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Too Scared to Go Sick: Precarious Academic Work and 'Presenteeism Culture' in the UK Higher Education Sector During the Covid-19 Pandemic

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Abstract
This article discusses the story of Steven, a precarious academic worker, and his decision to work from home while being infected with Covid-19; a phenomenon called virtual presenteeism. As argued, Steven's sickness presence is the outcome of the increasing precarity and job insecurity in the sector, as well as the outcome of a presenteeism culture in academia which is being facilitated by technology and the blended learning approach adopted during the pandemic. The article outlines precarious academic workers' fear to go off sick, illustrating how Steven negotiates the precarity of his contract via virtual presenteeism to portray over-commitment to the institution and avoid the risk of job loss. As concluded, while blended learning becomes the new educational norm in higher education, virtual presenteeism risks becoming the new attendance norm. This article calls for more research to examine how the blended teaching approach will further impact on academic work, post-pandemic.

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Introduction

This article discusses the story of Steven, a relatively new academic who works as an hourly paid lecturer in a UK university. Steven has extensive professional experience and his decision for a career shift was driven by the aspiration for better work–life balance and to share childcare responsibilities with his wife. Steven mentioned in a discussion with the authors, which triggered the development of this article, that he had come across the precarious nature of academic work which drove his decision to work, virtually, while being sick.

Steven decided to share his experience in the UK higher education (HE) sector with us following the outbreak of Covid-19 and the intensification of blended teaching. He discusses how the pandemic has exacerbated his feelings of insecurity (Kınıkoğlu and Can, 2021) and the increased pressures for sickness attendance (Van Der Feltz-Cornelis et al., 2020). The article provides an important insight into the casualisation of academic work and the impact this has on workers' decisions to work when sick, one of the commonly identified forms of presenteeism (Johns, 2010), particularly in periods of crisis (Hadjisolomou, 2016). Presenteeism is discussed as an outcome of embedded job insecurity (Lohaus and Habermann, 2019) and presenteeism culture (Ruhle and Süß, 2019) in academia, which is further intensified and facilitated by the growth of blended learning and teaching and the use of technology.

Precarious academic work and Covid-19

With the outbreak of Covid-19, many universities, following governmental guidelines, had either cancelled or postponed most on-campus teaching and other activities. After the initial shock, HE institutions further proceeded with emergency planning to assess the associated risks of the pandemic (Watermeyer et al., 2021). As such, an urgent online migration was imperative, mainly through combining online and face-to-face teaching, ignoring, however, the University and College Union's (UCU, 2020a) calls to offer only online teaching in order to keep staff and students safe. This hybrid teaching approach (known as blended learning) is not a novel discovery as there have always been institutions with a strong track record of online provision in the UK (e.g. The Open University). Those institutions which have lagged behind, however, have intensified its use because of Covid-19 with the digitalisation of learning featuring as the panacea in the time of the pandemic (Adedoyin and Soykan, 2020). Indeed, for a significant number of universities, blended learning featured as the threshold to ensure the smooth operation of educational provision as well as to attract international and domestic students and, ultimately, to secure their financial viability (UCU, 2020a).

Online migration, however, has raised concerns over the precarity of academic work. Watermeyer et al. (2021) argue that employment precarity in HE has led to career-stasis and flat-lining of the academic labour market. Concurrently, predictions of lower levels of student enrolment, because of Covid-19, could result in loss of institutional income (Ahlburg, 2020) and, consequently, job cuts (Watermeyer et al., 2020). Additionally, significant concerns have been raised regarding staff members' health and safety. While some universities migrated fully online, many institutions continued face-to-face teaching alongside the online provision, at least throughout the first term, despite the spiking

infections in their student community, leaving staff and students further stranded and exposed to the virus (Kınıkoğlu and Can, 2021). This differentiation in teaching approach was fortified due to the confusing and unclear governmental responses to the pandemic across all four nations of the UK. The ambiguous governmental guidelines, and over-promises for blended learning to keep income flow and reinforced institutional ambiguity, surfacing most institutions' unpreparedness for online teaching (Corbera et al., 2020) and resulting in diverse experiences for students and staff across the sector (Ahlburg, 2020).

The divergence of staff members' experience is also related to the nuances of HE institutions' approaches in managing attendance during the pandemic. While, for example, some institutions offered dedicated paid leave for Covid-19 sickness, or increasing home care responsibilities, this was not a universal approach, with notable differences being evident among institutions' HR practices on sick leave and flexible working arrangements (Nash and Churchill, 2020). Arguably, these differences are the outcome of the government's lack of clear guidelines for the sector, which becomes particularly problematic for those on precarious contracts and their conditional entitlement for, and the level of, statutory sick pay (Stricot and MacDonald, 2020). Importantly, Nash and Churchill (2020) highlight the key involvement of line managers in these practices, as is also evident in Steven's story. As he discusses, his line manager, alarmingly, sidestepped institutional policy and asked him to continue working from home while being infected with Covid-19, further reinforcing the precarious nature of his contract and the presenteeism culture found in HE (Ruhle and Süß, 2019).

Evidently, the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic has fundamentally shaken the UK HE sector, has intensified uncertainties and inequalities in work and has exacerbated hierarchies of precariousness in academia (Bone, 2019: 1219; Kınıkoğlu and Can, 2021). Indeed, the long-standing casualisation of academic labour has reinforced a deep polarisation between permanent academics and a reserve army of teachers on precarious contracts which has continued during the pandemic. The latter have been described as atypical academics who are left vulnerable to exploitative practices, lacking job security and work–life balance, and being unable to make long-term personal and career plans (Bone, 2019; Ivancheva et al., 2019; UCU, 2020b). Steven's story, similar to Whelan's (2021) autoethnographic testimony, further reveals how casual staff members' mental health, well-being and job security has remained under threat during the pandemic as many universities have cut jobs since the pandemic started, mainly for cost-saving (Dolton, 2020). Similarly to Whelan (2021), Kınıkoğlu and Can (2021) report, however, that those in vulnerable and commodified positions, such as Steven, have developed devices and behaviours to negotiate their precarious positions and the continuous uncertainty. Indeed, Steven, for example, agreed to continue working while sick with Covid-19, consenting to, as he argues, a culture of fear and presenteeism (Reuter et al., 2020; Taylor et al., 2010) to ensure that his contract will be renewed.

Precarious work and presenteeism (culture) in the UK HE sector

Presenteeism has received increasing attention in academic research. However, as Lohaus and Habermann (2019: 44) report, 'a generally accepted definition of

presenteeism has yet to be offered'. Johns (2010: 521) lists a number of definitions such as exhibiting excellent attendance and working elevated hours, but also reduced productivity due to poor health. The author also employs the definition of attending work while ill to explain presenteeism, which is one of the commonly identified examples of this behaviour highly relating to Steven's case (i.e. sickness presence / virtual sickness presence).

Another common aspect of most contributions on presenteeism research is that the phenomenon is mainly negative and should be avoided (Lohaus and Habermann, 2019: 44). Research clearly shows that presenteeism can delay recovery, increase the risk of future health problems and absenteeism and result in errors, accidents, and injuries (Ruhle et al., 2020). This behaviour has become even more important during the Covid-19 crisis as it raises the risk of further spreading the virus. This is critical in sectors that have continued to operate during the pandemic, such as HE, since many UK universities have adopted a blended teaching approach, refusing to go fully online, and thus, putting staff and students' health at risk (UCU, 2020b). Even more worryingly, as Kinman and Grant (2020) report, the shift in working practices to reduce the spread of the virus has left many white-collar workers, including academics, working from home, and has intensified the pressure to work virtually during illness. Steven's testimony confirms the latter authors' arguments when discussing his decision to continue working from home although heavily infected with Covid-19, a phenomenon that this article calls 'virtual presenteeism'.

Scholars have identified a range of personal and work-related factors driving presenteeism. Personal characteristics include, but are not restricted to, job attitudes, feelings of high obligation, perceiving absence as a less legitimate option (Reuter et al., 2020), gender, work engagement and financial difficulties, but also aspirations for career advancement and reputation for high work ethic (Lohaus and Habermann, 2019). Work-related factors include stress, low support, increased attendance pressure (Reuter et al., 2020), strict and flexible absence policies (Hadjisolomou, 2016), job demands, reward systems, conditional entitlements of statutory sick pay, and/or low level statutory sick pay (Stricot and MacDonald, 2020), absence culture, and job insecurity (Johns, 2010; Lohaus and Habermann, 2019). This article underlines the interconnection between these characteristics to Steven's decision to work while being sick. As his story reveals, two main factors have driven his virtual sickness presence: the casual nature of his contract, generating financial instability and job insecurity, and the presenteeism culture of academia, expecting and pressuring casual workers to project a high work ethic, commitment, and loyalty to the organisation via sickness presence (Ruhle and Süß, 2019). This contributes to Bone's (2019) concept of the 'continuous present', arguing that young, precarious academic workers are required to make commitments and sacrifices driven by feelings of job insecurity and aspirations for career advancement. Along similar lines, Steven discusses his decision to continue working while sick and self-isolating, thereby sacrificing his physical and mental health to ensure the renewal of his contract.

Steven's decision should not be surprising given the insecure nature of his contract. Kim et al. (2020) found that non-permanent workers who often perceive their job as insecure were more likely to report presenteeism compared to permanent workers. Indeed, presenteeism, evidently, is strongly associated with job insecurity (Lohaus and

Habermann, 2019), as Steven also emphasises. Johns (2010), similarly to Steven, suggests that presenteeism occurs when employees do not perceive absenteeism as an available option, especially in a period of uncertainty (Hadjisolomou, 2016), such as Covid-19. Research has already revealed that 26% of academic staff in a UK university have experienced presenteeism during the pandemic (Van Der Feltz-Cornelis et al., 2020), while others predict that feelings of job insecurity will motivate presenteeism further among precarious workers post-pandemic, thereby increasing personal and public health risks (Kniffin et al., 2021).

Presenteeism, however, is not merely the outcome of instability in the external environment and the consequent feelings of job insecurity. Steven's story shows that it is generated by, and rooted in, the presenteeism culture of academia, experiencing institutional pressure to continue working from home while ill. Specifically, his line manager, disturbingly, expected Steven to continue working virtually as this was facilitated by the blended teaching approach adopted in the institution. This is highly worrying but not surprising. Authors have recognised that it is common practice in academia for staff to work from home while sick. As reported, the use of technology allows academics to work remotely without being infectious and therefore remain productive and avoid attracting negative attention from colleagues and management (Jaye et al., 2020; Levy and Savulescu, 2021). This suggests the development of a particular presenteeism culture within HE organisations which is based on a culture of fear (Hadjisolomou, 2016; Taylor et al., 2010), further facilitated by technology.

Similar to previous research, Steven clearly outlines his feelings of fear of dismissal and the self-pressure to continue working while sick, to visibly portray the image of the good employee (Bone, 2019; Jaye et al., 2020), adapting to the presenteeism culture of the entrepreneurial university. This is in line with Bone et al.'s (2018) analysis of the experiences of precarious academic workers, suggesting that the threat of expulsion which forces this group of workers is related to over-commitment and the need to be visibly present at work. As the authors conclude, the insecurity feeds into the power of what Bone et al. (2018: 227) call the 'greedy institution' and establishes a culture of presenteeism. Consequently, presenteeism is not merely a personal decision by the worker, as Johns (2010) initially described it, but a wider indicator of the power imbalance between workers and employers. Indeed, as Steven's testimony shows, precarious academic workers feel pressured to adapt and fit within the presenteeism culture they observe in order to secure their employment (Bone, 2019; Bone et al., 2018).

Overall, it is clear from Steven's story that academia is characterised by what Ruhle and Süß (2019: 248) describe as a voluntary 'presentistic culture', within which sickness presence is voluntary but, nevertheless, in this case, it is expected by management and facilitated by technology (Levy and Savulescu, 2021), leading to feelings of fear to go off sick (Hadjisolomou, 2016; Taylor et al., 2010). The underlying, unitarist, assumption of this type of presenteeism culture is that the individual is loyal to the organisation and is responsible for the organisational goals and success, although the 'greedy' HE institution does not provide job security, decent work or adequate health and safety protection (Bone et al., 2018). Covid-19 has revealed the inequalities in the UK HE system and the impact of precarious academic work on individuals' physical and mental health (Kinman and Grant, 2020). This article calls for further research to explore the experiences of

casual academic workers within a continuous precarious employment, especially in the post-Covid-19 period when the prospect of a blended learning environment is expected to be the new educational norm in HE (Lockee, 2021; Whelan, 2021), thus increasing the risk of virtual presenteeism worryingly becoming the new attendance norm.

Steven's story

Covid-19 and employment insecurity

The HE sector was hit hard by the pandemic with many international postgraduate and undergraduate students cancelling their enrolment. This had a tremendous impact on universities' finances, which unavoidably impacted on employment in the sector. Indeed, many members of staff, both administrative and academic, especially those under casual employment contracts such as myself, either had their hours reduced or did not have their contracts renewed. Although more domestic students were enrolled, somehow counterbalancing the loss of international students, my university continued its retrenchment strategy by cutting its operational costs, ending many hourly paid contracts and offering exit schemes to senior staff.

This made me worried about being dismissed and highly concerned about how to support my family. My teaching hours had been reduced or transferred to permanent staff members' workloads. This has significantly decreased my income and created lots of stress and anxiety for myself and my family. Furthermore, there is so much uncertainty regarding new working arrangements for the next academic year as these have not, as yet, been clearly communicated within the department. Talking with colleagues in other universities, this seemed to be the new normal in academia as many institutions across the country either proceeded with dismissals, furloughed staff on precarious contracts, and/or refused to renew their contracts rather than supporting them in these difficult times. This made me feel insecure as the possibility to move to a different university seemed utterly impossible.

Decisions for blended learning: Profit over people's health?

My university, in line with most HE institutions, followed the government's vague guidelines and implemented changes to its estates to ensure that social distancing was maintained across campus. Nevertheless, I was still highly concerned for my health as the chances of becoming sick remained high, due to the blended teaching approach adopted by the University, within which I was still expected to interact with the students delivering face-to-face sessions.

To explain more, at the outbreak of the pandemic (February – March 2020), the University, appropriately, decided to move all teaching activities fully online as an action of emergency. At the end of the academic year, and ahead of starting the new one (Summer 2020), the senior management team decided to follow a blended learning and teaching approach to attract more students to enrol. Although I understand the financial drivers behind this decision, I felt that this was not a reasonable response as infection numbers were still high. The University, by adopting this blended approach, neglected

the suggestions of the University and College Union (UCU) and opposed the decision of other institutions to move fully online to help reduce the spread of the virus and keep staff and students safe. Indeed, my concerns came true as cases increased sharply in the city as soon as students arrived on campus. This led to the area being put into a higher tier and government imposing further restrictions. The University, however, insisted on continuing the blended teaching approach, which evidently was not safe. We, therefore, continued to teach most of our classes face-to-face along with some online lectures.

Regardless of what the University blended approach strategy meant on paper, my reality was that I had to continue my face-to-face teaching amid the second, more aggressive, wave of the pandemic, putting both my health and my family's health at risk, as well as risking the health of my students. One of my major concerns and frustrations was the fact that staff were not consulted regarding the University's decision to follow a blended teaching approach, despite previous recommendations to move fully online for the first semester until January 2021. Although many emails were circulated from the top management stating that the University is committed to its staff's mental health and well-being, I felt that these were simply false and rhetorical managerial promises. We were still expected to be physically present at work for the face-to-face sessions which kept us, our families and our students exposed to the virus. Despite having some lectures moved online, the reality was that everyone continued to work as usual, with staff and students continuing to physically interact with each other. The University might argue that the necessary health and safety measures were in place; however, these did not reduce the risk of contracting the virus. We were all still expected to commute to work during the pandemic while alternatives were available. Indeed, we had the option to move online, similar to many other UK universities, yet I strongly believe that my university prioritised its finances over our health and well-being, which is alarming and immoral. My institution is among the largest in the UK in terms of student numbers and thus it is in a good financial position to support a decision to move to a fully online provision since most students are home students. Nevertheless, they decided not to and kept us exposed to the virus, simply to fulfil their overpromises to students for blended learning and secure income at the cost of individuals' health. I was one of those infected with the virus as an outcome of the University's decision to implement the blended teaching approach.

Blended teaching, virtual sickness presence and the presenteeism culture

When my teaching started in September, I had a mix of online lectures and face-to-face seminars. Everyone wore their masks (in the communal areas, but not in the classroom), and everything seemed to work according to the standards of the new reality. However, after a few weeks, increasingly more students were going absent and informing us that they had to self-isolate either because they had tested positive for Covid-19 or they were in contact with a positive case. Similarly, there were many cases of staff who also tested positive and had to self-isolate.

I started worrying about my health as I had taught many of those students in the preceding weeks. I was terrified and surprised by the University's decision to continue with the blended teaching strategy, ignoring the ineffectiveness of the measures to stop the spread of the virus on the campus. I continued coming in to work. I could, by law, refuse

to do so on the grounds that this puts my health at risk. However, when you are working on an hourly paid or temporary contract the reality is that the employment regime of academia does not allow you to refuse work as teaching hours are pre-defined. It is a very competitive sector for us (casual workers). It can be a case of one day you are in and the next day you are out. I did not want to be the troublemaker and the rebel here. It would be too risky for my employment status and job security. Thus, I continued delivering my face-to-face classes as directed by the University.

Four weeks into the semester, however, I started feeling sick. I had symptoms which I was not sure whether to describe as Covid-19 or not. After having a high temperature for a few days, I decided to take the test and it was positive. I panicked and got worried about my family but also my employment. I was teaching on a wide range of modules, and I was not sure how my line manager would react, on short notice, that I needed to self-isolate. I knew they would not have an immediate replacement for my teaching hours, which would create a major inconvenience for the line management. Being on an hourly paid contract, I was afraid of being dismissed or not having my contract renewed if I failed to meet my teaching responsibilities and/or generate such hassle for them.

My first response was to inform my line manager and the module leaders of the classes I was teaching. All seemed to empathise and understand my situation. The line manager suggested informing the HR department as well as the institutional team responsible for tracking Covid-19 cases. To my surprise, my line manager further suggested to move my sessions online and continue working from home. As they said, there was no-one available to cover my sessions. In the first instance, this arrangement appeared convenient for everyone. Module leaders would have their teaching covered and I would have my income and, hopefully my job, secured. It was a conundrum to me whether to go off sick or to continue delivering my sessions online. On the one hand, I did not want to inconvenience my line manager but, on the other hand, I was physically and mentally exhausted and needed time to recover. Eventually, I agreed. I was hoping, however, that my line manager would have been more empathetic to my condition. On the contrary, I was expected to be available and work online from home, despite being sick.

I started questioning myself about why I had agreed to continue working while sick yet needing time to recover. I had a very high fever, a continuous headache, cough and tiredness. At the same time, it was extremely difficult for me to self-isolate from my family. On the one hand, I had to protect them from getting the virus but, at the same time, I was feeling like a stranger in my own house. I could not spend time with them and it was particularly challenging to stay away from my five-year-old son as we live in a small, two-bedroomed flat. It really broke my heart seeing him begging for a hug and not being able to give it to him. For all these reasons I broke into tears many times worrying about my mental health.

Having gone through this situation, I realised that my line manager's suggestion was nothing more than an indirect, coerced proposition, leaving me with only one option. I was frustrated by this request, as well as with my own decision to go ahead with what was suggested. I also regret not seeking advice from the union, primarily because I am not a member. Today, I am wondering whether my decisions were eventually beneficial for me (e.g. to secure my job) or whether it was merely detrimental for my mental health and well-being. I can confidently say that it was challenging and difficult for me to deliver the online sessions. My wife was deeply frustrated watching me work while

being on medication, struggling to keep myself focused due to prolonged fatigue because of the infection. Indeed, I was struggling to perform and keep students satisfied, which was highly worrying given the forthcoming evaluation surveys. In a period when student evaluations and Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) measures are part of our performance appraisal, for me, a casual worker, this generated further stress, anxiety and uncertainty for the future.

Apparently, when you are on an insecure contract like me, working while sick is a one-way road in academia. I got worried about not being offered a contract in the future. My line manager took advantage of the precarity of my contract and the feelings of insecurity this comes with, and expected me to continue working from home, overemphasising the staff shortage and, therefore, the unavailability of bodies to cover my sessions as well as the inconvenience my sickness had created to the department. In my case, I was physically absent yet virtually present, delivering sessions online, which was still a violation of my employment rights. Surprisingly, however, this is perceived as a normal condition in academia.

Thinking of my situation back then, I blame myself for agreeing to continue working while sick and not proceeding with the necessary arrangements to receive statutory sick pay[1] in order to not inconvenience my line manager and the department. I am, however, particularly concerned that the pressure to work while sick is widespread in HE, especially in the current online working environment, which is here to stay. Having discussed my situation with friends and colleagues in other institutions, both in the UK and abroad, it seems that working while sick is an accelerating trend in the sector, coming with negative consequences on workers' mental health and well-being. My consent to this was against my personal morals as well as my employment rights. However, the precarious employment regime in the sector, and the expectations for presenteeism, drove my decision. I could certainly say that my trust in the University, and the management team, is broken. I have learned a lot through the situation I went through. Covid-19 has revealed how the marketisation and casualisation of the UK HE system has left workers, particularly us in precarious employment, vulnerable to managerial decisions. We are expected to prioritise work over our health, while being afraid to claim our employment rights. It is time to change this.

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Note

1. Steven was entitled to statutory sick pay as he had worked for the university for at least three months (Govuk, 2020).

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