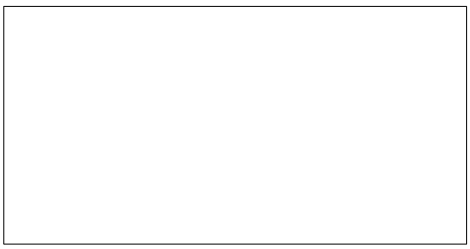

Organisational attachment and the academic: A collaborative autoethnographic reflection within the "newer normal" context of emergent workplace norms in UK higher education

Abstract

Purpose – With hybrid working having become more commonplace and normalised within higher education in the post-Covid-19 period, this paper considers whether such trends have impacted the level of attachment that academics experience in relation to their institution. In doing so, there is scope to gain a greater understanding of academic behaviours and working practices in the post-pandemic environment, with potential implications for higher education institutions in their future staff development strategies, initiatives and interventions.

Design/methodology/approach – A collaborative auto-ethnographic approach was adopted to examine the lived experiences of four academics reflecting on their personal career journeys and related fluctuations, over time, in feelings of attachment towards their institution.

Findings – Despite personal contextual differences, the changing 'newer normal' context of the post-pandemic period has contributed to each academic experiencing changing levels of attachment and foci in their roles.

Research implications – Coupled with the declining nature of academic citizenship and a shifting psychological contract, increasing levels of disconnect and dysfunctionality within higher education institutions in the post-pandemic period can lead to a relative decline in sense of staff belonging and engagement, which should be of concern to institutional management.

Originality – This study provides an original reflection on the changing features of attachment in higher education, indicating that the connectedness of academic staff goes beyond their connection to the institution, also being grounded within individual relationships that are increasingly subject to change and strain within the emergent post-pandemic hybrid working context.

Keywords: attachment; engagement; identity; psychological contract; psychological climate; hybrid working.

Introduction

A growing area of discussion and debate within the workplace attachment literature centres around the concept of employee engagement, questioning whether this constitutes a new construct or little more than a re-badging of older ideas (Eldor and Vigoda-Gado, 2017). Johnston (2025) argues that employee engagement continues to have important alignment with the psychological contract as a contributor to knowledge and understanding of the employment relationship. This relates to the premise that the more engaged an employee, the greater the likelihood of the psychological contract between employer and employee being relational and mutually beneficial (Demerouti et al., 2010). The concept of engagement has however also been described as a means of ensuring individual employees "are committed to their organisation's goals and values, motivated to contribute to organisation success" (MacLeod and Clarke, 2009, p. 9). The onset of the Covid-19 pandemic led to widespread changes in

working practices, more-or-less overnight, which saw staff in sectors such as higher education (HE) move to remote forms of working (Mathew et al., 2024). In the context of the "newer normal" that subsequently emerged following the end of lockdown restrictions in the post-pandemic period (Mathew et al., 2024), there remains scope and necessity to consider whether increased tendencies to work from home and/or increased opportunities for hybrid working within HE settings have impacted levels of employee engagement and attachment with their organisation.

This study seeks to consider how the manifestation of these 'newer' ways of working for academics in the post-pandemic period is potentially changing or influencing individual perceptions of connectivity with their institution. The underpinning aims within this study are therefore to chart and explain the changing face of attachment within academic institutions through the eyes of four academics with varying experiences and personal contextual backgrounds, in response to the following research questions:

> RQ 1: What is attachment within the HE sector and how does it manifest in the lives of academics?
>
> RQ 2: What factors influence perceived levels of attachment and how do such issues change or develop over time for academic staff members?
>
> RQ3: What changes, if any, are academics experiencing in feelings of attachment to their institution within the context of 'newer' working practices that have emerged in the post-pandemic period?

The following section of this article provides an initial review of literature relating to issues of attachment within the workplace environment, including interrelated issues of organisational identity, employee engagement, the rise of managerialist tendencies within the HE sector and the impact of such issues on academic identity formation and development. The collaborative autoethnographic methods that underpinned this project are then outlined, before the key findings of this investigation are drawn, and subsequent conclusions and limitations of the study then considered.

Literature Review

Organisational attachment

Organisational attachment is defined by Tsui et al. (1992, p. 554) as "an individual's psychological and behavioural involvement in a group or organisation". Employees identify with their group or organisation, and when the resulting social identity is positive, they are motivated to maintain this connection over an extended period. Pelled and Hill (1997) later added various behavioural indicators to this definition of organisational attachment including turnover intention, absenteeism and organisational commitment. Such developments further highlighted the importance of reciprocity within attachment theory by indicating that when organisations support and benefit their employees, this can potentially result in loyalty and dedication. De Grooijer (2009) uses the term emotional connectedness as a means of explaining such forms of attachment, suggesting that a key facet of such connections also includes the interrelationships that exist between the people who create an organisational bond. Organisational attachment cannot therefore solely be explained by organisations offering benefits like salary and perks. Employees are more likely to feel attached to an organisation

when they develop formal and personal relationships within the organisation, with the prospect of departure then feeling like a loss of meaningful connections or a form of relationship sacrifice (Verma and Khatri, 2021). Whilst existing research on attachment within the employee-employer relationship primarily focuses on individual attachment styles and their impact on various work-related outcomes, recent studies have begun to explore the idea of the organisation itself serving as an attachment figure, also emphasising the importance of the connection between the worker and their organisation (Yip et.al, 2017). There remains scope to reconsider such points within the context of changes in key working practices in the post-pandemic period, particularly in light of increased trends towards remote and/or hybrid working that have potential to impact on opportunities for academics to develop meaningful connections in the workplace.

Affective Commitment and Organisational Identity

The concept of organisational attachment has primarily been explored through the two constructs of affective commitment (AC) and organisational identity (OI) (e.g. Riketta & Dick, 2005; Qu et.al, 2019). AC and AI are reflecting constructs of the psychological bond between employees and their organisation (Stinglhamber et. al., 2015). AC refers to how strongly an employee aligns with their organisation's goals and values, and their willingness to support its success (Meyer & Allen, 1991). OI is the psychological bond created when an employee internalises their organisation's characteristics as part of their own identity, whilst also demonstrating the extent to which an employee's own values and goals are aligned with their organisation (Qu et.al, 2019).

Verma and Khathri (2021) found that employee attitudes and perceptions towards their organisation are vital antecedents of organisational attachment. Employee perceptions of organisational culture, work environment, leadership, and engagement with management and co-workers are often deemed to be significant factors in increasing organisational attachment (Verma and Khatri, 2021). Employee perceptions of fairness within the organisation, the levels of support they receive, the organisation's reputation, the extent to which employees identify with the organisation, and their experiences of discrimination can also influence feelings of attachment to the organisation (Kim et al, 2019; White et al, 2020; Verma and Khathri, 2021). Additional factors including levels of autonomy, job security and distributive justice have also been investigated, but demonstrated minimal impact on an individual's level of organisational attachment (Sung et.al, 2017).

Despite numerous researchers investigating a range of factors that potentially lead to organisational attachment, understanding of the resultant outcomes that might stem from such feelings remains underdeveloped. Feeney et.al (2020) argue that employee attachment styles towards an organisation might include more positive citizenship behaviours, or more counterproductive forms of work behaviour. Understanding those factors that improve levels of employee attachment towards an organisation can potentially drive employee commitment and reduce staff turnover. In turn, greater levels of organisational commitment can also: (a) result in increased employee performance (Chen et.al, 2019); (b) improve employee wellbeing (Ng and Allen, 2018); and (c) positively affect citizenship behaviours (Haque and Aslam, 2011). Research on organisational attachment has however seldom focused on other potential outcomes including employee loyalty, productivity and job strain (Verma and Khatri, 2021).

In the HE landscape, several studies have highlighted the significance of AC and OI as the intellectual core of universities that contribute to an academic's research output and influence

their ability to provide effective student experiences (Atalay et.al, 2022; Shrand and Ronnie, 2019). Atlay et al. (2022) show the significance of organisational support (work-related or career-related) towards AC and OI. Likewise, Wilkins (2018) found that OI strongly influences an academic's willingness to engage in extra-role behaviours and their turnover intentions. More recently, Johnston (2025) used a qualitative approach to examine the lived experiences of academics from UK Business Schools and identified the central role of academics in managing and organising conferences, peer-reviewing, committee participation, and other extra roles or administrative activities relating to both teaching and research to be important for the smooth functioning of universities. Within such studies, research has typically indicated the importance of relationships between academic identity and the academic's role as well as their relationships with the organisation and with their colleagues as central to their involvement and engagement in such activities.

Despite growing interest from researchers in examining issues of organisational attachment from an attachment theory perspective, much existing research has primarily emphasised the importance of attachment to coworkers or other individuals within the organisation, rather than the organisation itself as a social entity. Yip et.al (2017) emphasise however the need for research that focuses on employee attachment to the organisation in relation to changing workplace practices. Mathew et.al (2024) likewise highlight the need for further research to better understand changing working practices and organisational cultures within HE as changes to remote teaching and research that emerged during the Covid-19 pandemic are now adapting to the even "newer normal" cultural and working practices that are becoming established across the HE sector in the post-Covid-19 era.

Employee Engagement

Engagement is a contested topic, which is embraced by management as a way to ensure higher levels of productivity (Bingham, 2016), and as such, is an important part of the managers toolbox. Engagement is also deemed to be a component in the psychological contract that can be used to secure discretionary behaviour, or to get workers to work harder, suggesting that discretionary behaviour is induced rather than freely offered (Johnston, 2024). The link between engagement and commitment is driven by several factors including job role, responsibility levels, permanency or temporal nature of the employment contract, full or part time nature of the contract, and length of tenure (Sunderland, 2018). Sunderland (2018) also suggested that smaller organisations were likely to induce greater levels of commitment and engagement from their employees, and that female staff were more likely to be committed and actively engaged. Within HE, a key driver for most academics is permanency (or tenure). The casualisation of academic labour and the drive towards part time and flexible staffing models therefore constitutes a particular challenge for HEIs and management, given their potential impact on employee engagement, commitment and the underpinning psychological contract for employees working within academia.

Dibben et al. (2011) argue that higher levels of engagement suggest that employees: (a) have a positive attitude; (b) are engaged in the business context; (c) work well with colleagues; (d) seek better performance for the organisation; (e) have a two-way relationship with managers;(f) show discretionary effort; and (g) express positivity towards their organisation. Linked to this, they recognise and define 3 typologies of employees, referring to those who are engaged, non-engaged or disengaged. Rayton and Yalabik (2014) support this conceptualisation and point to the effect that any perceived failings can have on levels of job satisfaction. Their underpinning premise is that without job satisfaction, employee engagement is unlikely. Therefore, Dibben

et al. (2011) emphasise the need for employers to consider three forms of engagement – termed as emotional engagement (involvement), cognitive engagement (concentration), and physical engagement (willingness to 'go the extra mile') – as fundamental to ensuring an effective relationship between employer and employee. They point to Robinson et al. (2004, cited in Dibben et al., 2011), noting that an engaged employee is one who identifies with and is involved with the organisation, believes and accepts the espoused organisational values, is inclined to extend their efforts (in the form of discretionary effort) for the organisation, and wishes to stay and remain within the organisation. Robinson et al. (2004) state that commitment is therefore one step up from engagement.

Managerialism

Within the HE context, issues of employee engagement cannot be considered without also taking into account the concept of managerialism. The rise in new public management, referred to as managerialism, has impacted the way that academics within HE behave. Such processes have reduced academic freedom and placed greater monitoring and control over the day-to-day activities of academics (Johnston, 2024; Johnston and Davies, 2025). For many, managerialism manifests itself as control and regulation, with the use of managerial techniques such as quality audits, financial targets and the concept of performance management often noted as key monitoring processes (Deem and Brehony, 2005). Central to these are the concepts of economy, efficiency and effectiveness in how resources are allocated and used. One reason behind this approach may be linked to structural changes in the UK HE system post 1992 (Bryson, 2004). This included a move from a more 'elitist' approach to HE towards an 'opening up' of the system that saw the creation of a larger number of 'new' universities and an accompanying expansion in the number and range of courses available, and the numbers of students that attended university (Bryson, 2004). However, such changes also brought increased levels of scrutiny in attempts to ensure consistent academic standards. This raised the prospect of greater accountability, as the use of public monies to fund HE also increased the focus on value for money and financial restraint as key managerial processes within the sector (Bryson, 2004). Bryson (2004) also notes an accompanying trend towards more student-centred approaches to learning and teaching as part of such processes.

Based upon changing political ideologies and policy approaches, Creasy (2013) and O'Neill et al. (2010) note that decision making at governmental and institutional levels has contributed in turning HE into a private good. Such approaches have reduced or removed the burden of the tangible cost of provision from the state and onto the individual student, perhaps disregarding the intangible social benefits that a HE experience can bring to individuals and broader society. At the same time, government and business continue to expect an influence on what universities offer and how they are run, in what is described by Feather (2012, p. 336) as a "Trojan horse" approach to HE. This approach is characterised by placing the student at the centre of university systems and denoting them as customers and clients, thereby altering the relationship between student and university (Robinson, 2012). Such developments further reflect the shift noted by Deem (1998) towards the rise of managerialism and changes to key stakeholder expectations resulting from changing government policies and ideological approaches to the perceived role of the HE sector in recent decades.

Mercer (2009) discussed the manifestation of managerialism at departmental level within a UK university, noting that marketisation, accountability, efficiency and entrepreneurialism, and the role and place of HE within society require ongoing discussion and debate. Research in Australia has likewise demonstrated manifestations of managerialism (O'Neill et al., 2010).

Within this context, O'Neill et al. (2010) recognised the growing relevance of such changes on the psychological contract for the academic. Previously, Bryson (2004) had noted the importance of individual employee perceptions of circumstances and situations as a key influence on the psychological contract. Intrinsic motivators and the desire to pursue individual interests – whether more research or teaching orientated – have long been known to be fundamental to the academic role within HE. The rise in managerialism coupled with trends towards massification have however led to increased workloads for academic staff and, as a result, have reduced opportunities for academics to pursue their own areas of interest. The "neoliberal policy agenda" (O'Byrne and Bond, 2014, p. 572) has often been deemed the cause of such changes within HE, contributing to the advancement of consumerist and managerialist cultures. Graham (2016) argues that neoliberalism as a construct offers a base of managerialist principles that are now found within HE, particularly within the UK. The introduction of workload management processes has become central to monitoring and controlling academics. As part such processes, perceptions of organisational justice and individual views on fairness increasingly resonate and have become ever more critical, particularly in relation to issues such as workload and the distribution of resources (Inelmen et al., 2017).

The onset of managerialism, increasing workloads and the introduction of a competitive market structure have led to increased levels of dissatisfaction among academics (Vardi, 2009). Reisz (2017) noted that 71.6% of academics felt neither respected nor valued by their senior leaders. Vardi (2009) likewise noted that increased expectations have been placed on academics across all aspects of their job, including the requirement to take on additional administrative tasks and burdens, increased pressure to publish and the need to deliver effective student-centred forms of teaching and learning. Reisz (2017) emphasised that 55.6% of academics reported that the pressure to publish was causing adverse effects on their mental health and well-being. Similarly, 69.5% of academics indicated that sufficient time was not available to effectively support students and 79.6% that they were regularly working weekends and evenings in their efforts to meet the increased expectations of their job (Reisz, 2017). Cooper (cited in Reisz, 2017) blames poor quality human resources provision within Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), suggesting a greater focus on process rather than the learning, development and well-being of academics. Linked to increased managerialism and the marketisation of academia, key reasons for such trends and pressures may be reflected in the fact that around 58% of income is taken up in staffing costs at the average university (Graham, 2016). Additional work pressures and the need to strive for ever-greater efficiencies have arguably culminated in reduced levels of collegiality and accompanying declines in individual autonomy (Anderson et al., 2002; Johnston, 2025). The increasing introduction of efficiency models within HE are fundamental to underpinning concepts of managerialism (Yiedler and Codling, 2004). Yet there remains scope to consider the ongoing impact of such issues on perceived levels of employee attachment to their organisation in the post-pandemic period, particularly given highlighted trends towards increased levels of hybrid and/or remote working that have potential to place additional strains and pressures on individual academics.

Academic Identity and the Psychological Contract

The concept of what it means to be an academic can differ from person to person, dependent on the focus and emphasis that each academic places on different aspects of their role. As such, the notion of academic identity relates to an individual's idiosyncratic perception of their role, which can likewise have a knock-on effect on their psychological contract. Bathmaker (1999) emphasises the Janus-faced facet of the academic role, comprised of three components: teaching; research; administration. Most academics would typically point to being either

research-focussed or teaching-and-learning focussed, partially influenced by the type of institution they work for (Baruch and Hall, 2004). More recently, it has become increasingly necessary for academics to find a greater balance between teaching and research. Meanwhile, those academics wishing to follow a managerial progression route will often focus their attention towards administration and service-based work. The particular focus that underpins an academic's perception of their own identity will therefore also influence their psychological contract.

Whilst the role of an academic can be complex, varied and place increasing demands on the individual (Houston et al., 2006), teaching and research often remain at the forefront. Macfarlane (2011) notes two types of academic, described as the all-rounder and the para-academic. The all-rounder often contributes effectively to all aspects of academic life, whereas the para-academic has a singular approach to one aspect of their role. The para-academic approach, he suggests, may have a detrimental effect on engagement with colleagues and lead to reduced academic citizenship, perhaps due to the more singular focus taken by the individual. Johnston (2025) agrees and draws a link between the notion of academic citizenship and the psychological contract. Macfarlane (2011) points to the increasing use of research contracts and teaching only contracts as a materialisation of a para-academic approach, but notes that such divisions perhaps also result in a measure of deskilling. This situation is further complicated by the increasing casualisation of academic staff (Vernon, 2011), which further contributes towards a deskilling of the workforce.

Linked to academic identity, the teaching and research divide becomes increasingly important as academics seek promotion and status (Johnston, 2025; Johnston and Davies, 2025), particularly given that research tends to remain the primary measure to determine progression and to develop an identity within many HEI contexts. The 'publish or perish' culture continues to remain synonymous in driving academic careers, with more prestigious institutions in particular distinguishing between those on a research contract and those on a teaching-only contract. Such trends remain important influencers in the configuration and evolution of an academic's psychological contract and how they thus identify themselves. There also remains scope therefore to reconsider the implications of such issues in potentially leading para-academics towards reduced levels of academic citizenship and more isolationist approaches in the post-Covid-19 period. Such questions are pertinent given interrelated stressors such as managerialist tendencies, changing organisational identities and the knock-on effect of such issues upon employee engagement. With related trends towards increases in hybrid working within HE in the post-pandemic period, it is important to reconsider the potential impact of such interweaving processes on feelings of attachment for academics within the work environment.

Methodology

This study follows a collaborative autoethnographic approach (Bishop et al., 2022; Johnston et al., 2023) through the reflections of four academics with varied life and career experiences, drawing upon their perceived levels of attachment to their institution(s) within the HE sector. In adopting a collaborative autoethnographic approach, the authors recognise the challenges and potential limitations with such methods, particularly in the requirement to interpret and evaluate responses within and across the dataset. Such limitations are however outweighed by the potential benefits of autoethnography (McIlveen, 2008). Whilst the small sample size of four contributors introduces potential limitations in the extent to which such data can subsequently be generalized to other contexts, the adoption of a collaborative autoethnographic

approach facilitates the generation of a rich dataset, which provides depth to the discussion. Such processes allow the contributors to engage in deep reflection and extract their key thoughts, views and perspectives of their time in academia, where they are now, and how they feel they got to this point in their career.

It is acknowledged that past experiences are perceived through a retrospective historic lens, which may be distorted through memory, bias and other perceptual filters and constructs (Voros, 2005).. Also central to such forms of research however is the key tenet that self-perception and interpretation of an individual's own past and lived experiences can provide particularly rich and personalised data (Pavlenko, 2007; Sparkes, 2000). Such data can prove illuminating of an individual's past experiences, whilst also providing a voice to their own perceptions of those events and their perceived role(s), situation and context within them. The adoption of a collaborative autoethnographic approach can therefore provide opportunities to draw out in rich and vivid detail the perceived 'truth' as the contributors see it.

Data were drawn from the four authors of this article following a collaborative autoethnographic approach. This followed a self-selective approach originated by the lead author who believed that each contributor had an interesting story to tell, based on knowledge of their career paths. Each individual academic responded to a series of questions designed to draw out their lived experiences, focussing in particular on their perceived feelings of attachment to the HEIs in which they have worked. Each academic responded in written format to a series of questions that drew on their own experiences and feelings regarding their relationship with those HEIs during their academic career. Participants reflected upon their perceived levels of attachment to their institution(s) and relative felt engagement in the different roles, responsibilities and workloads that have been undertaken. Each written document was then analysed, and through use of open and manual coding, general themes were identified and then narrowed, before being grouped to find connections and meaning in a qualitative process of thematic analysis (Saunders et al., 2009).

Chang et al. (2013) have outlined the potential benefits for researchers in engaging in collaborative autoethnographic approaches. Through ongoing iterative processes of individual and group-based data collection, analysis, interpretation and writing, there is scope to develop, build and explore more vivid personal accounts of the topic under investigation. Similarly, the "inclusion of multiple voices and perspectives adds rigour to autobiographic interrogation" (Chang et al., 2013, p. 25). Through ongoing iterative and reflexive approaches, the authors worked together to build shared analysis and understanding of emergent data, leading to greater levels of intersubjectivity through striving – as far as possible – to develop shared appreciation, awareness and co-construction of one another's thoughts, reflections and perceptions as part of the underpinning analytical processes adopted (Roy and Uekusa, 2020). The findings emerging from this analysis are presented in the following section of this article. In-line with ethical approval granted for this study, contributor codes (C1-C4) have been used and randomised in the write-up process to offer further anonymity, as far as it is possible to do so within the context of a collaborative autoethnographic research project.

Findings and Discussion

Emotional Attachment and Connectedness for Academics in the Post-Pandemic Era

Feelings of emotional attachment still appear to be important for academics in the 'newer normal' context of the post-pandemic period, with all four contributors indicating that they held an attachment to their institution, for example:

> *I do feel like I have an emotional attachment to the organisation. I suppose I have always felt attached to any of the organisations I have worked in, in a sense of believing there is a close relationship between my success and the success of the institution. I suppose in many ways this links in and relates to my work ethic, on the fact that I want to do a lot of work, I want to do your work well, and in doing that, it enables both myself and the organisation to succeed* (C4).

This perception from C4 that their own success comes from having a close interconnected relationship with their organisation can facilitate success for both the individual and institution is in-keeping with previous research findings (Atalay et al., 2022; Shrand and Ronnie, 2019). C1 likewise noted their own role and involvement in generating a positive working environment to facilitate both personal and organisational success. C2 however identified the value of shared personal connections with colleagues as being more important, for them, in developing feelings of attachment than a direct emotional attachment to the institution per se. Indeed, all four contributors acknowledged the importance of personal connections in contributing to feelings of attachment, consistent with De Grooijer (2009).

Within this context, it is however important to note that feelings of attachment can fluctuate for academics over time. C2 indicated a perceived decline in feelings of attachment to their organisation, highlighting that such feelings were now more reliant on a small number of colleagues who they worked closely with, rather than the emphasis being directed towards the institution or department to which they belonged. As is often the case in employment settings, C2 referred to "*an initial honeymoon phase*" after first joining their department that had dwindled as a result of workload pressures, previous perceived risk of redundancy and/or institutional fragility, and some perceived feelings of inconsistencies and/or unfairness within the working environment. C1 also acknowledged changing feelings of attachment over time, but reflected more on the changing nature of that attachment, which had been borne initially out of student days, nurtured through the Covid-19 pandemic as an hourly paid member of staff and then a post-Covid permanent member of staff.

The above findings suggest different trajectories and experiences among the contributors into their academic roles. For example, C3 reflected on their trajectory from undergraduate to lecturer and the different institutions to which they had been attached. They noted the collaborative and supportive nature of smaller institutions and collegiate relationships particularly during earlier formative stages of their career, and that they still held positive feelings of attachment to previous institutions stemming from past experiences. Even though C3 continues to work regularly on campus, they suggested that opportunities to develop such connections have perhaps declined now, with fewer chances to interact on a day-to-day basis with colleagues in comparison to the pre-Covid era. C4 shares similar feelings, suggesting that the rise in hybrid working has impacted opportunities for collegiality and connectedness. These changing experiences and perceptions align with the findings of Verma and Kathri (2021) that perceived alterations in the working environment, particularly formal and professional collegiate working relationships, can impact feelings of employee attachment. Such feelings were indeed central to influencing the way that all four contributors felt about their connection to the organisation, as defined by Yip et al. (2017).

Challenges of Changing Roles, Identities and Feelings of Attachment in the Post-Pandemic Era

Another issue that can potentially impact feelings of attachment for an employee within an organisation can be related to changing roles and identities within institutional structures over time. For example, having previously held leadership positions within the department, C4 reflected on their changing roles. Compared to instances in the past where they often had more input on aspects of decision making, C4 felt to have less of a voice nowadays within the wider department. At times, this has contributed to feelings of isolation and in some respects disenfranchisement, which took a while to adapt towards. Yet in-line with their own changing identities on the roles they now undertake, they have gradually become accustomed to such changing connections and relationships with both senior and junior colleagues. This has resulted in a shift of mindset towards a more individualised and self-focussed approach to aspects of their work, alongside an increasing tendency to focus more directly on their relationships with a smaller group of colleagues with whom they now collaborate more closely and directly. C4 still remains keen to work with and support other colleagues, but also has opportunity to focus increasingly on teaching and, more particularly, advancing their own research.

C3 recognises a similar shift in their relationships with colleagues within the department, also largely driven by changing circumstances and roles within the team. Whilst their changing roles were pitched to them as being required to help support the development of a new team to meet increasing demand on a newly emerging set of programmes, C3 indicated that such changes may have had a detrimental impact on their feelings of attachment to the department, noting they felt to a point less involved now as a member of the overall departmental team. Such perceptions are consistent with the works of Kim et al. (2019), White et al, (2020) and Verma and Khathri (2021). Changes of this nature can have negative consequences for the individual psychological contract (Johnston, 2025), as indicated by both C4 and C3. Whilst C3 has also placed increasing emphasis on their own personal research and working with a smaller group of individuals with whom they are now collaborating on a more regular basis, they also remain committed to supporting colleagues and have continued to undertake mentoring at both formal and informal levels. This resonates with feelings expressed by C4 and aligns with suggestions regarding the involvement of academic staff members in forms of organisational citizenship (Feeney et al., 2020).

In both of the above instances, C3 and C4 acknowledged their prior positions and interpersonal connections within broader departmental and organisational structures as having been fundamental to shaping aspects of their previous academic identities and perceptions of attachment to the organisation (Verma and Khatri, 2021). C3 and C4 discussed the various roles they had undertaken during their careers, which had often been about the ‘greater good’ and the collective. Changes in organisational structures and roles experienced during their careers had however required a reorientation in their perceptions of self, which had found expression in resultant trends towards focussing more on their own research and research productivity, albeit not to the extent and/or detriment of continued engagement with other colleagues as can sometimes occur within a more formal para-academic role (Macfarlane, 2011). Both contributors felt that this change in direction has resulted in a shift in their own self-perceived academic identities to be more grounded in research and orientated towards their future career trajectories (Johnston and Davies, 2025) than was perhaps the case in the past. C1 and C2 who are at earlier stages of their career still feel that they are establishing themselves and their personal academic identities. As such, they both still feel that they are trying to strike

a balance in the various roles they are required to undertake on a day-to-day basis, including the need for balance between teaching and research. It is however important to pose the question as to whether such reorientations of self and the accompanying (re)development of interpersonal collegiate working relationships that contribute towards personal academic identity formation and feelings of attachment towards the organisation is perhaps more challenging now, at times, within the post-pandemic context of an increasing hybrid working environment, given reduced opportunities to develop or redevelop such connections among academic staff teams?

Interestingly, C1 who started their academic career during the Covid-19 pandemic, acknowledged a perceived initial comfort zone stemming from the remoteness of online teaching in the early stages of their career. Since then, however, they acknowledge that such feelings quickly dissipated, with the need for more direct interpersonal connections and working relationships taking over, as they felt this would better support their own working behaviours and continued development. Similar to C4 and C2, they acknowledged the subsequent building of a small network of close colleagues in the post-pandemic period. In this context, the ending of remote working following the end of the pandemic opened opportunities for C1 to engage more directly for the first time, in person, with other colleagues. Such findings further suggest the importance of maintaining direct personal interactions for academics in building support networks and accompanying feelings of attachment within organisational settings (De Grooijer, 2009; Verma and Khatri, 2021). The onset of increased levels of hybrid working in recent years poses potential challenges for management and leadership, again, however, within this context.

As part of their emerging identities mentioned above, both C3 and C4 acknowledge their increasing connections with external bodies and express a high level of attachment to these. They acknowledge external work and connections as an important aspect in the establishment of their new emerging more research-focussed identities. C3 also acknowledges connectedness with colleagues from other departments within the university, with whom they have collaborated on research in the past and continue to do so. Involvement in this broader network of connections has further supported and enhanced the ongoing development and establishment of their emerging self-perceived research identity and accompanying feelings of attachment within, across and also external to the institution (Verma and Khatri, 2021). For C3 and C4, such developments are more readily within the post-pandemic context in which remote collaboration – particularly with external individuals or groups – is more manageable through use of relevant real-time communication technologies than was perhaps the case pre-pandemic.

In comparison, C2 and C4 do not feel as comfortable in alien surroundings, with people they do not know and not yet as comfortable nor built trust with. C2 fears saying the wrong thing, while C4 dislikes small talk and networking situations. C4 also expresses concerns around trust in sharing any written work they produce, despite having published several well received peer review journal articles. Whilst C4 is gradually developing a more research-focussed identity, such concerns are further indicative of the challenges and fluctuations that can be involved as part of ongoing and ever-changing processes of identity formation. The potential interrelationship between issues of academic identity formation, the roles that academics undertake and their attachment to relevant organisations is therefore important (Johnston, 2025). Alongside the potential challenges that might occur as a result of trends towards hybrid working, there can also be potential opportunities for academics to leverage in the ‘newer normal’ post-pandemic period in the development of interpersonal connections that facilitate

increased feelings of attachment to relevant external people and groups within broader academic discipline areas.

Managerialism, Work Commitment and Role Commitment in the Post-Pandemic Era

While there was acknowledgement that the institution understands the challenges that currently affect the sector and value the work that staff teams undertake, there was also an accompanying perception that they do not necessarily fully appreciate the volume of workload that staff members undertake (C2) and are increasingly striving to encourage efficiencies under a standpoint of more for less (C4). C2 refers to the challenges of a perceived disconnect between those in senior leadership positions and those with *"boots on the ground*" with the risk that such perceptions impact feelings of attachment to the organisation. As is the case in many modern HEIs, staffing is a significant element of the costs of the institution and in the turbulent economic times faced there is also an acknowledgement and understanding from all four contributors on the need for greater efficiencies from all employed individuals. It is however also evident that such issues align directly with key features of managerialism (Johnston, 2025) and the adoption of efficiency models (Yielder and Codling, 2004), both of which have increasingly come to encompass and engulf the broader HE sector.

Whilst feelings of attachment can fluctuate over time for staff members, this does not seem to have affected the commitment or engagement of academics with their role (Dibben et al., 2011). All contributors demonstrated a willingness to work beyond the norm of contracted hours, including evenings and weekends, when necessary, with three out of the four contributors identifying weekends as part of their normal working pattern. C2 noted for example that "*I work almost every day and sometimes late at night... which is required for me to complete the tasks assigned*". There were however differences in the work that contributors were willing to undertake in their own time. C2 was willing to undertake administrative tasks at a weekend, whereas C4 was now predominantly only prepared to undertake research and external activities at the weekend, unless it was absolutely necessary to do otherwise. C4 stated that "*in the past I used to work every hour possible to get things done, but now I am only really prepared to do stuff which helps my CV at weekends*". This was echoed by C3 who had also previously worked extensive hours on campus and at home including evenings and weekends, but now focuses only on their own research when they are away from campus, whilst also trying to keep their weekends entirely free. C1 however worked weekends as necessary, feeling a need or requirement to work on any and all necessary elements of the job to ensure completion of set tasks and workload.

All four contributors have worked beyond capacity in recent years, which has to a large extent become an expected norm, but which they also acknowledge is also a reflection of changes within the broader HE sector towards increased workload demands on academic staff (Vardi, 2009). Such workloads often relate directly to teaching, but can also include various types of associated work including marking and administrative tasks. Indeed, all four contributors felt that the requirement to undertake an ever-expanding volume of administrative tasks was at times affecting and inhibiting what they perhaps viewed to be the more important aspects of their jobs, namely teaching and research.

At the same time, all four contributors have remained research active and have published numerous peer-review articles in the past few years, some of which they have undertaken collaboratively. C2 suggests that heavy workloads associated with teaching can have a negative impact on their ability to get their research written up and submitted for publication. C2 also

identifies a need for additional support for Early Career Researchers (ECRs), noting that the publication process can sometimes affect them badly, particularly if rejections are received to their submitted work:

> *I love research, I feel it is refreshing and getting a successful publication gives me a sense of achievement. I am fortunate to be working alongside experienced colleagues who guide my research activities. While I enjoy research, I also understand it can be lonely work, so I usually try to work with my colleagues. However, sometimes I feel like I am not doing enough. Publications feel like a game, rejection can be hard and sometimes it takes me days to recover from the blow [of a rejection or feedback]. I can see how much research is celebrated here at my workplace, which is good, but there needs to be better support in place for Early Career Academics to do research. The teaching and admin workload make it sometimes impossible for meaningful research participation* (C2).

C4 in comparison has made time for research by selectively covering modules which they are more at ease with, and which perhaps do not take up as much preparation time. This has facilitated time to allow research to become the main focus of what they do. C1 acknowledges a fear, directly related to self-acknowledged feelings of imposter syndrome, arising from a lack of confidence and similar perceived feelings of a need for support for ECRs that was identified by C2. Increased feelings of a pressure to publish is a challenge that many academics face within modern HE environments (Vardi, 2009; Reisz, 2017). Whilst still heavily engaged in their day-to-day roles (Dibben et al., 2011), all four contributors alluded to the pressures of publication and the accompanying challenges in the post-pandemic period that increased workloads and managerialist tendencies have placed on their attachment to the organisation within this context.

Conclusion

The findings within this study highlight changes and fluctuations over time in each academic's perceived feelings of attachment to their institution and their own perceptions on the focus of their underpinning roles within their organisations. Much of this has resulted from factors that influence each individual's psychological contract and psychological climate. The concept of attachment is based upon a combination of contributory factors including employee engagement, psychological climate and job satisfaction. A key feature of this conceptualisation is incumbent in academic identity and coupled with notions of equity. As has been the case in many HEIs, key changes within the host institution have included an increase in managerialist practices coupled with increases in workload. Changes in working practices, over time, linked to a shift within HE towards the "newer normal" in which forms of hybrid working have become more commonplace (Mathew et al., 2024) have resulted in a subsequent impact on opportunities for collaboration and connectedness that have impacted each contributor's personal experiences and feelings of attachment to the organisation. Such issues have led to each contributor taking more individualist approaches to certain aspects of their work, particularly in relation to emergent research identities and the need to publish. Indeed, with ongoing changes over time in the perceived primary focus of their own working roles, there is an evident fluidity to each participant's self-perceived academic identity, which also continues to change. In part, such developments might be considered as the manifestation of the processes through which working relationships continue to shift, change and develop during the course of an individual academic career. Yet as the institution and the wider sector shift focus and as personal collaborative relationships change, so too individuals also continue to adapt to their

environment. This can influence an individual academic's decision as to what areas of work they focus on within their institution as well as their views on where the most productive points of collaboration might be found within their day-to-day working lives.

A key feature of human resource development (HRD) is to initiate positive behavioural change in employees while also creating positive attitudes among the workforce. The importance of organisational attachment has implications for HRD professionals and academics, through the need to consider how attitudes are formed and developed, and how organisations may need to adapt their practices to develop greater levels of positivity among employees. Connectivity and attachment are major contributors to an individual's psychological contract, which in turn influences aspects of organisational life such as engagement, performance and innovation. It is crucial therefore that HRD professionals are able to develop and design HRD interventions that enable academics to remain attached and loyal to their organisation rather than visualising their organisation simply as a means of facilitating their own desires and success. At the same time as institutions increasingly adopt hybrid models of working, there are risk that subsequent disconnects between academics and their institutions will continue to grow until key solutions can be found that facilitate the development of interconnected (remote, hybrid or in-person) working relationships that retain a continued sense of belonging for academic staff.

This paper therefore contributes to the current literature base of HRD, management practice and education through exploring the experiences of four academics and their roles within a UK HEI. Each academic has experienced a series of changes and challenges during their career, with their ever-changing experiences in the workplace contributing to ongoing fluctuations in their self-perceived feelings of attachment and emotional connectedness to their work and their institution. Despite this, each academic remains attached, committed and engaged in their role (Dibben et al., 2011), even though their perceptions and identities continue to shift. The article therefore makes an important contribution to practice by considering the lived experiences of academics and their interpretations on how their self-perceived feelings of attachment have shifted over time, but not disappeared. Whilst there have been changes in aspects of each employee's discretionary effort in terms of the types of activities in which they are willing to undertake whilst away from campus, each contributor continues to engage fully in their academic role (Dibben et al., 2011). Given increasing strains and stressors within the HE sector, there remains necessity however for managers and HRD professionals to consider how their actions impact employee attachment as well as issues linked to stated job roles and requirements. Such considerations are important, given that psychological aspects of behaviour can ultimately dictate key aspects of the employment relationship, including levels, feelings and influencers of attachment (Johnston, 2025). The potential implications here could be far reaching in impacting issues linked to performance, engagement, institutional loyalty and staff retention and the continued long-term sustainability of the HE sector.

Building upon the findings within this study, future research could draw upon a wider range of participants and examine issues of attachment and identity formation across a wider disciplinary group of areas. This may provide opportunities to generate further in-depth insights examining the lived experiences of individuals in HE academic roles, while also removing common characteristics that may potentially be associated with the singularity of a particular disciplinary area. Expanding such research to other geographic locations may likewise provide opportunity to examine the experiences of academics within other socio-cultural HE contexts. The potential impact of other key demographics could also be examined to better understand how the lived experiences of individual academics might be influenced by their own personal context, background and personal circumstances. The findings from

such research may provide further scope to consider key steps and stages within individual career trajectories, as they relate to issues of attachment within the workplace as well as other potential interventions and implications for researchers and practitioners within the HRD field.

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