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An exploration of academic identity through the COVID-19 pandemic

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 global pandemic precipitated migration to online learning and teaching for students and universities. This study explored the change in self-identification in an academic role through the significant disruption caused by the urgent migration from on-campus teaching to online teaching in the face of lockdowns designed to limit the spread of the virus. Drawing upon identity theory, this study explored the impact of the swift change in work practices on the academic identities of staff (n = 33) at a UK university. Three themes were identified: identity disruption, sensemaking and nostalgia for what had been lost. Hearing directly from academics is important because academic identity, in an increasingly neoliberal sector, was already a topic of interest, with tension and insecurity affecting work practices, including interactions with students. The experiences of the disrupted academic sessions could result in significant changes in practice, and a re-shaping of the academic role to build upon online pedagogies, interactions with students, and peers. If so, what it means to be an academic will change with consequent implications for prioritisation, workloads, attracting and retaining academics, and student experience. The themes arising from this study are discussed and implications for future practice are presented.

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Introduction

Many universities have been offering well-planned and well-resourced online learning for years, for example, high-profile Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), postgraduate online courses and credit-bearing short courses. However, the COVID-19 global pandemic resulted in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) moving face-to-face learning and teaching wholescale and at pace to being hosted on online platforms from January 2020 onwards, in an attempt to limit the spread of the virus (Ali 2020). Indeed, the everyday lives of most academics changed suddenly as students and staff were, for a time, no longer able to access their campuses for lectures, labs, tutorials or supervisions.

Changes in everyday life have consequences for an individual's sense of self, their identity. Academics, as others, seek the security of knowing who they are and how they are regarded (Knights and Clarke 2014). But what kind of person would emerge from this seismic shift? Finding an answer to this question is important because identity enactment receiving social validation (for example from students and peers) can lead to individuals feeling assured, while disrupted identities can lead to insecurity (Ashforth and Schinoff 2016). Academic identity, or sense of self as an academic, is based on a role that includes some degree of teaching, research

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and management/administration (Churchman and King 2009). Each of these activities was affected by the move online and each involved a change in enacting the academic role. This study explored how academic identity was impacted by the global pandemic through interviews with academics at a UK university affected by the migration to online teaching.

Identity and identity work

From a sociological perspective, identity is considered to be 'parts of a self composed of the meanings that persons attach to the multiple roles they typically play' (Stryker and Burke 2000, 284). Social identity theory (a social psychology perspective) similarly understands identity as socially constructed, a self that 'mediates the relationship between social structure or society and individual social behaviour', (Hogg, Terry, and White 1995, 262), and examines the dynamic sense of self in group interactions, leading to observations of in-group and out-group behaviours which can be seen in academia, for example in academic disciplines (Pifer and Baker 2016). For the purpose of this study, identity was explored through consideration of the academic role, including behaviours of academics within the social structure of the university, and in particular how such sense of an academic self was made manifest (or enacted) throughout a period of significant upheaval.

Identity is said to be *constructed* through our interactions with others and our enactment of life roles (Stryker and Burke 2000). Role identity is a relatively stable view of identity as self in a role, that changes over time with new experiences and skills, together with consequent changes in behaviour in the role (Stets and Burke 2000). When the role is that of a worker, the location for role enactment is, in the main, within the employing organisation (Pratt, Rockmann, and Kaufmann 2006).

Identity is dynamic and contextual, widely analysed through theories of identity reconstruction/adaptation, with the process of adaptation largely referred to as *identity work*. Identity work has been defined as 'interpretive activity involved in reproducing and transforming self-identity' (Alvesson and Willmott 2002, 627). It constitutes a search for stability in the face of insecurity and anxiety (Marks and Thompson 2010), with the purpose of forming a coherent sense of self (Beech et al. 2016). Identity work through a role transition process strongly affects the nature of subsequent role enactment and career trajectory (Ashforth, Harrison, and Sluss 2018). Identity work is conceptualised as a social process of sensemaking (for example, through interactions with colleagues (Sweitzer 2009) or developing new skills (Nicholson 1984)), following a change in role requirements. Such sensemaking is designed to achieve a secure identity and can be triggered by significant identity disruption caused by, for example, a change of role or organisational practice (Ashforth, Harrison, and Sluss 2018). Resources for identity work therefore include the development and application of new skills, and interactions with those around us. The premise of this study was that the rapid move to online teaching and learning represented one such disruptive episode for academic staff, with consequent sensemaking drawing on such identity resources, leading to reconstructed academic identities.

Academic identity

Academic identity has been a topic of interest for many years, in part because of the complexity of the academic role within organisations where significant 'professionalism' (migration to key performance indicators and managerialism) has taken place following a period of significant expansion in student numbers and a move towards neoliberalism (for example, Billot 2010; Churchman and King 2009; Harris 2005; Winter and O'Donohue 2012). The academic self is constructed in the context of social, organisational and institutional structures (Cornelissen, Haslam, and Balmer 2007). In terms of the academic role, expectations of lecturer and professor are generally well understood across HEIs through shared understandings as articulated in promotions frameworks and job adverts.

Self-identification as an academic influences motivation, job satisfaction and effectiveness, including the quality of interactions with students and colleagues (Billot 2010; Day et al. 2006). Institutional stories also influence academic identity through, for example, mission statements, organisational imperatives, and offering a 'special place and orientation' (Connelly and Clandinin 1999, 93). *Dis*-orientation might better describe the impact on universities of transitions to online learning platforms, by necessity and at pace. Some universities and academics had pre-existing organisational and personal stories of expertise and experience in online learning and teaching affecting the nature of this enforced and unplanned transition to online. However, most academics were running to catch up with these more experienced staff, including by learning pragmatic (as opposed to theoretically underpinned) approaches to online delivery (Ali 2020).

Following a period of significant change of teaching practice, the phenomenon of a reconstructed or disrupted identity is worthy of exploration, together with any associated identity work to reach a new consolidated sense of an academic self. Self-identification in a teaching role has been researched widely (for example, Coldron and Smith 1999; Goodson and Cole 1994). Teachers' professional identity is influenced by notions of professional community (Goodson and Cole 1994). Although identity is concerned with how we view ourselves, studies have shown that being a teacher requires the teacher being seen as such not only by themselves, but also by others (Coldron and Smith 1999). Academics with significant responsibility for teaching often cite challenging working conditions (for example, heavy teaching loads) and lack of prestige compared with colleagues who focus on research (Blackmore 2016). Moore and Hofman (1988) found job satisfaction, derived from self-esteem and self-actualisation, acting to override dissatisfaction with working conditions. They also found that where teachers were located within organisations that were striving for teaching quality, their academic identity was strongly aligned with the teaching profession. Agency is significant in the construction of teachers' professional identity (Coldron and Smith 1999), and academic freedom is also widely considered to be an aspect of academic role enactment (Henkel 2005).

So, how specifically have academic identities been framed? Knights and Clarke (2014) found a range of academic identities emerging from their study of business schools, categorising identity insecurities revealed by self-narratives that encompassed three groupings: being uncomfortable with expectations; striving to meet external and internal expectations; and a third group that were attempting to find meaning for their role while undertaking what they considered to be meaningless tasks. Identity work included, for example, incorporating the value of research into the activity related to research evaluation indicators, an attempt to align who they were with what they do.

Similar categories to those suggested by Knights and Clarke (2014) were proposed by Tran, Burns, and Ollerhead (2017) who studied academic identity as an HEI adopted a new research-focused strategy, finding "enthusiastic accommodators, pressured supporters, losing heart followers and discontented performers" (69), painting a picture of the complexities of the academic role and the challenges for some to find meaning in the academic role as organisational expectations changed. Identity disruption caused by recent moves by HEIs to a more managerial approach has been studied (for example, Kallio et al. 2016), with academic nostalgia identified as a counter narrative to resentment at the levels of performance management being introduced.

Unsuccessful funding applications, rejected papers, unfavourable comparison with peers, and having expertise questioned, lead to self-doubt and a questioning of self-worth among academics (Hutchins and Rainbolt 2017).

The swift and significant shift in academic practice experienced across HEIs as a result of COVID-19 impacted the academic role, in particular the student-facing aspects of the role such as teaching and student support, and is therefore likely to have had an impact on academic identity. Whether this is experienced as a shift to a new online competence-based identity incorporating new skills or as a disrupted identity resulting in self-doubt is important to understand both in terms of future

academic practice and job satisfaction. Kulikowski, Przytuła, and Sułkowski (2021) hypothesised that the nature of tasks, feedback, autonomy and social dimensions might impact on academic job motivation; however no empirical data was presented in their paper.

Recently published pandemic experiences of academics which are likely to impact identity include: workloads increasing because online teaching, as implemented during the pandemic, was found to be more 'burdensome' than face-to-face teaching (Kınıkoğlu and Can 2021, p.s822); academics feeling under pressure to work when ill because of job insecurity (Hadjisolomou, Mitsakis, and Gary 2021); rejecting prior selves as 'high-performance juggler[s]' and trying to resist some of the additional workload and emotional investment that seemed to be expected (Newcomb 2021, 640); and personal accounts suggesting a bigger impact on women in terms of future careers, in part due to additional caring responsibilities (Bowyer et al. 2021; Pereira 2021). The opportunity for reflection has led to critiques of academic priorities, with proposals including a greater focus on the wellbeing of academics, based on less competition and more collaboration (Corbera et al. 2020), while recognising that reduced capacity for research impacts professional confidence (Buckle 2021).

The aim of this study was to explore how academic identity had been affected by the sudden shift of the academic role, in particular towards online delivery and student support precipitated by campus closures.

Methodology

Academic identity research draws on a wide range of philosophical and methodological approaches (Flowerdew and Wang 2015). In this study the aim was to capture and explore academic identity and reconstructed identities, and the ways in which academics drew on resources for identity work. The social processes for such identity reconstruction are rarely self-conscious (Ashforth and Schinoff 2016). As such, a qualitative approach would allow for identity claims to arise by encouraging participants to reflect on experiences and situations, recognising the emergence of new identity narratives. Academics are generally well versed in self-reflection (Archer 2007); however, a lack of the usual opportunities for social interaction caused by new predominately online activity necessitated an interview protocol designed to reveal nascent identity work and identity reconstruction. An interview protocol was developed based on identity literature that asked about motivations for being an academic, values associated with the role, how their practice had changed, and sought practical examples of identity work through exploring the nature of interactions with peers and students. Questions invited participants to describe their sense of self as academics and whether/how their views of the academic role had changed as a result of the transition to online teaching and learning. Questions included: 'In the past, which aspects of your academic role have you found most satisfying? Have you been able to maintain these aspects?', 'Did you benefit from or offer any peer support related to new online teaching and learning practices?' and 'How has your sense of self as an academic changed? Do you feel differently about your role?' The study received ethical approval and informed consent was obtained from all participants.

In Spring 2021, an email invitation was sent out over a learning and teaching network email list at a teaching-intensive, medium-sized urban UK university and all academics who volunteered were interviewed by one of two researchers (n = 33). One of the interviewers was known to members of the network as a colleague and an education researcher and had similarly migrated their learning and teaching to online platforms. Lazard and McAvoy (2020) suggest perspectival distance is not possible for such researchers, instead the researcher should reflect on the subjectivity of the topic and methods. Identity in different contexts had previously been researched by this interviewer, the egalitarian nature of the network approached to participate and the derivation of interview questions from published studies were all reflexive considerations. The other researcher was new to the university, joining after the interview protocol had been finalised. Patton (1999) suggests both credibility and shared experiences can be useful in qualitative research, while advising rigorously

Table 1. Participants by subject discipline.

Subject discipline	N
Business	13
Computing and Engineering	8
Health and Social Care	5
Applied Science	4
Creative Industries	3
Total	33

following the interview protocol. Table 1 shows the breakdown by subject discipline. Interviews lasted between 30 minutes to one hour. These were conducted online using video technology as the UK was still in lockdown at that time.

All participants were UK or EU nationals, on permanent contracts, and 55% were women. Most had over 2 years experience at the university, one had been recruited within the previous six months with prior academic experience.

Data analysis

Following independent coding and discussion for consistency, thematic analysis was conducted (Ryan and Bernard 2003). Initial codes, as arising from the literature on academic identity, included: sense of self as an academic pre and post-COVID, responses to disruption, resources for identity work, narratives of transition. The two researchers previously described searched for themes that stood out, reviewed each theme, and finally labelled the themes considered of relevance (Ryan and Bernard 2003). A two-stage process of inclusion and elimination of themes was undertaken with all authors (Sinkovics and Alfoldi 2012, 817). The themes are presented and discussed below, with quotes providing specific examples.

Findings

The participant group shared their varied routes into academia, with most expressing these routes as by 'chance' through an opportunity or migrating over time from practitioner to educator. Apart from a very small number of new starts, the teacher identity was based on competence in a discipline achieved through experience of practice and/or research. All had achieved Fellowship of the Higher Education Academy, a mark of professional competence in the UK.

The three overarching themes were: (1) a disrupted academic identity; (2) sensemaking and resources for identity work; (3) nostalgia for what had been lost.

A disrupted academic identity

Unsurprisingly, given the dynamic nature of academic identity (Billot 2010), academics' sense of self was disrupted by the experience of moving online and off-campus. To deal with new techniques and technology, teachers described becoming students. Participants talked about experiencing steep learning curves in their attempts to master online working. Periods of self-development and training impacted significantly on personal time and at times displaced other academic activity, including student support and research.

Participants talked of having iterated with colleagues and students to refine new approaches. The following quotes are representative of the experiences of participants:

> I think there's been a huge amount of stuff we've had to do and learn, and we've had to spend an awful lot more time sitting looking at screens with headphones on. Not getting a huge amount of feedback from our students as we've got all these little black boxes[each representing a student on a video call] . I've never worked so hard in my entire life, I mean I really haven't, it has just been full on – Participant 9

> We happened to learn from our mistakes – participant 2

> I'm more confident in my role than I was this time last year .... I've got through it and my students have got through it relatively unscathed. I'm more willing to recognise my capability than I was this time last year – Participant 7

There was recognition that new-found competence had been gained in a hurried manner, often through trial and error played out in front of students. When things did not go smoothly, interactions with students reveal a shared 'understanding of the pressures'. Examples showed student appreciation that participants were doing their best in difficult circumstances.

> Students are normally really supportive. They're quite quick to see what's not your problem, in fact I've had students say to me ... 'I know it's not your fault'. ... They realise that you're trying to do what's best for them – Participant 22

> Generally speaking, students have been quite positive about it, especially about the amount of work that they see that we're putting into this and that we're trying to support them to the best of our abilities – Participant 9

All participants shared examples of online teaching or online aspects of their roles that they would retain when back on campus:

> There's a lot [to retain], so quite a lot of the things I've done as an adaptation to the pandemic, I wanted to do anyway and to get students, for example, to do their own preparation of study before we go out in the field together. – Participant 31.

And new ways of viewing work and the workplace:

> I don't think I'll ever work in the office in the same way again. I don't need a desk. – Participant 31

> I suppose it's changed in a way; I still consider myself an academic but a home living academic who wears joggers and can't remember what it's like to get dressed up and actually go to work. – Participant 9

The participants' quotes show a temporary loss of competence, combined with new priorities, acting to disrupt previously consolidated academic identities. By expressing understanding, students supported participants to regain competence. There was a sub-theme to this disruption related to pastoral concerns that affected academic role enactment and sense of self as an academic.

Disruption to the pastoral aspects of the academic role and identity

A sub-theme of disrupted identity was identified when participants spoke of the impact on students of the move to online learning. A 'homogenised' experience for students had positive and negative aspects. For some, this meant inclusion, for example hearing-impaired students now routinely had access to subtitles and re-play lectures. However, the value of activity to students was questioned, compared with the on-campus experience,

> And all of our classes are pretty much the same now in a way because of the medium almost homogenising that experience with the students. And I worry that what we are doing is not going to be valued as much. – Participant 2

Concern for students during lockdown and in light of online learning was expressed. Caring for students included missing the chance encounters that were previously useful for observing when something wasn't right with a student and prompted a conversation. Participants speculated about how chance interactions with students, to observe and then act on anxiety and concerns, could be replicated online but feared that the lack of face-to-face contact, of *knowing* students, would hamper any attempt to find a suitable alternative. For those with programme leadership or personal tutor roles, lacking these close encounters was a preoccupation.

> How do I get these students through this programme? How do we keep everyone safe? And a lot of anxiety management planning, then replanning, structuring and restructuring. – Participant 7

> I'm very conscious of the potential anxiety amongst students as a programme leader, it's one of our biggest issues that we have to deal with. Anxiety is already at I would say tsunami proportions before the pandemic, and it's only got worse, and I think we haven't really seen a lot of it because we see students intermittently on a screen. I think everyone was trying their best, but I wouldn't describe it as comfortable. – Participant 12

Overall, the academic role had changed, for example to incorporate new ways of engaging and interacting with students, not always 'comfortable'. There was shared consensus, however, that some aspects of newly-trialled approaches would be retained.

Sensemaking and resources for identity work

Participants described identity work in the form of social and developmental interactions facilitating sensemaking; through their interactions with peers, students and engaging in training and development. Participants regained self-identification as competent practitioners by making sense of their new educational practice (Marks and Thompson 2010; Sweitzer 2009). In evidence across the participant group were narratives of transition that drew upon factors such as the challenge of meeting student expectations, trying new things and pride in achievements. Participants gave examples where students were full of praise.

> I actually got my feedback yesterday and I was practically in tears. It was so nice. It was the only module that had really felt like there hadn't been a big impact on being online to them. – Participant 29

> And then the tutorial was all online, and that was obviously live, and I have to say the feedback was phenomenal. It was actually better, significantly better, than the old module when it was face to face and I think so. I've got a hearing-impaired student in my class, and I know like, teaching them in the lecture theatre, a lot of students, not just hearing-impaired students, but a lot of students struggle to hear. – Participant 28

Peers and external influences provided rich resources for identity work through sense-checking whether what they were doing was okay,

> And she said, 'If it's good enough for your students, it's good enough to share with other people' And I thought that's actually a really good point. – Participant 17

> [A colleague] who I worked with very closely . . . we worked together really well and there's lots of things we've looked at together and we've supported each other with. – Participant 14

> Sometimes you'll chat about your new greenhouse and what's happening in the garden but other times you'll chat about something that's working, 'Oh did you try this? Did you try that?' And certainly, through the [teaching support] sessions there's been lots of peer mentoring that way. – Participant 9

Training and support for online teaching were provided by the university,

> IT support has been I'm sure a life saver for a lot of people. – Participant 24

> However, the thing I would say is it was the learning technologists and the one-to-one support they provided. I don't know what other schools were like, but I found as a school there was a collegiality. So, once I learnt something new, I would support my colleagues that hadn't done it. – Participant 5

For the majority of participants, new-found competence was shown to have value, forming part of reconstructed notions of being an academic. This must be tempered however by the caveat of the circumstances: claims of competence were contextual, grounded in the exceptional circumstances.

Nostalgia for what was lost

The final theme was nostalgic comparison of the present with past times, which was also found, in a context of change, by Kallio et al. (2016). Examples included comparisons of the online experience with face-to-face, on-campus settings, including opportunities for informal networking, love of collective idea creation and just being a social academic.

> It's so much easier, you sit in the office, and you think, 'Oh' and you go and grab someone if they're free and you can solve something in five minutes. – Participant 1

> I'm a people person so actually being away from people has been really difficult. And having to deliver more online has been difficult. – Participant 7

> And they're walking across the stage and just the pride that I feel in seeing my students finish and get their first posts and speak to them in [the university café] when they're doing their job interviews and whatever. That's gone. – Participant 7

Nostalgia was expressed also about the performative aspects of the academic role, and the stage settings where academic roles were enacted.

'Performing' the academic role

Whereas the first two themes reflect concepts prevalent in academic identity research, the performance aspect of teaching was identified as a specific sub-theme related to nostalgia. Many participants were missing the drama and energy of the big lecture theatre where they had enjoyed rising to the occasion and putting on a performance.

> I also miss a little bit, the audience, the interaction, the sense of being on stage, that sort of thing. – Participant 19

> The dance of a classroom, there's no music on that one and that's the one bit that I've just looked at and gone, 'no I've not got that one at all yet'. – Participant 4

> One of the things I found most enjoyable is actually being in a lecture theatre … I prefer doing lectures and tutorials. I certainly didn't find the same satisfaction in making lecture videos. – Participant 19

Humour was also affected. Many had cut out any jokes as any attempt at recording jokes for a video lecture or making humorous remarks during a live web streamed lecture to 'grey rectangles' met with an uncomfortable and unsettling silence.

> You don't have that same energy. You don't have the same immediate response. You can't see the confused face. Jokes don't even work. One of my colleagues said to me that the videos that I do, I've basically taken all my personality out of them. … It feels very much broadcast as opposed to communication. – Participant 4

> You're looking at grey screens. And it's just really hard, you feel like you've lost something. – Participant 1

> It felt really weird talking to the screen of black squares. Thinking, oh for god sake put your camera on. And sometimes they would but they're quite young and they're quite shy and they don't probably know each other that well. – Participant 6

> Yeah, in terms of my role,' it's somewhat unsatisfying, because it's me, even when I'm just recording in advance and as I said, you're not gonna make a joke very much on the record. You're not going to have that atmosphere in the room and that interaction. So, it does feel a bit … it does feel a bit unsatisfying. – Participant 25

But participants were also wary of sharing the home as a stage setting or themselves as individuals outside the academic setting. Participants mentioned the intrusion into the types of places they lived in, the room in the background, the evidence of personal life.

> You're letting people into your personal space, they're coming into your home when you teach online. – Participant 5

> And there's parts of my life that I don't want [students] seeing and that includes my bed. – Participant 7

> I've got nowhere to work. I've got no privacy; I've got no study. We don't have the room; we have a small house. So, it's not been a happy situation. – Participant 2

Some also experienced the balance of working and home life tipping; missing the delineation of performing in the academic role and enacting personal identity. Examples included working late and responding to communications out of office hours.

> The requirement to work from home feels like it means work bleeds into my life more, as in my home life. – Participant 7

> It makes you feel quite different because you don't go to work. You're kind of at work and at home at the same time. The separation between those two things is difficult. – Participant 19

The home environment was not always conducive to structuring each day, in particular missing the transition from one location to another as an opportunity to focus on a different aspect of the academic role, for example:

> I think I've found that in terms of research at first I thought it would be great to have more time, not even more time, a different space for doing that. But it's not the same as having an afternoon working from home when you're at home all the time. – Participant 1

This final sub-theme was less related to participants' previous conceptions of the academic role. Rather, these observations were personal; showing the elements of the role that encompassed personal performance enjoyment (drama and humour) and stage setting (home as a location for work).

Overall, there were many examples within each theme, but many participants questioned, during the interview, whether their experiences were unique or commonly shared. The casual university conversations and observed behaviours were less possible online, leaving academics with fewer opportunities for identity sense-checking through the social interactions of a professional community (Goodson and Cole 1994).

Discussion

This research study explored the lived experiences of academics during the COVID-19 pandemic through the lens of identity. While existing research into academic identity has revealed much about sense of self and role enactment, the rapid migration to online teaching was a new context which will almost certainly lead to longer term changes in teaching practice (Weale and Adams 2021). The findings were organised into three themes that highlighted disruption to a competent academic self, drawing on peers and students as resources for the identity work of sensemaking and nostalgia for aspects of the role that were easier or better face-to-face. The theoretical and practical contributions of the paper are now considered.

Theoretical contribution

This study captures working-life experiences of academics during the pandemic to understand the impact of the disruption on academic sense of self as it related to teaching practice, interactions with students, and personal lives. A sense of competence underpins teacher identity (Van Lankveld et al. 2017) and most academics in this study experienced a transitory lack of competence with new modes of delivery and online technology being imposed at pace. Competence affects wellbeing (Averill and Major 2020) and participants managed this loss of competence in similar ways: there was a notable reliance on peers for advice and students for affirmation; (often time-consuming) experimentation with new approaches; and considerable time devoted to staff development. Academics benefited from students understanding that things were difficult because of the situation, rather than because staff lacked competence or experience with the new technology. Participants could see the advantages in retaining aspects of their new online practice beyond the pandemic, but what might students lose?

Despite the many challenges, a strong teacher identity was expressed, as evidenced by statements of the value of the work being undertaken. In a systematic review, Van Lankveld et al. (2017) found staff development leading to construction of strong teacher identity and all participants in this study had undertaken formal and informal staff development. The other emerging factor from Van

Lankveld et al.'s review was the importance of student contact in constructing a teacher identity. Although academics reported here that they *felt* distant from their students, perhaps the online substitutes for face-to-face contact had less impact than anticipated on teacher identity construction, when combined with a period of sustained development. However, this is the academic identity perspective, not taking into account the effects on student experience.

In this study, the emotional aspects of the academic role, for example, expressing care for students and missing colleagues for (emotional) support, surfaced over periods of lockdown. Caring about students acts to motivate at the expense of emotional exhaustion (O'Connor 2008). Studies have highlighted the phenomenon of burnout amongst academics (e.g. Watts and Robertson 2011). Burnout symptoms include a lack of interest, weariness, and degradation in performance which can be attributed to the stress of being relied upon for support and guidance (Maslach and Jackson 1981). Participants did not exhibit signs of burnout as described, however they did describe periods of overcommitment, previously linked negatively to psychological and physical wellbeing (Kinman and Jones 2008). At the time of the interviews, staff had experienced only two terms of fully online teaching. Many reflected on their inability to informally spot students with issues to whom they could offer guidance. Perhaps such de-personalisation will become normalised when (or if) on-campus teaching increases, with consequent negative impacts on both students and staff. Words such as 'difficult', 'challenging', and 'uncomfortable' were used throughout the interviews so while, overall, positive narratives were shared, that in itself could have been a coping strategy, a means of 'developing self-regard as an individual at work' (Dutton, Roberts, and Bednar 2010, 260).

The 'relentless surveillance' (Knights and Clarke 2014, 350) of academic life has extended further. This study found a fissure in the liminal space between academic self and personal self, that was especially uncomfortable for staff. This is a theme emerging from other recent studies in similar contexts, such as Nurhas et al. (2021). However, the way the academic role is enacted is strongly associated with personal lives and experiences (Bukor 2015), just historically in a less up-close and personal way.

Participants looked back fondly on informal social interactions, and also missed previously enjoyable aspects of the role: the energy of performance, humour, and the campus as a stage for academic role enactment. The humour in teaching was lost both from pre-recorded lectures and when academics were addressing computer screens during live sessions. Instead, faced with grids of initials or names when cameras were not switched on, humour fell flat. Previous work shows the positive impact some level of humour has on students' interest and attention (Powell and Andresen 1985) and in this study, the lack of humour was experienced as a loss by academics: it may have also had a negative impact on students.

Aspects of autonomy were surrendered, though autonomy was claimed over small decisions within strict new rules. Indeed, the much-valued (Henkel 2005) and yearned for (Ylijoki 2005) academic freedoms were less in evidence through the pandemic. Academics in this study did not question their former role as decision makers when autonomy was eroded by swift (and reportedly necessary) managerial decisions relating to and affecting their roles as academics. Although autonomy was eroded, participants in this study suggested there was no going back as new skills and online advantages were consolidated. New technical/online modes were expressed as being able to save students the commute onto campus and facilitating working around students' schedules and family commitments, rather than as personal advantages. That is to say, narratives showed a convergence around a future incorporation of more online teaching and learning, as reported also in Watermeyer et al. (2021). Such moves must, of course, be tested with students rather than imposed.

Practical implications

In this study, academics found aspects of new practice worth retaining, and incorporating into hybrid models (Raes et al. 2020). However, in recognition of the impact on academics, HEIs must ensure in future that sufficient staff time is reserved for ongoing development of teaching practice, with less reliance on staff pivoting rapidly and students tolerating disruption. Such ongoing staff

development must focus on pedagogy and technical training, and be supported by new institutional stories and orientation. Confidence based on mastery and competence will serve to consolidate any sense of self as an assured educational practitioner, however, this will require careful management of future workloads to achieve. When the context changes, both staff and students will have new and different expectations of how learning should be accessed. Therefore, the relied-upon tolerance must be replaced with shared agreement (between academics and students) on any future balance between online and face-to-face activity.

An important priority for universities is that the academic role remains an attractive future career option. Careers that reflect an individual's values can act to overcome relative diminution of status, relative pay, and long-term job security (for example, Newson and Polster 2021); all are possible outcomes of a much-anticipated post-pandemic economic downturn. The participants shared descriptions of overcommitment through excessive workloads which ate into personal and family time. Kinman and Jones (2008) previously found such overcommitment amongst academics affecting psychological and physical health. Their call for more research into longer term impacts of overcommitment on academics is echoed here to encompass this period of enforced overcommitment. In this study participants lost academic freedom, spending significant additional time preparing for online classes and missed the energy and drama of the lecture; so the inherent value of the role will need some internal and external re-examination.

The COVID-19 pandemic has illustrated the importance of talented, motivated academics in facing global challenges; using their research to advance knowledge and adapting their teaching to provide students with an excellent education. During the period between March 2020 and May 2021 the participants in this study described a dramatically changed role. As universities return to campus life, it seems unlikely that things will return entirely to how they were pre-pandemic. What can be done with what is now known about academic identity through these experiences? Should HEIs retain a focus on newfound skills and growing confidence, in an uncertain future? We certainly should admit how reliant we have been on a student body that proved understanding and tolerance, one that should help shape the future of learning and teaching. Building upon those aspects both students and staff found beneficial in order to consolidate and stabilise identity would seem to be a useful legacy of the significant efforts expended.

HEIs must seek to bridge the gap between workloads and expectations. Significant additional time was spent providing online activity, to the detriment of personal time and meeting other role expectations. A working-time review of flexible delivery is essential if a hybrid on/off-campus model emerges as the pandemic waxes and wanes. Supporting both on and off-campus learners in ways that align with academic identity will require new skills and significant added time that needs to be recognised in planning future work.

Limitations and future research

There are several limitations to this work. The data was collected from a single university with an academic staff group that had a learning and teaching orientation and so it represents a somewhat narrow perspective. The data represents a reflection over a period of 12 months that may have resulted in an aggregation of many smaller but significant iterations of identity work and consolidation, thus some sensitivity may have been lost in the data.

Longitudinal research would be useful to examine whether the new academic identity as technically competent with online platforms is temporary and whether the significant effort to migrate teaching online results in downplaying of researcher identity in the short and longer terms.

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