

## **Winter is coming?**

### **Academic identity transitions for a digitized and precarious landscape.**

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## **1. Abstract**

This paper considers academic identity and sensemaking at the nexus of New Public Management within the digital education arena to understand what it means to teach in this neoliberalised context. Precarity of HE lecturers with fixed and short-term contracts is an increasingly dominant factor internationally, driving uncertainties. Disruptive developments of digitally innovative paradigms accompany and further enable parallel growths of managerialism, metrics and accountability. The impact of such measures provokes sensemaking activities and resultant 'sticky' behaviour from digital teachers in order to manage feelings of insecurity.

Our research design uses photographic ethnography and in-depth interviewing to gain insight into micro routines, identity legitimations and practices of participants. This paper then focusses on the impact of these transitions considering how implementation is being experienced by teaching lecturers. We explore teaching cultures within UK and UAE teaching institutions at different points on the continuum of digitisation, finding discourses of alienation and liminality.

## **Introduction**

Higher Education teaching is fast approaching and may already be at the crossroads of a profound series of change intersections. Growth in online delivery and new media platforms for delivering pedagogy and assessment along with new forms of interactions with students have resulted in a proliferation of digitised equivalence practices.

Using a comparative approach focusing on cross-national issues this study undertakes an inter-cultural analysis between the UK and UAE HE sectors. The teaching context in the UAE, where digitisation is in the introductory and innovatory phase, is as a complement to traditional campus interactions. This is in contrast to the UK where digital equivalence options for HE courses are becoming ubiquitous within a neoliberalised environment.

The two institutions that are the focus for this study are a UK distance learning provider offering a blended approach and an American Accredited University in the UAE with a predominantly face-to-face offering that is accompanied by a complementary digital facility. In both institutions, digitised strategies are aiming to

ensure currency, increase student numbers and facilitate retention, as sector providers undertake competitive and mimetic behaviour, offering digital teaching as part of a holistic student experience. The move to digitisation as a division of learning has been described as impacting who would learn, how and what (Zuboff, 2015:p77).

However, management motivations behind digitisation operate on two levels. In both UK and the UAE, normative technological solutions are presented as model enhancements, widening participation and increasing availability of teaching materials and student support. In the UK, this also explicitly accompanies a secondary purpose from neoliberalised UK governmental frameworks which assess the value and purpose of our universities as social institutions and support drives toward metricization.

The enactment of these policies continually shapes the individual's bond with their University in material, economic and political ways. In the UK, US and Australia histories of tenure are being unwound, whilst the melting pot<sup>1</sup> of cultural variation in the UAE has proliferated a myriad of fixed-term local and expat contract variations. Narratives of a multi-tiered academic 'marketplace' are sprouting, alongside untenable workloads and a higher education gig economy.

However, the amplification of material aspects of precarity obscures questions about its obverse, immaterial considerations of evolution to a digital sphere of teaching. There may be a variety of practical and emotional implications for this sort of work and inhabiting this sort of role. These might include positive frames such as international reach, and spatial and temporal flexibility. More contestable implications could be loneliness, self (or externally imposed) ever-presence online, and loss of institutional belonging such as via water-cooler conversations. Negative associations include loss of community of practice and personal development opportunities. Whilst contributors such as Mann (2005) propose frameworks such as communication strategies to ameliorate downsides, the issues remain prevalent. Mann's work is orientated toward students' feelings of alienation in online education, but recent developments to the neoliberalised academy have substantially changed

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/united-arab-emirates-population/> ref (accessed 04 01 2019)

power structures, leaving many precariously employed lecturers with similar feelings of insecurity, and disengagement from their students. New customer orientations in the UK with changes to fee regimes could even be said to contribute to lecturers feeling more transient than their students. The advent of new ways of working, new and emergent technologies as transformation of the ways people get work was commented upon in [Gallup's \(2017\)](#) workplace study.

The very nature of the transient digital sphere brings further institutionally-orientated difficulties to the precarious academic. In appearing compliant and performative to metrics, they are devising their own mechanisms attempting to game the system (see Clarke and Knights, 2015) and transition from liminal (Beech, 2011) to “sticky” and visible to the institution. Changing policies and subsequent practices within these institutions are; through daily encounters and corresponding coping strategies, duly transitioning perceptions of workplace and role, and the associated identities of academics who inhabit them. The normalisation of the digital space as integral to institutional student experience metrics is one such transitional arena, and provides a focus for our study which seeks to hear narratives of lecturers who we found to be experiencing a form of digital ‘enclosure’ (Hall, 2013).

Whilst the term “digital enclosure” is not in widespread usage in the higher education sphere, articles have started to emerge considering other online spaces as “digital enclosures”. Boyle (2003: 37) raises online space as a kind of commons, and digital as a “second enclosure movement” and Andrejevic, (2007: 296) in his discussion on surveillance, raises concerns of obscuration of control online. He uses a model of digital enclosure to theorise forms of productivity and monitoring, what he refers to as a process encompassing strategies for “privatising, controlling and commodifying information and intellectual property” (Andrejevic, 2007: 301) Whilst applied to an enclosure for e.g. Google business models and application to data enablement and ownership, important questions of dependency of ownership and control are raised that are relevant to academia.

This paper therefore considers changing roles in higher education teaching and the impact of precarity alongside new digital solutions. One facet that we take into consideration are concerns around an increasing “Fordist” approach to academic roles. This appears to be transitioning away from a collegiate academic culture, with

one group predominantly orientated towards online student supervision and grading, as distinct from a research “superstar”. This has given traction towards the managerial imposition of reduced contractual status for a digital underclass of lecturers. We attempt to capture changing dialogues and subjectivity of organisational life thoughtfully and to progress the contribution of Knights and Clarke’s (2014) study of our own profession as academics. Whereas they focus on career aspects, we turn our lens to the transitional interplay between physical and digital teaching environments.

This article therefore begins by examining managerialism, the role of digital in facilitating this in universities and then goes on to discuss academic identity work. We then consider the implications for the academic identity processes underway within the context of current digital disruption. Before presenting our data on business school academics in the UK and the UAE we provide an explanation of our research design, data collection methods and analysis.

## **Literature**

### **NPM, Managerialism and new educational futures**

As recognised, HEIs are adopting a more traditional organisational and bureaucratic perspective, as noted by Enders (2016) and Husman (2016). Carvalho and Videira (2019 p. 762) write that traditional collegiate, collective decision-making processes are being subsumed by a top down managerial approach. They posit that this results in deprofessionalisation, with power and control, “moving from the hands of academics to the hands of managers or to administrative staff”.

The impact of such has been suggested to result in a reconfiguration in professional autonomy. Managers are then taking more responsibility for administration and decision making in the university. The twofold output of this enables the creation of the star academic who now has increased capacity for research output, contrasting with increased teaching only academic contracts. Fixed term and part time employment are then on the increase as de facto ways of working in Universities as part of the response to coping with funding issues and marketisation. Ylijoki and Ursin (2013) propose that academics are becoming managed professionals. They state our work is no longer represented by “academic freedom, self-regulation and autonomy, but instead by the steering and monitoring of the institutional

management (p.1136). However, this does not appear to be consistently applied, with the former group of star academics retaining more academic independence, and their findings applying more to supporting group of teaching academics. Kaplan and Haenlein (2016: 442) offer a brief glimpse of a MOOC'd future which benefits financial stakeholders via cost-effective flexibility, pointing to a glib neoliberalised future of star-faculty supported by faceless supernumeraries.

In today's NPM, Universities are demanding increased output, teaching, and compliance; enabled by technology which ensures a visible digital working arena furthering levels of scrutiny. Whelan (2015) and Ng (2015) acknowledge validity in the view that the ideal of the modern university as a community of intellectual integrity is in crisis, particularly in the emergence of multi-tier workforces. They made a comparison between tenured academics and those on year-by-year or semester-by-semester contracts. Both authors comment on evolution from autonomous academic to continuous subjections to audits and accountability. This is also evident not only in the managerial aspect of academic life but in teaching itself and in particular online teaching with associated technological innovations (see Myers et al, 2018). A neoliberal culture serves to stratify academic life creating silos of tenured and non-tenured academics, the system being emboldened by its capability to monitor online presenteeism.

Lorenz (2012) discussed this concept of NPM of higher education, particularly noting increasing student ratios and accompanying decreasing core of tenured staff. This movement results in an erosion of the profession to a mass production line.

The need then for critical examination of digital HE futures is key, as explored by Hall (2013: 54), who discusses the reshaping of "deterministic, socio-economic discourses of efficiency, personalisation and networked individualism that underpin the technologically-mediated University". Hall's paper considers how a previously socialised good is now in the process of privatisation via Marxist perspectives. Citing Harvey (2010), Hall visualises educational technologies inside a broader system of enclosure, extracting academic labour by moving more work online and blurring classifications of administration and teaching. There is a distinct lack of research into

the neoliberal university on individual experiences, perceptions and academic identity (Harris, Myers and Ravenswood 2019 p. 708).

Trends towards audit and control are short-sighted as they lend themselves to academics “tick boxing” what they know will be evaluated but these activities may not be valuable in terms of their self-identity as academics (Knights, 2006). Clarke and Knights (2015: 1875) sum up, saying that, ‘to acquire the rules of law, the management techniques, and also the morality, the *ethos*, the practice, the self that will allow us to play these games with as little domination as possible’. Our next section turns to the impact of NPM on academic identities as part of how they are constituted.

## **Identity**

Social identity is affected by social discourses intertwining with self-identity as our internal view of self within continuous constructions of self (Watson, 2009). Beech (2011: 286) writes of ‘projection of others towards the self, projection of the self towards others and reactions to perceived projections’. Ybema et al (2009) refer back to Goffman (1959) to explore the notion of identity being regarded as a bridge between the individual and the society within which they find themselves. They coined identity formation as ‘a complex, multi-faceted process which produces a socially negotiated temporary outcome of the dynamic interplay between internal strivings and external prescriptions, between self-presentation and labelling by others, between achievement and ascription and between regulation and resistance’ (p.301). In our paper we assume that identity is socially constructed and as such any construction is dependent on negotiation and articulation.

However, taking this into account, in certain circumstances, Beech (2011) proposes a notion that applies to the digital academic experience and that is that our ‘self’ can also be responsive and reacts to pressures that are external to us either reacting or accepting an identity that is forced upon us. Organisational members will actively or collectively undergo a process of accomplishing an identity and it is how we present our ‘self’ in our everyday lives that reveals how we try to construct our being (Goffman, 1959). When we use narrative about ourselves and others in the organisation this serves as a reference point.

Academic identity can be difficult to define (Feather, 2016). However, Martin et al (2018) suggest that it is based on a co-creation by the university and the academic of what they do, what they are expected to do within society and media platforms. They draw attention to how these behaviours may become more marked during disruptive change ( p4).

Identities and identifications remain concerned with definitions of the self when compared to other groups, which can include organisation or occupation (Ashforth and Mael 1989). Gabriel and Connell (2010, p.507) highlight the value of storytelling in an organisational setting in sense making and communicating of experiences. Bruner (2003: 98-100) turns to Vygotsky and Lévi-Strauss for “internalisation” to characterise how we take over and emulate established ways of talking and telling as bricolage.

Whilst when Goffman (1990, 1959) conceived of presentations of self, a digital self in everyday life could not have been envisaged, his understandings of interactions at moments of crisis and change and maintenance of key impressions and acceptabilities remains critical to conversations about professional identities (Goffman, 1990:166).

Additionally, the work of Beech (2011: 286) can further notions of compatibility to digital academic experiences and seeing a digital self as an extension of self, either in rejecting or accepting externally imposed identity. He considers liminality within identity as being ‘betwixt and between’. Furthering this, we can identify digital academic work as undergone within this transitional state, forming a composition from anthropological and organisational literatures. Reedy and Learmouth (2011:124) discussed how managerial practices can result in ‘unthinking regulation of our selves’, and this is antagonised as managers lurk, and judge unseen in the panopticon of the digitised learning space. Implications of what continuous observation might mean to an ‘authentic’ self (Costas and Fleming, 2009) to perceive self as foreign or unreal are important for consideration within developing digital, and/or digital precarious spheres. The contribution of Elsbach and Bhattacharya (2001) to disidentification discourses could also be relevant here.

Further implications include moving beyond current ‘tiering’ to potential future stigmatisations of these adjunct, liminal teaching roles. Kreiner et al (2006: 633) built

on Goffman's view that stigma would result in lower self-esteem and identity destruction for an individual. They argued that the greater the external threat caused by a stigma or taint the more likely people will develop collective defence tactics. Davido et al (2001) also cited in Kreiner et al (2006) discussed how an occupational stigma can be controlled. If we enter an occupation that is, or becomes stigmatized (or tainted) then we perceive this as being our own fault, but also this is in part an impression that is socially imposed. This is not dissimilar to recent contestations around meritocracy (e.g Littler, 2018). Most occupations are tainted or stigmatized in part or in full at some point. This paper examines the implication of this concept of tainting upon sections of academic teaching life.

Kreiner et al (2006) argued that the greater the external threat caused by a stigma or taint the more likely people in the organisation, or in our case, academics in universities, will 'develop' collective defence tactics '(p.633). Using discourse and narrative we can undertake identity work to understand who we are and who and what we are becoming in relation to any taint or stigma within our professional role. It could be argued that this poses a greater challenge to our identity as it is accomplished when our self is threatened or destabilised (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003).

One collective defence comes from Butler (1997: 20) who proposed that "where social categories guarantee a recognisable and enduring social existence, the embrace of such categories, even as they work in the service of subjection, is often preferred to no social existence at all".

'Identity is constructed and understood by the stories told to and by individuals' (Martin, Lord and Warren-Smith, 2018; p3) who propose in conjunction with Brown and Copeland (2015) that in order to maintain a positive self -image individuals are selective in their choice of memory and experience to bolster aspects of themselves as a response to identity threats.

Weick, Sutcliffe and Obsfield ( 2009:409) describe sense making as a process "in which people concerned with identity in the social context of other actors engage ongoing circumstances from which they extract cues and make plausible sense retrospectively, while enacting more or less order into those on going

circumstances". Degn (2014) used Weick et al (2009) framework to make explicit the connections between identity construction and sense making highlighting "cognitive frames and organisational rules, routines etc., but also the 'authoring actor' "( p1183) .

## **Research design**

The team adopted a practical-hermeneutic framework (Alvesson et al, 2008: 17) of ethnographic approaches, hearing narratives from two business school contexts: one UK, embracing a digital strategy, as both innovation and cost saving, the other, a UAE US-accredited institution, using mimetic digitised strategies as international teaching currency enhancement. Whilst the UK institution had experienced intensive change strategies to teaching delivery via digitisation, the UAE model was promoting digital as a complement, growing expertise in a more organic fashion.

Interest in embodied identities has been the subject of much academic interest of late. Visual ethnography as a tool to enable co-creation of knowledge is congruent with these ideas. Additionally, our use of photographs as artefacts enabled the creation of an 'anchor' of physicality to immaterial facets of presenting a digital self.

We undertook eighteen semi-structured interviews as the punctum of a more encompassing ethnographic approach where respondents were asked to bring several photographs along with a short text that portrayed for them what it meant to be an academic in their varying teaching environments. Fieldwork encompassed workplace observations using Knoblauch's (2005) framework for focussed ethnography. Given all three researchers fitted the criteria of intimate knowledge of the field, with one having extensive experience of lecturing roles in both cultures, using this approach facilitated researcher choices within funding parameters, and limited time for 'hanging out' (Alvesson et al, 2008: 21).

Interview questions were given in advance to help secure a reflective fabula (Bruner, 2004) and comfort in sharing. Including respondents own choice of images and the way they chose to present themselves were interesting findings in their own right as well as an aide to individuals who might have difficulty considering professional selves reflexively. In this way, the singularity of what was chosen for recording (Barthes, 2012: 76) facilitated transition between actor and spectator roles for participants, aiding what Knoblauch (2005:3) refers to as "bestrangement" of the

familiar'. Whilst not the fully collaborative approach advocated by Pink (2007), the preparatory work allowed participants time to consider and frame ideas prior to discussion.

For example, some respondents interpreted instructions literally, showing themselves in the classroom, or at their computers. Others depicted working tools, office posters, or other organisational symbols (University logos or office doors). Others considered ideas of 'identity' more actively, one UAE academic for example, offered her name painted in Arabic calligraphy. Thus, the photographs became individual artefacts for discussion, exchange and negotiation (see Pink, 2007).

Data analysis of transcripts, photographs and personal texts was undertaken in three steps; independent open coding (as per Glaser and Strauss, 1999). First order themes were then drawn from the transcripts, and used as Nvivo headings. Given the large amount of data we did both manually and then used Nvivo to check our manual clustering. We went on to draw insights as a form of second order themes as per Corley and Gioia 2004. Gioia et al (2012) uses second order themes to balance the participants view of the issue as knowledgeable agents

Building on the seminal work of Van Maanen (1979) who posited within an ethnographic investigation that first order concepts are the 'facts' and second order concepts are the 'theories' that the researcher uses to explain the patterning of the first order data. Collins (2018) proposed a design thinking approach that we adopted here. We used first order concepts as clusters of data and second order concepts as insights to explain the patterning. The difference being that second order concepts are not yet theories but rather insights into the situation which would then be further analysed.

Given the assumption of a socially constructed context we followed Gioia et al (2012) assuming that our organisational participants are 'knowledgeable agents' (p.17) because they know what they are trying to do and are trying to explain their thoughts and feelings. By using first order concepts and second order themes and not relating our data to existing theory and terminology initially, we drew out insights of the participants sense making. Through clustering our data samples we got a good understanding of their experiences and allowed their voices to come through rather than having apriori judgements imposed.

Narrative of purpose (title)

Done to (2no.)sticky. Real politik, NPM (additional lit in discussion-stress and anxiety as a response to digitisation and instructor versus teacher/prof – the tyranny of metrics across industry – Muller )

Done by (2 no) specialisation and compliant face, identity, (additional lit in discussion-parenting, caring trailing spouse)

**This is what the institution did and this is what the agent did in response- a done to and a done by example for each- gamekeeper poacher.**

When we rewrite finding we can balance each section

### **Setting up the narratives (response to the done to)**

We are in sympathy with Boje's (2008) ideas on antenarrative, as fragmented and non-linear storytelling, as we saw emerging through the discussions on the photographs. However, as this was one period of ethnographic study, we were unable to take a longitudinal approach. In consequence, although in agreement with Boje's notion of temporality, we could not feature this in our work. We are able however, to support Gabriel's view that the individual's oral story is plastic (2004, p 72) in comparison to formal organisational stories in the written format. Whilst taking and thinking about the photographs in advance brought linearity and helped elicit the story in a more developed manner, we acknowledge the limitation of our study being over a set period in time.

Dialectic in each of these conversational forms. One way that these stories did manifest was through the stories representing as the self and a dialectic of the individual vs the institution and presented as they x so I responded with y. Showing the complexity and relating back to theory.

The trusted interviewer, informed participant role played a part in level of discussion and honesty. Interviewers helped create those narratives, we are immersed in the context as fellow lecturers we had more in common than external consultants or administrators.

Identity work that sought to find both an emotional and a physical space for digitised teaching staff was a consistent theme of narratives. These manifested in a series of discourses, (first order sorting) and then put into second- order themes which are discussed below: *attempts at materiality, advantage through specialisation and real-time responses and realpolitik.*

*(Further explanation of each, and each subtitle links to a done to and a done by....)*

One feature of the plasticity of these stories is you can see a dialectic developing between a respondent and a representative of the University as entity, they did this to me, so I responded like this..... both deliberate and some were not. (Adam's equity theory?) Inputs they bring to a job and the outputs they gain from it (expectancy theory). Whilst some deliberately in their narratives show a rationality in their behaviour, others feelings of insecurity were such they made emotional decisions and being sticky was emotionally justified. Following interviewer interaction post experience reflection illustrated that their behaviour was not necessarily thought out, or it was post behaviour justified.

### **Attempts at Materiality (response to the done to and then post behaviour rationalisation??)**

Respondents reported the difference between an environment which was physically present and an intangible digital sphere in a number of ways, both in their teaching interactions with students and the way they went about their daily routines. They expressed discomfort with a digital panopticon, where “*every ten minutes of the course is written out [detailed]*” (UAE02), rather than the fluid, owned and bounded, *private* space of the classroom, and its “*closed door*” even if this was temporary. Several reported reduced bonds with students in this different environment, particularly when working with enlarged cohorts in the online space: “*I'm no longer tutoring my students exclusively, I'm having to restrict what I'm doing*” (UK01). This was particularly the case in the UK institution, which had changed its position to allow any students registered on that module to join in with any group.

Outside of teaching, digital and precarious staff sought to leave ‘sticky’ markers of their presence within the university, whether through outreach, or participating in

legitimisation rituals such as graduation and department meetings: *“I kind of feel obliged” ... take advantage of ...interacting.*” (UAE03). Where they were blocked from participation, often due to governance rules, there was often a profound sense of loss, even though activities were extra-curricular and unpaid. One had organised fieldwork for the students: *“...I had set up this trip...but because I was adjunct, I couldn't take the students.....I was very disappointed.* (UAE07). The loss of ‘corridor contacts’ online and the potential opportunities that had offered was also acknowledged by more than one.

Respondents were aware of gaps in institutional knowledge due to both status and a lack of presence to find out what was going on, which they actively sought to smooth e.g. *“since I'm an adjunct, I might not have the whole story. I don't always get information the same way [as] other full-time staff....* (UAE07). Some rationalised their behaviours according to the type of contract, or attempted to justify limited investment through valence, *“...well I've only got a contract for the next six months, you know, it's not worth me investing my time and effort in creating that community of practice”* (UAE06).

### **Advantage through Specialisation (done by)**

Response to being made ‘the same’ is to make yourself different, this links to precarity, if you want to keep you role you need to find a special place / skill for you, need to differentiate yourself eg PhD, publications are valued, they need to pick up on other areas to validate their place. Whole variation... could be being flexible, never moans, reliable, vs IT consultant skills. Precarity may make you feel less emboldened in your role in order to not rock the boat far more prevalent in the UAE, eg UAE no employment rights. In UK precarity due to market factors glut of phds and not enough roles.

*“Wonderful academic freedom still,...that we are losing as things become more standardised with greater online offering ... you lose the richness as you as an individual“* (UAE 02).

*“Until recently the tutors had a bit of autonomy” (the narrative then discussed role has become more of an admin role but we also manage faculty) UAE 02. This is also reflected in the UK, eg tutors giving days for lems... sems setting lems, is uk further*

*forward on the continuum as we are using the digital platform as more admin due to cost cutting due to enabled technologies that used to be a purely admin role..*

Another way that respondents tried to articulate their unique place was through specialisation, and offering scarce skills, such as significant industry experience and network access. In several of the discussions, they explored how they promoted this aspect of their skills in the institutional context:

*“to be an academic is very prestigious, and so I find that because I have a professional background as well as an academic background that there are numerous opportunities” (UAE 03).*

Others reported how they sought to be indispensable through specialist knowledge or IT skills, whilst others focused on pedagogic expertise and increasing need to lead students through an ever-expanding maze of information in a digital world. One reported the sheer number of sources available to undergraduates now in comparison to his own historical experiences in student life.

For those who looked to help students work through the masses of information, they focussed on developing students critical thinking skills as opposed to simply being providers of knowledge.

*“It’s given them more data and less information. The cognition of what’s out there is less. There is more out there online but the way students comprehend and use it is less” (UK04).*

Many respondents were positive about particular skills and their contribution to their working lives and their institutions in turn. However, in a more contestable way, there was a suggestion that these pedagogic and other skills were being ever more measured and supervised.

They also noted that the teaching role was taking on a much more administrative burden that duly impacted the tutoring role, and that often they were asked to do tasks that simply reflected the immediate need of the organisation, rather than fitted to their specialist role. Part of this was due to reduction in numbers of support staff, but also about the institution seeking to gain more value from its adjuncts through adding administrative tasks that were unseen at the outset of a contract, *“Now it all seems to be all about administration and solving problems.” (UK05).*

## Real-time responses and realpolitik – a balancing act (a response to done to / done by)

Digital teaching and student interaction proved a central discussion point in interviews. Respondents from both institutions reported increased ability to engage with more students with the development of digital platforms which accompanied institutional growth strategies. This was directly evidenced through tangibles such as library access as well as helping manage class sizes and resources. All reported the need for flexibility in approach and changing culture in academia, and key criteria still remained as about “*supporting students....about challenging them, and...finding new ways to do that...*” (UAE04).

Positives included reach for large audiences for appropriate events such as library briefings, contrasted with the need to reflect upon online pedagogy and restriction on class sizes. Concerns were raised about greater numbers e.g. (UK05) who wanted to preserve smaller group relationships: “*I’m this one special person for that person doing the module, but they can be just one in 100 to me at any one time. And it’s how do I make sure that all of those 100 are just as important...when I’m working in a digital environment and I may have very, very limited contact....*”

Tensions over academic decision making in pedagogic choices best for quality teaching and learning rather than management “rollouts” of one-size-fits-all were raised. Where online teaching decisions were appropriate and pedagogically sound, respondents referred to new ideas such as extended roles for students as leaders in groups as empowering learning and resilience, e.g. (UAE 02) “*I came to shift proudly from being [an]...authority...to being a mentor....I really feel happy about that*”.

Where the shift to digital had more nuanced implications was in terms of the practicalities of managing an “always on” environment. Respondents reported tensions in maintaining balance between offering the best learner support and meeting student expectations. There was a growing awareness that with digitisation comes the expectation of real-time response possibility. Teachers were aware that they could not always meet expectations on a practical level and that feeding this need was not always in the learners’ best interests. The tutor role aimed to build learning skills and resilience in students, and so responding to their needs rather than immediate wants needed to be balanced. However, response times were

highlighted from student surveys, and tutors were aware of the potential impact of perceived negative student feedback on their precarious contractual situation. This flexibility came out in discussion of changing work hours context in the UK, with one being texted after midnight with an assignment problem, and feeling they had to respond, "...*fortunately, I'm not the early to bed type....*" (UK 02). In this instance, the tutor reported that the role was just about being "*a voice of calm*". The same respondent also highlighted a student "*expecting an instant answer almost.*"

There were also practical implications of not responding immediately, as students quickly sought support outside institutionally sanctioned web pages and other support areas because of the immediacy of responses available on external social media. The "*quick fire*" (UK02) environment and often erroneous responses on social media sites was acknowledged by one respondent who contrasted internal moderated sites, and who felt the need for greater resilience and kindness all round.

The flip of the "quick fire" scenario was also felt as part of teaching staff roles with some students reported as going dark at times, and no physical markers of attendance in the digital environment. One respondent commented: "*really incredibly frustrating when it goes completely silent...and whether that is a reflection of people changing behaviour...*" (UK05).

## **Discussion**

As seen in the contextual information and the themes explored above, a reduction in tenured roles and erosion of contractual rights, coupled with trends toward hourly or semester paid teaching has resulted in an increasingly precarious work situation.

The digital academic arena has proved an enabler toward the creation of what can be seen, in Marx's terms as becoming a "nomadic" (Marx, 2013:465) population of distributed and untethered educational workers, as in some ways, part of a new digital proletariat. This reconfiguration of the digital space in education is normative, in Marxist terms. Harvey talks about the "unanalysed scale problem" for sensible management of resources (Harvey, 2011: 102-4) and the conundrum of whose interests we seek to protect, in this case, the cultural commons of education at its increasingly global scale. Digital enclosure as an idea then helps us understand how management logics and policy ideas around digital have been adopted toward

normative benefits, narrowing debates about differentiation and increasing academic precarity.

NPM and managerialism thus add another 'underdog' layer to the profession of online teaching as part of a mass market approach. This level of uncertainty, coupled with the increase in managerial supervision in what has historically been viewed as an elite profession, has resulted in a situation where academics are trying to understand what their role in academia is.

As the digital education environment is increased and the physical reduced, academics are undergoing identity work to find out who they are becoming and discovering the construct of their 'becoming' selves through the digital education environment. In addition, they are experiencing forced identities of markers, tutors, facilitators, being projected on to themselves which they are either rejecting or accepting. This is demonstrated above through discourses such as either the rationalisation of the amount of effort they are prepared to put into their roles, or in the sticky behaviours underway to demonstrate their value in the academy.

We see them comparing the enforced role of who they should be and who they are becoming with who they hope themselves to be as a self-identity. The result of this is that teaching, which was always understood to be a life choice and a passion, can be reduced to a more mechanistic approach when subject to audit and control. Alternatively, it presents as a frantic attempt to "belong" despite contractual status.

Using photographic ethnography, we saw growing evidence of a separation of the academic identity and self-identities as participants explained their lives, their understanding of their roles as they journey down the road of increasing development of digital education. They explained their journey as needing to justify their niche or value to others. They questioned who they were becoming as a professional identity. They were trying to be seen to do the tasks that are being observed and evaluated in order to maintain a modicum of control of their lives. They are pushed into a situation where they try to portray elements of themselves that are valued and that give them a competitive edge. Where the physical is reducing and the digital increasing there are fewer physical cues academics can use to interpret,

to construct, and adapt self. They question their role and value more in an environment where autonomy and professionalism are decreasing.

Meeting notes of 3<sup>rd</sup> April

Why do we accept precarious contracts?

Parenting, trailing spouses, caring (the lit for this can go into the discussion )

What is the future of work- egos session – could go into implications section

You don't have work for the money but want to do something professional

Retiring is saying goodbye to professional identity.

Freedom of the classroom no freedom on line even when tutor notes are provided.

Anxious in online forum for both tutors and students – check quote 'express discomfort.....'

Online being recorded so you can tell what has been covered therefore students and faculty are wary about they say.

The option to have some kind of interaction is .....better than not (fran- UK06)

Precairous but you make the best of it working it in with your home identity

In the wrong corridor to hear what is being said

**We adapt – the compliant face- these people aren't own by the institution – a pocket of resistance**

NPM came first but these are the opportunities people have taken to fit in.-kicked off land so went to factories (Marx)

Presenting compliant fact while getting the best of it /

NPM is the

Active agent in a number of ways

Stories about how agency was enabled- a narrative with purpose

Response to the done too

## Actions

### **Implications**

A reduction in tenured roles coupled with eroding contractual rights and trend towards hourly-paid teaching has resulted in precarious work and associated practices. Our findings fully support the work of Ylijoki and Ursin (2013) who state that “narratives of resistance, loss, administrative work overload and job insecurity are embedded in a regressive storyline.”p1135.

Uncertainty as to the eventual destination of the digital workspace, in parallel with supervisory increases has resulted in teaching, always understood to be a life choice and a passion, appears in some cases as reduced to a more mechanistic, process-driven approach riven with emotional labour. We appear to be losing academia as a critique of society and questioning, (concurring with Clarke and Knights; 2015), as efforts are diverted towards “sticky” and visible activities.

Using photographic ethnography our participants were able to express how they saw themselves in transitional states, as they were, and as becoming. We saw growing evidence of separating academic identity and self-identity as participants explained lives and roles, journeying down the road of increasing development of digital education.

That these debates within academic life about the meaning of teaching and identities of teachers, particularly online, are now attracting attention and gaining traction outside the academy can be seen from recent developments in the US. Newton (2019), writing for *Forbes*, leads with a story from the Department of Education, who are seeking public comment on proposals to change the meaning of educational terms – i.e. what colleges can do, and what degrees mean. He writes of how these proposals have implications for “the very meaning of “instructor”” and what a teacher is, from instructor as individual to team roles of instruction. Implementation of such

proposals would add further distance between the expert academic and the faceless, supporting academic.

### **Further research**

It is aimed to undertake further research by a return visit to the research sites, using the same participants where possible and revisiting the same research questions to see if and how narratives have evolved over time. This would involve picking up the theorisations of Boje (2008) and Gabriel (2004) on aspects of temporality and plasticity in lecturer's narratives on the digital workspace, and also trends in precarity and responses from agents to their working conditions.

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