A Hopeful Manifesto for a More Humane Academia

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I recently read a Twitter reply to a scholar bemoaning the state of academia, which suggested they clearly never worked in the ‘real world’. The implication was that while academia may be challenging, work everywhere is under existentialist strain of capitalism and precarity. Many certainly have it worse.

Let me respectfully double down: academia sucks.

In the UK, where I work and on which this essay is focused, a 2021 Education Support report surveyed 2,046 university staff: 53% showed signs of probable depression, 62% regularly worked more than 40 hours per week and 59% hesitated to get support for fear of appearing ‘weak’. While some had it better – 3% said they never had to do unreasonable tasks – the overall picture is of considerable overwork and poor mental health and support.

It gets worse. In 2010, the UK University and College Union conducted a survey in which 47% reported being bullied at work in the last five years; 71% reported witnessing bullying. A decade later, as the Covid-19 pandemic raged, staff members reported feeling pressured to teach in person (Fazackerley, 2020). Unsurprisingly, such pressure disproportionally fell on the more precarious: those on casual teaching-only contracts, those clinically vulnerable and those with greater career concerns. More recently, when I asked on Twitter if colleagues had experienced bad behaviours, harassment or bullying, one person’s response was ‘might be simpler to ask if you’ve ever had an academic or research job in the UK and *not* experienced’ it.

Add to this deteriorating pay, pensions and working conditions, brutally forced-through redundancy processes at Leicester, Goldsmiths and elsewhere, persistent and largely unaddressed pay gaps, and the influence of various rankings in cementing the ideological spread of ‘excellence’ we are all meant to embody, and frankly who cares whether it’s same or worse elsewhere? It’s hard to be reasonable when you are just so tired, including tired of being asked to provide yet more evidence for what is entirely evident to most. The fact that academia feels that way is no less valid part of the problem. Feelings also don’t preclude consequences, as evidenced by stories more junior colleagues shared. They described clearly inequitable workloads, but also vile harassment by senior scholars without meaningful investigation resulting in accountability and determent. No wonder some decided to simply leave.

I’m tired too. I started my first academic position almost exactly 10 years ago. I’ve since witnessed excellent colleagues ground down under the weight of disproportionate workload, then being told they should just manage their time better. At a work social event, a male academic – who had previously asked me out, which I politely refused – blatantly stared at my fully buttoned up

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chest. When I asked if I was showing in some way, he replied along the lines of ‘you’re always showing’, with a smirk that made my insides crawl. Those sitting alongside us ignored it. I’ve exchanged emails with (female, more precarious) colleagues at 2 am while hurrying to meet marking deadlines for huge modules – more than once. I’ve seen male colleagues rudely dismiss legitimate collegial requests or suggest maternity leave is basically a nice holiday. I’ve cried in a bathroom stall on seeing early evidence of miscarriage drip out of me, then returned to a meeting because it would be unprofessional to leave. I spent a year punishing myself for losing a baby because I let work drown out all other primacies, my anxiety-riddled body included. No one at work knew, the first time or the second.

I know my experiences may not be yours: national structures matter, so do institutional choices, immediate managers and proximate colleagues. Who we are matters too. I write this as a white European woman with a well-paid, stable senior position in a highly ranked UK business school. I’ve been educated in elite institutions and speak English that doesn’t reflect my Croatian origins. The fact that my name is constantly mispronounced and that I spent the last two years panic-raising a baby amid a global pandemic while stressing about my non-existent outputs and sitting on a pile of frequently cruel rejections doesn’t diminish those privileges.

Against this morass of compounded harms, as different as we are, is there anything we can do to make our experiences better? Is there hope? I think so.

To be clear: relational action, which I centre below, does not cancel out powerful institutions. We should join unions, strike as necessary, and ensure our governing bodies work in collective interest through active membership. This is not an individual-first ‘lean in’ manifesto. Instead, it is an acknowledgement that while many of us are rightly weary of power structures or find them variously ineffective or inaccessible, personal dynamics are comparatively more in our control. Our interactions can either sustain or challenge institutions; make good ones better, or bad ones worse. As my colleague Chahrazad Abdallah says, we can burst change into existence. Yes, some of us will find ourselves with more capacity to enter power structures and advocate for better conditions from within, and to keep trying after every inevitable hurdle. Yes, the consequences of such choices are unequally applied and the effort they take rests on disproportionally burdened backs. Our personal challenge therefore is deciding what each can work toward doing more of, recognizing that those of us who have more should do more too.

1. **Value teaching, student support and collegiality.** Teaching isn’t a ‘load’, it’s our public contribution. Students deserve our best, as do our colleagues. If you have the capacity, reach out to take something off colleagues’ hands or support their work in another way they’d find helpful.

2. **Respect administrative and support colleagues.** They are just trying to do their job. Consider their perspective. Say thanks. And pick up after yourself in meetings.

3. **Don’t be Reviewer 2 or the editor that empowers them.** A colleague recently overheard a conversation in which a PhD student boasted of trashing a paper to impress an editor. Setting aside the question of quite how they came to be normalized into such behaviour, it’s plainly not what reviews are for. If the baseline expectations of fit and rigour are met, our job is to developmentally aid the authors. It’s not to rewrite the paper to serve our own purposes, or to kick it out as a way of unquestioningly reproducing some spurious notion of ‘excellence’. Review and edit generously.

4. **Don’t be inappropriate.** Yelling at people is not ok. Nor is belittling them publicly or carelessly commenting on intimate matters, including appearance. Don’t touch others unless invited, especially those in lesser power positions. Never use a bar or hotel room as a meeting place for work conversations. People shouldn’t have to say no without you knowing
what is inappropriate in professional settings. And if you’ve done wrong, recognize, apologize and do better.

5. **Call out bad behaviour.** If someone blatantly fails to recognize #4, show support to the victim. If you have legitimate fears of retribution, reach out to others to challenge collectively. If you are senior, hold the wrongdoer to account. Your own relationship, what Sara Ahmed (2021) calls a shared web of past intimacies, should not prevent that.

Though this may be an unpopular opinion amid our widespread managerialism, I also genuinely believe management can make a meaningful difference. Witnessing so many bad examples of it daily is devastating (see also Erickson, Hanna, & Walker, 2020). So, a few further suggestions for academic colleagues in powerful positions. If you can’t honestly say you are doing at least one, perhaps it’s time to walk away and find alternative venues for change.

6. **Be human first.** Many things make us uncomfortable: death, blood, disease. That should be no excuse to simply ignore colleagues living with these. Perhaps you’d rather your colleague was not experiencing menopause, or your postdoc didn’t have to care for an ill relative. Tough luck. If you’re a manager, educate yourself on how best to support them (hint: as a discipline, we’ve done considerable research on that). You may also begin by being more human yourself. Being trusted to (a) care and (b) care enough to do something about it is a good first step. Regularly asking ‘how are you?’ and taking the time to listen helps too.

7. **Make room for others.** If you’ve established yourself as a securely employed senior academic, consider whether your new idea really requires a 4* journal. If it does, reach out to a colleague you can equitably collaborate with to support their nascent career. If you serve on journal editorial boards or funding panels, advocate for decisions to be audited for structural inequalities. Push for collective commitment to redress balances. Don’t publish other seniors simply because you know them.

8. **Work toward liveable pay.** If you run research groups or hire research assistants, pay them as much as you can, given institutional limitations. Advocate that such limitations be addressed. Otherwise, we risk academia further cementing itself as a place of passion exploitation (Kim, Campell, Shepherd, & Kay, 2020) of the already privileged.

9. **Use your power to craft better systems.** We often talk about managerialism’s many downsides, but one generative upside is that academics in senior managerial positions now have considerable power to occasion change. For instance, if you are a head of group or similar, do an audit of workload allocations and hiring going back 5 years. What work gets valued, what gets ignored, and who does most of either? How diverse are your staff and how differentially supported are they? Commit to making these fairer by persistently raising the issue for institutional consideration, recognizing we already have plenty of evidence they absolutely aren’t. Challenge overwork: if staff are being told to do something, insist that those decreeing this tell you what staff should do less of. Be willing to say no on behalf of colleagues. Remember though to involve them as equals. The growing absence of effective checks and balances to managerialist power in universities is a major structural impediment to a better reality for us all. Reproducing the same unequal power relations at more local levels is equally as problematic.

10. **Model a better academic reality.** Do everything you can to dispel the myth of an all-powerful, work-is-my-life professor as the ideal to which all should aspire. Advocate for and celebrate people who aren’t or cannot be like that, yet still make important contributions.
I know that most of us are bone weary. I know this just scratches the structural surface. I know that those who should read this likely won’t or will dismiss it out of hand. I know the system values productivity above all, and purposeful kindness does not fit the bill.

But I stay despite that system, even as it’s made me one of the lucky ones. I stay because for every bad structure, there is a humane encounter. Because these make me believe that daily relating can matter. And I hope if enough of us try – in our defiant collectives – the system won’t worsen on the back of our increasingly exhausted resignation.

The Quakers have a saying: let your life speak. I stay because academia lets me live my values: to research purposefully, to engage respectfully, to teach ideas that centre understanding and compassion, to speak publicly on issues that matter. It reminds me that each choice speaks. Our silences do too.

A better academia is possible if we live it.

References