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Precarious, Always-On and Flexible: A Case Study of Academics as Information Workers

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Abstract

The higher education landscape has changed in the last decades. The neoliberal restructuring of universities has led to transformations such as reducing public expenditure, allocating resources based on competition and quasi-market disciplines. These structural transformations have also an effect on the working conditions, practices and relations of subjects within universities. Questions that need to be addressed: How do different working contexts and conditions in the academia shape feelings of autonomy, flexibility and reputation on the one hand and precariousness, overwork and dissatisfaction on the other? What are the broader political realities and potentials in terms of solidarity, participation and democracy at universities? I address these questions based on a theoretical analysis and qualitative interviews with precariously employed academics.

1. Introduction

It is often argued that we have now reached a societal stage that could only be claimed as a possibility so far: a knowledge-based society depending on the brains of human beings and the social intellect (Dyer-Withford, 2005: 73; Bulut, 2011: 161). The brain has become an important force in the information society (Webster, 2002: 29). There has been an intensification and extension of informational goods being based on knowledge, ideas, communication, relationships, emotional artefacts and cultural content in the last decades of capitalist production. A fundamental cornerstone of this information and knowledge is created and shared by academics at higher education institutions. Universities thus play a fundamentally central role in the knowledge-based economy and information society. The realm of academia is a specific subsystem of the information and knowledge sector. Academic work is a specific form of information work producing and distributing academic knowledge, skills and practices. Because culture entails information work, creating content and communication, academics can be considered as cultural workers (Gill, 2014: 12). In sum, academic work is part of informational work that is part of cultural work. 'Artistic and academic traditions extol sacrificial concepts of mental or cultural labour that are increasingly vital to newly important sectors of the knowledge industries' (Ross, 2000: 2).

However, the economic, political and cultural transformations of universities in the recent decades have attracted criticism. This is also reflected in a growing academic literature investigating those changes in the context of neoliberalism, globalisation and the rise in interweaving private and public providers. Within universities, a new entrepreneurial and

managerial spirit has emerged that has resulted in the implementation of market-driven rules and competition (Deem et al., 2007). It is argued that educational institutions nowadays aim to respond to market demands on an international level, whereby the public character of education – education that is funded by the state and offered to society – tends to fade away (Peters, 2003). HE institutions compete on a global market for international students (McGettigan, 2013: 117). Critical scholars speak about ‘academic capitalism’ (Slaughter and Leslie, 1999), the ‘corporate university’ (Giroux, 2002) and ‘Uber.edu’ (Hall, 2016). These structural transformations have had an effect on the working conditions, practices and relations of subjects and result in, to name but a few, the intensification and extension of work, the blurring of work and free time, casualisation, precariousness, self-exploitation and self-marketing. How these conditions are experienced by different subjects is open to debate. While the experiences of work in other sectors such as the cultural and creative industries are well documented, there is still a lack of understanding labouring subjectivities in academia as well as a lack of analysis how the existing conditions are experienced by academics (Gill, 2014: 12-3).

Questions that need to be addressed in this context include but are not limited to: How do different working contexts and conditions in the academia shape feelings of autonomy, flexibility and reputation on the one hand and precariousness, overwork and dissatisfaction on the other? How do new information and communication technologies frame the working conditions of academics? How are the effects upon the quality of pedagogical practice perceived? What are the broader political realities and potentials in terms of solidarity, participation and democracy at universities?

I address these questions based on a theoretical analysis and qualitative interviews with academics who are employed precariously at higher education institutions in Scotland. In doing so, the theoretical foundations of academic labour, digital media and the political and economic context of higher education are outlined in the next section. Section three provides the methodology of the empirical research conducted, before the findings of the study are presented and discussed along working conditions, digital media, impact on teaching and research and politics and potential change of higher education in section four. The article concludes with a summary and further implications of the study.

2. Theoretical Foundations

As indicated above, the higher education landscape has changed in the last decades. One of the most obvious changes is the expansion in terms of providers, student population and university staff in absolute numbers. Considering Scotland as an example, 232,570 (part- and full-time, under- and postgraduate, national and international) students were enrolled in the academic year 2014/2015. In contrast, 223,530 people studied in Scotland in 2006/2007 and 163,519 people in 1996/1997. This is an increase of 36.7 per cent from 1996 to 2006 and a further increase of 4.0 per cent from 2006 to 2014. One of the main drivers of this expansion is the internationalisation of the higher education sector. 50,015 international students (other European Union and non-European Union students) study at one of the 19 higher education institutions in Scotland. Considering the postgraduates separately, 40.7 per cent of the students come from outside the UK. 19,250 (part- and full-time) academics, 10,515 academic ‘atypical staff’ and 23,650 non-academic staff are employed at Scottish universities. Almost two-thirds (64.9 per cent) of them work in the

major cities Edinburgh and Glasgow (all data for the academic year 2014/2015: Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2016).

According to Giddens (1981: 64) and Bourdieu (1977: 4), social phenomena are characterised by a mutual relationship of social structures and social actors. Social structures can be understood as institutionalised relationships that enable and constraint the individual. Social actors can be understood as human individuals that act within and might react on social structures. Social phenomena consist of social structures enabling and constraining social actors that react upon social structures. Academic work is also characterised by a mutual relationship of social structures and social actors; or speaking more specifically, of form and content. The social structure and form of academic work can be understood as the political, economic and cultural context of universities. This includes political power relations, the economic structure and cultural hegemony of academic labour and to see universities as institutions within capitalism. These structures do have an enabling and constraining effect on academics. Structures enable academics in the sense that they make possible work in the first place. For example, universities provide employment contracts and material resources and thereby making possible academic work conducted by individuals. But contracts and resources are limited in many ways and thus also constrain individuals and academic work. The social actors can be understood as human individuals conducting academic work resulting in academic content. This includes the academic as subject creating a certain outcome of academic knowledge, skills and practices, the analysis and assurance of the quality and values of this outcome and the pedagogical impact. Social actors might react on social structures within universities. Social structures are the historical outcome of struggles and thus changeable to a certain extent. For example, salary bargaining, reduced workloads, additional resources, new staff etc. are possible reactions of academics to the social structure within universities. These new social structures again have an effect on individuals. Academic work is thus a permanent process of social structures enabling and constraining individuals that react upon social structures. Yet, Winn (2015: 1-2) argues that there is a tendency within the existing literature to focus on the content of academic practice, values of as well as teaching and assessment in higher education, concerns with identity and what it subjectively means to be an academic. Such a focus is one-sided, undialectical, leaves out the political economy of higher education and critical engagement of capitalism. Bringing back the relationship between the political-economic context and the academic as worker within academic labour studies is the focus of this paper. The distinction between form and content of academic labour is related to the distinction between relations and forces of production. Both the content of academic work and productive forces consider the particular production process and the form of academic work and relations of production take into account the social context of this process. Talking about the content and omitting the form of academic work is similarly as problematic as talking about specific forms of the organisation of the productive forces, cumulated in terms such as 'information society' or 'network society', and omitting questions of the relations of production with regard to ownership, power and division of labour.

The question how academics experience their working conditions is an empirical one. Several authors have already conducted empirical work in this context. For example, Prichard and Willmott (1997: 313-4) ran 36 interviews with senior post holders such as chancellors, heads and deans at 4 pre- and post-1992 universities in the UK about their

experiences, consequences and changes of work. Archer (2008: 269) conducted eight semi-structured interviews with early-career academics at different universities in England about their identities and experiences in higher education. Deem et al. (2007: 33) realised a large-scale project about managerialism, management practices and organisational forms at universities in the UK between 1998 and 2000. The authors carried out in phase one 12 focus group discussions with academics, managers and administrators, in phase two 137 qualitative interviews with manager-academics and 29 senior administrators in 16 pre- and post-1992 universities and in phase three interviews with employees from manual workers to staff at four universities. The study presented here wants to contribute to this discourse by focusing on academics who are employed precariously at higher education institutions in Scotland.

One important aspect of an academic employment contract is its permanent/open-ended or temporary character. Many different forms of temporalities exist; including fixed-term, hourly paid and zero hour contracts. A tendency of casualisation and temporality of employment characterises higher education in the UK. According to the Higher Education Statistics Agency (2016), 128,300 permanent/open-ended and 70,035 fixed-term academic staff worked at universities in the UK in the academic year 2014/2015. On top of that, there were 75,560 academic atypical staff in the same year. Summing up those on a fixed-term contract and the academic atypical staff means that the majority (53.2 per cent) work on a temporary basis in UK higher education. Casualisation allows the university to test the performance of the academic, strengthens Darwinian selection, reduces labour costs and gives the opportunity to respond quickly to changes on the education market in order to deal with low and high peaks of demand (Bryson and Barnes, 2000: 193). The amount of staff needed also depends on how successful a university is in terms of marketing and attracting students for the upcoming academic year. Universities compete with each other on a market of potential new students. Casualisation of academic staff can thus be considered as an outcome of applying quasi-market, neoliberal rules at higher education institutions. 'The university could never be sure about enrolments size or profitability; it had to remain forever poised to take action, to stimulate enrolment, to cut costs, to keep growing. The permanent flexibility this required meant that the staff had to be proletarianized and stratified into temporary part-time workers, permanent teachers and permanent researchers' (Shumar, 1995: 94). Pratt (1997) highlights that employing part-time and fixed-term staff at universities has become a management strategy. Those working at a new university, are on research only contracts, work part-time, have up to five years work experience, are female and under the age of 40 as well as non-white and non-European are most likely to be on temporary contracts (Bryson and Barnes, 2000: 209). Temporary contracts tend to have an impact on the employee's economic security and control, exclusion from the department, relationship with other colleagues and lack of opportunity for career development and promotion (Bryson and Barnes, 2000: 217). Gulli (2009: 5) highlights that the expansion of temporary staff is typical for the neoliberal discourse as it brings flexibility to the university at the cost of individual insecurity that can lead to anxiety, disruption, stigmatisation and loss of dignity. A contradiction between inclusion and exclusion characterises the employment of temporary staff as it is much needed and included in economic terms, but tends to be invisible and exposed and therefore excluded in social and political terms. Tirelli (1999) therefore stresses that casual contracts lead to labour segmentations within the academic workforce leading to increased

hierarchies and potential of conflict. Neoliberal universities tend to decrease the number of established and respected permanent staff and increase the number of relatively powerless temporary staff. From a trade union point of view, casualisation brings also political changes that advantages the management and weakens the academic workforce. 'Faced with a restive mass of immaterial labour, university administrator's best strategy – backed by centuries of academic hierarchy – is to ensure that regular and contingent faculty remains divided' (Dyer-Witheford, 2005: 78).

Van Dyk and Reitz (2016) argue that universities are becoming what Boltanski and Chiapello call the 'projective city'. The projective city signifies the idea of the new spirit of capitalism that is based on projects sparking temporary compression of networks, competition of project teams on the market and new work ethics and forms of employees' motivation. 'This refers to a firm whose structure comprises a multiplicity of projects associating a variety of people, some of whom participate in several projects. Since the very nature of this type of project is to have a beginning and an end, projects succeed and take over from one another, reconstructing work groups or teams in accordance with priorities or needs' (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2007: 105). Statistics confirm this trend for the Scottish higher education landscape: 72.9 per cent of the total annual research income for Scottish universities comes from research grants and contracts such as research councils, societies, charities, corporations, EU sources etc. In comparison, only 27.1 per cent go directly to the universities in form of recurrent research income as result of the Research Excellence Framework (all data for the academic year 2014/2015: Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2016). Most of these funds are project-based and competitive. Academics employed in such projects mainly work on a temporary basis.

The academic work process is today strongly linked to the usage of new information and communication technologies such as email communication, online education and digital registers for research, teaching and administration purposes. The use of technologies is not a new phenomenon at universities and one can argue that academics have always used some sort of technology as means for their work. For example, the chalk and blackboard served for many decades as an important tool in order to share knowledge in the classroom and was later accompanied by the overhead projector. The communication between university teachers and distance learning students used to take place via traditional letters sent by snail mail (Noble, 2001: chapter 1) and is today fully replaced by digital communication. One can argue that educational technologies have been developed in analogy with the progress of the productive forces and reflect the historical development from agricultural to industrial to informational eras in capitalist societies. Although the application of technologies at universities is not new, the use of digital technologies is a relatively new phenomenon and has generated a rapid quantitative expansion that simultaneously raises questions of a qualitative shift. A gradual expansion of educational technologies (quantity) led to a new digital realm at universities (quality). The application of education technologies can thus be considered as a new and at the same time old development. A dialectics of continuity and discontinuity characterises the development of educational technologies.

Digital and non-digital media and resources often co-exist in the work experience of academics. One might think of someone, who uses Blackboard for teaching in order to

upload documents for students and supervises students via email, but teaches in a physical classroom. Another example might be that researchers browse the library catalogue online, but still prefer to read the hard copy of a book. Digital technologies and resources have neither displaced non-digital ones fully, nor are non-digital technologies and resources completely independent of digital ones. It is as hard to imagine an academic who is able to manage his work without the use of digital media, as it is an academic without the use of non-digital media. Different people have different degrees of blending digital and non-digital media at their work.

Digital education and technologies have an impact on the working conditions of academics. There is a certain risk that conditions of labour are being intensified and extended in the realm of digital media; to name but a few, the blurring of working space and other spaces of human life, the blurring of labour and free time, fast academia, always on cultures, deskilling, casualisation, electronic monitoring, digital surveillance, social media use for self-promotion, and new forms of intellectual property rights (Noble, 1998; Gregg, 2013; Lupton, 2014: 79-83; Poritz and Rees, 2017: 68-82).

For a more detailed discussion of the theoretical foundations of academic labour and digital media, see Allmer (2017). I will next discuss the methodology of the empirical research conducted.

3. Methodology

The data were collected as part of a small case study. I conducted 10 semi-structured, face-to-face, qualitative interviews with academics. Focus was given to people who are employed 'atypically' such as on a fixed-term contract, casual contract, hourly paid basis, zero-hour contract, etc. at higher education institutions in Scotland. The participants were chosen randomly from nine different universities (5 pre-1992, 4 post-1992) across Scotland and directly approached via email. The interviews took place in offices, university rooms and cafes in 2016. After individual consent, the interviews were audio-recorded and fully transcribed. Participants had the freedom to withdraw at any stage during the interview. All data were stored securely, treated confidentially and anonymously. Interviewees were asked about their experiences in terms of the working conditions at their job, the usage of new information and communication technologies, effects of working conditions on teaching and research as well as political challenges and potential changes. The interviews lasted between 50 and 100 minutes. A copy of the transcript was sent to the participants for further comments and final approval. The scripts were analysed with the help of content analysis (Krippendorff, 2004; Berg, 2001) and in order to find answers to my questions about how academics perceive the existing working conditions that are shaped by political and economic contexts.

Here is an overview of the socio-demographic factors of the participants:

- Gender: 6 women, 4 men
- Citizenship: 7 British, 1 German, 1 Austrian, 1 Belgian
- Educational level: 10 doctoral degrees
- Job description: 1 Teaching Fellow, 8 (Postdoctoral) Research Fellows/(Postdoctoral) Researchers/Research Associates, 1 Lecturer

- Subject area: 1 Education, 1 Politics, 2 Social Studies/Sciences, 1 Psychology, 2 Sociology, 1 Informatics, 1 Economics, 1 Health Sciences
- Higher education institution: 6 pre-1992 universities (2 Russell Group universities), 4 post-1992 universities
- Mode of employment: 7 full-time, 1 part-time, 2 hourly-paid
- Terms of employment: 9 fixed-term (1 currently on leave), 1 80% fixed-term/20% open-ended
- Age: youngest 33 years, oldest 56 years, average 42 years

4. Analysis and Interpretation

In the following, I will present and discuss the findings along working conditions at universities, digital media, impact on teaching and research and politics and potential change of higher education.

Working Conditions at Universities

People were asked how far they are confronted with job insecurity at their current post. Participants mention concerns and worries about their insecure situation and report about precariousness, missing prospects, increasing competition and the burden of job applications. Most of the participants are concerned about the insecure nature of their job and aspire to economic security. 'I really wanted a more secure position', claims Participant 2, 'I would rather have a permanent position and stop wondering where I will be in five years' stresses Participant 6. A postdoctoral researcher emphasises that her insecure job situation was depressing, making her feel devalued and affected her self-esteem. A female researcher tells me that she could not concentrate on her work anymore due to the insecure job situation. The precarious nature of the job worries her and is constantly in her head:

'At the moment it is just the insecurity, the precarious nature ... when it gets to next year, what if I don't get anything, it is that worry. Constantly in your head, that worry.'
(Participant 8)

People report about precariousness, inadequate payment and economic insecurity. A young academic mentions that her previous departments wanted her to fulfil tasks such as lecturing and marking without getting paid. Interviewees also claim that preparation time for teaching is not adequately compensated with their pay. Interviewees are confronted with a lack of knowledge, confusing information and missing prospects in their jobs. A contract researcher tells me that she feels insecure in terms of not knowing when and where the next contract might come from, not knowing what percentage of full-time equivalent she might be able to secure and not knowing when a particular project might start. Because of their temporality and insecurity, participants feel the necessity to be competitive and hard working. For example, a research fellow tells me the following:

'I could just go "no", but I am in a temporary position and I want you to keep me and I want ... "we can't let her go, she has won the best lecturer awards three years in a row".'
(Participant 2)

Simultaneously, people are aware of and worried about the competitive atmosphere among staff. Interviewees tell me that competition and pressure for permanent posts and secure jobs get constantly higher, which they find difficult on an individual level. An early-career academic justifies his conformism with his insecure position:

‘No, I cannot say, I never say “no”. I am relying on other people ... my future is in their hands.’ (Participant 10)

Participants mention their fears and worries of being unemployed and the risk of being made redundant as academic. Many interviewees are constantly screening the job market and applying for new jobs. A fellow at a Russell Group university mentions that fixed-term academic like him are constantly looking for something else. ‘The longer we are teaching fellows, the less research output we generate so the harder it is to compete with the people who are outside, who are already in lectureship posts’ (Participant 1), he continues. People complain that finding a new job is time and energy consuming, tiring and humiliating:

‘Oh it is just time wasting. It is tiring. It is ... I don’t know if I can say, it is humiliating at the same time ... And if it is not writing applications for jobs, it is also writing applications for projects and I just want to do something else.’ (Participant 6)

Many participants report about overload and overburden in their working environment. An interviewee tells me that working hourly-paid in different departments at the same time was the hardest she has ever experienced. A lot of the participants complain about work pressure and a high level of stress. A teaching fellow expresses that there is a lot of pressure in terms of the turnaround time of assignments. In addition, he has been told that it is considered to be normal to work overtime at the school:

‘Everybody does more and there have been occasional messages in meetings that it is kind of normal to do more, etc. Which is quite stressful, because you are already struggling to do more and then you are being told, “it is normal”.’ (Participant 1)

Another interviewee remembers a time where she saw some of the students more often than her family and could hardly find time to eat and sleep properly. ‘There is no time for weekends’ (Participant 2), tells me another interviewee. A young mother frequently works on evenings, after she had come home from an eight-hour working day:

‘My daughter is six months, so I try to stick to an eight-hour working day and then go home. But very often I will then work in the evening when she is in bed.’ (Participant 4)

Managerialism, hierarchical organisation structures, narrow specialisation and routine tasks lead to frustration and anger for my participants. A teaching fellow tells me that he does not see the need to be loyal and ambitious anymore, since his contract has not been made permanent.

‘They weren’t going to renew my contract, I am not really sure anymore how bothered I am about showing that I am super loyal hard working, ever ambitious.’ (Participant 1)

In a very similar tone, a single mother has experiences in putting a lot of effort into a project without getting any rewards, which ended in giving up loyalty at all. A young research associate at a Russell Group university tells me that everyone is 'playing the game'. He criticizes these developments, but acknowledges being also part of it. People were asked how far the working conditions affect their mental and physical health. Interviewees mention psychological and emotional distress, narrowed social life, strained work relationships and misrecognition. A research fellow tells me that she is constantly tired and snappy and there were times where she could neither sleep nor eat properly because of stress and overwork. A further one experienced stress and exhaust in the past that also affected her health conditions. 'The fact that I am in an insecure position has had an impact on my relationship as well because I am bitter and I am not the nicest person to live with at the moment' (Participant 6), claims a young research associate at a Russell Group university. Another participant feels better at the office and is worried and stressed when not at work:

'When I am away... I am more stressed ... I think about the job more, like, and I am worried that I am away, it worries me ... when I go to the office ... I feel better, then when I do not ... even if I have taken annual leave.' (Participant 10)

Being precariously employed, obeying hierarchical organisation structures and constantly fulfilling narrow tasks does also have an impact on the identity and recognition of academics. A female research fellow says that it can make you feel narrowed down if you are treated like a managed timetable for doing work. She continues by saying that it is difficult to be taken seriously in academic terms as research fellow. Another interviewee at a pre-1992 university argues that their tutorial staff is not only getting paid poorly, but they are not getting the recognition either.

Female researchers tell me that academia brings both flexibility and insecurity, especially for women. Participants spot a gender bias on the job market and argue that it is still harder for women in higher education. If we take a look at the statistics, once can see that the higher the hierarchy in higher education, the less women one can find. For example, there were only 23.1 per cent female professors in the UK in the academic year 2014/2015 (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2016). As women are more likely to be employed precariously within higher education (Bryson and Barnes, 2000: 209), I conducted the majority of my interviews with female academics in order to better reflect the overall picture. A young researcher voices that she cannot be as competitive and has to carry on with insecure jobs, because she has to look after her son as single mum and thus feels disadvantaged in academia:

'I am a single mum ... I don't feel like I can be as competitive as other people ... I do feel at a disadvantage. ... It feels like you are really restricted in what you can do ... As well it is that insecurity, it is just like a vicious circle because you are having to keep on these short insecure contracts, because you can't compete on a level to get something permanent. It is ... it perpetuates.' (Participant 8)

Digital Media and Working Conditions

There seems to be a certain pattern among many academics in terms of email burden. Participants mention the high amount of emails from both students and colleagues to deal

with in their working environment. An interviewee portrays his experience of how new technologies including email communication have led to an increase of administrative tasks and people's expectations:

'The amount of administration that we do on using technology or new technology is just much, much more. And people have an expectation that you are paying attention much more so. If someone sends you an email and you get a phone call that afternoon saying "could you respond to my email".' (Participant 1)

There seems to be a certain blurring of work and spare time as well as workspace and other spaces of human life. Academics tend to receive and respond to emails independently of time and space such as out of working hours, evenings and weekends, from home and on the way. An interviewee checks his emails regularly in the morning from home before coming to the office, another one looks at his emails regularly on the mobile phone and a further one responds to student emails occasionally at one o'clock in the morning. While some feel such an email communication pattern is necessary, others find it annoying that job emails interfere private life:

'But these emails, I just hate the emails you get that have been sent around midnight ... "Is this me working at midnight?" You know, that kind of annoys me.' (Participant 5)

A younger research fellow tells me that she emails students at any point of time, including nights and weekends. She continues by saying that she is now beginning to panic if emails are not regularly checked, even during social meetings:

'There is not a turn-off button and that can be quite frightening and I start to panic. I had a friend over for an evening the other day and I was just like "wait a minute, do you mind if I check my emails because it has been four hours?"' (Participant 2)

Impact of Working Conditions on Teaching and Research

Participants report about a lack of sufficient time in order to develop the pedagogy and prepare teaching material. An hourly-paid lecturer tells me that preparation time for teaching is not compensated financially. A pedagogically experienced teaching fellow claims that there is less time to think about the content and pedagogy than it used to be. Interviewees also report about a lack of choice in the areas of teaching and a certain separation between teaching and research. Experiences in delivering modules and teaching subjects off expertise and interests were mentioned by some participants. For example, a research fellow tells me that she taught in an entirely different field as her background:

'They asked me to create a new course from the religious studies department and the centre for lifelong learning - on completely different things that I didn't have a background in. The background I did my undergraduate in, international relations with philosophy, master in security issues, and PhD in fundamental Islam, so obviously I would be the first choice to ask to do a course on witchcraft and shamanism.' (Participant 2)

Many academics mention time constraints in terms of conducting research and publishing that leads to frustration and disappointment as it is important for being scientifically

recognised, receive a more secure post and career development. A teaching fellow at a Russell Group university finds it hard to spot the time to conduct research, because research is not part of his employment contract. An hourly-paid lecturer tells me that she does not get paid during summer by the university and thus has also other jobs, which keeps her away from writing journal articles that would be important in order to find a more secure post:

‘So that is really difficult because I am kind of caught in the funny cycle, because I have my job to maintain ... just to buy food, because I can’t stop eating over the summer holidays. So I need to have some kind of job to have an income, but that doesn’t allow me to have the time to write articles, get published, to do these kind of things.’ (Participant 3)

Academics tend to experience either a certain lack of choice in the subject of research due to hot topics and pre-defined projects, or economic disadvantages with their chosen research topic such as funding problems and insecure posts. A female research fellow tells me that there is a complete lack of freedom in her research as it is dominated and defined by the project. She continues that there are hot topics one has to keep up with. Another academic explains me that there are constraints, rules and a lack of autonomy in his job tasks. An early-career researcher tells me that he focused in his PhD on nationalism in an Eastern European country from an ethnographic studies background, but experienced that the research and outcomes ‘are not mainstream and they are not interesting for academia today’ (Participant 6). He feels that his research topics and interests do not fit within funding schemes and grants and has the impression that his research methodology is considered as a waste of time by the managerial university. Here he talks about a project application for external funding, which was already rejected on the school level:

‘Meaning that for them, me spending time in the field is a waste of time and what they want to see is applications, impact, knowledge exchange, outreach, all these words. And so me spending three months doing, I don’t know, observation in an NGO is seen as a waste of time. And so I had to boost my application and promise things that I would do just to make it look like. It was worth, according to their standards, which are not their standards, standards of managerial university ... That would be my experience.’ (Participant 6)

He concludes that he should have chosen a different topic in order to secure a post and have a decent job. A rather experienced research fellow at a pre-1992 university summarises that you have to promise more and more in the proposal for less and less money in the project in order to compete for and successfully obtain funding.

Politics and Potential Change of Higher Education

Participants value and see the importance of solidarity. A young researcher tells me that speaking to other precariously employed academics helps to understand patterns of anxieties. She feels it might be better to organise those who are in similar situations and take some agency, instead of feeling alone and powerless:

‘There is an awareness that there is loads of us in the same position which is the only comfort about it. I think it does get to the point where you just have to take some agency ... Maybe we should try and use that, the people who are in a similar position to me, we

should actually ... rather than just feeling like we are alone, we should do something about that, instead of just waiting about.’ (Participant 8)

Many interviewees mention a division among staff, especially between adjuncts and permanent staff that also affects solidarity and politics at their department. A research fellow at a pre-1992 university tells me that PhD students and tutors do neither get well paid, nor do they get the recognition for their work at the institute. She continues by saying that adjuncts are neglected here. An hourly-paid lecturer mentions that she is not part of any meetings and any other department related business bringing the feeling of some lack of information. She does feel neither affiliated to the department physically as she does not have an own desk, nor politically involved at the department because of the hourly-paid contract:

‘I tip in and out. You have to imagine, when I run in, this ... I run in on Tuesday, coming away from my other job, I park the car and where didn’t have to pay parking fees, run to university, go in, get the register, run to my class, do my class, run home. I don’t have time to talk to people. I don’t talk to people, I am just running.’ (Participant 3)

There is a relationship between insecurity and unionisation. Participants mention the importance of being a union member especially if on a fixed-term contract, but concerns are also raised when it comes to disciplinary mechanism. A teaching fellow expresses fears that his union activities might affect the job prospects in the long run:

‘I am not nearly as active as I might be, because I am thinking HR might just decide not to renew my contract. I am very conscious of that as an issue. So now I am just wondering, so here they go, they have done it again, another temporary contract. Is that because I wasn’t more active in the union, or is it because I am?’ (Participant 1)

5. Conclusion

This article has engaged with theoretical foundations by discussing the political and economic context of higher education, academic labour and the rise of digital media. It has furthermore provided the methodology of the empirical research as well as presented and discussed the findings along working conditions, new information and communication technologies, impact on teaching and research and potential change of higher education.

I showed that the higher education landscape has changed in the last decades. This is also reflected in a growing academic literature reporting about these transformations, especially in settings where the neoliberal restructuring can be considered as relatively advanced such as the UK, Netherlands, the US and Australia (Lorenz, 2012: 600). One of the most obvious changes is expansion in terms of providers, student population and university staff. Many people are employed precariously in higher education who were the focus of my case study.

One of the crucial questions is how to assess the expansion of the universities. According to Callinicos (2006: 5), there are two main competing ways of interpretation: (1) One way might be to criticise those developments on the argument that an expansion of the university necessarily brings down the quality of higher education. The expansion leads to quantity instead of quality, worsened staff-student ratio and a devaluation of the university

degree in general. This line of argument is often accompanied with the idea that universities should remain a privilege for a minority being educated at elite universities. This position considers the expansion of universities as a negative development and is traditionally linked to conservative politics. (2) Another position might be that the expansion of the university widens access for people from poorer backgrounds, women and ethnic minorities and thereby provides inclusion, equality of opportunities and social justice. Education is considered as a route out of poverty and disadvantage and to build a more socially just society. Traditionally linked to labour politics, the expansion of the university is rather considered as a positive development.

Terranova (2004) argues that 'the debate seems to be stuck in the false opposition between the static, sheltered ivory tower and the dynamic, democratic market'. We rather need a socialist expansion of the university that provides the necessary material resources in order to ensure teaching and research at a high quality on the one hand and a political and economic context in order to widen access to education in general and higher education in particular for all social groups without interferences of capital's interests of cheap labour power and industrial research on the other. 'Our understanding of the mode of knowledge production in higher education and its conceived role and purpose in public life over the last century must start from a categorical understanding of capitalism and the historical mode of production that reproduces the university'. (Winn, 2015) The struggle for better universities can thus not be separated from the struggles against capitalism (Callinicos, 2006: 7; Gulli, 2009).

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