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New year, new you? Forget it if you're an academic

1 comment

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Starting the new year with a surge of self improvement ignores the contemporary realities of precarious and casualised academic life. It's time to ditch the self-help mantras for collective action, argues Valeria Ruiz-Perez

In the last couple of decades, self-help books and the [happiness industry](#) have become [extremely popular](#). Higher education is no exception to the trend: as early academics, we often come across a wide variety of guides that will lead us to a better, more effective and employable version of ourselves. Many of these guides, despite recognising the context of poor work conditions and various forms of marginalisation in higher education, [argue that](#), as academics, we can “fight these injustices but reclaim the possibility of effectiveness, success, and happiness in [our] own work”. From doing [all the right things in order to become a professor](#) to [effectively managing workloads and finding work-life balance](#), to guides on [how to successfully leave academia](#), these books pride themselves on their ‘data-driven’, ‘realistic’, and ‘practical’ advice for self-reflection and improvement. In the [hypercomplex world of higher education](#), and through the illusion of the endless

potential of individual choice (we can always be faster, more productive, smarter, more creative, better teachers!), these guides tend to conceal the extent to which we can make meaningful choices within the structural constraints of the fast-paced, short-term, casualised workplace of higher education.

Close to breaking point

In the context of last year's [UCU strike](#) and broader [discussions](#) regarding precarity and casualisation in higher education, these books seem to have little to offer. The Guardian's 2021 piece on the [lecturer who lived in a tent](#) provided a striking example of the extent to which the market of higher education may put us in conditions in which happiness and self-realisation are simply impossible. Though we may not all be living in tents, how far would we have to stretch the definitions of happiness and success to see our own experiences as fulfilling? Job insecurity, marginalisation within academia (particularly for [women and ethnic minorities](#)), lack of opportunities for professional development, and an overall sense of isolation have been highlighted as some of the [main effects](#) of casualisation and short-term temporalities in higher education. Hourly paid teachers often refer to their experiences as frustrating: as highlighted by [Anna Lopes and Indra Angeli Dewan](#), we often feel unable to plan for the immediate and long-term future; our unstable contracts make it difficult to secure access to employee protection, tenancy agreements, and benefits; there are huge discrepancies between contractual hours and actual hours worked; and our sense of vulnerability and powerlessness tends to [impinge](#) on our "ability to challenge the injustices of [our] own work situations". All of these conditions, in addition to constant subjection to performance indicators and other forms of surveillance, have a significant affective and emotional impact on our lives, including high levels of stress, low self-confidence, and a feeling that we're always close to our breaking point.

Wrong choices?



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Even those performance indicators, that often constitute a source of frustration for us, are framed by self-help literature as nothing more than worrying trends which can, through careful reflection regarding our personal and professional priorities, become part of an effective career strategy. Likewise, the fast pace of higher education is presented as something we can deal with through a clear formulation and hierarchisation of the right goals, which naturally results in work-life balance and a better strategy for professional progression. However, the truth is that self-help may lead to exactly the opposite of its intended outcome, leaving us feeling more and more frustrated with ourselves: where success and effectivity become so easily measurable, our awareness of inadequacy, 'failure', and even our perception 'fraudulence' also becomes more acute, and we may start blaming ourselves for making the 'wrong choices', for allowing self-exploitation, for not doing enough to match the indicators, or for not giving enough of ourselves to make sure our students get the best education possible.

Paradox of hope

Regardless of whether it works or leaves us feeling worse about ourselves, the catch of self-improvement narratives is precisely that they give us the hope that, through effort and dedication, things will someday get better, despite structural conditions remaining unchanged: happiness and success seem to be both within and out of reach. Because optimisation is such a key component of performativity and the chronologies of higher education, self-help gives us the sense that the metrics and data required to recalibrate our lives are within our reach. But, by immersing us so deeply in this managerial, short-term logic, these discourses actually isolate us and demolish our awareness of the **chronologies of higher education**. Such output-driven, short-term logic has a direct impact on our teaching: even if we make all the *right* individual choices (and even if we lower our standards as much as we can and define 'success' as a series of short-term jobs with the hope of eventually being eligible for a permanent contract), these chronologies are **not conducive** to the development of relationships where critical engagement and reflection are possible. As noted by **Carole Leathwood and Barbara Reid**, following their study on the temporal implications of academic casualisation, the

'thought-time' required by academic research, teaching, and learning is undermined by output-focused approaches to pedagogy.



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In addition to this, the narrative of self-improvement tends to ignore the fact that casualised staff are often in a position of relative lack of power and status, placing us at the bottom of the hierarchy. Despite our best efforts, dedication, and attempts to mitigate the negative impact of casualisation through 'time-giving', the creation of pedagogical relations is heavily limited by the uncertainty and insecurity of higher education's short-term rationality and its spatial manifestations. The very idea of the creation of an effective career strategy puts us in a position in which it becomes almost impossible to generate environments for flourishing, growth, and long-term relationship-building between teachers and students: 'success' requires 'effectivity' and excellent performance in our short-term contracts, leaving little time for continued and long-term pedagogical relations, while students focus on steps and milestones towards future employability.

The way forward

Self-help therefore appears as another face of the proliferation of performance indicators and audit mechanisms to which we are subjected in the era of performativity, as another form of regulation which further settles tactics of tacit governance, leaving aside the affective, emotional, and psychological cost of our attempts to adapt to the accelerated temporality of academia. In a way, self-help works because it brings us closer to what is demanded by the higher education market. But, at the same time, it conceals that it is precisely the structural precarity

and the short-term chronology of higher education that put us in a position in which the very possibility of making meaningful choices is significantly reduced. Perhaps the way forward is not self-improvement, but collective action: we can only move beyond the fast-paced **careless academy** through a recognition of the slower, less demanding temporalities required by teaching and learning.

*Note: A **version** of this post first appeared on 5 June 2023 on the **Contemporary Issues in Teaching and Learning Blog**, part of the **PGCertHE** programme at the LSE.*

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Absolutely get what you're saying. Making strides in academia can be a real uphill battle...