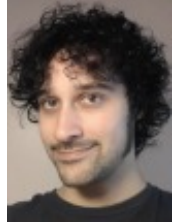


Is it ethical to be passionate in academia? Passion is a central concept for understanding academic labour.

Today we launch a new series of posts from a recent conference about the *Accelerated Academy*. Pieces over the next few weeks will explore the history, development and structure of audit cultures in Higher Education, digitally mediated measurement and the quantification of scholarship. The first piece in the series is from **Fabian Cannizzo**. Drawing from his research in Australia, he explores performance management criteria, motivational drive, and the development of self in academic labour.



The broad global transformation of universities over the late 20th and early 21st centuries has excited a public imagination about the nature of labour in the university. In the Australian context, works such as Sheila Slaughter and Gary Rhodes' *Academic Capitalism*, Richard Hil's *Whackademia* and Simon Marginson and Mark Considine's *The Enterprise University* characterise the flavour of this public imagination, fed back to academe's reflexive labourers. Though the proposed engines of change are not consistent across the field of higher education studies, the echo resonating between these texts is that the way in which intellectual labour is conducted is in a state of transformation.

For nearly three years now, I have undertaken a doctoral research endeavour to understand how institutions and individuals sustain an imagination of academic labour. That is, how do universities conceptualise the "good" that their staff do? How do academic labourers understand their own trajectories? What conceptual clashes and agreements exist between these two levels of perception?



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Academic labour, in the Australian setting and abroad, is characterised by overlapping modes of self-government. Through analysing publicly available policy and strategic planning documents from eight of Australia's 40 public

universities and interviews from 29 academic labourers, two widely adopted modes of academic self-government were identified: the “entrepreneurial academic” and the “passionate academic”. Although these two models by no means exhaust the possible modes for organising ourselves as academic labourers, they highlight how our experience of labour is shaped by institutional contexts and practices.

The Entrepreneurial Academic

In an era of knowledge capitalism, as both national governments and university departments are made increasingly aware of the value of knowledge production to post-industrial economies, corporate management styles impress values from the private sector upon academic practice. Notable, in my Australian data set, three discourses recurred in every university whose policy and strategic documents I analysed. The valuable academic was s/he who is able to embody these discourses, which filtered into academic’s own career planning through performance management and advancement criteria:

- **Excellence:** evidence that one may excel in a range of metric outputs and indicators (Key Performance Indicators) set at the university or departmental level. International university, journal and individual rankings are adopted and adapted by universities and departments here to assist with organisational decision-making, encouraging the naturalisation of a market rationality, whereby one’s performance towards a university’s international prestige is assumed to be a legitimate function of one’s employment.
- **Innovation:** demonstrations that one’s scholarly practices are integrated into technologies and expertise prescribed by the university, such as information communication technologies and learning and teaching management systems. Innovation funding formula are regularly used to link organisationally-valued definitions of “innovation” to academic’s self-interested career advancement.
- **Impact:** engagement with industry and other external research interests, in line with Gibbons et al.’s Mode 2 knowledge production model. With the recent Turnbull Liberal government having launched its *National Innovation & Science Agenda*, there is already speculation that the removal of peer-reviewed publication as a measure of success [will disadvantage the Humanities and Social Sciences](#) over other disciplinary areas that are more readily able to draw the interest of industry and venture capital.

As a practice for governing academic labour, performance management not only strategically links academic (formal) career advancement to institutional interests, but consequently attempts to envisage its staff members as subjects of an academic enterprise. The academic is charged with the responsibility to take the university’s demands on board, strategise and (following this logic) game assessment systems to maximise the prospects of career acceleration. This liberal mode of government is coupled by the threat of an illiberal form of intervention, which Peter O’Brien (2015: 844) describes as the “ultimate sanction” of termination of employment.

The presumed motivational drive of formal career advancement places the value of academic labour in a realm external to the academic labourer, within the purview of institutional management rather than scholarship itself. Hence, the entrepreneurial academic, as a model subjectivity, assumes that the value of academic labour, for the labourer, is an outcome beyond the labour itself: a goal or prize always lingering on the horizon and always subject to the changing interests of national governments and universities.

The Passionate Scholar

When asked what it is like to work in academia, one participant responded by invoking the concept of passion, which recurred in many of my interviews.

“Passion is a word I think of a lot. Passion. You have to have the passion to do it I guess. Passion around your discipline as well. And that helps you drive through all the crappy bits. And [academia is] quite flexible. Certainly after working in the real world and coming into here, the flexibility and

independence I have is above and beyond anything that I've ever had before and I find that quite empowering I guess" (female lecturer in the social sciences).

This Lecturer's reflection here is typical of many of the uses of "passion" within my interviews with academics. The claim to be a passionate scholar or desire to experience passionate scholarship across universities and disciplines suggests that the discourse of passion may be common parlance within a broad academic "speech community" (Bloor and Bloor, 2007: 9).



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Passion is a central concept for understanding how academics present their relationship with their labour amongst peer groups. The deeply personal dimensions of academic labour have been well-documented in past research and commentary (Henkel, 2009; Weber, 1918). Academic labour is characterized and supported by moral conceptual frameworks. Individuals seeking to gain entry into academic groups negotiate existing norms and values associated with what Tony Becher and Paul Trowler (2001) describe as tribe-like cultural forms. Negotiating closeness to the academic tribe, often in the organizational form of the discipline group or research unit, is wrought with tensions, which may be characterized as passion.

It is my contention that this passion is not only indicative of an emotional response to certain forms of academic labour, but is itself governed by tacit norms of expression and legitimation, which are situated within disciplinary contexts and discursive conventions. These norms form a possible competitor and co-habitant of the competitive, enterprising academic subject promoted within university policy and planning.

Institutional Subjectivities

When seeking to understand how academic staff are responding to transformations in the governance of teaching, research and other academic activities, the models of subjectivity proposed here offer valuable heuristic and analytical tools. The local adoption of elements of these subjectivities have the potential to shape the use of institutional practices for governing academic conduct.

Career conversations, for example, are a routine of self-care for the passionate academic, which emerge out of attempts to institutionalise performance management and planning amongst academic staff. Career conversations,

as outlined in university policy and planning, are designed to act as performance planning and monitoring processes to fulfil both the university's performance objectives and also to assist academic staff in ensuring their own viability within such a system. Interview participants avidly voiced their disdain for what many described as an "empty bureaucratic process", "box-ticking" or an "audit culture". However, some also distinguished between the formal appearance of these processes and the informal relations through which career conversations occur. For some, career conversations provided opportunities to establish mentoring relationships with senior staff that enabled them to reflect upon their development of meaningful research programs and a sense of belonging within their work environments. In other words, the conditions in which programs for the government of academic work occur allow for adaptations and possibly subversions of the subjectivities intended by governing authorities (in this case, university management).

Through the day-to-day processes of performing academic labour, the participants in my study have engaged themselves in their local academic cultures and developed alternative modes of thinking and acting upon their labour. Although, much like Louise Archer's (2008) participants, academics in my study recognise that the university's and the state's bureaucratic demands cannot be ignored, these demands do not form a single totalizing framework as the idea of a neoliberal subject would imply. Because their academic labour contributes to the development of a sense of self, a sense of belonging and also perhaps authenticity, passionate academic labour is not able to be treated as another enterprise that can be wrung through a cost-benefit analysis. In other words, alongside, and not below, a neoliberal subject, the passionate academic subject forms an alternative mode of ethico-political regulation, and hence a possible source of being and thinking otherwise.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Impact blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [Comments Policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.

About the Author

Fabian Cannizzo is currently undertaking a PhD at Monash University. His research project is provisionally titled 'Creating Academic Careers: A study of subjectivity and governance in Australian universities'. He aims to explore how university policy frames the experience of academic labour, and what factors academics consider significant in shaping their work and journey within academia.

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