'Being an academic is not a 9–5 job': long working hours and the 'ideal worker' in UK academia

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Abstract

The deregulation of working time has been occurring over recent decades. Academia is one of the many industries that can be characterised by a long hours work culture and intensification of work. This is significant given the negative effects of such a work culture on the physical and mental health and well-being of workers. Using evidence from two UK-based qualitative studies, this paper begins to explore the causes and effects of academic long hours work culture further. It has a particular focus on the extent to which the long hours culture is a result of cultural and structural changes in higher education, which have led to an increased focus on performance and outcome measures. It queries whether this is also shaped by more personal factors, such as the desire to excel and blurred boundaries between work and leisure, whereby the pursuit of knowledge may be a source of leisure for academics. It finds that while individual factors contribute to the long hours culture, these factors are shaped by cultural norms and pressures to cultivate a perception of the 'ideal academic' within an increasingly target-driven and neoliberal environment.

Keywords: academia, ideal academic, long working hours, work-life balance

Introduction

Long work hours and the intensification of work are a common feature of many workplaces. This is particularly the case in academia, where work and home boundaries are frequently blurred (Wright et al. 2003) with a similar pattern observed internationally (Bagilhole and White 2013). However, explanations for the long hours work culture in academia are mixed, and research on the effects for academics and universities is minimal. This paper uses multiple methods to explore the nuances of the long hours culture in academia using data from two UK-based qualitative studies. In contrast with previous literature, which has provided in-depth disciplinary analyses of academic working lives, this paper transcends traditional disciplinary and institutional boundaries to illuminate the lived experiences of academics in the UK and the strategies academics use to navigate their experiences. We begin by documenting the intensification of work and long work hours both generally and in the academic context. Subsequently, we present the key themes emerging from our data analysis. Based on the findings, we suggest that negotiating work and non-work in contemporary academia revolves around cultivating the perception of the 'ideal worker' within an increasingly target-driven and neoliberal environment.

Workload: long work hours and intensification of work in the West

Over recent years, research has demonstrated an intensification of paid work (Green 2004), fragmentation of time, and blurring of boundaries between work and other activities in many Western countries (Allan, O'Donnell, and Peetz 1999; Poelmans, Kalliath, and Brough 2008; Williams, Pocock, and Skinner 2008; Pocock, Skinner, and Pisaniello 2010). In this context, managing work and non-work is increasingly important for employee wellbeing, including mental and physical health

(Pocock 2003; HREOC 2005; OECD 2007; Kalliath and Brough 2008) and work satisfaction (Pocock, Skinner, and Williams 2012). This is also seen as important for employers in terms of business outcomes, such as productivity, minimising absenteeism and staff turnover (Pocock 2003; Pocock, Skinner, and Williams 2012), and recruiting and retaining a highly skilled workforce (Sang and Powell 2012).

Since the mid-1980s, however, the deregulation of working time has been ever-increasing (Chatzitheochari and Arber 2009). In 1993, the European Working Time Directive set a weekly limit of 48 hours of paid work to protect employees. However, the UK is the only EU member state that retained the right for an exemption to the limit. This means that British employees can sign an opt-out agreement, allowing more than 48 hours of weekly paid employment. As a result, the UK has established a long hours culture with over a quarter of employees working over 48 hours a week (Kodz et al. 2003). The long hours culture is particularly manifest in certain professional sectors, most notably banking, medicine, and management consultancy. A large body of research into the impacts of long work hours on physical and mental health now exists (see, e.g., Pocock, Skinner, and Williams 2012).

Drago, Wooden, and Black (2009) argue that there are two types of workers who work long hours: 'conscripts' and 'volunteers'. They suggest that the former would prefer not to work long hours, while the latter desire to do so and work long hours freely and rationally. Drago, Wooden, and Black (2009) argue that 'conscripts' work long hours in spite of their preferences otherwise as a result of norms (e.g., to promote the image of the 'ideal worker') or a lack of bargaining power with employers. The binary notion of conscripts and volunteers, however, is problematic, since it fails to recognise the potential for shades of grey – most notably that personal choices are often shaped by structural constraints (see, e.g., Campbell and van Wanrooy 2013). The concept of the 'ideal worker' emerged from the work of Acker (1990), who argued that organisations assume workers are 'disembodied', unencumbered by domestic responsibilities and other aspects of life, and demonstrate this by working long hours and showing total commitment to the job (Williams 2001; Gornick and Meyers 2009). The 'ideal worker norm' leads some workers to exhibit high levels of dedication and the absence of external commitments and, hence, to work long hours (Drago, Wooden, and Black 2009). Levels of compliance with the ideal worker norm carry rewards and penalties for workers. Rewards, hinged on long hours and high levels of presenteeism, may include promotion and salary increases, while penalties include negative career consequences, such as poor assignments and rejection by colleagues and superiors (Crompton 2002; McDonald, Pini, and Bradley 2007). For example, using Australian household panel data, Drago, Wooden, and Black (2009) concluded that many ideal workers may prefer reduced hours options but believe they cannot use them without the risk of permanently damaging their careers and even may lead to job loss. However, Drago, Wooden, and Black (2009) also argue that the long hours culture may be related to the creation and expansion of jobs with high levels of autonomy and a focus on task completion and results rather than working time.

The academic work context

Many of these issues are relevant in academia, but a range of factors also set academia apart from other sectors. Universities have changed dramatically over the last few decades with many scholars perceiving that academic work has transformed from secure and autonomous to insecure and invisible (May, Peetz, and Strachan 2013). Such changes exist across multiple national boundaries and are having profound changes to working conditions in academia (Rainnie et al. 2013). Sappey (2005) argues that structural change has emerged as a result of four key factors: (1) the marketisation of the sector and increased competition between institutions; (2) changes to higher education consumption patterns; (3) the commodification of education consequent on

marketisation; and (4) the growth of managerialism. These structural changes have included changes in governance, structures and process, devolution of budgetary control, weaker disciplinary boundaries, employment flexibility, and a decline in collegiality (Broadbent, Troup, and Strachan 2013). They have also been marked by a focus on performance measurement (Rainnie et al. 2013; Teelken and Deem 2013) and surveillance and control of the academic workforce (Ryan et al. 2013). These shifting patterns, while present in the UK, have begun to become evident in Australia and other Western countries (Bagilhole and White 2013).

Intensification of academic work

The increased focus on performance management and measurement (Teelken and Deem 2013) that appear to have emerged as a result of these structural changes have led to academic concerns about diminishing opportunities to exercise autonomy and academic freedom (Rainnie et al. 2013), declining collegiality (Broadbent, Troup, and Strachan 2013), and increasing quantification of academic output (Blackmore and Sachs 2000; Broadbent, Troup, and Strachan 2013). These factors are thought to have increased academic workload pressures (May, Peetz, and Strachan 2013) to the extent that academic working hours have been described as 'all consuming' (Morley 2013). Although reliable data on the working hours of academics is difficult to locate, some studies suggest that it is in the range of 50 hours per week and has remained static (Corbyn 2009). Data from the University and Colleges Union (which represents academic and academic related staff in the UK) reveal approximately one-third of academics report working in excess of 50 hours per week, and their health and well-being levels are poorer than comparable occupational groups. Similarly, Kinman and Jones (2008) found that many academics worked in excess of the 48 hour weekly limit set by the EU time directive. Data from the US suggest that academics may work even longer hours. For example, early career scholars in Dowd and Kaplan's (2005) study suggested a working week of around 80 hours. In addition, academics report high levels of stress, and while hours of work may not have increased, the intensity of the work has (Corbyn 2009; UCU 2013).

These concerns may have emerged because as Henkel (1997) suggests, many academics' conceptualisations of higher education are dominated by notions of security of tenure, generous time allocations, low levels of administration, common salary structures, and the interdependence of teaching and research. However, Doherty and Manfredi (2006) found that academics faced conflicting demands created by work intensification. These included increased student numbers, more demanding students, increased levels of evening and weekend teaching, pressure to conduct high-quality research as well as the tension between teaching and research, and a plethora of new strategic initiatives.

The focus on performance management and measurement have had an impact on perceptions of what counts as success in academia, and therefore what gets measured in assessing suitability for permanent employment and promotion. Academics face a strict set of guidelines for securing a secure contract and promotion (Dowd and Kaplan 2005) focused on research, teaching, and service (Baker 2010). However, many academics perceive that greater credibility is granted to peer-reviewed publications (Nakhaie 2007) and income generation (Skelton 2005). This is illustrated by notions such as 'publish or perish' (Dany, Louvel, and Valette 2011) and academia as 'greedy work'. It means that the long working hours culture in academia is likely influenced, at least in part, by normative pressures of what success looks like. For example, Dany, Louvel, and Valette (2011) found that academics in their qualitative study structured their activities in response to performance demands. For example, Finnish academics in Nikunen's (2012) research believed that outcomes were strongly connected to hours spent at work. In a New Zealand study, Baker (2010) found that academics who did not aspire to professor or thought they would not reach professor cited insufficient time and an unwillingness to work 80 hours a week.

Additionally, while performance measurement may seem meritocratic, evidence suggests that it is in fact gendered and more suited for those able and willing to conform to an uninterrupted career path, that is, men (Knights and Richards 2003; Fotaki 2013; Teelken and Deem 2013). Baker (2010) found that women were less likely than men to aspire to professor and more likely to cite insufficient publications as a reason. Teelken and Deem (2013) describe how even when performance targets are supposed to take account of part-time work or absences such as maternity leave, they do not address the cumulative effect on quality as well as quantity of output. They also suggest that there is a negative judgement on the functioning of employees with fewer publications – even if this is due to part-time work.

Against this background, a growing body of research has been investigating the impact and effects of the academic work culture on those working in higher education. Mullarkey et al. (1999) found psychological distress among academics were considerably higher than that found in other professional groups and the UK population as a whole. Examining work demands, work-life balance, and wellbeing among UK academics, Kinman and Jones (2008) found that only 38% of respondents indicated that they could cope with the demands of their jobs. Almost half of their sample indicated that they had seriously considered leaving academia. Nevertheless, they also found that academics were generally satisfied with intrinsic features of their work, such as intellectual stimulation, opportunities to use their initiative, and students. Lower levels of satisfaction were found with more extrinsic job features such as pay, opportunities for promotion, and working hours. In terms of impact, Kinman and Jones (2008) report that most of the academics they surveyed stated that their work made it difficult for them to fulfil family and social roles, although those who perceived more job control, schedule flexibility, and support from their institutions experienced less work-life conflict. Academic managers in Doherty and Manfredi's (2006) study also spoke of pressures on academics to work longer hours and expressed concerns for academics failing to take annual leave or using it for research purposes. They also reported that some academics requested part-time work either to help cope with work pressure or so they could do research in their 'own' time. Acker and Armenti (2004) suggest that while there is little research on illness among academics, this is a problem 'waiting in the wings', as people are working harder and sleeping less in order to 'perform' their roles as academics.

These findings have led researchers to argue that academic work entails high expectations, which set conditions for potential conflict with other life domains (Fox, Fonseca, and Bao 2011). The 'ideal academic' very much embodies the notion of the 'ideal worker' set out above (Gatta and Roos 2004). Normative expectations in academia are that academics prioritise work, have few outside interests and responsibilities, and pursue research single-mindedly (Bailyn 2003; Ward and Wolf-Wendel 2004).

Flexibility and autonomy in academia

At the same time, however, academic life appears to provide more freedom and autonomy than most high-level endeavours and allows individuals to work on topics that they care about (Bailyn 2003). High levels of flexibility and autonomy in academia (Heijstra and Rafnsdóttir 2010), coupled with its (often) liberal belief system should make it the ideal place to work in order to integrate work and family demands (Gatta and Roos 2004).

However, this is likely a double-edged sword. Research in other sectors has found that while flexible work practices have many positive features, they can also add to the blurring of boundaries between work and non-work and feelings of increased workload (Kelliher and Anderson 2008). More specifically in academia, research has found that because the work of academics is often highly salient to their personal identity, they may be especially responsive to the demands of their work

settings because professional success and rewards are important to them (Fox, Fonseca, and Bao 2011). Fox, Fonseca, and Bao (2011) suggest that the rewards and standards of evaluation in academia can therefore heighten the intensity of work, and anxiety about professional status may be amplified, fuelling a striving to excel against sometimes ineffable standards. Furthermore, the boundaries between work and leisure can be blurred, as the pursuit of knowledge through research is often considered a source of leisure for academics (Doherty and Manfredi 2006). As Gatta and Roos (2004) demonstrate, the implementation of flexibility, along with the demands of tenure and promotions, actually make integrating work and family particularly challenging. As in other knowledge industries, the shift from standard to flexible work hours means that the boundaries of work are being eroded (Kvande 2007); this is a trend accelerated by technology, which enables academics (like many other professionals) to stay connected to the workplace anytime and anywhere (Heijstra and Rafnsdottir 2010). In their Icelandic study, Heijstra and Rafnsdóttir (2010) found that while academics valued flexibility and would be unwilling to change to a 9–5 job, flexibility is nevertheless something of a utopia since the notion enables the possibility of prolonging working hours. Many of the academics in their study worked at home in the evenings and weekends (a finding supported by other research including Kinman 1998), a temptation they attributed, in part, to the fact that both male and female academics are determined to advance their careers. Wortman, Biernat, and Lang (1991) suggest that work-life balance may be difficult for academics to maintain because academic work can be seen as 'open-ended'; for example, there is always more reading to be done or research and teaching preparation to be undertaken.

To summarise, there is some tension in the literature around the academic experience of work and whether the normative long hours culture is a result of push or pull factors, or some combination of the two. In the current academic environment, there is both an increased focus on performance management and, with it, increased emphasis on the need for more publications and income generation as well as a tendency for more individualised decisions to work long hours due to commitment and passion for the job which may lead to blurring of boundaries. We explore these issues further in this paper.

Research methods

This paper brings together findings from two research projects examining academic careers within built environment schools in order to investigate whether academia exhibits a 'work-life culture' shaped by the notion of the 'ideal worker'. For example, in organisations where the 'ideal worker' norm is present, there may be job or career penalties (or at least the lack of reward) for employees who cannot or choose not to be an 'ideal worker'. Within this context, the research aims to examine the long hours work culture in academia and to discern the extent to which the long hours culture is a result of personal choice or a shift in the cultural and structural environment of the UK higher education workplace. Both of the studies aimed to understand the working lives of academics with specific reference to workload and how this is experienced by academics.

The two studies each used qualitative methods. Study one (S1) used semi-structured interviews to address the under-representation of women working in construction-related research across Europe. Interviews explored a number of topics including career choice, the negotiation of work and non-work time, professional experiences, and gender equality. Here, we draw on interviews with five UK academics, four of whom were female, from science and construction-related disciplines at different institutions, ranging in seniority from senior lecturer to professor.

Study two (S2) used six focus groups to explore working cultures within a newer research intensive UK university (less than 50 years old). Each focus group had between 6 and 10 participants and lasted for one hour. All staff within one school (social sciences) were asked to participate, and, as

such, the sample was self-selecting. The data used here focus on responses from academic members of staff, although professional support staff was also present. The focus groups explored themes relating to working lives, work and non-work time, organisational culture, and equality and diversity. Both studies aimed to understand the lived experiences of academics and their perceptions of working cultures within UK academia. Although the focus groups also included professional support staff, this paper uses only the data from academics, given the focus on lived experiences of academic staff. Two members of staff were unwilling to participate in the focus groups and were interviewed separately. Respondents ranged from early career (in their 20 s) through to those closer to retirement (in their 60 s). The majority of respondents were White British with approximately equal numbers of male and female respondents.

With the agreement of participants, the interviews and focus groups were recorded, and then transcribed and anonymised prior to being analysed with the aid of NVivo. The data were analysed by the two lead authors for emerging themes, the identification of which was informed by the literature. This approach is called template analysis and follows the guidelines established by King (2004). Initial themes from the literature were used to analyse the data, including workload, travel, and promotion. This approach allows for themes to emerge from the data to be incorporated into the template. Both studies secured ethical approval from the authors' respective institutions. Participants were assured of their anonymity. As with any qualitative research, the aim of this paper is not to draw generalisations, but rather to understand through rich data the lived experiences of academics working at different levels and across disciplines.

Findings

The following section presents the data from both studies, indicating, where appropriate, the source of the quotes. A number of themes emerged from the data analysis in terms of factors that contribute to the long hours work culture, namely workload, promotion, and travel. Each of these are discussed in turn. To preserve the anonymity of the participants, identifying signifiers have been removed.

Workload

High workloads and long working hours were typical across the data sets. Although academics reported benefits of being able to work flexible hours, there was also a sense of the need to manage high workloads and work outside of normal working hours. Respondents reported difficulties maintaining work-life balance:

> *I think I'm pretty good [with my work-life balance]. I work 50–60 hours a week, and that's it. So, I typically don't work weekends. I work hard in the week, then I stop. I know you're laughing at me now, but that's what you've got to do to get a Chair; it's a lot of hard work. And then when you've got there, if you're going to maintain your standards, it's the same sort of level of work.… But the positive is, I enjoy the work; otherwise, I wouldn't do it. (S1, respondent 1 – Male, Professor)*

Being an academic is not a 9–5 job. For example, it is often necessary to work in the evenings. But to achieve work-life balance you have to be selective about what you do. (S1, respondent 2, Female, Professor)

Despite the above two respondents suggesting that working long hours or managing a high workload was something that was the property of the individual academic not everyone shared this view. One respondent felt that working long hours was part of the culture within academia:

When everybody is working this many hours, if you don't, you are not doing enough. (S1, respondent 5, Female, Professor)

Nevertheless, there was a sense from some respondents that the desire to work long hours was something that comes from within the individual rather than from external pressures:

I'm not sure in terms of workload; it is always high, as you are an academic. You don't have spare time; it is just more time to do more work! We are all cut from similar cloth. (S2, Focus group)

In contrast, within the same focus group, one participant felt that the pressure to work long hours and the high workloads was the product of changing relationships between managers and academics:

Another change which has become quite formal is, in the past, staff was set targets at group level. Staff was trusted. That has become more formal. There is a minimum expectation of each staff, one journal publication per year. Before, there was more trust. (S2, Focus group)

A key issue for this participant was a perceived decline in trust between academics and their employing institutions. As such, the ideal academic worker is no longer one with autonomy; rather, he or she is one who reports their activities and actively engages with the managerial processes. As Bagilhole and White (2013) have argued, this increasing managerialism can be seen internationally within academia. Targets are no longer collaboratively set but are established at the institutional, if not national level, through control mechanisms such as the Research Excellence Framework1 (Smith, Ward, and House 2011). However, 'success' as measured against these targets was seen by participants as essential if a linear upward career path was desired. The following section discusses academics' perspectives on promotion, as part of such a career trajectory.

Promotion

As indicated in the previous section, many participants felt that long working hours, for example, 60 hour weeks, were necessary to secure promotion. The data also suggest that promotion required

individuals to demonstrate that they were currently operating at the grade above their current position, rather than demonstrating potential (as might be the case in other sectors). Consistent with other research (Skelton 2005; Nakhaie 2007; Dany, Louvel, and Valette 2011), promotion was largely seen to result from demonstrating excellence in teaching and research – with a particular emphasis on research. However, ambiguous benchmarks for promotion and an enigmatic application process were also cited as a possible roadblock to advancement; this could be seen as a deterrent for busy workers who did not devote the time and effort into navigating the system. Indeed, the promotion criteria were felt to be vague and lacking in clarity:

I suppose, to a certain extent, there is an expectation that one should conform to certain norms and values as well, although it is not so clear what the values might be. Research excellence is clearly very big on the School agenda. Research intensity, research excellence. How people arrive at that, those are more subtle things. It is also not often clear to people I think, how one achieves recognition of that. I think this is where criteria that you mentioned are helpful, in terms of lecturers. (S2, Focus group)

The above quote suggests that for this academic, there was perception of the need to meet unspoken norms. One participant stated that promotion procedures were unfair and 'a lottery' (S1, respondent 3, Female, Senior Lecturer). Within Study 2 there were perceptions that within a multidisciplinary department, particular disciplines were valued more than others. This set particular norms in terms of securing research funding and the nature of publications which were used as metrics for promotion.

In part, successful applications for promotion were felt to rest on the individual and their ability or willingness to state their case for promotion and to demonstrate they had exceeded expectations. Most participants saw this as almost inevitably requiring long hours of work. This is similar to findings from Nikunen (2012) and Baker (2010) whose research also demonstrated that academics perceived long hours were necessary if they wanted to achieve the requirements necessary for promotion.

Further as this respondent indicates, promotion was also linked to being able to use academic language in particular ways:

You have to be ambitious and as well as listing your achievements such as publications, on the application you also have to state your case for promotion. You have to use hard-hitting words to defend why you should be promoted. (S1, respondent 2, Female, Professor)

Both data sets suggested that promotion depended not only on research excellence and convincing applications, but also on social networks:

It can also be by being quite friendly with the right people in School. You need more than just winning funding. (S2, Focus group)

Promotion was, overall, seen as an opaque and difficult process. Success depending on a range of factors, with excellence across metrics and in less definable aspects, such as social networks. One aspect of building these social networks was the ability or willingness to engage in international travel, as discussed in the following section.

Travel

A unique finding of our research was the perception that travel, particularly international travel, was essential to academic careers. While this was seen as a positive aspect of academic work by some, it has a clear impact on workload and was seen as problematic rather than as a perk of the job for others. For example, one respondent described how travel extends the working day:

You spend all this time with these boring academics who are so intense and just want to talk about their bloody subject – they never unwind – it's just stressful, I find. (S1, respondent 1, Male, Professor)

One part-time academic reflected on the difficulties of combining international travel with her contractual hours:

In the last few months, I've been to Holland, Geneva and Italy, where I was invited to give lectures. I managed to do these as day trips leaving at 4 o'clock in the morning and getting home at midnight. This is preferable because it takes less time out of other work. It is harder managing the travelling working part-time. For example, this week I have a meeting on a Wednesday, which is normally my day off. Instead, I will take Thursday off, but this means I'm out of the office for two days. (S1, respondent 4, Female, Reader2)

Travel appeared to be collectively understood as necessary in constructing the ideal academic worker. In particular, travel can be considered necessary to build networks that are an important feature of developing an international profile and reputation, another aspect important for academic promotion. The presumption that part of the academic role involves time spent travelling for work is potentially detrimental to those with caring responsibilities, disabilities as well as impacting on other non-work aspects of life. As others have suggested, while developing an international profile may seem meritocratic, like other aspects of performance measurement, it is highly gendered given the assumption of total availability to make travel possible (Knights and Richards 2003; Fotaki 2013; Teelken and Deem 2013). The data suggest that academia is becoming increasingly target driven and bureaucratic on a day-to-day basis, as outlined in the following section.

Discussion

Although there was some debate whether long working hours among academics stem from individual choice or a culture that promotes such activity, there was an overwhelming majority from both data sets who expressed frustration with the increasingly bureaucratic nature of academia. There was seen to be a culture of 'red tape and targets', which has become the norm:

There's a Danish proverb that says you don't fatten a pig by weighing it. And we are weighed far too often. (S1, respondent 1, Male, Professor)

Evaluation of performance based on the measurement of increasingly economic outcomes has become the norm. Indeed, metrics based on citations were seen as problematic:

There is a lot of frustration and a lot more bureaucracy in universities now than there used to be. (S1, respondent 5, Female, Professor)

The increased levels of bureaucracy being raised by the participants can be linked to the spread of neoliberalism in UK higher education institutions, whereby the interests of profit making have overtaken intellectual concerns (Giroux 2002). Target-driven and managerialist approaches were identified as presenting a shift in academic culture and adding to the bureaucracy of academic work, which is now being felt by those at all levels and is viewed in a negative light. These heightened levels of bureaucracy are seen as impediments for doing what is considered by the participants of both data sets to be actual academic work; yet, they comprise the main criteria for how success is recognised. Navigating bureaucratic processes can be considered one of the more important skills for the academic in today's environment. However, further analysis is needed to understand how the pressures of administration interact with teaching and research requirements to affect the working lives of academics including working hours.

The findings suggest that there is pressure to work long hours as a result of increasingly target-driven managerial styles, which emphasise bureaucratic processes in order to measure success. As Doherty and Manfredi (2006) identify, higher education within the UK is facing a changing context, and control of academics and their work is increasingly becoming a concern. The ideal academic worker is no longer one with autonomy. Rather, the shift to control mechanisms such as the Research Excellence Framework (Smith, Ward, and House 2011) has instituted managerial activities which demand minimum publications per year, and targets are set at national and institutional level. Further, the data suggest that a culture of long working hours, specifically seeing colleagues work long hours, can result in pressure on individuals to meet and maintain normative expectations. Nevertheless, the data also point to the desire for promotion and enjoyment of flexible working contributing the culture of long working hours (Hejistra and Rafnsdóttir 2010). As Doherty and Manfredi (2006) also suggest, the desire for career progression is one driver for working intensively. It is also likely that the desire for progression and enjoyment of flexible working conditions promotes compliance with, rather than resistance to, the structural changes in higher education of which many academics are critical. It also shows how difficult it is to tease out the extent to which the long hours culture of academia is shaped by individual choice or structural constraints. As such, our findings are consistent with those of Campbell and van Wanrooy's (2013) Australian qualitative study of full-time workers, working five or more hours of unpaid overtime. They found that although interviewees stressed the significance of personal choice in their work hours, none fitted a strict

notion of 'volunteers', as described by Drago, Wooden, and Black (2009), since they also acknowledged external constraints such as employer expectations in shaping their practices.

Within the framework of the 'ideal worker', the data suggest that the 'ideal academic' is not only one who works long hours, is willing and able to travel, is research active and productive, but also one who is embedded within social networks that will enhance promotion prospects. There are implications for those who are unable to meet these requirements, for example, those with caring responsibilities and/or disabilities. While a considerable body of evidence has pointed to the difficulties experienced by women within academia, further critical feminist work could reveal the impact of other social identities, for example, men with caring responsibilities and disabled academics.

The data also revealed an awareness of, and dissatisfaction with, decreasing trust and autonomy. These patterns have been seen in other studies (Smith, Ward, and House 2011). Interestingly, the data do not reveal overt resistance to these working cultures beyond recognition of them, although there was some sense of disagreement with the increased academic bureaucracy. This is in contrast to other sectors where resistance is evident through the use of information technology even within tight control regimes (Barnes 2004).

Conclusions

This study aimed to understand the lived experiences of academics working in the UK. Through the lens of the 'ideal worker', the data presented here suggest that academics within the UK are facing long working hours and high workload similar to those reported by their colleagues in Australia (Rainnie et al. 2013).

Further work is required to understand the working lives of academics. Doing so will help to render visible the micro-politics of academic life which can explain persistent inequalities in academia. At present, it is difficult to tease out the dynamics of structure and agency in framing the working lives of academics. Although it is likely that there are both push and pull factors towards the normative long working hours, the data presented here suggests that structural aspects of the academic workplace, including the REF, administration, and the need to travel underpin the resulting high workloads. Future studies should consider the extent to which working long hours is the result of choice rather than structural constraints. Further, such work will help to understand why there is apparently so little overt resistance to the working culture despite recognising its often detrimental effects. Such studies may want to take innovative approaches. It is possible that academics in the focus groups were not willing to share their dissatisfaction in-front of colleagues. Future researchers could undertake longitudinal and ethnographic research to understand the daily micro-practices of resistance which are evident in other sectors (Anderson 2008; Prasad and Prasad 1998). In addition, new technologies may provide opportunities to understand academics' acceptance or resistance to increasing managerialism. Previous research has suggested that the rise of blogging and micro-blogging represents a forum for employee resistance in other sectors (Richards 2008; Richards and Kosmala 2013). Given the proliferation of academic blogs and twitter feeds, these may provide fruitful avenues for understanding academic experience and resistance.

The study, although limited in size, provides a rich source of data and has allowed for understanding of the lived experiences of the academics who participated. The study adds to our understanding of how academics are experiencing and navigating the increasingly managerial terrain of the university. This paper has demonstrated that academics are facing increasing workloads in part as a result of neoliberalisation; however, compliance with this is also largely related to a desire to fulfil the notion of the ideal academic worker.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. The Research Excellence Framework (REF) is the system for assessing the quality of research in UK higher education institutions. It replaces the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE).

2. The position of Reader is equivalent to Associate Professor.

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