple with themes such as everyday experiences of time, precarious timelines, 'working against the clock', 'staying afloat' and 'finding the time'. We further consider way(s) in which our experiences have been further compounded by socio-historical positions, attending to intersections of class and gender given our differing class backgrounds, circumstances, life stage and the timeline of history and biography.

Keywords: class; working-class; gender; neoliberal academia; collaborative autoethnography; precarity; time.

Introduction

> 'I feel like time in academia, you always feel like you've got this … I don't know what it's called. What's it called? That time … You know that thing with the sand in it that you turn over?' (Charlotte)

> 'The sand's going to run out any minute … *Time, you know, the years just flash by so quickly* when you're full-on teaching' (Charlotte, emphasis added)

> 'I know. Well I handed in my PhD in just November, no in June 2018, my Viva in November 2018, handed in my corrections in in like March time, um, and then graduated and, you know, I haven't published, I haven't even attempted to take my PhD and to get some publications out of it, and I know that I need to, but *it's just finding that time*, and like at Christmas, I just wanted a holiday …' (Carli)

The aforementioned, brief extract of a conversation between the authors of this paper reveals much about the contemporary landscape of higher education. It speaks of the accelerated nature of time within academia that otherwise operates at a glacial pace (how long do we typically wait to hear back from a job application, or an article that we submitted months ago, or to hear if our fixed term position is going to be extended?) and of pressures and pulls felt by early career academics (ECAs) [1] navigating the uneven, non-linear trajectory from doctoral student to permanent academic position (Wilson et al. 2021). (We use the term 'early career academic' to refer to the period of time within eight years of the award of the PhD. We refrain from using the more popular term 'early career researcher', recognising that this excludes those who are on teaching-focused contracts within universities.)

To the outside world, academia operates as a 'dream space', a place for armchair pondering and luxury pursuits, detached from the 'real world' (Read 2018). But for those on the inside, it's a different story. However, 'despite the pervasive myths and nostalgia about universities' (Gill & Donaghue 2016, p.98) contemporary academia is one of rampant acceleration, massification, commodification, casualisation and disposability (Barcan 2013; Gill 2009; Holmwood 2017; Telling 2018). For those on the inside, working in higher education, such environments result in chronic stress, anxiety, exhaustion, imposterism and a culture of overwork among much else (Addison et al. 2022; Breeze 2018; Loveday 2018; Pereira 2019). This is what Gill (2009) has referred to as the hidden injuries of the neoliberal university and whilst it can be argued no university worker is free from the entrapment of neoliberal academia, the hidden injuries that it inflicts are more acutely felt by those most adversely affected by wider societal inequalities of class, gender, race, sexuality, age and (dis)ability (Loveday 2016; Read & Leathwood 2018). There are further impacts and implications for those at the start of their academic journeys and those on precarious contracts which can hinder career progression (Courtois & O'Keefe 2015; Ivancheva & O'Flynn 2016). Moreover, academics who are employed on temporary teaching-focused contracts, especially in the long-term, represent a lacuna in the scholarly literature and the effects of neoliberal academia upon them remain under-explored.

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[1] We use the term 'early career academic' to refers to the period of time within eight years of the award of the PhD. We refrain from using the more popular term 'early career researcher' recognising that this excludes those who are on teaching focused contracts within universities.

It is against this backdrop that this article has three interlinked aims: firstly, it seeks to foster and contribute to a body of feminist literature that sheds light on the politics of the contemporary neoliberal academy; secondly it moves the focus to an under-researched group, those employed on teaching-focused contracts; finally, it explores the temporal in relation to class, gender and precarity. In doing so, we begin by considering classed and gendered dimensions of time and precarity within neoliberal academia, before discussing our empirical research, that of collaborative autoethnography (comprising a trio of methods). Based on this data we then discuss ways in which academic time-space, and our classed and gendered experiences of this time-space, have served as structuring forces in our working and personal lives, shaping our lived experiences of navigating academia. We discuss ways in which our gendered, classed biographies resist simplistic linear notions (Clegg 2010; Puwar 2004) of what it means to be and become academic in the context of neoliberal academia, in an era which has seen a separation of teaching and research. In particular we resist the notion that 'ideal academia' (Bourdieu 1988) means adopting disembodied, detached, rational, mobile subjectivities motivated solely by economic rationalities, alongside neat compartmentalisations of 'work and life' and lives which follow decontextualised career timelines. Rather, we foreground relationality, care and interdependence, alongside the messiness and complexity of careers which intertwine with and are embedded in everyday experiences. Drawing on theories of time, we hope to interrupt neat categorisations and compartmentalisations and problematise classed and gendered assumptions about who is academic and the 'right ways' to do academia. We offer specific insights into lived experiences of those cast in 'teaching-only' roles which, in intersection with precarity and exacerbation of time pressures, render academic careers unsustainable, especially for those already affected by inequalities. While we primarily refer to precarity in relation to job insecurity here, we recognise the broader dimensions of social precarity (Butler 2009) and its reach into context-specific 'microspaces' (Ettlinger 2007) and temporalities of everyday lives. Such microspaces and moments contain memories, thoughts, feelings and interactions linked to positionalities and situated within a specific historical milieu.

Before reviewing the literature, we wish to reflect on the politics of production inherent in writing this article. We do not wish to deny or downplay our privileges for we are privileged in so many ways. We were born in the Global North and are English-speaking therefore possessing the privileges this entails in relation to the geopolitical *and* global academic hierarchies of knowledge production (Bhambra 2021; Connell 2011; Spivak 1988). We are both white, cis-gendered, have led heterosexual lives and have not had to contend with operating on the margins of academia along these lines. Moreover, we are now employed on continuing contracts[2] (albeit teaching-focused, a theme threaded throughout this paper) within UK (non-Russell Group) universities. (We use the term 'continuing' rather than permanent as a political commitment to recognise that, within neoliberal academia, nothing is permanent and permanency is not guaranteed.) Indeed, we may be read by some as being figures of achievement having 'successfully' navigated the pipeline from doctoral student to full academic. Yet, 'success', 'achievement' or its associated synonyms are seldom sentiments that we read in our work given the ever demanding, though self-nominated (if we are to 'succeed' in academia) pressures upon our time. Even writing this article Carli was sure we would have to withdraw, owing to competing work commitments (but was kindly granted an extension after Charlotte gave her the confidence to 'keep calm and carry-on writing'). We have voluntarily taken time out of our annual leave to work on this article and we have both felt, in working on this 'output', the squeezing of time and space. Stealing a few hours here and a few moments there, finding

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[2] We use the term 'continuing' rather than permanent as a political commitment to recognise that, within neoliberal academia, nothing is permanent and permanency is not guaranteed.

ourselves writing on planes, and at times when panic struck, into the early hours of the morning. Academic literature highlights the challenges academics face in prioritising writing (Murray 2013; Murray & Newton 2009), as a result of workplace demands and roles which render academic writing as less urgent (MacLeod et al. 2012), especially so when on teaching-focused contracts. Our own experience of writing this article was marked by disjuncture and spatial precarity. It was one of starts and stops, neither here nor there, as we 'stole' time increasingly from our personal lives and found the physical space to write wherever we could. An otherwise relaxing hour in the departure hall browsing duty free turned into a rapid one-hour intense writing session, before closing the laptop to board the plane, only to resume writing as everyone else spent their time enjoying the onboard flight entertainment. This article now turns to provide an overview of literature in the field, situated within contemporary neoliberal academia.

Literature

Neoliberalism in higher education

In recent decades, the higher education landscape has been subject to intense radical reforms, both nationally and globally (Deem 1998; Jones & Maguire 2021; Holmwood 2014). Within England (our context), it has shifted from 'the extension of a social right to education' (Holmwood 2014, p. 62) to market ideologies with neoliberal reforms transforming its logics. Transitioning from a public good, to an individual private choice, the 'reward' of higher education is positioned as being of sole benefit to the individual rather than society at large (p. 62). This discourse is used to justify the shifting of the funding of higher education from the public purse to a private one consequently subjecting higher education to mass marketisation and commodification. In the contemporary marketised landscape of higher education, universities are pitted against one another in the fight to secure student numbers (Brown 2011). Within universities, even the most foundational of academic pursuits, the formation of academic knowledge, which 'can feel like the most immaterial and intangible of constructions' (Pereira 2022, p. 983) is now subject to increasingly neoliberal regimes as academics clamber for ever diminishing funding and are having to justify their intellectual pursuits through discourses of wider societal 'impact'. As a direct result of the imposition of neoliberalism, the nuance of academic life in all its forms has been conflated to mere measures and metrics (research and teaching 'excellence'; impact factors; university world and national rankings, student satisfaction surveys and monitoring of graduate outcomes) as Foucauldian 'technologies of power' and surveillance pervade academic life (1977).

There exists a strong body of feminist literature highlighting the impact of neoliberal academia (Breeze et al. 2019; Gill 2017; Pereira 2019; Taylor & Lahad 2019), or what Gill and Donaghue rightly refers to as the 'deep crisis affecting universities' (Gill & Donaghue 2016, p. 91). In academia, turning the scholarly gaze back around on itself has highlighted ways in which neoliberalism shapes, makes and pervades the everyday lives of scholars – aspiring, established or otherwise – and of the lived realities of the *less glamorous* side of neoliberal academia (Taylor & Breeze 2020; Breeze et al. 2019; Pereira 2019). Rampant commodification, casualisation and competition, alongside the rise of audit culture (among much else) has resulted in a contemporary academic labour market characterised by precarity and disposability on a structural level, and feelings of insecurity and anxiety on an individual one (Loveday 2018; Gill 2009; Gill & Donaghue 2016; Wilson et al. 2021) for those working as labourers in the 'knowledge factory' (Tokarczyk & Fay 1993). The adoption of this specific business model has led to an increasing separation of teaching and research, hence the creation of 'teaching-only' lectureships and career pathways in academia which can also be read as highly gendered and classed, reinforcing a hierarchical 'two-tier' system (Bozzon et al. 2019).

Time

A focus on time offers insights into ways in which neoliberal academia has become commodified, accelerated and intensified (Gill 2009; Ylijoki 2013), with demands to be constantly 'flexible' (Bunn et al. 2018) and productive having profound impacts on staff wellbeing (Gill 2009). This is reflected in the accounts here and it is important to consider the specific implications for precariously employed academics, particularly those experiencing wider societal inequalities. Leathwood and Read (2020) have identified impacts of 'just in time' modalities casualised staff often operate within, not always knowing until the last minute if they will be teaching or what they will be teaching, and prevented from offering consistent support and continuity for their students. The assumption underpinning such expectations is of a young, mobile, able-bodied academic unencumbered by caring and domestic responsibilities which, we suggest, is far from the case given the overrepresentation of women, Black and minoritised staff in the casualised workforce (UCU 2019). In the UK context, there is a gender gap in relation to academic mobility (EU Commission 2016), reflecting wider gender inequalities. Extended periods spent working on temporary contracts, which can continue for decades, mean that mature women can be misread and infantilised as 'early career' or less experienced (Vantansever 2020).

Time is often viewed as neutral, abstract and constant, however theorists have drawn attention to gendered and classed aspects: Adams (2002, 2003) has theorised the imposition of western 'clock-time' through industrialisation, enforcing the notion that 'time is money'. This has entailed obsfucation and devaluation of caring and domestic labour, which does not fit neatly into carefully measured, quantifiable regimes and which is primarily undertaken by women. Activities cast as 'women's work' frequently occupy 'shadowlands', outside recognised, legitimised labour and values epitomised by *homo economicus* (rational economic man). Rather than being understood as 'abstract, decontextualised and de-temporalised' (Adams 2003, p. 67) then, understanding time as gendered and classed, means attending to relationality, to embodied caring interdependencies embedded within communities which are essential to survival. Clegg (2010) has noted reductive neoliberal constructions of the future which require continual self-development and self-surveillance on the part of individuals, yet her research highlighted that not all individuals share this orientation and it can inhibit more ethical care for the future.

This devaluation of care and interdependent ways of being which do not fit neatly into abstract, linear conceptions of time, carries over into the academy and has been theorised as 'carelessness' (Lynch 2010) with a narrow set of criteria attached to what (or who) are deemed 'productive' and which activities are accorded recognition, prestige and viewed as career-building (Bunn et al. 2018). O'Keefe and Courtois (2019) noted how women on precarious contracts tend to be delegated the majority of 'academic housework' (teaching, pastoral care, administration). This is especially pertinent when considering staff on teaching-only contracts who may occupy academic 'shadowlands' (Adams 2002) – providing an invisiblised service rather than creators of knowledge in their own right. Assumptions of autonomous, 'flexible', freely floating, financially privileged mobile entrepreneurial subjectivities which characterise contemporary 'ideal academia' are highly gendered and classed, belying interdependencies, relationality, embeddedness and the need for belonging and proximity which shape the narratives shared here. Nevertheless, we are aware of the problematics of reproducing (often heteronormative) assumptions and stereotypes surrounding gendered and classed identities in relation to im/mobility dichotomies (Sautier 2021). We concur with Leathwood and Read (2020) who argue the need to recognise that time – 'the way it is lived, experienced and (re)constructed through our location, positionality and experience – is gendered, classed and racialised and tied to unequal power relations and socio-cultural differences' (p. 914).

Precarity and inequalities

Continuing gendered and classed inequities in the academy are underpinned by patriarchal, elitist and racist value structures despite a surface rhetoric of equality and diversity (Ahmed 2012). Women, single parents, mature, disabled, working-class, sexual and gender minority, racialised and migrant academics are particularly subject to academic marginalisation (Amsler & Motta 2017; Ivancheva et al. 2019; Lörz & Mühleck 2018). However, much literature on gender equality in the academy has tended to focus on the higher ranks (O'Keefe & Courtois 2019; Thwaites & Pressland 2017). A developing body of literature exploring gender in relation to academic precarity is drawing out gendered, classed and racialised effects including lack of dependable income, impacts on career progression and affective consequences for self-esteem and professional identity in light of ongoing 'micro' inequities of marginalisation in everyday lives (Courtois & O'Keefe 2015; Ivancheva et al. 2019; Murgia & Poggio 2018; Read & Leathwood 2020; Ylijoki 2010).

Women tend to do the most exploitative, least secure work and tend to be channelled into part-time positions, become trapped in roles which comprise 'dead-end jobs' (Zbyszawska 2017), are debarred from promotional opportunities (Courtois & O'Keefe 2015) and often have less opportunities and resources than their male counterparts (Zheng 2018). Exploitation of casualised staff means that they serve the advancement of (usually privileged male) 'research stars' (Smyth 2017), 'regardless of the impact that this might have for their own research output and advancement potential' (Zbyszawska 2017, p. 949). Nevertheless, casualised workers can experience ambivalence due to the construction of academia as a 'dream job' (Murgio & Poggia 2019) and often feel 'grateful' to have any work at all (Loveday 2018).

Investigating precarious timelines

This paper derives from a wider project focusing on our experiences as ECAs on teaching-only temporary contracts (at the time of this research) who found ourselves 'competing' for the same academic job. The research project accompanied us as we journeyed from fixed-term contracts to continuing full-time academic posts thus 'securing' our institutional future. It is against this backdrop that the project sought to explore everyday lived realities of navigating academia as ECAs, attending to class and gender. In doing so, we drew upon collaborative autoethnography (Chang et al. 2012) with data collected over the course of 2020, beginning with a series of face-to-face methods before the pandemic, then shifting online in light of the national lockdown. Our qualitative toolkit comprised a trio of unstructured qualitative methods of co-produced empirical material through: (a) a co-walking interview; (b) a post co-walking interview; and (c) a follow up online zoom co-interview. In total, just under five hours of interview 'talk' was captured, recorded and transcribed verbatim resulting in 27,960 words.

Collaborative autoethnography (Chang 2013; Chang et al. 2016) is a way of drawing upon our personal experiences as an outlet of social critique. Where autoethnography seeks to 'expand the understanding of social realities through the lens of the researcher's personal experience' (Chang 2013, p. 108), collaborative autoethnography involves more than one researcher to consider multiple layers of intersubjectivities. By drawing upon collaborative autoethnography, a method that is 'simultaneously collaborative, autobiographical, and ethnographic' (Chang et al. 2013, p. 17) we were able to sharpen our interpretation(s) and assist one another in making the familiar strange when exploring the way in which class and gender have served as structuring forces in our experiences of precarity in academia. Authoethnographic methods have been critiqued, as Pearce (2020) indicates, for being intellectually lazy, narcissist and self-pitying given that many centre personal anguish and are thus written off as 'me-search' (Stewart 2017, p. 301). We

contest such critiques and, echoing Gill, question how any communication that is in any way, however slightly, critical of the conditions of the contemporary university 'remains hearable as a »moan«, as an expression of complaint or unhappiness, rather than being formulated as an analysis or a (political) demand for change' (Gill 2016, p. 41).

Our methods were underpinned by the feminist priority of experiential, situated ways of 'knowing', alongside the feminist ethic of reciprocity (Harding 1997; Letherby 2003). Throughout our collaborative autoethnography we deployed unstructured interviews to promote dialogical exchange, allowing for emotional demands of the research and space for reflection and exploration (Rizvi 2019). Thus, our 'co' approach to data collection, whereby we both were the topic of sociological exploration and thus both 'asked' the questions and both 'responded' *felt* like more a conversation based on existing friendship and sisterhood (Oakley 1981). Thus, 'data collection' was characterised by a two-way flow of experiential knowledge rather than the mechanical extraction of 'data' or strict adherence to methodological 'how to' blueprint. We acknowledge the complexity of the interactional politics of our encounters and of the shifting of power (Oakley 2016) alongside differences between us, most notably in relation to our class, age and (dis)ability which have shaped our respective findings and discussions. That said, we do not view any of our co-methods as being too subjective or staged but rather as interactional and interpersonal events whereby as co-researchers, co-authors and friends we have *jointly* negotiated, navigated and constructed meaning. Data analysis occurred collaboratively and intuitively as with much collaborative autoethnography (Chang 2013; Muncey 2010). As we sought to make sense of the emergent themes and observations we shared our analytical notes with one another over the course of the research interweaving our analysis. We corresponded and met several times to reflect on emerging findings; this iterative process finally resulting in the identification of broad themes, situated within our biographies, including that of 'time'. Alongside cross-cutting themes we also sought to holistically preserve the narrative dimensions of this data and to situate our storied lived experiences within a wider socio-cultural context (Plummer 2000).

In early 2020 both authors partook in a walking interview, drawing on walking as a means of method (Moles 2008) in order to capture, compare and construct our subjective experiences of navigating academia. Walking as method was motivated by the desire to explore what everyday spaces and places of higher education can reveal about classed and gendered trajectories of journeying to and through academia (given education's historical classed and gendered exclusions). It was also in part prompted by our desire to experience the university space in different ways than we normally would in a typical workday, one of leisurely reflection and exchange rather than characterised by task driven urgency and the ever-ticking time of the hourglass of the working day. We engaged in the act of 'bimbling', the act of wandering aimlessly 'through a co-ingredient environment, which can be harnessed to prompt therefore unstated or unrecalled knowledge' (Moles 2008, 4.3). The following excerpt, taken seconds after we pressed record and whilst we were still orientating ourselves with the built environment, led to a rich conversation about the competitive nature of academia, and of competing against your friends. It reveals how quickly bimbling can elicit insights that would otherwise go unstated:

> Author**:** *I'm trying to think, where should we go from here* in terms of, I guess because you did your PhD here the campus probably has more like, meaning in terms of, I imagine, like different buildings when you walk past that spark different things, whereas to me not every building has that, if that makes sense?

>Author: Well, kind of. There must be a few… I feel we should be democratic, and we should each pick say three locations each to have a conversation in, and we'll take it in turns to maybe ask each other questions?

Then, just as we were about to continue bimbling, a memory of Carli's is invoked:

>Carli: *I think that one of my things is right here, like physically here,* because this is where I obviously sat, was waiting, and then turned round and saw you coming, and then it was the realisation of like "Oh shit! I knew academia was small but perhaps not this small." And it's like the whole of academia pits you against your friends and your colleagues and your peers. I think that was the moment of like, just, sort of I don't know how I felt, I just felt like, I guess it was just that realisation of "How could I not have thought that there would be somebody that I would know being interviewed for the same position?"

Our positionalities served as potential points of 'connection', however, there were also differences that characterised our experiences of navigating academia. Both of us, at the time of fieldwork, defined ourselves as early career academics (ECAs), Carli had completed her PhD one year prior to the time of fieldwork (2018) and Charlotte in 2014. We use the term 'early career *academics*' rather than *researchers,* having both worked in 'teaching-only' positions which place constraints on the ability to undertake research-related activities (through exclusion from the research excellence framework, researcher training and support, ability to contribute to funding bids and lack of time for research activities) and so it feels more inclusive. We are conscious of the ambiguity of the term 'early career' in an era where academics can remain on short-term contracts for decades, building up experience yet without the status this might afford colleagues on 'permanent' contracts (Morris et al. 2022; O'Keefe & Courtois 2015; Vantansever 2020). Neither of us had held continuing academic positions prior to this, though we both had experiences of working within temporary teaching and research roles. Charlotte had done their PhD and taught on a series of fractional, hourly paid and fixed-term contracts across several institutions for over 15 years and Carli had worked as an Associate Tutor and Teaching Fellow during the final year of her PhD and as an Economic and Social Research Council Global Challenges Research Fund (ESRC GCRF) Postdoc. Similarly, although not the focus of this article, neither of us possess the 'able body' that academia demands, with Carli having received a diagnosis of endometriosis in 2018, followed by two operations since. Similarly, Charlotte manages chronic health conditions, making certain everyday tasks challenging; combined with working in precarious academic roles, this meant periods where her wellbeing was affected.

With regards to differences, Carli identified as coming from a working-class background with no history of higher education participation in her family or among close friends (who she did not meet prior to non-compulsory education). Charlotte followed a non-traditional route through education and academia (leaving education early then returning later), left school early and balanced part-time study with caring and work responsibilities. Her transition into academia was affected by hidden disabilities, age (as a mature returner to higher education), and financial and health challenges, exacerbated by long-term precarity. Secondly, being of different ages means we do not share the same socio-political location. Carli is, to echo Allen (2014), one of 'Blair's children' and has experienced the institutionalisation of the socio-political rhetoric of aspiration and education within school practices and cultures. Charlotte was considered an 'under-achiever' and left school at 16 to work before returning to education later. For middle-class

young women there was pressure to enter a 'respectable' career, to marry respectably (Skeggs 1997) and follow a neatly delineated life trajectory. Both authors experienced 'not fitting' with such expectations of 'linear time' (Adam 1995), accompanied by its classed, gendered, ableised ideals, yet embarked on precarious journeys into and through academia.

Working-class and working against the clock

> The notion that academics are privileged above all others, with "cushy" tenured positions, has a firm hold in the popular imagination. (Gill & Donaghue 2018, p. 92)

As a result of the proliferation of academic capitalism, short-termism has proliferated as a work model and it is against this backdrop that Read and Leathwood (2018) write of the uncertainty and the impossibility of knowing what one's professional futures hold for ECAs and established academics alike. This uncertainty, the impossibility of knowing what our futures entailed was a key narrative pervading our exchanges. Whilst we both spoke of our enjoyment and passion for our work; our accounts were littered with anxieties and fears about our professional futures which in turn reveal much about the classed and gendered aspects of navigating precarity against a ticking time clock in contemporary academia. Precarity served to intensify the dominance of 'clock-time' (Adam 2002) at the level of everyday lives, academic semesters and years, with end-of-contract and project deadlines continually on the horizon amid uncertain futures. We spoke at length about experiences of navigating multiple fixed-term contracts and of the constant need to plan for *the next academic job* which further intensified our work. For Carli, the juggling of fixed-term positions started even before the completion of the PhD, as funding came to an end before the completion of her PhD, due to then caring commitments. Reflecting on the experience of starting one-year teaching fellowship at the start of her final year of her PhD, Carli describes the constant feeling of needing to plan '[for] the next move or what comes after':

> Although I started in [institution] it was very much: "Right, I need to find something for the year that follows." I think because of me there's always been this underlying fear that I would not get a job out of it [the PhD] because I know how congested the labour market is in some way and they just expect so much from you, um, so for me as soon as I got to [institution] it was almost about: "Right OK *there's not even a chance to breathe you need to start planning for your next move or what comes after* ... (Carli)

Later in the interview, Carli reflects on her experience of embarking on a fixed-term, three-year lectureship (which she had recently begun at the time of the interview):

> So, 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.

Evident here is Carli's necessary need to think ahead and plan for the next academic job, or rather, the job search, since applying for an academic job does not equate to an interview, much less a job offer, and of the ticking clock of her fixed-term contract. Planning for and preparing oneself for the academic job market for Carli took the form of what we might refer to as 'hyper work', a defining feature of navigating contemporary academia in the lives of other working-

class ECAs (Wilson et al. 2021). In their study of Australian job advertisements in order to answer the mysterious question that is 'what do academic employers really want from the PhD now?' Pitt and Mewburn (2016, p. 88) speak of the so-called, 'new academic': 'A multi-talented, always ready and available worker that we have started to label the "academic super-hero", capable of being everything to everyone' (p. 99). In the eyes of the university, being everything to everyone entails (to name just a few): conforming to university strategic priorities, winning research bids, authoring world-class publications, designing and learning innovative courses, delivering excellent pastoral care, developing an 'impact' agenda and emerging as future leaders within one's respective field (among much else). Given the multiple forms of expertise and experience one needs to evidence on the academic CV it is of no surprise that despite being *at the start* of her three-year fixed-term contract she still spoke of the *urgent need* to build a CV in addition to carrying out her day job (a teaching-focused lectureship). The implication is that it is not enough for Carli to simply do her day job *and do it well*, but that, in order to survive against the ticking clock of academia, there is a need for her to go beyond that if she is to progress and secure permanency. Interestingly, planning for the next academic job was never spoken about through discourses of 'progression' and 'promotion'; absent from Carli's narrative was a sense of entitlement. Instead, feelings of fear and survival within an already congested academic labour market underpinned this narrative. There was seldom any explicit talk of 'climbing the academic career ladder' but instead, the notion of 'staying afloat' was echoed in the sentiments expressed throughout these exchanges.

For Carli, the *need* to 'succeed' within academia, which was understood at the time, for her, as achieving a permanent position, was deeply bound up in her working-class positioning. As Reay notes, 'working-class relationships to education have always been deeply problematic and emotionally charged, inscribing academic failure rather than success' (2001 p. 333). Academic failure *had* been a defining feature of Carli's educational trajectory prior to discovering sociology at A-level[3]. Primary school was marked by memories of being placed in what was termed as a 'special needs' class, frequently being positioned at the bottom of the weekly spelling test chart followed by attendance at a 'special measures' secondary school and all that it entailed. Carli's experience of education was characterised by fear; it was envisaged as something to get through, something to survive, rather than thrive in. These same feelings of fear, inadequacy and survival that underpinned Carli's earlier experiences of education lingered on, matching her orientation to the academic labour market. There was a constant fear of not succeeding within academia; the fear of not being able to secure a permanent job underpinned every facet of her PhD and post-PhD journey. This is of no surprise given that working-class academic habituses are rarely infused with feelings of self-confidence and entitlement, but rather insecurity and ambivalence (Reay 2018).

For those working-class persons who find themselves 'succeeding' in education, navigating the post-doctoral academic labour market becomes yet *another* educational hurdle which they have to overcome. The need to 'succeed' within academia, the need to 'succeed' in navigating the precarious labour market for Carli was fuelled not least by the fact that a period of 'non-work' and thus loss of income was inconceivable but also further fuelled by the fact that, as a working-class person, pursuing education is bound up with the expectation that doing so will pay off, literally. From the moment you embark on a PhD you are constantly asked by your friends and family 'have you got a job yet?' (Rowell & Walter 2022). After all, how do you explain to your working-class community that after investing that much in your education, after spending that

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[3] A leaving qualification following college or sixth form in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

long studying (when you didn't have to), that in the end, 'nothing', by way of materiality, came of it?

These findings broadly reflect ways in which time is commodified (Adam 2002, 2003) and seen as an investment; this is especially pertinent where resources are under pressure in a context of austerity, underpinning the classed dimensions of time. They speak of the neoliberal milieu and accompanying pressures to 'succeed' alongside the intensification of academic labour and, above all, an internalised need to be constantly 'productive' and engaged in self-development (Adam 2003; Bunn et al. 2018; Clegg 2010). Feelings of shame and fear of being cast as a failure are exacerbated in relation to classed and gendered positionalities. For both authors, academic precarity often involves existing in an ongoing state of fear – needing to survive in the moment, always desperately striving to keep the current contract and secure the next one while simultaneously trying to work towards a future which it is impossible to predict (Read & Leathwood 2018). As Clegg (2010) observes, 'staying put' is not an option within a neoliberal milieu, rather there is an individualised imperative for continued upskilling, mobility and projection into the future.

Precarious timelines: Non-linear journeys to becoming an academic

Charlotte similarly feared that the 'investment', not just financially, but in terms of time, emotions and wellbeing, in belatedly pursuing academia would not come to fruition. While at the time embarking on academic work had seemed exhilarating, and also a 'second chance' to 'make something of myself', in retrospect it seemed that returning to education and following an academic pathway had been highly risky (Reay 2003). Juggling being a single working mother of three with studies (Hinton-Smith 2012), managing disabilities and working across multiple short-term contracts was perceived as a necessary 'sacrifice' in order to achieve security. Opportunities to undertake paid research and teaching alongside her PhD felt like a promising start, however with rapidly diminishing long-term positions, 'staying afloat' and continuing on this path became fraught. The journey of finding work that was fulfilling and provided a sense of vocation became overshadowed by the realities of narrowing opportunities. However, as challenging as it was to continue, it became increasingly difficult to envisage leaving. Spending such a long period of time working and studying in academia, alongside becoming older and experiencing health challenges, entailed a perceived shift to becoming 'unemployable', far from neoliberal requirements for social mobility (Clegg 2010).

> [Not getting a job] was just not an option, for so many reasons, but the huge investment of me and my children, and going through the PhD as a single mum, and having to make sacrifices, there was all of that, and the joy that I find in academic work that I can't find in other spheres of life, and there was the journey that I've been on of discovering "This is what I want to do" and it means so much to be able to do that, and then for me, 'cos I'd worked in university for a long time, it's kind of "I've invested fifteen years in this, I have all of these skills and experience, and where am I going to use them?"

An imagined linear trajectory of an academic career, moving neatly from undergraduate to postgraduate to a PhD, possibly doing a 'post-doc' and then as a young academic moving into a permanent position was far removed from a reality which was further complicated by caring responsibilities. Increasingly, international mobility has become a requirement for successful entry into academia (Sautier 2021). However, Charlotte's main priority was being there for her children, supporting them through their education and remaining local as they grew up in a

climate of austerity where job and housing security is difficult to obtain. Moving to another location was impractical and so she was dependent on local universities for whatever work was available. A part-time PhD and needing to take time out for financial, family and health reasons was disadvantageous career-wise, reflecting academic 'carelessness' (Lynch 2010) and devaluation of non-productive uses of time (Adam 2002). The longer this period continued, the more chaotic and 'messy' her CV looked. It became difficult to find a coherent career narrative to share through applications and interviews and, despite her experience, she felt less competitive than those who had followed a more direct route. Rather than following a neat career progression, Charlotte might work at several jobs at different grades at any one time. There was never guaranteed continued employment with opportunities usually only arising at the 'last minute' (Leathwood & Read 2020) and so there was little choice or control over what work to take, accompanied by the humiliation of having to 'beg' for work each semester. Nevertheless, there was always a sense of being extremely fortunate (Loveday 2018) to be able to remain in work, 'stay afloat' and undertake labour which was meaningful.

Time was experienced as gendered and classed in multiple ways which interlink with and are exacerbated by precarity. While there was ostensibly the option of leaving academia, it was not seen as viable with the need to financially support families, maintain livelihoods and provide care. This links to Adam's (2002) notion of 'shadowlands' whereby only labour recognised as economically 'productive' is valued. It reflects the 'carelessness' (Lynch 2010) of neoliberal academia which fails to recognise care and interdependencies, assuming an autonomous, mobile entrepreneurial subject. Both authors were conscious of a spectre of failure attached to investments of time for which a 'return' is expected. The ultimate fear of being unemployed and resultant shame is exacerbated in a period of neoliberal austerity with high levels of stigma attached to those perceived as 'unproductive'. For both middle and working-class people, in different ways, the loss of 'respectability' (Skeggs 1997) and status could potentially have profound impacts on self-esteem and identity, especially in such a highly pressurised, competitive environment, with the constant need to prove ourselves in order to stay in work and apply for suitable roles. There was a very real and urgent need to maintain livelihoods and reach some level of financial stability. This will be exacerbated for those currently struggling with precarity in a UK cost-of-living crisis and the implications are housing insecurity alongside energy and food poverty, likely to impact most on working-class and minoritised women and those with caring responsibilities. Age and health concerns were further factors which heightened fears of running out of time and working 'against time' in order to 'stay afloat'. Combined material, cultural, relational and emotional factors and our gendered, class positionalities left us feeling as though we had to 'be everything for everyone'; we discussed pressures to 'tick the right boxes', reflective of multiple demands inherent within a broad instrumentalisation of academic work (Ylijoki 2013) alongside particularly exploitative conditions for casualised staff. Our shared sense of a 'never ending list' denotes temporal precarity and the impossibility of meeting ever-expanding job and career requirements yet institutional under-resourcing, support and adequate time-space for precarious ECAs (Leathwood & Read 2020).

Conclusion

Our use of collaborative autoethnography has allowed us to explore configurations and intersections of the temporal with class, gender and precarity and ways in which they work to structure our conditions. This article has provided a lens through which we have been able to cast light upon the complexity of time within neoliberal academia, and of its deeply contextual, classed and gendered nature. The contemporary demands of neoliberal academia have created a landscape whereby precarious, ECAs constantly find themselves working against time to

achieve 'success' or, at the very minimum, a 'decent' contract. We cast light upon the politics of contemporary neoliberal academia, moving the focus to an under-researched group – those employed on teaching-focused contracts. We have reflected on how class and gender shape experiences of time, reflecting upon our journeys from doctoral study to and through the academic labour market. We have discussed our experiences of navigating precarity, of the need to 'stay afloat' and to work 'against the clock'; Adam's (2002) notion of 'clock-time' is rendered even more pertinent in relation to precarity. The need to 'stay afloat', to work 'against the clock' and thus the motivation to 'succeed' within academia was in part, motivated by *the need* to prove the worth of the choice to pursue doctoral study to ourselves and to our family and friends who did not choose to pursue higher education (Carli) and as a result of the need to provide for one's family (Charlotte) respectively. We have explored ways in which 'clock-time' (Adam, 2002) has served as structuring forces in our working and personal lives, shaping our experiences of navigating academia on both a micro and macro scale. Casualised academics are particularly subject to intensification of academic labour and must also be continually engaged in finding the next contract; they are bound by both necessity and a neoliberal imperative for constant self-development and investment in the future (Clegg 2010). Yet complex, embodied, situated realities of interdependent lives render adopting ideal entrepreneurial, mobile subjectivities impossible. A two-tier academic system reinforces classed, gendered and racialised inequities, reproducing 'shadowlands' of time and space (Adam 2002, 2003) wherein certain bodies and activities are devalued and under-resourced. Our paper therefore highlights the need for research to focus on the impact of neoliberal academia and all that it entails, including for those on teaching-focused contracts. The wealth of evidence strongly indicates the unsustainability and inequity of this system; our work contributes to this and further suggests that narratives proposing that temporarily employed academics can simply 'choose' to leave tend to individualise what are structurally imposed conditions, casting staff as 'non-productive disposables' and further entrenching inequalities.

In drawing this article to a conclusion, we wish to return to our earlier discussion regarding the formation of this article. As articulated above, the production of this article is the 'output' of a series of 'micro moments' which speak to just one aspect of the precariousness of higher education beyond the insecurity of a job contract. It highlights the temporal regimes of higher education, the fluidity of academic time as having no boundaries (Ylijoki 2013) and the spatial liquidity and precariousness of this aspect of academic work. Far from the image of the 'sociological flaneur', space and time was not something we could approach at a strolling pace. Neither was this article the product of a creative process that derived from the fixed location of the office high up in the 'ivory towers' of academe (both of us share university offices and so peace and quiet is not guaranteed) and thus the space to think. The aforementioned 'micro moments' serve as ways in which academic time-space spills over into our personal lives, of academic homelessness despite our continuing contracts, and of the impossibility of clocking in and out of the so-called knowledge factory. Such experiences often elicit feelings of academic fraudulence and imposterism (Morris et al. 2022), feelings that stand in juxtaposition to what we are frequently told about ourselves from our fellow sociological sisters:

"You are really career goals."

"You achieved so much, so so quickly when you got your PhD."

"Not that many people would try and do a PhD while raising three
children on their own!"

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From PhD to ECR: Supervisory relationships, precarity and the temporal regimes of academia

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Andrew Brown, 2022, Ilford to the world and back again.

The expansion of higher education in the United Kingdom (UK), the multiplication of doctoral routes and the increased precarity of academic jobs (Leathwood & Read 2020) have been associated with more uncertainties regarding the transition taken to a permanent academic position (Le Feuvre 2015). This paper seeks to examine and problematise the structures and practices recent PhD graduates from UK universities face as they navigate the transition to their first post-PhD position in higher education contexts characterised by temporal regimes which regulate access to an academic position. The data informing this paper are derived from our project studying the transition from PhD to academic position (Precarious transitions? Doctoral students negotiating the shift to academic positions, funded by British Academy-Leverhulme, 2020–2022). Particular attention is drawn to the role of supervisors as gatekeepers, able to give and withdraw opportunities to their doctoral students with significant consequences for career prospects. The concepts of mentorship and sponsorship are used to make sense of the different support received by doctoral students. We argue that practices of mentoring and, to an even greater extent, sponsoring, ease the transition from doctoral research to early career academics, with patterns of supervisory support legitimised through the mobilisation of narratives such as elective affinities or talent spotting.

From PhD to ECR: Supervisory relationships, precarity and the temporal regimes of academia

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Keywords: precarity; doctoral students; higher education; neoliberalism; mentorship; sponsorship.

Introduction

The expansion of higher education, the multiplication of doctoral routes in the UK (including professional doctorates and PhDs by publication) and the increased casualisation of academic posts (Leathwood & Read 2020) have been associated with more uncertainties regarding the transition to a permanent academic position (Le Feuvre, 2015). These uncertainties and the rise in the costs of higher education borne by doctoral students – a significant proportion are now self-funded (Hewitt 2020) – have well-identified effects on the wellbeing and mental health of doctoral and early career researchers (Moreau & Robertson 2019). The COVID-19 pandemic has only exaggerated existing inequalities due to the closure of university campuses and concerns related to student recruitment and retention (Kınıkoğlu & Can 2021). Whilst not discussed in this paper in any detail, we also acknowledge the challenges facing part-time, unfunded students who are particularly at odds with the discourse of timelessness as they often have other commitments such as work and/or family ties that require them to balance multiple demands on their time.

This paper seeks to examine and problematise the structures and practices that reinforce a discourse of timelessness in academia facing early career academics navigating the transition to their first postdoctoral post (Leathwood & Read 2020). Our focus is on the dynamics of power that are at play in the supervisory relationship. The changing temporal rhythms of higher education, in part due to neoliberal ideology, policies and practices, alongside associated growing cultures of over working, have resulted in an intensification of academic work that begins, we argue, from the doctoral submission stage, sometimes earlier. The competition for posts creates an environment where doctoral students must achieve more in less time.

The data informing this paper are derived from our project studying the transition from PhD to academic position (*Precarious transitions? Doctoral students negotiating the shift to academic positions*, funded by British Academy-Leverhulme, 2020–2022). The study explores how students enrolled on a PhD programme in the UK build up to an academic career and how they navigate the transition from PhD student to academic, drawing on symbolic, social, cultural and economic capitals. Particular attention in this paper is drawn to the role of supervisors as gatekeepers, able to give and withdraw opportunities to their doctoral students. While doctoral programmes have diversified over the past decades, the original study underpinning this article focuses on the traditional PhD due to the scale of the original project and to acknowledge that a PhD degree has long been viewed as leading to an academic career in some academic disciplines, including the social and natural sciences.

Specifically, in this paper we address the following research questions:
1. How do doctoral students experience the supervisory relationship?
2. What role is played by their supervisors in enabling access to networks, opportunities and resources that support doctoral students' transition to an academic position?

Such questioning takes place against a background characterised by 'social precarity' – drawing on Butler's and Waite's writings (Butler 2004a, 2004b, 2009; Waite 2009) – and by neoliberal spatio-temporal regimes which endorse a discourse of timeliness in higher education. The dataset for this project is formed of 26 semi-structured interviews with doctoral students who had graduated less than 18 months prior to the time of interview and interviews with six doctoral supervisors to gain their perspectives on the process of deciding who to supervise and the forms of support they offered. The paper is underpinned by the theoretical work of Butler (2004, 2004a,

2009) and Waite (2009). In what follows we provide the background context, methodology and key themes from the data analysis.

Background contextualisation: Neoliberal, temporal regimes of academic precarity

For decades now, neoliberalism as a political and economic ideology has informed higher education systems. Neoliberalism, according to Harvey (2007, p. 22) refers to 'a theory of political economic practices proposing that human wellbeing can best be advanced by the maximization of entrepreneurial freedoms within an institutional framework, characterised by private property rights, individual liberty, unencumbered markets and free trade'. In the context of UK higher education, neoliberalism has been interpreted and enacted through policies and practices, summarised by Olssen and Peters (2005, p. 313) as follows:

> The ascendancy of neoliberalism and the associated discourses of "new public management", during the 1980s and 1990s, has produced a fundamental shift in the way universities and other institutions of higher education have defined and justified their institutional existence. The traditional professional culture of open intellectual enquiry and debate has been replaced with an institutional stress on performativity, as evidenced by the emergence of an emphasis on measured outputs: on strategic planning, performance indicators, quality assurance measures and academic audits.

This shift to neoliberal policies and practices has been keenly felt by students, who are repositioned as consumers in policy discourses, and are constructed as if they are operating with a market logic. In 1994, Acker noted that students felt 'buffeted about' due to the competing demands on their time and the difficulties of managing their studies alongside family and professional commitments. Almost 30 years later, this experience has only intensified. The current UK higher education context is characterised by an increasing level of financial and political uncertainty linked to changes to the funding mechanisms of higher education, of heightened national and international competition for students, including doctoral students, and of the UK exit from the European Commission (Blanden & Machin 2013; Carpentier 2004; UCAS 2021). These macro and micro shifts have contributed to an increase in precarious academic posts, as these posts cover the ebbs and flows of teaching and research demands. Spina and colleagues (2020, p.2) powerfully highlight the impact of an increasingly casualised workforce and suggest 'the image of homo academicus, if it ever existed at all, is now only experienced by a very small minority'. They contend that universities are reliant on a temporary and casualised academic staff body because of broader shifts towards increased accountability, efficiency and fluctuating market demand. The shift from permanent, secure posts, to casualised contract-based work has been guided and steered by neoliberal influences and ideology that place pressure on universities to operate in an 'increasingly competitive post-imperial international environment' that places higher education at the centre of efforts to 'systematically improve the economic performance' of the UK (Radice 2015, p. 411). Others have noted how the spatio-temporal demands of neoliberalism place academic positions out of reach for those who do not neatly align with the figure of a bachelor boy, with gendered, classes and racialised implications (Lynch 2010.

Neoliberal influences have played a key part in driving the expansion of higher education, not only in the UK but the Global North and Global South. Expansion has encompassed the multiplication of doctoral routes (including professional doctorates and PhDs by publication). Over 100,000 doctoral students have enrolled in research programmes in the UK over the last

five years (HESA 2021), in a context where the amount of doctoral holders significantly outnumbers the number of academic posts available. The combination of an increase in precarity of permanent academic posts and the exponential increase in numbers of doctoral students has been associated with more uncertainties regarding the returns of a PhD and has narrowed the possibilities available to early career academics seeking to transition to a permanent position (Le Feuvre 2015; Leathwood & Read 2020). Meanwhile, precariousness has become more broadly a condition of life, including academic life, with minoritised groups at greater risk of their academic identity being under threat (Butler 2009; Ivancheva, Lynch & Keating 2019).

Enactments of the supervisory relationship

In this section we provide an overview of existing research examining the varied and diverse enactments of the supervisory relationship. The research literature confirms that understandings about supervisory practices are mixed and there is variation in enactments of existing supervisory approaches (Akerlind & McAlpine 2017: Bastalich 2017). While measures of accountability directed towards individual institutions are on the rise, little is known on how supervisory relationships relay or resist policy discourses to increase numbers of doctoral completions in shrinking timeframes. The supervisory relationship is often left unexamined and untheorised, possibly reflecting some of the individualised terms which frame the way some of our participants talk about it. Research on supervisory relationships tends to embrace uncritically neoliberal ideals, focusing on effectiveness and management techniques such as conflict resolution, rather than engaging in deeper and more meaningful ways. According to Deuchar (2008), supervisory styles can be understood as four distinct paradigms. First, laissez-faire, which views candidates as autonomous and agentic, able to manage their doctoral project, academic trajectory and broader existence. Second, the pastoral style that views students as autonomous and agentic but in need of personal support. Third, a directorial style, which positions students as in need of support for their research but not themselves. Fourth, contractual, where the focus is on agreement between the parties about the support provided in relation to the research and personal support. In the current context the emphasis, Deuchar (2008) argues, is on the neoliberal directorial style where students are expected to be self-directing and motivated and require help and support only in relation to their research. Such an approach is potentially less time consuming for supervisors and thus provides an efficient model that appeals to neoliberal higher education institutions (Deuchar 2008). Other descriptions of the supervisory relationship have questioned if the relationship is that of teacher, guide or exploiter, raising questions about the problem of 'over-' and 'under-supervising' doctoral students (Hockey 1994, p. 1995).

In the current context of higher education, Brabazon (2016, p. 26) argues that the neoliberal global university is 'particularly destructive for doctoral education'. She notes that 'doctoral programmes are destabilized', and that supervisors now move around more and are under increasing pressure to move doctoral students through their PhD as quickly and efficiently as they can. This temporal pressure has eroded the potential for many supervisors to have the time needed to support their students as they would want to (Brabazon 2016). This discourse of timeliness where one goes swiftly from being a PhD student to being an academic is also embedded in accountability indicators. For example, in the UK where we write from, universities are made accountable regarding the 'timely' completion of PhDs. In turn, this timely completion 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 the multiple relations of care-giving and care-received they are embroiled in, both outside and in academia (Moreau 2016). Indeed, reforms to doctoral provision introduced in the UK (for example: QAA 2018; Roberts 2002) tend to diagnose issues

(for example, high attrition and poor timely completion rates) and offer solutions (for example, institutional and sector-broad indicators, skills development programs for students) which assume youth and carefree-ness.

To capture and characterise the supervisory relationship in our analysis of the data, we drew on the concepts of mentorship and sponsorship as defined by Hoskins (2012). In her work, she defines mentors as providing guidance, advice and counsel to junior colleagues, and provided to them by their institutions as an aspect of formal career support. Mentors offer mentees 'a helping hand', 'someone to talk things over with' and opportunities for 'working together' to produce meaningful publications. Mentors are particularly useful for 'getting on' and progressing through the academy (Hoskins 2012, p. 80).

Sponsorship includes many elements of mentorship but extends beyond and refers to the actions of a more experienced or senior colleague who selected students to provide support above and beyond the requirements of the supervisor role (Hoskins 2012). Sponsorship is conceptualised as 'very useful' and 'very helpful', particularly for 'getting in' to an academic post, prestigious institutional committee or research group and was even viewed as 'necessary for [academic career] success' (Hoskins 2012, p. 80). In sum, sponsorship will go well beyond the boundaries of mentorship and will encompass sustained support to access some of the more prestigious areas of the academy, providing understanding and insights into the expectations of academic life and helping to navigate the transition to that academic life. In this paper, we consider the different styles perceived and discussed by our participants, conceptualised here in relation to mentorship and sponsorship (Hoskins 2012) to understand how they perceive the support they received both during and after completion of their PhD.

Methodology and methods

The study draws upon a qualitative methodology to provide detailed and rich accounts from the participants' perspectives on their experiences (Wisker 2017). This qualitative approach provides insight in their world views, as they share and give meaning to life events. To generate the data, 26 interviews were conducted with students who had completed a PhD in a UK institution less than 18 months prior to the time of interview. Participants were based across a range of subject areas (including the Social Sciences, Arts and Humanities, and Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM)) and in a range of institutions across the UK (pre-1992, including Russell group institutions, and post-1992 universities) as discussed below. (In the UK the higher education sector is formed of 'new', so-called post-1992 universities that were former polytechnics, contrasted with the established 'old' pre-1992, Russell Group and civic university sector.)

We sought diversity rather than representativeness in relation to these multiple criteria that form the basis of our sample. This approach is consistent with the 'long-established tradition of post-positivist qualitative, narrative analysis' (Priyadharshini & Robinson-Pant 2003, p. 96; Herman & Vervaeck 2019), with the main concern focused on how individuals negotiate their identities within specific academic cultures framed by a broad range of national, sectorial and institutional influences. We also completed interviews with six supervisors, based in similarly diverse institutions, to understand how they support students seeking an academic career. We asked supervisors to discuss the motivations for accepting a student and to describe the supervisory approach and commitment. These accounts, however, are not explored in this paper (for details, see Moreau et al. 2022).

The interviews with all participants took place online, due to the COVID-19 lockdowns and due to the geographical spread of the participants (some of whom had moved abroad, although all had studied in the UK at some point during their PhD). The interviews lasted between 45 and 80 minutes and were digitally audio recorded and professionally transcribed. They were analysed through a thematic content analysis combined with discourse analysis, to enable us to identify dominant themes and discourses within the participants' experiences. Specific attention was given to the influence of two overarching themes: the support Early Career Researchers (ECRs) perceive they receive from their supervisors and how it translates into privileges, through the mediation of social class, gender and ethnicity. In this article, we focus on the first of these aims and examine the support ECRs received from their supervisory team.

Participation in the research was entirely voluntary and the informed consent of all participants was sought prior to the interviews. Those who took part in the research were assured that their comments would be treated in confidence and any quotes used would be anonymised. The research complies with the ethical protocols set out by the British Education Research Association (BERA) revised ethical guidelines (2018); the British Sociological Association (BSA) ethical guidelines (2017); and Anglia Ruskin University's and Brunel University London's ethical guidelines.

Sample

Among the ECRs who participated in this study, 18 identified as female and eight as male; age varied, with five participants aged 25–29 (three women, two men), nine aged 30–34 (8 women, one man), four aged 35–39 (one woman, three men), and two (both women) aged 40 and above (six participants did not state their age). Participants were asked to describe their social class position and as the sample table confirms, only three identify as working-class, five as working-middle, 17 as middle-class and one as upper middle-class. In terms of ethnicity, 18 identified as White or White British, three as White 'Other', three as Asian and two as Black Africans. Participants represented a broad array of disciplines, including Arts and Humanities (for example: Archaeology, English Literature, Geography, History, Law and Politics; eight participants in total), Social Sciences (for example: Anthropology, Education, Psychology, Religious Studies and Sociology; 12 participants), STEM subjects (for example: Health Studies, Life Sciences and Medicine; five participants) and Business (one participant). Four participants had gained a PhD from a post-1992 university (all women), 22 from a pre-1992 (14 women and eight men), including 12 from a Russell group institution (four men and eight women). Twenty-one ECRs had completed their PhD in an English institution (16 women, five men), one in Northern Ireland (woman), two in Scotland (one man, one woman), two in Wales (both men).

Table 1 - Sample demographic data

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Social Class	Field of study
Alice		Female	White British	Middle	Social sciences
Connor	35	Male	White British	Middle	Arts and humanities
Evie	33	Female	White British	Working/middle	Social sciences
Frank	39	Male	Black African	Upper (Liberia) Working (UK)	Arts and humanities
Gillian	27	Female	White British	Working/middle	STEM
Grace	32	Female	White British	Middle	Arts and humanities
Jade	29	Female	White	Working	Social sciences
Jasmine	33	Female	White British	Middle	Social sciences
Jason		Male	White	Middle	STEM
Karen		Female	White British	Middle	Social sciences
Kiara		Female	White British	Working/middle	Social sciences
Marcus	35	Male	White British	Working	Arts and humanities
Nick		Male	White British	Working/middle	Social sciences
Olivia	54	Female	British Nigerian	Middle	Social sciences
Penelope	30	Female	Greek	Middle	Arts and humanities
Rachel		Female	White British	Middle	Social sciences
Sadie	34	Female	White British	Middle	STEM
Simon	34	Male	White British	Middle	Social sciences
Sofia	29	Female	Greek	Middle	Social sciences
Sonia	32	Female	Malay Malaysian	Working/middle	Social sciences
Stella	44	Female	White British	Middle	Social sciences
Susan	30	Female	Goa Indian	Middle	Social sciences
Tanya	30	Female	White British	Upper middle	STEM
Toby	29	Male	White British	Middle	Social sciences
Umar	27	Male	Indian	Middle	Social sciences
Vicky	37	Female	White Italian	Middle	Social sciences

Theoretical framework

The article is informed by the concept of precarity to highlight those individuals who experience life worlds characterised by 'uncertainty and instability' (Waite 2009, p. 415). The term precarity can be conceived as either a 'condition' – a more generalised condition of life in the twenty-first century characterised by fear and malaise – or a more focused descriptor of particular experiences derived from the labour market (Waite 2009, p. 415). It is the second definition, as Waite (2009) argues, that has been adopted by social-justice groups and scholars as a potential point of 'mobilisation' among those experiencing precarity. For Waite (2009), the analytical advantage of the concept of precarity is that rather than just focusing on individualised experiences of precarity, it incorporates the political and institutional context in which the production of precarity occurs. Such an approach enables us to analyse participants' experiences of accessing the labour market, focusing on any contextual challenges they encountered as they navigated the transition from PhD student to early career academic.

This article is also informed by Butler's work (2009, p. 25), which views precarity as a 'politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death'. For Butler, the concern is with how vulnerability is unequally distributed across different groups and within different spaces (Butler 2004a, 2009). The idea of 'social precarity' has been developed from Butler's (2004) work and used as an analytical frame to understand the social conditions required to make 'life livable'. A central core of Butler's (2004) work is the question of what constitutes 'livability'. Butler (2004, p. 39) states that 'when we ask what makes a life liveable, we are asking about certain normative conditions that must be fulfilled for life to become life'. Within this configuration, precariousness is a condition of an unlivable life, which creates the conditions that can exacerbate the effects of social precarity.

To examine the temporal challenges of securing a typically precarious first post in higher education, we now examine the participants' descriptions of the supervisory relationship and draw on the concepts of mentorship and sponsorship to characterise the support they had received.

Describing the supervisory relationship: Mentorship and sponsorship

The supervisory relationship was described in different ways ranging from very positive and highly supportive to negative and unsupported. Frank (all names in use in this article are pseudonyms) was a good example of a participant who identified mentorship as the approach he had experienced. He described the supervisory relationship as 'mentorship rather than sponsorship. It wasn't very hands on where they say, "I've seen this position, I think you might be interested in it, can you apply for this and that, send it to me and I'll do this and that". It was more of, "I'm here, if you need anything"'. Thus, the support was less proactive and more reactive. Frank felt supported, but he had to seek out opportunities at the point of transition into his first academic post. Based on the definition above, Grace similarly reported a mentoring relationship: 'I found perhaps the wording of the first one [mentor definition] was more relatable and that guidance, advice and someone to talk things through with and sort of yeah the advice/counsel side, that seemed to relate more to how we work together definitely.' Mentors here provided a helping hand and strategic counsel useful to navigating higher education. Sometimes this support extended well beyond the supervisory period as with Jade who told us 'I would have said it was mentorship rather than sponsorship. But I feel like some of that mentorship wasn't just for the PhD, so I still have a good relationship with my supervisors now'.

Student participants were asked if they had experienced sponsorship, which we suggested in earlier work could be guided in part by perceived class, raced or gender allegiances, as well as being a 'pleasurable exchange for both parties.' In our sample several participants described experiencing sponsorship into the first academic post, sometimes extending well beyond the completion of the PhD, as in the case of Alice:

> And I think that's where my supervisors have been instrumental. They're always giving me work, always giving me opportunities that will look good on my CV, so that when the point comes where a job goes up that I want, I've already gathered the experience. But it does sometimes feel unfair. But the other side of that is that I am hugely grateful to my supervisors, because they don't have to. They don't have any obligations to me anymore, they've done their jobs. They are still supporting me post-PhD to try and get ... You know, I send articles to them, and they review them for me and send them back still, and I finished a year and a half ago.

Karen also benefited from support that went well beyond reasonable expectations of the supervisory relationship,

> So, sponsorship, the latter, probably – and your definition of it – more appropriately captures the level of support … it's been above and beyond I think what is required of a supervisor or mentor. I think they've really taken me under their wing in a different way … And I think what's evolved has been more in line with sponsorship … because it's so much more than a PhD.

The support discussed by Alice and Karen eased their transition into their first post-PhD positions. Karen explained that she received help from her supervisory team with publishing, teaching together and help with her post-doctoral applications. She obtained a post-doctoral position whilst completing her PhD, making her shift to early career research one of the more secure and straightforward transitions amongst our sample.

In contrast, Evie described the support she had received as 'more towards sponsorship' but that the support faded away, in part due to the temporal pressures experienced by her supervisors to develop their own academic profiles. She explained that 'the other one had a couple of suggestions, but also is insanely busy, and took on a kind of administrative role within research, on top of her lectureship and everything. So yeah, it just kind of fizzled out'. Evie's experience represents that of several of our participants' who noted that their more junior supervisors (lecturers and senior lecturers) needed to build their own expertise, whilst helping and developing their students' opportunities. Such a sentiment was reflected by Stella, who acknowledged that her supervisor was under pressure due to her own status:

> She is really in the grind herself. She's a lecturer, she's not that senior, she's just trying to publish and teach and have young children and commute. So I feel like there's definitely an element where there wasn't a lot of time for her to do everything she really wanted to.

For Nick, the support also ceased once he had completed his PhD and he felt let down by his supervisors and institution:

> No [support from supervisor post PhD], …I'm quite disappointed in not just that relationship but the school really, that there's been what I would call a lack of aftercare really, there's been a real absence of any kind of contact or working relationship really which is a bit disappointing.

These examples confirm that aspects of short-termism are commonplace in UK higher education and that not all supervisors are equally placed to support their doctoral students against the effects of social precarity due to their own precarious institutional position (Leathwood & Read 2020). The temporal pressures embedded within higher education around the need for staff to regularly publish, bid for research funding and ensure impact and knowledge exchange, alongside their teaching and supervisory commitments, can contribute to an environment that perpetuates and reinforces inequality in terms of the support they can provide to doctoral students. Such conditions, we argue, intensify the opportunity for social precarity to grow, with consequences for the liveability of life for those at the junior career level (Butler 2004).

The pressure to maintain different areas of academic responsibility that span teaching, research, supervision, administration, knowledge exchange and impact are differently experienced by academics depending on their seniority. Our participants' experiences draw attention to the variation in supervisory relationships, with more senior academics better placed to ease their doctoral students into academic posts. This finding raises questions about the sustainability of academic cultures and practices that reduce doctoral supervision and any subsequent support to a neoliberal box ticking exercise for institutions, seeking to maximise the capacity of academic staff.

Political projects, finding affinities

To build on the idea of sponsorship, we argue here that an element of who gets sponsored and how sponsorship is enacted, is in part driven by a political project with an explicit or implicit commitment from supervisors to those with whom they have affinities on the basis of identity. We use the term 'political project' to capture the sense of connection and belonging that may form between supervisor and supervisee along the lines of social class, gender and ethnicity. Supervisory relationships enacted along the lines of a political project are framed and expressed in our research in individualised terms of elective affinities, despite clear evidence that these intellectual and social affinities develop on the basis of gender, class and race, as discussed elsewhere (Moreau et al. 2022).

In this section, we focus on the doctoral students' perceptions that they were, or were not, part of a political project to their supervisors, and consider if they perceive they had been supported based on a classed, gendered or raced affinity. Several of our students did express these sorts of sentiments when reflecting on the breadth and depth of the support that they received:

> Can you say love?! … The relationship that I've developed with my supervisors over the three years of the PhD – so one year beforehand, the master's year, and then a year subsequent – it's just been really special, and I feel really fortunate to have met these two wise and kind and pragmatic academics. It's terrific. And it's really grown and changed during that time as well, and now I think I've finished this kind of postdoc year, with me as an ongoing colleague. (Karen)

> Yeah, the support from supervisors here, and I think this is something that everybody else has found as well, has been really, really good. As far as I'm aware from speaking to other people, I know that supervisory support can really vary and we are, I've been extremely well supported. My primary supervisor … has been excellent, we have a really good relationship. (Toby)

> I was incredibly lucky. I love both my supervisors … I think my supervisors gave me a really good model of you don't have to be hard-nosed and competitive in academia. You can be collegiate and supportive and caring. And I think in the context of such a hyper neo-liberal academy, that's really important to hang on to, that not everybody has to be bastard. (Rachel)

In these three examples, the support provided by supervisors to their students constitutes, in part, a classed political project, even when the relationship is presented by participants in individualised terms as a meeting of minds. All of these self-identified white, middle-class

participants had similarly self-identified white, middle-class supervisors. But it might also represent an affinity, a connection and a sense of belonging with those who share similar identity markers. There were potentially gender allegiances too as Karen and Rachel were supervised by women and Toby was supervised by men. Both Karen and Rachel used the word 'love' to describe their feelings towards their supervisors, an indication of the warmth, trust and support that formed the basis of the relationship. Since completing her doctorate, Karen reported the relationship has 'continued to be really great. We've worked together on many projects'. Rachel also worked as a research assistant on several of her supervisor's projects.

Toby reflected on his supervisor's ongoing support and said that he 'is very good at providing that kind of support and going out to bat for you in those kinds of circles as well', referring to the internal posts that come up. Whilst Toby was planning on a move to a different institution, he noted the potential for a job at his current university was not impossible, even though he was concerned about the perception of 'nepotism' from other students. His concerns are well-founded when we consider that according to Wheatley (2016), a vast majority of British workers believe that nepotism exists within the workplace and 60 per cent have witnessed discriminatory favouritism in the workplace, further intensifying the effects of social precarity. Gilani (2020) argues that the role of universities is to challenge nepotism by building up all students' networks, thus supporting them to all compete on a more level footing than currently exists

These examples represent many of the experiences we noted across our sample. Given the competitive, neoliberal pressures of higher education in the UK, it is perhaps not surprising that supervisors, particularly those who are more established academics, choose to select and support those students whose values, identities and subjectivities match their own (Trowler 2022).

Spotting talent

The final theme we discuss here, which is related to the idea of political projects that rest on some kind of affinity between supervisors and students, is the idea of spotting potential talent. There was a perception amongst some of our participants that their supervisors were often spotting talent when deciding upon which students to supervise, not dissimilar in this to some of the findings of Ingram and Allen's study about the 'pre-hiring' practices of graduate employers (2018) In our data, we identified that 'spotting talent' referred to working with those students who are good writers, who are academically successful and who are relatively self-propelling, as these are attributes that are desirable commodities in academia. Some examples from the data include Evie, who told us:

> I think they saw that I produced good work quite early on, and basically weren't worried about me [laughs]. So there would be times when I didn't see them for four or five months like when I was doing field work. They just were like, "You get on with it and we'll see you when you're done." When I was writing as well, I would just email them a chapter once a month. That was when I saw them the most actually, was when I was writing, because I was producing quite a lot of work, and basically forcing them to read it and meet with me. They were supportive, but there was certainly no hand-holding, let's put it that way.

> It's incredibly supportive, but not overbearing. I think everybody, when they're doing a PhD, thinks that they can do four or five PhDs in one. I was always given the space to figure out what I wanted to do without having one particular aspect pushed at me. (Alice)

> I have had and continue to have a really good relationship with my supervisor. He's quite I would say hands-off as supervisor in that he gives you a lot of independence to develop your own ideas … I was already quite an independent minded person, so our relationship works very well because I go and do stuff and then every now and then I say, "Hey is this okay?" Whereas I know that some people come into a PhD maybe needing a little more direct support and I don't know, I mean I have met and talked to others of his students of course but partly they, you develop as a PhD student partly in relationship to what your supervisor does, right? So, we all became very independent thinkers because that's kind of what he assumes you're going to do, "You go and think about this and then come back and we'll talk about it. Yeah, I think it took me probably a few months to really get used to having that level of trust in my work and I can imagine it might be challenging for some people. (Simon)

This 'light touch approach' to supervision by these participant's supervisors has fallen through the gaps of accountability regimes that seek to prescribe the regularity and expectations of supervisory meetings. As Davis (2020, p. 1120) points out, many universities in the Global North have attempted to address the problem of 'negligent' doctoral supervisors identified by the Robbins Report (1963, p. 105) by 'instituting codes of appropriate conduct and professional development programmes to assist new and existing staff members to shape their supervisory behaviour'. Yet despite these efforts, so called negligent supervisors 'remain the elephant in the room' (Davis 2020, p. 1121).

However, it is also noteworthy that many supervisors in both post- and pre-1992 institutions in the UK will experience significant institutional pressure to ensure doctoral supervisory completions within ever shrinking timeframes (Green & Bowden 2012). As Green and Bowden (2012) note, this pressure for timely completions is a key driver in the quest for university funding and generates significant pressure for supervisors and students. Our study highlights that one response to this pressure is for supervisors to work with those students who have well worked out research proposals and who are capable of working under their own initiative, with minimal intervention and demands placed on the supervisory team. Such an approach raises questions about the future possibilities of widening participation agendas at doctoral level as all of our participants reported in this section are White and middle-class. In contrast, the students from working-class and minority ethnic backgrounds in our study all benefited from frequent and supportive supervisory meetings.

Discussion

Over 20 years ago, Johnson and colleagues noted how '[m]ore private than any other scene of teaching and learning, supervision and more generally, the pedagogic practices of the PhD – in the humanities and social sciences at least, have remained largely unscrutinised and unquestioned. Yet the supervision relationship is often fraught and unsatisfactory – as much marked by neglect, abandonment and indifference as it is by careful instruction or the positive and proactive exercise of pastoral power' (2000, p. 136).

The practices we identified would not fit Reimer's model of the pedagogy of 'magisterial disdain' (Riemer 1998) which Johnson and colleagues discuss at length, nor are they strictly determined by more recent trends in doctoral education policies that monitor students' progress and hold institutions accountable through sets of indicators that often fail to capture the diversity

of learners. Rather, this article highlights how pedagogic practices of the PhD (understood broadly) are characterised by a high level of diversity.

In particular, we show how the transition from doctoral research to early career academics is greatly eased by supportive and well-connected supervisors through practices of mentoring and, to an even greater extent, sponsoring (Hoskins 2012). There are uneven patterns of support provided by supervisory teams, despite efforts in UK institutions to regulate expectations around doctoral supervision support. The production of inequalities of support and, ultimately, outcomes is rendered legitimate through various discursive mechanisms of doctoral supervision (for example, elective affinities and talent potting). For some students, support encompassed help with establishing a publications profile, access to research posts and teaching opportunities, and access to informal and formal supervisor networks. For others, the support was piecemeal, conflicted within the supervisory team and even discouraging. Some supervisors were engaged from the outset of the process and supported students well beyond completion of the PhD, in some instances even becoming colleagues in teaching and research. For others, they lost all contact with their supervisors once the contractual obligations of fulfilling a PhD had been met. Participants perceived that this happened in part because their supervisor was grappling with their own precarity and insecurity in relation to their own employment and occupational status in the academy.

Conclusion

In sum, a key aim of our research involved exploring how privileges and inequities play out in how ECRs tell their stories. Our analysis highlights how our participants embody privileges and equity in distinct ways. The reproduction of these privileges simultaneously depends on the institution and on gender, class and ethnicity, for example students who are privileged (White, male, middle-class) are more likely to use the idea of talent spotting to describe their supervisory relationship. The differences we noted centred around the provision for doctoral students within the dynamics of the supervisory team. There were very mixed experiences as might be expected. To make sense of the divergent experiences, we developed the concepts of sponsorship and mentorship. Those participants who felt most supported and perceived a more straightforward transition into academia, identified sponsorship from their supervisor(s).

As claimed by Johnson and colleagues, 'the historically produced relations of power and desire between the academic and student are complexly bound up with the production and experience of, and the investment in, "independence"' (Johnson et al. 2000, p. 136–7). Yet, as the doctoral population has diversified, the figure of the care-free, masculine, elite doctoral student body able to embrace a discourse of timeliness continues to be invoked. This calls for supervisors and institutions to be vigilant as per how power operates through discourses and practices which favour some scholars and exclude others.

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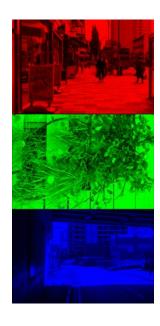
Precarious entanglements

Andrew Brown

It is a real pleasure to be invited to make a visual contribution to this special edition of Access. The images were selected, through discussion with Julia Shaw, for their resonances with the themes discussed and in the hope that they would make a distinct contribution to the overall impact of the arguments made by the contributors. Given the Editor's aim to explore social precarity 'seen through a spatial and/or temporal lens' (Read 2023, p.1), it is particularly apposite to present the papers alongside lens-based images.

All except two of the images here are from my Entangled Ilford (2022) series. This series was produced for a competitive commission to produce artwork for the 50-metre-long hoardings around a ten-floor derelict furniture store in Ilford, on the eastern outskirts of London. Each of the nine images in the series is composed from three photographs taken at the same place at the same time: one of street activity, one of urban nature and one of the changing built environment. Over a period of two weeks, I walked north to south and west to east across the central district of the town, stopping at intervals to make the three photographs. The intent in each case was, through a process known as channel mixing, to produce a final image that is intelligible from a distance but with closer inspection reveals a variety of scales and the entanglement of everyday activity with the natural and built environment at a time of instability and flux. The images are presented alongside their constituent red, blue and green photographs.

The work emphasises the spacio-temporal in being made in a particular place for public display and engagement in that place, and by juxtaposing elements of the landscape which unfold in time at different paces. Ilford grew from a small village to a metropolitan town in the nineteenth century, and thrived in the second industrial revolution, becoming home to manufacturers of pharmaceuticals, electronics and chemicals, including the Ilford Ltd photographic materials company, all with global aspirations and with both a blue- and white-collar workforce. Ilford entered decline with the Thatcherite shift of the British economy from material to symbolic production, and a particular emphasis on financial services. In 1966, the nightclub on the top floor of the furniture store was chosen by Bobby Moore, captain of the England soccer team, as the venue for celebration of their World Cup victory. Now, the building, derelict for a decade, is no more than a concrete shell, casting its shadow over a faded town centre which bears the scars of successive waves of piecemeal and unsuccessful re-development. The place itself both signifies the ebb and flow of civic fortune in an unstable economic environment and provides a context for socially precarious and financially insecure lives to be played out across one of the most culturally diverse populations in the UK. The images are an attempt to convey something of the entanglement and inter-dependence of human activity with the affordances and vicissitudes of the built and natural environments. They are a product of, and exist within, the 'wider social world' with which the heterotopia of Higher Education has, as Barbara Read states in the introduction, a complex relationship, evoking what, for staff and students, lies outside shaping and shaped by the 'dream space' of higher education (Morris & Rowell 2023, p.9).

Time and space are also explored through the lens in the image Song and Dance. This is a still image from an animation which juxtaposes long-exposure near infra-red images with a field-recording made at a particular place (the interchange on a busy shopping street) at a particular time (dusk, as the sound of birds gathering in the tree canopy above compete with and eventually overwhelm the sounds of human activity below). The camera records the interweaving of humans in motion from what cannot be seen (reflected infra-red radiation) and at a pace that reveals sway and pivot in our motion around each other. The final image also draws attention to the effects of the apparatuses through which we engage with the world, in this case a simple camera obscura made from a cardboard box and a plastic lens, wedged in the window of my studio. Resonating with Read's discussion of the university as heterotopia, the precarious device presents an inverted image of the world outside, suggesting contextualisation and relationality, but not determination.

My own working life has been predominantly within the heterotopia of Higher Education, having joined the University of London Institute of Education (now a faculty of UCL) as a temporary contract primary teacher educator following several years of primary and secondary school teaching in London. My initial decision to become a teacher was itself a response to financial insecurity and social precarity. My intention had been to study for a masters in photography in London, but, as the first in my family to stay in education beyond the compulsory school leaving age, and without the requisite confidence and financial support, teaching, at least in the short term, seemed to offer a more secure path. It took me 45 years to find my way back to that particular fork in the road.

Cover Image and thumbnail: Andrew Brown, 2022, Ilford High Road, Composite Photographs, Entangled Ilford.

Installation photograph by David Mirzoeff, 2022.

Andrew Brown is an artist and educator based at SPACE Studios in east London. He uses analogue, digital, alternative and historic photographic processes alongside soundscapes, documents and objects to explore the impact on communities of rapid changes in the built and natural environment. Recent commissions include SPACE/Aetreum, UP projects and the Arts Council England, and collaborative work with the River Roding Trust, East London Textile Arts, Humorisk CIC and Thames Ward Community Project. Following a career in education, he studied photography at Falmouth University and is now working towards a Doctorate in Fine Art at the University of East London. He is Emeritus Professor of Education and Society at the Institute of Education, University College London and Honorary Professor at the Centre of Excellence in Equity in Higher Education, University of Newcastle, Australia.

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