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Is neoliberalism costing us knowledge creation at post-92 institutions?

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Abstract:

This developmental paper explores the sustainability of the current workload at post-92 universities and its effect on the career progression of academics as well as on the knowledge creation in the UK higher education sector.

The semi-structured interviews revealed themes of unrealistic workload allocation models, heavy teaching workloads and disproportionate administrative burden compared to academics from research-intensive institutions. This has been shown to prevent academics employed at post-92 institutions from conducting research.

Additionally, by employing an intersectional lens the study further revealed that migrant academics and those with caring responsibilities face additional hardships when looking to be research active in their mainly teaching roles.

Following the initial stages, the project intends to explore the raised issues in more depth, as well as to expand its reach to include participants from across more UK universities. This will be done in order to evaluate their experiences of the identified themes and to gauge their proposed solutions.

In the long term, the project seeks to develop a blueprint for sustainable solutions towards improving research opportunities for academic colleagues employed at post-92 institutions who wish to be research active, without them being forced to choose between creating original knowledge and their private lives.

Keywords: *mid-career academics; post-92 institutions; research; teaching; workload*

Track: Knowledge and Learning

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1. Introduction

"Post-1992 universities", also known as "new universities" or "modern universities", refer to the former polytechnics, central institutions or colleges of higher education that were created or restructured in the UK after the passage of the Further and Higher Education Act 1992.

Post-92 institutions are generally characterised by their focus on vocational and professional training, and their emphasis on partnerships with industry and commerce. They often offer more practical, career-oriented courses than traditional universities, and are more likely to be located in urban areas. Modern universities have been established with the aim of increasing access to higher education, improving research, and promoting innovation (HEFCE, 2016). And over the years have played a significant role in knowledge creation across the country (HEFCE, 2016; Hillage and Graham, 2006).

The current academic landscape in the UK is shaped by the ideology of neoliberalism, which has been adopted by many post-92 institutions (Harvey, 2005). This ideology places a strong emphasis on the marketisation of education, which has led to a focus on profit over the pursuit of knowledge (Giroux, 2014). As a result, there is a growing concern that neoliberalism is costing us knowledge creation at post-92 institutions (Marginson, 2016).

Another key aspect of neoliberalism in UK academia has been the increasing use of metrics and performance indicators to measure research quality and productivity (Heller, 2021) and implementation of frameworks such as the Research Excellence Framework (REF) and the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF). Critics argue that prioritising quantifiable outputs over the quality of research and teaching and can be detrimental to academic freedom and creativity (Burrows, 2012).

Neoliberalism has further influenced the governance and management of universities in the UK. Many universities have adopted a corporate-style governance, with a focus on efficiency, cost-cutting, and profit-making often at the cost of staff experiences (Marginson, 2016).

2. Literature review

The implementation of neoliberal policies and their impact on post-92 institutions have raised questions about the ability of academics to engage in research while also fulfilling heavy teaching workloads and dealing with disproportionate administrative burdens (Fumasoli et al., 2015; Tight, 2010). In today's business-oriented environment, academics are expected to meet the ever-increasing student expectations and operate in a culture of audit and increased accountability (Giroux, 2014). A key consequence of the neoliberal transformation of higher education is the reorientation of universities towards a focus on market-driven outcomes rather than the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake (Marginson, 2016). As a result, academic roles and academic workloads have changed significantly over the past decades. A ten-year comparison conducted in a Canadian academic setting revealed that between 2007 and 2017 the academic workload increased significantly and that academic activities are continuously more evaluated (Nakano et al., 2021). According to Blackmore and Kandiko Howson (2015), academics face various challenges in managing their workloads, including increasing expectations for research productivity, administrative tasks, teaching responsibilities, and limited time for personal and professional development. Observing the UK settings, Tight (2010) confirmed that the workloads have indeed increased across all academia. However, the academic staff at post-92 institutions have been disproportionately

affected with most of their added workloads coming in the form of administrative demands. Understandably, the UK HE institutions addressed the increase in workload in line with neoliberal managerial principles to safeguard effective and efficient allocation of resources by implementing Work allocation models (WAMs) (Adair, et al., 2019).

When it comes to understanding the impact of WAMs on academic staff, research has been conducted on how different workload models affect faculty members' perceptions of their professional identity and their teaching practices (Kandiko Howson, 2016); how institutions allocate workload (James and Baldwin, 2016) and into creating a framework for a good WAM ensuring the implementation of different skills and expertise of individual academics, the workload requirements of different academic programs, and the institution's strategic goals (Firth and Diment, 2016;).

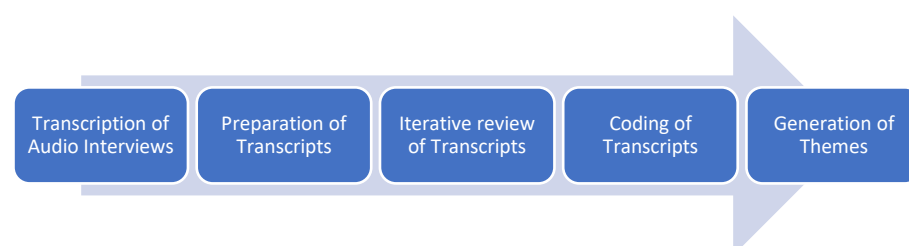
However, the everyday reality remained under-researched, particularly for mid-career academics at post-92 institutions, and this is the gap this research seeks to fill.

3. Methodology

The initial study focussed on identifying of barriers and facilitators to career progression amongst mid-career STEM academics.

However, mid-career academics were defined based on the length of the service in academia rather than their achieved position or quantifiable outputs. According to majority of funding grants an academic ceases to be eligible for an early career research grants 5-8 years after completing their PhD. Regarding 8 years post-doctorate as the starting point of mid-career academia and adding the same amount of time for the duration of mid-career stage, the mid-career academics were for the purpose of this study defined as those who have completed their doctorates 8 to 16 years prior.

Participants were recruited via non-probability purposive sampling (Vehovar, et al., 2016) to ensure a varied population. And data was collected using semi-structured interviews that were audio recorded. The collected data was analysed according to Creswell's (2013) five step process outlined in the figure below in order to generate themes.



The experiences of participants were also considered using an emic intersectional lens (Tatli, and Özbilgin, 2016). Emic intersectionality focuses on the experiences and perspectives of individuals belonging to a particular group, while etic intersectionality analyses broader societal structures and power dynamics that contribute to inequality. By utilising an emic approach that draws on Bourdieuan concepts such as habitus and field, researchers can gain a detailed and nuanced understanding of diversity in the workplace. Emic intersectionality allows researchers to explore how individuals navigate multiple identities and how these identities intersect and interact with organisational structures and

culture. In contrast, etic intersectionality looks at how broader societal structures such as racism, sexism, and heteronormativity shape individuals' experiences and opportunities.

33 participants were recruited from 3 post-92 institutions. Breakdown of participants can be seen in the table below.

Total participants N=33	Institution 1 N1=15	Institution 2 N2=10	Institution 3 N3=8
	Female N=14		Male N=19
	BAME N=17		White N=16

4. Preliminary findings

The initial analysis revealed that out of 33 participants, 17 mid-career STEM academics employed at post-92 institutions identified heavy workloads and unrealistic workload allocation models as the main barriers to their career progression. Furthermore, an excessive burden of administrative duties that had to be prioritised over research activities was highlighted in 29 out of 33 conducted interviews. The participants also agreed with Tights' (2010) statements that post-92 academics are expected to carry out more administrative tasks than their peers from research-intensive institutions.

“Coming from one of the top research-focused universities to a post-92 institution was a big change. The current institution is very much teaching focused with loads of admin.” (Reader, male)

Whilst another went on to support the findings of Nakano et al. (2021) who claim that academic workloads are getting heavier overall.

“How can you compare it in terms of workload? In comparison with peers from the Red Brick institutions we do a lot more teaching, and as a result of that, the research expectations are lower. I think if I compared my teaching load of 12 years ago to that of somebody starting today in the same position, I think they're doing a lot more, which obviously affects their research potential as well.” (Reader, male)

The interviews further revealed that 30 out of 33 participants were interested in conducting their own research. However, when discussing the unrealistic work allocation models and how these affect their ability to produce research, the participants felt that pursuing a career at a post-92 institution is becoming increasingly unmanageable and undesirable (Mondokova et al., 2022).

“You don't get enough time in your workload allocation model. You get something silly like 50 hours for each year. And many of us had spent those 50 hours in the first two months. So afterwards even though your workload doesn't show it, you are doing a lot more work just to make sure that the students are happy, the course is running well, quality assurance, timetabling, all the concerns, queries, all the meetings!” (Female associate professor)

“I'm currently working 150% of what is normally allowed. 150% is not realistic! So they give you for example, 150 hours per year for the course leader role. That in itself is not realistic at all. I spent at least 800 per year on the course leadership alone! I can hardly cope with my current workload. There's no time for research at all.” (female senior lecturer)

Furthermore, using an emic approach to intersectionality (Tatli and Ozbilgin, 2012) allowed participants to divulge as much information about their identities as they felt comfortable, without looking out for pre-determined categories. This emergent approach to analysis uncovered that those with caring responsibilities are even further penalised by the neoliberal managerial system and those at the intersection of caring responsibilities and migration are particularly victimised.

“I'm not just a mother. I'm an immigrant mother. In fact we are both immigrants and therefore we don't have any family around us. if I have to take a day off for a sick child, the marking that I didn't do on that day, I have to do the next day. And so I have twice as much work to do on the day I am back. So you can only imagine what happens with three days off, a sick child, and having just two days to do 5 days worth of work because no one else takes on your workload.” (Lecturer, married mother of young twins)

The findings thus far show that the workload in post-92 institutions is something that needs to be re-evaluated for the benefit of all staff. Nevertheless, there is also a highlighted need for the use of an intersectional lens when developing solutions to ensure that no academic gets left behind.

5. Conclusions

Despite being employed on mainly teaching contracts, mid-career academics employed at post-92 institutions are determined to participate in knowledge creation by conducting their own research. Unfortunately, their ability to conduct research continues to be hampered by the excessive administrative workload they face compared to their peers from research-intensive universities. Many of the post-92 academics are currently choosing to use much of their personal time for research activities, compromising their work-life balance and relationships. However, whilst this is not a sustainable long-term solution for anyone, even this is not an option available to all academics. Those with caring responsibilities and particularly migrant academics who live far away from their friends and families, and are therefore unable to rely on their support, are unable to utilise their personal time in this way. The act of granting post-92 institutions university statuses was intended to enable the staff of these institutions to create research that was not been previously produced at the traditional universities. However, unless something changes, with the ever-increasing teaching and administrative workload modern university academics will be able to contribute less and less.

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