Journal of Further and Higher Education

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/cjfh20

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Alan Johnston & Eleanor Davies

To cite this article: Alan Johnston & Eleanor Davies (2025) Academics' psychological contract: applying discretionary effort, Journal of Further and Higher Education, 49:4, 524-538, DOI: 10.1080/0309877X.2025.2467396

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2025.2467396

Published online: 27 Feb 2025.

JOURNAL OF FURTHER AND HIGHER EDUCATION
2025, VOL. 49, NO. 4, 524–538
https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2025.2467396

Academics' psychological contract: applying discretionary effort

Alan Johnston [a] and Eleanor Davies [b]

[a]York Business School, York St John University, York, United Kingdom; [b]Keele Business School, Keele University, Staffordshire, United Kingdom

ABSTRACT

Limited research has been conducted on the academic psychological contract and the role it plays in influencing academic behaviour. This qualitative study investigated the impact that the psychological contract has on 18 academics working across 9 university business schools, by understanding how they perceive the employment relationship, and how this perception influences their work activities with a particular focus on the application of discretionary effort. The research conducted followed an interpretivist design using semi-structured questions to seek out the lived experience of the academics. Findings suggest that discretionary effort is focused on what individuals perceive as being or not being academic work, but is not readily recognised as such; instead, it is considered part of the job, suggesting that perhaps it may be considered induced and is an outcome of increased managerialism in the sector. The outcomes of this research provide an interesting insight into the workings of academics and as such should enable improvements in the employment relationship between academics and their host university. The research investigates the construct of the psychological contract from a different perspective.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 30 October 2023
Accepted 10 February 2025

KEYWORDS
Psychological contract; discretionary effort; higher education; academics

Introduction

A focused literature search would identify the psychological contract as a path that has been well-trodden. The seminal work of Rousseau (1989) provided new energy to the construct and, as a result, numerous writers have investigated it, in a variety settings. A significant proportion of this research focuses on and highlights the impact of breach and violation initiated by the organisational turbulence of the 1980s and 1990s that tested long-standing employment relationships (Freese and Schalk 2008). Authors suggested that it was this unrest which reawakened curiosity into the psychological contract (Cullinane and Dundon 2006). The research undertaken provides a timely investigation into the ever-changing higher education (HE) sector and supports the notion of the psychological contract being 'a well-developed, emerging and dynamic area ripe for further research' DelCampo (2007), 439), as the sector continues to be a political football, with increasing demands in a more for less culture (Johnston 2024). Subsequently, there is need for university management and leadership teams to increase their awareness of the psychological contracts of their academic staff (Wang et al. 2023). The sector continues to face pressure from government to raise efficiency levels, widen participation and support learners while restricting universities to a maximum tuition fee of £9535 for 2025–26, while also continuing to restrict visas for international studies. At the same time, the increasing casualisation of academic staff remains, coupled with

CONTACT Alan Johnston a.johnston@yorksj.ac.uk York Business School, York St John University

industrial turbulence over salaries, pensions and working conditions. Alongside this, individuals and institutions continue to face the repercussions of Brexit and the COVID-19 pandemic. Research by Ronnie, du Plessis, and Walters (2022) suggests that the COVID-19 pandemic negatively impacted on trust and subsequently the psychological contract.

This article considers the relationship of the psychological contract to the concept of discretionary effort, acknowledging the high level of 'goodwill' required in the profession. In doing so, it looks to identify the impact of key features that influence behaviour. As the workload within academia is ever increasing, the expectations placed on academics are found to be increasing at an exponential rate, thereby giving rise to burnout and a reduction in 'goodwill'. As goodwill declines, the question of how much work are academics doing 'for nothing' arises. This notion of discretionary effort therefore become prevalent in the work of academics. There remains a gap in the literature, however, regarding the need for discretionary effort for institutions to function effectively.

According to Tookey (2013), a gap existed in the literature addressing the psychological contract within the context of academia, and, while several papers have been published since then, there remains scope for further investigation. This builds on the notion that 'the psychological contract of university academic employees has not been much considered in the literature' (Shen 2010, 576), highlighting the limited level of research that has been undertaken in this area (Nutakki, Reddy, and Balan 2015). More recent publications have focused on academia and the psychological contract (Gu et al. 2022; Mousa 2020; Sewpersad et al. 2019; Snyman and Ferreira 2023; Snyman, Coetzee, and Ferreira 2023) but none concern the UK. Only Johnston (2024) appears to have provided a UK focus. Tookey (2013) highlighted that changes occurring within the sector over the previous 20 years (now approaching 30) made it an interesting area of investigation but, in doing so, questionned the unique nature of the academic role and how it differs from other roles in other sectors. This notion is first proposed by Gillespie et al. (2001), who suggest that academics' psychological contract differs from those in alternative professions. Significant questions to address are academics' perception of their role, who they engage with and their career aspirations . In addition, Shen (2010) questions whether established approaches to the psychological contract are relevant in academia.

RQ: How does the psychological contract influence discretionary effort for academics?

Literature review

Background

The psychological contract construct has roots which date back to the 1960s and most contemporary authors (Cullinane and Dundon 2006; DelCampo 2007; Freese and Schalk 2008; Herriot, Manning, and Kidd 1997; Shen 2010) provide homage to its birthplace. However, it was Rousseau (1989, 1990, 1995) who re-established the prominence of this concept and breathed new life into it as a view of the employment relationship. The contribution of his seminal 1989 paper is described by Cornelissen and Durand (2014) as ground-breaking.

The turbulence of the 1980s created a number of fractures in the employment relationship and, with them, changes to the psychological contract (Rousseau 1990), forming what was prescribed as a 'new deal' (Herriot and Pemberton 1997). Organisational change became synonymous with industrial relations spanning the last 20 years of the twentieth century (Freese and Schalk 2008). Rather than the character of such changes, it was their frequency (van der Smissen, Schalk, and Freese 2013) that had the greatest impact on the relationship between employees and employers. This resulted from the dynamism of the psychological contract and the deviations that occurred within it over time (Kelley-Patterso and George 2001), which were 'lived and not defined' (Adams, Quagrainie, and Klobodu 2014, 281). This unrest reflects recent HEd experience and provides an opportunity to repeat the words of DelCampo (2007, 439) describing the HE sector as 'a well-

developed, emerging and dynamic area ripe for further research', which is as applicable now as it was two decades ago. This is evidenced by the growing literature on the psychological contract, such as Mousa (2020), Nutakki, Reddy, and Balan (2015), Sewpersad et al. (2019), Snyman and Ferreira (2023) and Johnston (2024), and articles with a broader focus such as those by Fontinha, Easton, and Van Laar (2019), Geschwind and Brostrom (2022), McCune (2019), Myllykoski-Laine et al. (2023) and Ogbari (2024).

Notably, two strands of the psychological contract have developed, one advocating an idiosyncratic approach (Rousseau 1989) and the other a mutual approach (Guest 1998). Rousseau (1989) supports an idiosyncratic psychological contract based on an individual's interpretation and perception of obligations, while Guest (1998) suggests a relationship based on mutuality and reciprocity. Rousseau's (1990, 391) definition, whereby the 'individual's beliefs about mutual obligations, in the context of the relationship between employer and employee', supports the fundamental perspective that it is the perception of the individual that is crucial in the interpretation of the supposed obligation, implicit or explicit, that is critical to the psychological contract and not what the employer perceives to have been agreed.

Notwithstanding debates surrounding definitions of the psychological contract, its importance as a construct to explain the employment relationship as an area of investigation remains. The psychological contract is significant because 'provides employees with a mental model of the employment relationship' (Coyne and Gavin 2013, 96); it 'fills the perceptual gaps in the employment relationship' (Shen 2010, 576) by outlining those implicit aspects that we know exist but which are not formally explained or written down. Principally, we use the psychological contract to explain how individuals undertake their role and identify with their employer; put simply, it is used to rationalise 'individual responses at work' (Kasekende et al. 2015, 834). Fontinha, Easton, and Van Laar (2019) and McCune (2019) argue that ongoing turbulence within the employment relationship has caused a shift in the psychological contract, resulting in a worker who is unprincipled, scheming and self-centred. Kraak et al. (2024) emphasise that understanding the psychological contract can improve the workplace. They suggest that greater understanding of the psychological contract helps to move the employment relationship to a more positive position. However, understanding the psychological contract does not guarantee a positive relationship because knowledge and appreciation of its existence does not make it effective. It does not mean it is necessarily nurtured, and therefore it lacks consideration in many organisations. To make this knowledge useful, the psychological contract must be nurtured and applied.

While the psychological contract may be seen as a single concept that is applicable in all employment relationships, Shen (2010) suggests that differing professions and differing organisations may observe variations in its interpretation. Cullinane and Dundon (2006) suggest that the psychological contract, as a concept, is difficult to quantify and thus its failure is not the fault of management but more than likely the result of unrealistic employee expectations. Tallman (2008) argues that the psychological contract is promise based, but perhaps should be amended to include promise and interpretation because emphasis on what is promised is subject to interpretation and raises the question of trust, which is fundamental to the psychological contract and hence the employment relationship (Robinson 2015). Subsequently, any changes to the employment relationship perhaps also change boundaries of trust. Snyman, Coetzee, and Ferreira (2023) focus on organisational justice and trust as key factors affecting university staff. They suggest that both factors influence individual psychological contracts and also perceptions of that relationship. Perceived justice generates trust and is therefore likely to enable the development of a positive psychological contract. If this perception of justice and/or trust is damaged through breach or violation of the psychological contract, it will have a negative impact on that relationship.

The process of exchange thus has a significant influence on the employer–employee relationship. However, a question remains regarding who is considered to be the employer. Academics often deal with several people or groups who they may consider to represent the employer on a daily basis and, as a result, have multiple psychological contracts (Johnston 2024) representing the different faces of

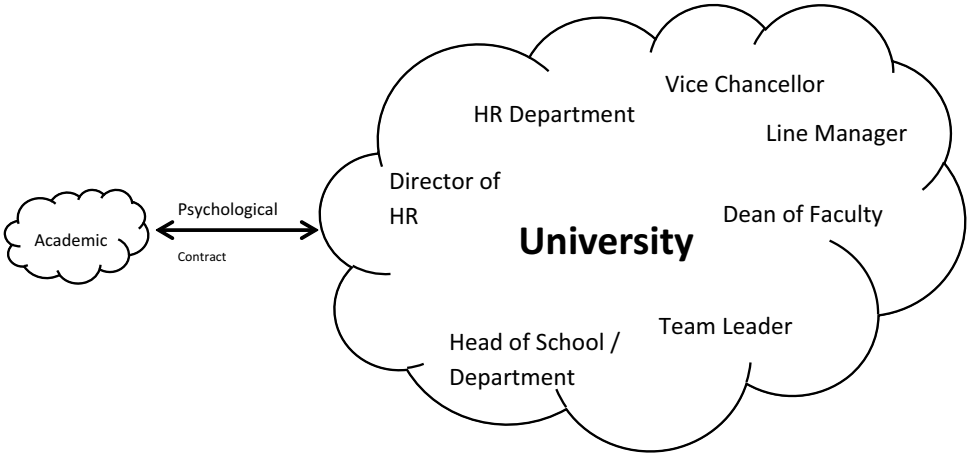

Figure 1. Manifestations of the psychological contract (adapted from Johnston 2018).

the employer (organisation). This is also considered by McCune (2019) in relation to academic identities and the value placed on teaching. Figure 1 highlights the different agents an academic may identify as the employer. This view is related to the focus of an academic's role, particularly whether they are more interested in teaching, research or managerial progression. hey will perceive and interpret this focus through differing lenses and, as such, develop various psychological contracts with different people (agents) who they identify as the employer (or organisation).

Academic environment

In considering the psychological contract of academics, it is first important to consider the context of the academic environment. In many ways, the watershed moment for the HE sector may be considered to be the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act, which brought with it the combination of economy, efficiency and effectiveness, with the crucial foundation of value for money (McCune 2019). Central to this approach were concepts such as quality improvement and management control, including managerial surveillance (Smith 2024). This managerialist approach (Deem 1998) clashed with the expectations of academics who valued their freedom to plough their own furrow (McCune 2019; Ogbari 2024; Russell 2015) and saw it as a means to apply targets and restrict and control their independence. Initially, the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) and, more recently, Research Excellence Framework (REF) were perhaps the greatest manifestations of this approach. In addition, it was perceived that academics were being asked to do more for less (McCune 2019; Ogbari 2024), notably more teaching and a greater number of administrative tasks.

Akin to the industrial unrest of the 1980s, which brought about renewed interest in the psychological contract (Cullinane and Dundon 2006), the UK higher education sector is now in a state of turmoil. Central to this situation are concerns regarding working conditions, notably workload and casualisation of the workforce. Mousa (2020) emphasises the transactional nature of the psychological contract for academics on short-term or precarious contracts. These issues have once more brought the notion of the psychological contract to the fore. Gu et al. (2022) suggest that organisations attempt to strike a balance between efficiency and flexibility. When the environment is more turbulent and dynamic, however, they suggest that organisations become more rigid and reduce flexibility levels. Gu et al. (2022) note that this may have a negative impact on the psychological contract as reducing freedom within a higher education context will negatively impact on the employment relationship where autonomy and academic freedom are normally considered sacrosanct. Woodrow and Guest (2020) stress the importance of belonging as a key feature of the

psychological contract, and refer to socialisation as being significant to academics; they need to feel part of their environment.

Psychological contract in academia

Shen (2010) proposed that academics have a relational psychological contract but questions whether the focus of their connection is their institution (employer), professional area (discipline) or academy. This question is raised in further studies (Nutakki, Reddy, and Balan 2015; Sewpersad et al. 2019) and had previously been questioned by Bathmaker (1999) and Gillespie et al. (2001). Shen (2010), however, uncovered a psychological contract that was more transactional in nature than expected. A study by Bathmaker (1999) highlighted the prominence of opacity and lack of clarity in the higher education sector in the 1990s, which she suggested had a negative impact on the relationship within her own institution (a former polytechnic). Fundamental to this was the rise in managerialism and the erosion of self-identity coupled with an increase in staff vulnerability. She suggested a shift towards a transactional psychological contract because staff felt devalued. These findings were supported by Gammie (2006), who identified that managerialism had engulfed the sector over the previous 20 years. Fundamental was the increase in political control, including use of the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), which remains to this day but is now referred to as the Research Excellence Framework (REF), and the role of the inspection framework under the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA). These changes and the burden of control also resulted in higher education institutions (HEIs) becoming organic rather than mechanistic structures and reduced academic input into the decision-making process (Gammie 2006). Stone-Romero, Alvarez, and Thompson (2009) and Fontinha, Easton, and Van Laar (2019), despite writing a decade apart, both note that, for many, extra hours and extra work are now expected within many organisations.

An academic's psychological contract will be influenced by a range of factors based on educational attainment, nationality and demographics, similar to the situation in most professions (Shen 2010). However, he also highlights areas such as type of institution (teaching or research focused), individual orientation (teaching or research focused) and length of tenure as critical in the formation of the psychological contract . Similarly, Rousseau and Parks (1993) note that individuals' views are influenced by several factors, such as past experience and the influence of organisations for which we have worked. Mousa (2020) identifies the psychological contract as the foundation of the employer–employee relationship (Mousa 2020) and emphasises the importance of mutuality and the building of an effective relationship that benefits both parties. In his research on Egyptian business schools, Mousa points to leadership as the key factor when ensuring that an effective and relational psychological contract exists between the individual academic and the business school. He points to inclusion as a central feature linking individuals and their organisation.

Gammie (2006) considered the academic's role and highlighted three job perceptions: calling orientation (useful-work focused); career orientation (advancement focused); and job orientation (reward focused). He suggested that, while academics can hold any of these perceptions, the one they adopt will influence their psychological contract. Within this, he highlights alternative job titles and contract types, notably the initiation of the teaching-only contract and the teaching fellow, which have become features of many institutions. Use of research assistants and research fellows must also be emphasised. This could be related to university strategy and linked to the concept of 'make or buy' institutions (Miles and Snow, 1984) and attempts by universities to develop academic staff via their activities. Arguably, the REF may have negatively influenced the landscape as organisations attempt to buy-in guaranteed research success. Moreover, academics often link research activity and promotion as it is felt that career progression requires an appropriate research profile (Johnston 2024; Myllykoski-Laine et al. 2023), while Vernon (2011, 45) identifies 'the casualization of academic labour' as a fundamental problem that is predominantly associated with teaching in the higher education sector and remains the case today (Fontinha, Easton, and Van Laar 2019).

According to Baruch and Hall (2004), transactional psychological contracts have similarities irrespective of the context. They argue that comparisons between those of academics and individuals working in more traditional arenas have no real differences. Research suggests, however, that for academics the working environment is a critical factor (O'Neill, Krivokapic-Skoko, and Dowell 2010). Of significance are areas such as promotion and career opportunities, job security and job satisfaction, which are considered to be promissory. Relevant to this is enculturation into an organisation and whether, as previously discussed, academics identify with the organisation, subject discipline or profession.

Psychological contract and discretionary effort

Schimmel, Johnston, and Stasio (2013) propose that a connection exists between the psychological contract and discretionary effort, and question whether formal systems of reward apply todiscretionary effort in the workplace. They argue that discretionary effort is intrinsically attached to individuals' psychological contract and, as such, is influenced by concepts such as person–organisation (P–O) fit, work ethic and self-motivation. Subsequently, Ramdhony and Francis (2014) introduced the concept of induced discretionary effort, suggesting that most of it derives not from free will but managerial pressure or influence. As such, discretionary effort is not provided independently but instead is provoked by organisational culture and managerialism. In the same way, Shen (2010) suggests that how a job role is carried out is influenced by the academic's reading of their own psychological contract. Kasekende (2017) emphasises that for discretionary effort to exist employees need to be engaged with their role and their organisation. The concept of engagement and the psychological contract is further supported by Schreuder, Schalk, and Batistic (2020) and Soares and Masquera (2019), who recognise that engaged employees are more likely to undertake tasks above and beyond the need to do so. This is further supported by Goswami (2021), who identifies commitment as a key element of both engagement and discretionary effort within the employment relationship.

Methodology

This research followed an interpretive design, making use of a phenomenological approach (Creswell 2014) as it sought to examine academics' experience of their role. Using a phenomenological approach allowed the researcher to consider the lived experiences of respondents and the added meaning they attribute to their stories and, simultaneously, their interpretation of their psychological contract. The research adopted a qualitative design using semi-structured interviews, supported by collecting and collating some quantitative data via a questionnaire. This approach is advocated by Guercini (2014), who consider that a hybrid of qualitative and quantitative data collection adds strength and rigour to research. The use of a primarily qualitative-based focus enabled analysis of rich data drawn from respondents, which allowed key ideas to be extracted and both theoretical (Tsang 2014) and analytical (Yin 2014) generalisations. As a result, our key findings may resonate with academics and managers at all types of institution.

Universities were categorised into three types: those that existed prior to the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act were titled 'pre-1992'; former polytechnics as 'post-1992 former polytechnic'; and universities that were previously colleges of higher education as 'post-1992 former colleges of HE'. To gain a crosssection, three institutions were chosen per category and two academics from the business school (or equivalent) of each were involved. This gave a total of 18 respondents. Two of the pre-1992 universities were members of the Russell Group and the third was classified as research-intensive. Two of the three former colleges of HE were members of the Cathedrals Group; one of these was also a member of GuildHE and the other a member of MillionPlus. The third had no clear affiliations. Of the three former polytechnics, two were members of the University Alliance, and the

third had no clear affiliations. The universities were chosen through a combined purposive and convenience method via connections with former colleagues, and respondents were chosen using similar methods. The Russell Group. The Cathedrals Group, GuildHE, MillionPlus and University Alliance comprise groups of UK universities that share certain characteristics (e.g. faith-based traditions, as with the Cathedrals Group, or a focus on research-intensity, as with the Russell Group), or common goals or visions; in some cases they may be considered pressure groups (UKSO n.d.).

All respondents were aged 30 or above, with a minimum of three years of experience within an academic role. Of the 18 respondents, 10 were male and 8 were female; 13 had a PhD or equivalent. All held permanent academic positions at their university as lecturers or senior lecturers and were recruited using a combined purposive and convenience strategy (Avramenko 2013), making use of connections at other institutions who were able to recruit volunteers willing to be interviewed. The research purposely avoided institutions that may be classified as private universities or providers, which usually adhere to a different ethos and approach to the university role, and mixed economy colleges, also referred to as college-based higher education (CBHE) due to contractual and role differences. In addition, institutions which the researcher had a personal connection (had worked or studied at) were avoided to avoid bias and provide greater objectivity. The research instruments were piloted at the researcher's host institution, however, and were subsequently amended to the versions used during data collection.

Interviews followed standard practice, using semi-structured questions (Alvesson and Ashcraft 2012). Each interview lasted between 30 to 50 minutes. Broad questions (Table 1) were posed, followed by narrower questions focusing on key areas. The rationale behind each of the questions was to encourage thinking, interpretation and opinion, and not to identify factual information. Transcripts of each interview were then combined with the questionnaire responses of each participant and combined into a case record for analysis. This allowed the dated to be analysed at several levels, most notably at the individual level but also at institutional, category (job role) and sector levels, albeit minimally. This article makes use of the data at an individual level.

Transcribed interviews were combined with individual questionnaires to provided a case record for each respondent. All interviews followed the process of broad questioning, which then narrowed to a more specified focus on key areas. Questions were devised so as to induce the thinking process, allowing individuals to consider and reflect on past experiences; this approach allowed for interpretation of events rather than the provision of factual information only. Critical to the process was

Table 1. Interview questions.

1	Could you please tell me a little bit about yourself, your experience, your role and how you came to be in the position you now occupy?
2	In higher education we can often describe our institution in a number of ways. This may be size, structure, history (i.e. ex-poly), focus (e.g. teaching or research-intensive) or even membership of mission group (e.g. Russell Group or MillionPlus). How would you describe your institution?
3	How well do you feel you identify with your organisation?
4	Does this allow you to fulfil your expectations and aspirations?
5	How would you rank the following in terms of your main priority? * Administration * Research * Teaching
6	To what extent do you feel you have the autonomy to determine and respond to your own priorities?
7	What are the key challenges of your role?
8	What are your key achievements?
9	(a) Can you give me an example of an occasion when you have provided effort above and beyond what was expected of you? (b) Why did you do this?
10	(a) Do you do this sort of thing on a regular basis? (b) Why?
11	Can you provide further examples of going above and beyond?
12	Do you believe that you do things that you do not have to do for the benefit of others (staff, students, communities)?
13	Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your role?

understanding opinion: the what, where, how and why. The alignment of the transcripts with the questionnaires allowed the data to be cut and analysed at a variety of levels, which meant that it could be considered at both a personal or individual level and an institutional or sectoral level.

To ensure the research approach was deemed trustworthy and credible (Sparkes & Smith, 2009) the following strategies were adopted: effective maintenance of records to ensure an appropriate audit trail; use of reflexivity to safeguard against researcher impact; and use of thick description methods to allow detail for analysis and interpretation. As a means of checking for accuracy, individual responders were provided with a transcript for checking. This ensured transparency (Levitt et al. 2018) whilst also maintaining academic rigour and practical relevance (Johnston 2014).

Key themes were identified using thematic analysis via a manual process, followed by further reading based on a constant comparative model (Thomas 2013) in search of links to the key phenomena. This involved a three stage process identifying: (1) a broad theme, (2) key elements, and (3) core themes.. The thematic analysis identified autonomy and discretionary effort as crucial in the manifestation of the psychological contract.

Findings

Findings were formulated from the 18 interviews conducted with interviewees, who comprised male and female lecturers and senior lecturers. Of the 18 respondents, 9 were second career academics who had previously worked in the business environment or similar; 4 had worked in further education (or similar). Responses suggested that previous employment history influenced both the views and focus of these respondents, which differed from those of what may be termed career academics. In addition, 4 of the 18 had been mature students, studying part-time to gain both their undergraduate and postgraduate qualifications.

Results suggest that expectations of the academic role are shared, that individual academics identify the role as important and academics have expectations of each other. Notably, it seems that academics from the post-1992 groups recognise the growth of managerialism. They particularly highlight the growing pressure to adopt a more research-orientated focus, which is being driven internally. They point to an increase in targets based on outputs, which detracts from their traditional focus of teaching and learning. While the same could be said of pre-1992 universities, the evidence was either less extreme or was having a lower impact on academics. While a sense of organisational fit seems to be experienced by each individual, there seems to be a lack synergy between individual expectations and those set by the institution; that is, all respondents identified a gap between their expectations and those of the university. Interestingly, though, it is evident that institutions have a significant influence on the academics who work there, with several respondents emphasising the historical context or ethos of their institutions. This was very evident among academics from the three former colleges of higher education, who all had backgrounds aligned to the church. This heavily influenced the thinking of the institutions, which was imparted to staff.

Interestingly, a significant factor appeared to be the institution awarding doctorates (for those who had them), rather than respondents' current employer. The respondents who had completed doctoral programmes at a pre-1992 university were significantly more focused on research than those who had completed doctoral programmes at a post-1992 university.

Autonomy

Individually, respondents felt that they had substantially autonomous roles and were supported emotionally. However, two respondents felt that their institution had previously let them down and drew attention to the rise in managerialism and the performance development review (PDR) process. They had become somewhat disillusioned and felt less associated with the university, which meant they also felt less positive about the future. Notably, there was a clash between organisational and

individual goals, with the organisation expecting them to adapt to the goals and ambitions of the university as opposed to pursuing their own.

Most respondents, however, were satisfied that they were able to follow their own paths, accepting that alongside this they needed to comply with their organisation's plan. They recognised that, except for timetabled classes (R1, R2, R4, R5, R8, R9, R10), they were left to do their job. Although R4 added that the academic calendar dictated when things needed to happen, such as examinationss, he stated that 'it's the administrative area that tells you what to do, when to do it and how to do it'. On the whole, however, the job was not prescriptive and there were many ways to achieve both their own goals and those of the institution. Regardless of institution type, teaching was identified as a priority by all respondents; it was seen as a crucial part of the role. R3 suggested that teaching allowed a high level of autonomy: 'It is your classroom, you do what you like.' Lecturers can teach and innovate as they see fit so long as the curriculum content is covered. This was supported by R1, who also included student support as part of his role. He suggested that he was 'left to get on with it and organise [him]self'. Most emphasised research as equally significant and fundamental to the role, although this was more pronounced in the pre-1992 institutions. All respondents were described as research active, with 13 having doctorates and 5 working towards them (although one had suspended their studies at the time of the interview). Those employed at the post-1992 universities were found to be less likely to have published in academic journals, although all had actively contributed to conference presentations. A number of respondents noted that they allocated similar amounts of time to research and administration; however, they generally resented the time spent on administration and the amount there was of it. All of respondents had achieved advanced fellowship and half were also members of professional bodies. Notably, only one-third of respondents were members of subject-level academic bodies (eg British Academy of Management). In addition, all felt a kinship with their school or area of work, followed by an association with their broader subject area and institution; the lowest level of affinity was with their professional area.

Discretionary effort

While all respondents acknowledged the additional effort they put in, above and beyond basic contractual requirements, they did not necessarily identify this with the concept of discretionary effort; instead, they associated it with the job and 'part of [the] academic role' (R11). R3 suggested that their institution 'relies on the extra effort that is put in, and that realistically the "place" wouldn't function without it'. They described 'going the extra mile to support students' and helping colleagues with their research. This was linked to the idea that they were doing their job to the best of their ability. It was also noted that many activities were centred on 'CV enhancement' (R12) and 'self-promotion' (R5). Putting in extra was often seen as doing things to rise above others and gain opportunities for career advancement. Most notable was a view that being an academic is what you are and, as such, you have a passion for all things related to your subject. Interestingly, one respondent (R4) suggested that they feared failing due to a 'feeling of deficit'; that is, concern that they were not able to cope but wanted to do their best.

Less common were positive examples of additional effort associated with administrative tasks; however, examples were provided of having to do extra work such as document production for validations, etc. Similarities were identified in the examples provided by academics in terms of what they do for students. These included providing additional tutorial support, attending meetings outside of normal working hours, attending trips and events and providing additional general support. Also noted was finding and organising guest speakers and a full range of extra-curricul a activities to make course content engaging and 'fun'. Marking and tight turnaround times also attracted comment; respondents noted that much of it had 'to be done outside of the normal working hours' (R3). Others talked about working evenings and weekends to cope with their workload, particularly noting the number of emails requiring attention.

Similarly, additional support for colleagues included providing class cover, reviewing drafts of journal articles/conference papers and offering feedback. Staff acknowledged that research accounted for a large proportion of their time, but much of this took place either at home or outside of normal office hours. All respondents noted a lack of time – 'not enough hours in the day' – suggesting that most research was conducted at home during the evening or at weekends: 'the hours that you are allocated are not a perfect match' (R11), which 'often means doing additional hours' (R14). No respondents were fazed by this situation; they accepted it as part of and an expectation of the role. No respondents identified their role with contractual hours; they noted contact hours only. Often academics perceived this situation as merely being part of the team, thus acknowledging the concept of academic citizenship.

The respondents also recognised the impact of student recruitment activities as a time-consuming element of their job, which often took place outside of the normal working week. There was some disagreement among them, however. Some felt that student recruitment activities were part of the job, while others were resistant to being involved in them. This situation appeared to be related to how much work was involved, how it was shared out and what the activities actually entailed. On the whole, respondents were happy to be involved in open days, interviews, et.c and were even willing to do overseas events. However, they were also conscious of the need to be allowed 'time back' when travelling and working weekends.

Discussion

A broad review of the research suggests that the psychological contract experienced by academics remains relational (Rousseau 1989) in spite of the rise in managerialism, increasing control and the monitoring of individual and group activity. There is still a feeling amongst individuals that academics retain high levels of autonomy. This suggests that the monitoring inherent to the managerialism approach is not seen as surveillance or felt to be intrusive and detrimental to the psychological contract. Findings suggest that academics still feel the need to be part of a collective body. This is in line with Shen's (2010) research rather than that of Bathmaker (1999), suggesting that academics feel a sense of alignment with their school or department. This may be due to timing, as Bathmaker's research followed on from significant changes in the sector with the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act and perhaps a sustained period of breach and violation (Cullinane and Dundon, 2006) As such, Bathmaker (1999) noted a weakening in the relationship between academics and their host department. The research underpinning the current article may be considered a generation apart because nearly all of the academics interviewed had been immersed in the current context of higher education and, as such, were more comfortable with managerialism as the expected norm. As a result, the relational contract may not be as strong as it may once have been, and the identification of multiple agents representing the employing institution, recognising the concept of multiplicity (Johnston 2018), means individuals will have a number of contracts and each of these will be dynamic and change over time (Morrison 2010).

In line with the findings of Rousseau and Parks (1993), organisational values are very important to academics, as are previous experiences, because they influence their perception of their role and what they believe is important and should be done. This is particularly the case regarding where their effort should be directed. An unexpected outcome of the research suggests that academics' historical baggage was influential, notably where they engaged in doctoral studies. Those who had studied for a doctorate at a pre-1992 university were more likely to be research focused and to place greater importance on this aspect of the role. Alternatively, those who came from a more restrictive environment, such as the further education sector, were less resistant to higher levels of teaching hours. Similarly, individuals who came from a commercial background found the HE sector to be less harsh, which seemed to promote a greater focus on teaching.

Although it may suggested by Cullinane and Dundon (2006) that a key issue resulting in breach and violation is the unrealistic expectations of employees. it would appear academics appear to have a realistic understanding of their role but acknowledge increases in the administrative burden and managerialism as having a negative impact. There is less resistance to administrative tasks related to teaching. They also recognise that the role cannot be time-defined and extra hours outside of the working day are to be expected .

Our research suggests that discretionary effort is central to an academic's psychological contract and coincides with Schimmel, Johnston, and Stasio's (2013) claim that it is intrinsic and internalised. It aligns with academics' self-perception of their role; that is, they are willing to go above and beyond for work deemed to be of academic relevance (and importance). At the same time, however, this continues to raise the question of whether such discretionary effort is induced (Ramdhony and Francis 2014) and thus an outcome of increased managerialism or is genuinely the result of free will.

Teaching and teaching-related work were identified as significant and areas in which academics gladly applied additional effort. Much of their extra effort was related to ensuring that students were able to achieve positive outcomes from their studies, whether measured by module grades or degree classifications; however, it also focused on enabling them to develop key employability skills. This included providing opportunities that would help them engage with useful networks and employers. Developing teaching materials or providing opportunities to engage with the subject area were also seen as important.

Notably, in support of Kasekende (2017), all respondents appeared to be fully engaged with their role and saw extra time working on 'academic' activities as worthwhile and part of the job. Resistance and resentment were more likely when activities were not perceived as academic work. This was partly driven by institutions' increasing focus on research and the drive to publish, and that not enough time (if any) was provided for it, particularly in the post-1992 institutions. There was some acceptance that research was an important aspect of the role of academics, however it was also noted that the growing need to provide student support plus administrative burdens were eating into the time available for such an activity. Research was increasingly conducted in personal time. This perhaps aligns with the concept of discretionary effort being induced (Ramdhony and Francis 2014) and as an expectation of performance, as framed by Stone-Romero, Alvarez, and Thompson (2009), and the norm (Shen 2010).

Certainly, it is significant that an individual's measure of success has an external impact. While an academic's focus on teaching leads to the success of their students, which may be their focus, success in research is often in the form publication in acclaimed journals and is done to attract recognition . These are both personal goals that also benefit institutions; higher student grades attract more applicants and improved REF scores may lead to higher levels of research income.

Ultimately this effort often has a negative effect on work–life balance but the cause is not clear because many would point to an academic year characterised by peaks and troughs in which academics control their own workload.

Conclusion

As a construct, the psychological contract remains a critical area of research and debate. As a tool it allows us to further our understanding of people's behaviour and influences our teamworking, approach to management and behaviour response. Much of what has been written concentrates on the private sector, with little on education. In recent years academia has become an area ripe for investigation across several countries. That said, focus often seems to be on breach and violation rather than trying to understand the impact of the psychological contract. As such, this article provides an opportunity for further discussion and debate. The research undertaken suggests that there is evidence to support the idea that academics are generally self-motivated with a high work

ethic, and consciously trade off managerialism and other organisational processes for the flexibility and autonomy of their role.

It is important to acknowledge the importance of agency, as academics identify with several institutional agents and subsequently hold multiple psychological contracts, some of which will be more relational than others. This allows flexibility in meeting expectations and results in greater alignment at school or department level than at institutional level. Organisational size and structure are crucial here; the greater the extent to which an organisation is integrated, the more likely it is that academics will connect with the institution as a whole. An institution applying centralised control is likely to be fractious, friction-orientated and restrained.

Discretionary effort is the outcome of internal drivers ensuring that academics contribute beyond what is expected of them. However, whether such extra effort results from managerialism and organisational pressure or free will drawn from internalisation of the processes. The changing face of an academic's role is critical to both individual and institutional success. Understanding the psychological contract is crucial to those managing and/or supporting individuals in the academic role from both a management perspective and that of the individual manager. Recognising how academics align with the institution (and the subsections of it) permits the management of academic staff. It also supports academics in understanding themselves, which will allow them to make effective career and life choices.

This research was conducted as part of a doctoral study that involved interviews with 18 academics in 9 Universities. All academics were employed wby a business school (or equivalent). As such, there may be characteristics that are nuanced to subject discipline and not relevant to other disciplinary areas. This does not provide the basis for any statistical analysis and, as such, does not claim to be statistically significant. Instead, it provides a snapshot view that may be considered generalisable across the sector by providing a cross-sectional representation. It is based on a qualitative study looking to interpret individuals' perceptions of their working environment.

Further research could involve more respondents, in alternative subject areas and with differing levels of experience. Greater use could also be made of individuals' experiences in different institutions.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

ORCID

Alan Johnston http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4796-466X
Eleanor Davies http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6959-536X

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