



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

Edinburgh Research Explorer

## Academic identities in contemporary higher education

**Citation for published version:**

McCune, V 2019, 'Academic identities in contemporary higher education: Sustaining identities that value teaching', *Teaching in Higher Education*, pp. 1-17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2019.1632826>

**Digital Object Identifier (DOI):**

[10.1080/13562517.2019.1632826](https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2019.1632826)

**Link:**

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

**Document Version:**

Peer reviewed version

**Published In:**

Teaching in Higher Education

**Publisher Rights Statement:**

"This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in Teaching in Higher Education on 03-07-2019, available online: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13562517.2019.1632826>"

**General rights**

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

**Take down policy**

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact [openaccess@ed.ac.uk](mailto:openaccess@ed.ac.uk) providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



**Academic identities in contemporary higher education: Sustaining identities  
that value teaching**

Velda McCune, Institute for Academic Development, University of Edinburgh

Institute for Academic Development,

University of Edinburgh,

1 Morgan Lane,

Edinburgh,

EH8 8FP.

[velda.mccune@ed.ac.uk](mailto:velda.mccune@ed.ac.uk)

0131 651 4083

6723 words, excluding references.

## **Academic identities in contemporary higher education: Sustaining identities that value teaching**

Velda McCune, Institute for Academic Development, University of Edinburgh

### **Abstract**

This paper investigates how academics in the current global higher education system - which often prioritises particular metric proxies for research activity and income generation over rich conceptualisation of teaching - can sustain identities that encompass deep care for students' learning and positive values in relation to teaching. This is a significant area that has been little researched, particularly with experienced academics in mainstream roles in research-intensive universities. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with twelve experienced academics in a research-intensive university. A thematic narrative analysis illustrated important ways in which it can be possible to maintain academic identities that encompassed deep care for teaching. The ways in which narrative processes are significant for identity development which underpins deep care for teaching and strong values in relation to teaching are drawn out. The interplay over time of tensions and synergies between different facets of participants' identities were shown to be important for maintaining strong teacher identities. Implications for how identities focused on transformative teaching can be prioritised in institutions are explored in relation to the institutional changes and reflexive processes which would be required.

## **Keywords**

Academic identities; higher education; teaching; student learning

## **Introduction**

This paper investigates how academics can sustain identities that value teaching when they work in contexts that often militate against such identities. The analysis considers the ways in which academics might continue to care deeply for students' learning and hold strong personal values in relation to teaching in the increasingly competitive, marketised and performative world of global higher education (Archer, 2008; Arvaja, 2018; Ball, 2003; Clegg, 2008; Tomlinson, 2017; van Lankveld et al., 2017; Warren, 2017). The implications from this paper focus on the reflexive processes required in institutions to critically deconstruct the status quo such that deep care for transformative teaching can be fully enabled rather than being a position that is hard won by a minority.

This is a world often shaped by the strategies of New Public Management (NPM) which emphasises inter alia: customer focus; higher tuition fees; increased competition between institutions; audit processes and target setting; efficiency measured against quantitative metrics; and performance reporting (Broucker, De Wit and Verhouvern, 2018; Marginson, 2009; Smith, 2017). This world view positions academics as being driven by extrinsic rewards such as pay rather than the caring about teaching or striving to make new discoveries (Marginson, 2009). This constellation of practices are partially overlapping with some conceptualisations of neoliberalism but do not represent the full scope of the

sometimes contradictory perspectives in the literature on neoliberal policy and practice (Rowlands and Rawolle, 2003).

In this performative world, teaching is increasingly evaluated using published quantitative metrics that support powerful processes of accountability and performativity (Ball, 2003; Gunn, 2018). Extrinsic metrics and rewards are often emphasised over the intrinsic satisfactions of engaging deeply with teaching (Leibowitz et al., 2012). These metrics can become powerful aspects of the mediational means which shape teacher agency (Lasky, 2005; Wertsch, 1991). Student numbers are increasing as government funding decreases (Clegg, 2008; Tomlinson, 2017; Warren, 2017). The introduction of and increases in student fees are also part of the picture. In Scotland, where this study was located, Scottish students and non-UK EU students do not currently pay fees but students from elsewhere in the UK and non-EU international students do pay. Scottish students do often end up taking on considerable debt to complete a higher education.

The emphasis on quantitative metrics and comparison and competition between universities internationally is also highly significant in relation to research activities (Olssen, 2016; Warren, 2017). Research funding has increasingly been provided through competitive grant funding streams that are tailored to solving specific problems set by funders and that are separate from funding tied to students and their learning (Robertson, 2007). Broader research funding provided to institutions relies largely on quantitative or proxy measures of quality such as the numbers of academics publishing, numbers of publications

per academic, and numerical grading of outputs. Publication and journal statistics are often influential within recognition and reward processes.

While the historical ideal in Western universities has been to have a close symbiotic relationship between research and teaching; mass higher education, policies and practices which value particular metrics for research productivity, and funding separation are increasingly pushing these two aspects of academic roles into tension with one another (Brew, 2003; Robertson, 2007; Robertson and Bond, 2005). The relationships between research and teaching are now highly complex and cannot be simply represented as an obvious synergy or a straightforward relation of tension and competition between the two. Rather the relationships are enacted differently by diverse academics shaped by multiple discourses and complex interplay between beliefs about learning and teaching and understandings of the nature of knowledge (Brew 2003; Robertson, 2007).

Despite the growing emphasis on accountability in teaching and the employability of graduates, the pressure on academics to prioritise research and knowledge exchange over teaching can be considerable (Harris, 2005; Leibowitz et al., 2012; van Lankveld et al., 2017). This is related to commentary in the literature on the intensification of academic work (Archer, 2008; Ball, 2003; McInnis, 2010). Thus identities encompassing strong values in relation to teaching may be under more pressure than ever before.

In contrast with the valorisation of simplistic research, knowledge exchange and student satisfaction metrics, the qualitative nature of learning experiences in higher education is central to social justice, critical citizenship and preparing

graduates for a complex and uncertain world (Anderson and McCune, 2013; Barnett, 2007; McArthur, 2016; Sutton, 2015). From these perspectives, academics engaging deeply in providing meaningful learning experiences is crucial. Cultural norms and recognition and reward processes, however, may give less value to teaching and take away from this vital work (McNaughton and Billot, 2016). It is therefore increasingly important to ask how academics in research intensive universities in the current context can still find ways of committing deeply to and caring about their students' transformative learning.

What we value and what we choose to do is in close and constant interplay with who we are, thus academic identities are crucial to understanding academics' engagement with teaching under challenging circumstances (Watson, 2006).

Academic identities lie at the intersection between the individual and the social and are central to understanding academic being and practice (Boyd and Smith, 2016). Particular identities can contribute to a sense of agency or empowerment as a teacher (Beachamp and Thomas, 2009). Enacting teaching focused identities may, however, be perceived negatively in research-intensive universities and may not contribute positively to academics' status (Skelton, 2013). This paper therefore asks how experienced academics in mainstream roles in research-intensive universities can develop and maintain identities that encompass care for teaching and strong personal values in relation to teaching. This is a significant area that has seen relatively little research, particularly with staff in these particular kinds of roles.

## **Academic identities**

In this paper, the term 'identities' is used to signal the dynamic interplay over time of personal narratives, values and processes of identification with diverse groups and communities (Beauchamp and Thomas, 2009; DiNapoli and Barnett, 2008; Sfard and Prusak, 2005; Taylor, 2008; Watson, 2006). Academic identities can be understood as a set of significant stories about an individual that are created and recreated over time through social, cultural and historical processes (Sfard and Prusak, 2005). The cultural tools available to academics to shape their narratives about themselves as teachers are crucial (Lasky, 2005; Wertsch, 1991). Identities are conceptualised here as multifaceted, social, overlapping and potentially in tension (Curwood, 2014; Watson, 2006).

Despite these complexities, there can be sufficient coherence in identity work over time to provide an ongoing narrative about who one is as an academic that can drive personal choices and give consistency in motivation and ways of being (Archer, 2000; Taylor, 2008). It seems possible to speak of an agentic self that can be used to explain academics' choices about teaching (Clegg, 2008). This paper considers the underpinnings which might be required for an agentic self which strongly values teaching.

## **Academics identities that value teaching**

Identifying oneself as the kind of academic who strongly values teaching in higher education is not necessarily a comfortable or well supported experience (Loads and Collins, 2016) particularly in research-intensive universities (Skelton, 2013). Clegg (2008) does, however, present a hopeful picture of how it is



possible to maintain principled stances in the face of performativity. So we might perhaps expect to find some academics who understand themselves, and are understood by others, as academics who find deep intrinsic value in teaching even within current research-intensive contexts. The interviews presented by Leibowitz et al. (2012) show that it is entirely possible to identify strongly with teaching in a research intensive context and to care deeply about students' learning. Skelton (2012) also reminds us that:

The idea of a teaching identity as a separate, knowable and legitimate category was given recognition and support in both the Dearing report and *The Future of Higher Education*. Post-Dearing enhancement initiatives have continued this trend and secured a place for teaching identity within the 'official discourse' of higher education. (Skelton, 2012, p. 26)

Where academics identify strongly with their roles as teachers, an important aspect of this will be adopting and expressing values congruent with these identities that guide what to prioritise (Fitzmaurice, 2013). These values within strong teaching identities might include, for example, care for students and high standards for teaching (Leibowitz et al., 2012; McNaughton and Billot, 2016). This must go far beyond performing rule bound procedures, such as meeting marking and feedback deadlines. What is needed is a genuine empathy for students and well considered care for providing learning experiences that enable students' development as more autonomous learners and critical citizens (Kreber et al., 2007).

There has been relatively little attention given in the literature to what makes teaching meaningful for academics and what underpins the will to teach. These are crucial questions, particularly in higher education, where teachers have more freedom over their engagement in teaching than in other sectors (Barnett and Guzmán-Valenzuela, 2017). In the context of the challenges to intrinsic engagement with teaching presented by NPM, it is crucial to consider how academics might hold values that embrace deep care for learning and teaching and how these values can be supported. Investigating those aspects of academic identities that inform teaching and how those relate to other facets of academic identities provides a strong theoretical position from which to explore these issues.

This study therefore addresses the following research questions:

- 1) Where academics are balancing teaching with other significant professional identities (such as researcher, clinician or leader) in what ways can they express that they deeply value teaching?
- 2) In a research-intensive context, what kinds of narratives can support experienced academics to care about teaching and have clear personal values in relation to learning and teaching?
- 3) In what ways do other aspects of academic identity support or challenge care for teaching in a research intensive context?

### **The study**

The analyses presented here are based on audio recorded semi-structured interviews with academic staff in a research intensive university in Scotland. The

institution has a history of valuing research more highly than teaching in recruitment, recognition and reward processes although this has very recently begun to change. The participants were experienced academics who had developed their teaching practice informally for the most part, rather than participating in formal continuing professional development. Participants were selected who were known to their colleagues for being strongly invested in teaching and who also identified themselves in that way. There were twelve participants from across the humanities, social sciences, STEM subjects and clinical teaching (Table 1). The participants had complex academic roles and were not in the kinds of teaching only posts that might be expected to lend themselves most easily to deeply valuing teaching.

(Insert Table 1 about here)

The interviews began by asking participants about their recent concrete experiences of teaching and assessment. Building on this, the participants were asked why they had chosen particular teaching practices and why they had made any changes they had made. Then the interviews moved on to exploring how the participants had developed as teachers and what had influenced that development. All of the interviews were transcribed in full. Formal ethical approval was received from the institution.

A rigorous thematic narrative analysis was conducted (Riessman, 2008). In this paper the term 'narratives' is used to refer to 'stories of personal experience'

(Watson, 2006, p. 511). The focus was the narratives that participants built and recounted about who they were as teachers and professionals and the experiences that shaped this, as these are so significant for teachers' identities (Arvaja, 2018; Beauchamp and Thomas, 2009; Boyd and Smith, 2016; Churchman and King, 2009; Curwood, 2014; Watson, 2006). Narratives are a crucial mechanism through which individuals can maintain the continuity of their identities by integrating personal meanings and experiences over time (Arvaja, 2016).

Reissman explains how thematic narrative analyses emphasise what is said rather than the context for the speech. The analyses presented here began with the narratives developed by individual participants rather than trying to construct categories across cases. Stories that related to participants' academic identities were considered as complete units. The analysis involved coding each narrative with its beginning, middle and end intact. All narratives that seemed salient to the participants' academic identities were coded and the transcripts were carefully checked for any relevant stories that might have been missed initially. These were typically short narratives relating to particular critical events rather than more extensive life stories. Counter examples to the main findings were carefully sought out and reported. This approach has strong similarities with the analysis processes described by Smith (2017) for a study into the identities of early career academics.

The narratives identified were then grouped together based on their relevance to the research questions and inter-relationships with the relevant literature.

Writing proceeded alongside the analysis, weaving theoretical considerations in with the participants' stories to develop a richer understanding of how care for teaching might develop and be sustained in a research-intensive context.

### **Findings**

From the participants' narratives, it was clear that they strongly valued particular kinds of teaching. They had clear views on how they hoped students would develop as learners and well considered perspectives on the kinds of teaching which would enable this development. This supports perspectives from the literature which suggest strong and principled academic identities can be sustained despite the uncertainties and challenges faced by contemporary academics (Loads and Collins, 2016; van Lankveld et al., 2017; Smith, 2017).

This being the case, it then became important to understand what kinds of narrative would support participants to maintain their teaching values in contexts that were not strongly supportive of these values. This part of the analysis identified stories which participants told about their lives as students and teachers that seemed to help ground and maintain their care for teaching. To maintain strong teaching values in complex academic roles requires balancing different aspects of academic identities. The third part of the analysis showed that this could involve synergies, not just tensions, between different facets of identity.

### ***Expressing identities where teaching is strongly valued***

Personal values give meaning to teaching and can help academics stay engaged with teaching in the face of wider pressures (Barnett and Guzmán-Valenzuela,

2017). Most of the teachers in this study offered narratives showing values of caring deeply about teaching and student learning. More specifically, their emphasis was on care for students as learners and interest in how to support students to become more autonomous, critically aware and active learners. They were less focused on external metrics relating to teaching, instead describing strong intrinsic engagement with how teaching mattered for them.

Participant 10, to give one example, talked about how they and a colleague had engaged deeply with developing a course that would support students' critical reflection on practice. They were strongly committed to this even when other colleagues were not engaged:

[The origins of the course] were very much from discussions with service side staff about the kind of skills we wanted from students [...] So this notion of critical appraisal of practice emerged [...] it was also an opportunity to look at how students bridged their thinking between practice based thinking and academic thinking and writing [...] we tried to put the two perspectives together in one course [...] That was myself and my colleague [...] who I suppose very much nurtured the idea. And then you would draft out a plan of the course, share it with other colleagues for informal feedback [...] We didn't have to change very much actually. So whether they were just disinterested I don't know.

In using this narrative to position herself in alignment with her colleague who cares about similar aspects of teaching - and as being in a different position from

her colleagues who were 'disinterested' - Participant 10 is engaging in the ongoing construction of their identity as someone who cares about teaching in particular ways (Arvaja, 2016). The availability of the notion of 'critical appraisal of practice' was an important cultural tool in shaping what story this participant could tell about their teaching (Lasky, 2005).

Participant 1 talked about their rich interactions with students and used this narrative as a jumping off point to explain their interest in students' learning outcomes and the importance of the university valuing teaching:

I think it's also important in a university such as ours that I do take part [in learning discussions with students] because I think it affirms to the students [...] that I care about the teaching [...] that I'm interested in whether they are meeting the outcomes [...] that teaching and education is an important part of the experience from the university point of view.

Participant 5 shared how much they cared about teaching by describing how particular teaching approaches inspired them and drew out the rich deep understanding they sought from their students. They then offered a narrative about how much extra effort they had put into that teaching approach and how much it mattered to them that the teaching connected with individual students' current understandings:

[The students] were really, really positive about the way we'd done the course. And I honestly believe it's worth it. But it is a lot of extra work [...] And in the free text box they say I don't understand this [...] And

then we see them at 2pm that afternoon. So [earlier in the day] is frantic trying to fathom what they actually want to learn that afternoon and what they don't.

Although the teachers in this study generally placed a strong emphasis on teaching as core to their identities, Participant 9 was an exception to this picture. Their research identity was strongly dominant:

I enjoy the teaching and it is stimulating when it remains a small part of what I do but it becomes overwhelming. If I had wanted to be a teacher, I would have gone into teaching.

### ***Narratives that support academic identities that value teaching***

What is of interest here is how narratives can function as ways for participants to make sense of aspects of their professional lives and selfhood in ways that allow strong care for teaching and support the participants to maintain continuity in their identities (Arvaja, 2016; Curwood, 2014; Watson, 2006). Half of the participants recounted narratives about the experiences through which teaching had come to matter to them. Having and reiterating personal storylines that give sense and coherence to engaging with teaching may well be an important part of maintaining a positive and coherent identity as a teacher in the challenging circumstances of contemporary higher education.

Participant 1, for example, presented a narrative of his experiences as a student and how this influenced his values in relation to teaching. This narrative helps Participant 1 to construct a coherent sense of self-as-teacher grounded in how



he tells the story of their experiences over time. Narratives involving academics building on or reacting against their own experiences as students also appeared in other interviews in this study and are echoed elsewhere in the literature (Hockings et al., 2009; Peseta et al., 2016).

I saw a number of very good examples [...] of large group lecturing when I was a student myself. I saw a lot of examples of very poor large group teaching [...] I realise that the *important things really for me* were going to be to learn the lessons, about the people who did well who engaged the audience. (emphasis by the author).

Another person having the same experience might have narrated it in quite a different way from Participant 1. It is only through the storyline constructed around this experience that it becomes part of how Participant 1 maintains an identity as someone who cares about teaching. The good teaching practices this participant had encountered as a student became important parts of the cultural tools available in growing an identity as an engaged teacher.

Participant 2 drew on his more negative experiences as a doctoral student as a resource to inspire his ongoing deep engagement with supporting doctoral students in his area to develop rich graduate attributes:

I probably did exactly the opposite to what was my own experience of PhD [laughing]. [...] The attitude [back then] was, if you are good enough to be admitted to PhD, you are good enough to get on with it! [...] There was absolutely no formal structure around what you were expected to do, when you could drift off etc. and I did drift off myself.

[...] I was also responsible for PhD training in [my area] [...] we developed a three year PhD Training Programme [...] that developed different skills in each of the three years.

Again, many different stories could be told about the impact of this kind of negative learning experience. It is the choice of a narrative of becoming inspired to improve teaching based on this experience which is an important facet of how Participant 2 builds a coherent sense of themselves as someone who values teaching.

Other narratives, such as the one below from Participant 8, reflected on role models who had influenced the participants' identification with teaching. Such narratives support individuals to reflect on who they may be in relation to others, which is a key process in the development and formation of identities (Hermans, 2003). This form of narrative came up in several of the interviews and was very important for these participants. The value of role models for academics' teacher identities has also been identified elsewhere in the literature (van Lankveld et al., 2017).

My hero when I started was [name]. When I was a student, I wanted to be [name]. He was young, he was cool, he was a terrific lecturer [...] He defined [how I teach].

There were also narratives of struggle and of resistance to aspects of the status quo, which were salient for some participants in their ongoing narration of their teaching focused academic identities. Narratives of resistance can form an important aspect of social change processes (Riessman, 2008). Participant 1, for

example, offered a storyline describing some of the challenges they had resisted in relation to their interest in teaching:

I certainly wouldn't have arrived in this university if I hadn't been able to show at least a few achievements on the research front but in the time I've been here I have I think been able to develop my interest in teaching although that was a struggle at the start [...] I hope now with those around me we've reached the accommodation whereby people realise that [...] I am of value to the university in that way [...] I think actually to be fair to the university I think it is catching up with that message [...] but I think people of my vintage will have certainly felt that their position was a lot less secure you know if they concentrated on teaching.

The choice of storyline here is crucial to Participant 1's ongoing identity as someone who values teaching. Had they adopted a storyline that was more regressive, this might have taken this participant down quite a different pathway (Arvaja, 2016).

Leibowitz et al. (2012) and van Lankveld et al. (2017) emphasise the importance of a sense of competence to academics' identities as teachers. In the present study, several of the participants offered narratives that showcased their confidence, skills and capacities as teachers and thus supported their identities as teachers. Participant 3, for example noted his growing confidence with a new teaching method:

I guess I've got more confident [...] I really don't panic if we hit something that, it's like 'oh no one has understood this'.

Overall, these participants described a rich set of narratives that could be reiterated internally, or to others, in order to support coherent identities encompassing caring about teaching, even within contexts where these identities might be challenged.

### ***The interplay between valuing teaching and other aspects of professional identity***

Academic identities can be partly understood as an ongoing attempt to achieve relatively coherent integration of diverse roles and membership of multiple communities. This coherence can come under challenge, however, in constantly evolving higher education contexts where academics must balance multiple pressures (McNaughton and Billot, 2016). Considerable emotional and cognitive effort may go into these processes of developing academic identities within the complexities of higher education (Fitzmaurice, 2013). The participants in the present study offered narratives recounting the interplay between their teaching and other aspects of their professional identities as, for example, clinicians, researchers, administrators and leaders. At times these identities were more in tension, in other instances more coherence could be achieved. Where these identities were in tension, participants often described considerable stress and talked about putting a lot of thought and effort into understanding and working with these tensions.

Participant 3 offered this temporal narrative about identities in tension, explaining how the tensions played out across an academic year:

There are fixed times that things have to happen in the teaching calendar, you often feel like right I've got to make that [...] That's just the way that I am. The undergraduate students expect and deserve a decent, quality education [...] obviously if you are wanting to do a major piece of development for a course, the time to do it would be over the summer but then over the summer [...] these papers that I need to get written for the REF or this grant proposal that I have been meaning to write for two years [...] you kind of think 'well those need to be my priorities' or are you going to conferences, doing a bit of travelling, maybe even a holiday if you are lucky [...] sense of being always under time pressure.

One salient aspect of this narrative (and those from some of the other participants) is that it suggests a degree of tacit acceptance of the performative practices which can shape academic life. Participant 3 assumes that they have papers 'that I need to get written for the REF' rather than considering a narrative in which they are part of dismantling these processes. This illustrates some of the ways in which social practices of which the participants are critical are also to some extent internalised in and reproduced by them. A phenomenon which has also been observed elsewhere in relation to neoliberal practices (MacDonald-Vemic and Portelli, 2018).

Participant 10 offered a complex narrative where they drew on their identity as a clinician to constructively critique some aspects of what they was asked to do as a teacher, although in other parts of their interview they spoke of good alignment between their clinical and teacher identities. This is one of a number of examples in the data where the same participants could experience both tensions and synergies between the different facets of their academic identities over time.

There is a feeling of perhaps of being a little bit abused by some of the [teaching and student support] initiatives that come along. Because they'll pop out of a committee somewhere [...] they're generally not bad ideas but it's all additionality [...] Because if somebody came to me as a clinician and say I want you to have four meetings a year to do this [...] my first reaction would be, so where's your RCT [randomised control trial], where's the evidence [...]

Some of the participants offered narratives where their care for teaching was well supported by other aspects of their professional identities. This is important to explore given that the literature often emphasises the ways that teacher identities in higher education are devalued relative to other aspects of academic life. Participant 4 below offered a narrative about their experiences with a professional community in his subject area that supported their interest in teaching.

[Ideas about teaching have come] from my engagement in professional societies. In particular [name of society]. We organised a

conference where there is always an education stream and I have participated in a couple of them.

While participant 5 sometimes spoke of tensions between valuing their research and teaching identities, they had also found a connection between their love of research and their subject area and identifying as someone who was strongly committed to teaching well. They offer here a narrative about why teaching matters in the context of valuing their subject area. Telling these kinds of stories can be an important mechanism through which academics can narrate more coherent identities around teaching despite the tensions inherent in their contexts.

[My subject] is one of the best ways to get people interested in science. [My students] are going to go out and they're going to be civil servants, they're going to work in industry and if you can build a community that believes science is important [...] then you have support from the taxpayers [...]

Some of the participants shared narratives describing how the professional teams or communities they identified with supported their engagement with teaching. Academic work groups are often important to the development of strong teacher identities, although these groups are not always supportive, can be unstable, and often involve tensions. This can be seen both in these data and the wider literature (Peseta et al., 2016). Where it is present, collegial support for teaching can be important for developing teaching identities (van Lankveld et

al., 2017). Participant 6 gives a positive example, where they had regular detailed discussion with their clinical colleagues about teaching:

[...] we also have [subject area] meetings where we discuss teaching quite a bit as well. [...] actually how can we make [teaching] better [...] with the practical classes, which we do a lot of, that's most of our teaching, we discuss in quite a lot of detail [...]

## **Discussion**

It is clear from the findings presented in relation to the first research question, that experienced academics in research intensive universities can express identities that encompass caring deeply about teaching. The participants espoused strong values in relation to the graduate attributes they wanted students to develop and what forms of teaching and assessment would support that development. These positions valuing teaching were hard won, however, and the second research question drew attention to participants' narratives of struggling against the status quo.

The final research question considered in what ways do other aspects of academic identity support or challenge care for teaching in a research intensive context? Although tensions between different aspects of identity are often reported in the literature on academic experiences (Jawitz, 2009; McNaughton and Billot, 2016) the picture was more complex here. While tensions were certainly present, it was also possible for research and other professional identities to support care for teaching and learning. This supports the positions



taken by Brew (2003) and Robertson (2007) that the research-teaching nexus is complex and unstable territory.

Maintaining engagement with teaching in contemporary higher education is likely to involve identity struggles requiring considerable cognitive and emotional energy on the part of academics in an era when the pressures on their time are considerable (Fitzmaurice, 2013; Skelton, 2012). This came through clearly in some of the participants' narratives about tensions in their roles. Yet care for teaching has never been more important than it is today as these teachers must prepare students well for the challenges of an increasingly fragmented, fast paced and complex world (Anderson and McCune, 2013; Barnett, 2007).

How academics navigate this challenging and complex territory will depend on their particular narratives, on the discourses available to them and on their beliefs about learning, teaching, knowledge and research. As argued by Brew (2003), institutions need to work toward conceptualisations of learning, teaching and knowledge creation that support positive synergies between research and teaching, rather than driving the two further apart. These conceptualisations can act as new cultural tools which are crucial to supporting academics' agency as teachers (Lasky, 2005). Such processes should consider how fundamentally to disrupt or challenge concepts and practices which mitigate against deep care for transformative teaching, rather than simply adjusting existing practice (Rowlands and Rawolle, 2013).

Part of the picture here may be for policy makers and institutions to critically evaluate how they engage with, or are complicit in, policies and practices that

contribute to unnecessary tensions within academic identities. It may not be a matter of tensions between research and teaching per se, as of tensions between teaching and the particular ways that research is currently valued and measured. It should be an important part of policy and strategy to work collaboratively with academics, professional services staff and students to develop processes for teaching, research, recognition and reward, that allow the different aspects of university life to be more coherent and closely focused on the wider social value of higher education. Academics should be able to foreground different aspects of their identities over time without being penalised in their career progression for these shifts.

It is important that policy makers do not take as given common but potentially harmful processes, such as the valorisation of certain quantitative metrics of academic performance. That these practices are now pervasive does not mean they should be accepted going forward. These should not become the dominant mediational means (Lasky, 2005) shaping how academics narrate their identities as teachers. It is important that research and policy development which note the impact of performance metrics do not simply give greater weight to the current game. This can be the case where additional metrics are added to balance current processes, such as seeking additional quantitative measures of teaching performance to set against research metrics.

That leaders at all levels consider deeply the impact of their own attitudes and practices in relation to teaching is also likely to be key to supporting care for teaching within academic identities. Senior academics with a strong history of

deep engagement with teaching can serve as role models and should be encouraged to take prominent roles and share their own narratives (van Lankveld, 2017). Some of the participants in this study talked about how important role models were for them and the participants as a group would make excellent role models.

Overall, new models for the management of higher education are also required to question the hegemonic status of New Public Management and move toward a richer consideration of the potential of higher education to contribute to the public good shaped by diverse stakeholders across society (Broucker, De Wit and Verhouvern, 2018; Marginson, 2009). There needs to be a process of building deeper trust and communication between communities, governments, managers, students and academics such that academics have the support and space they need to create academic practice that works for the public good. Better 'mediating systems' (Lasky 2005, p.900) are needed to support academics' identities as engaged teachers. This needs to include careful consideration of the ways in which: 'the aura of objectivity acquired by measurement practices can mask the social power relations between managers and the managed.' (Grealy and Laurie, 2017). The tacit struggles over the purposes of higher education embedded in metricisation and other social purposes needs to be closely considered.

Successful resolution of the tensions in academic being can lead to positive identity work and a more coherent sense of professional identity (Arvaja, 2018). Given the significance of narratives for developing identities, support for identity

work which draws participants' attention to how their narratives can function to help achieve more coherence is important (Beauchamp and Thomas, 2009; Boyd and Smith, 2016; Churchman and King, 2009; Curwood, 2014; Watson, 2006)

Part of the answer may be to value strongly opportunities for academics to bring a reflexive sensibility to how they narrate their development across their complex roles and identities within their particular contexts (Ryan and Carmichael, 2016). This could provide more critically aware perspectives on how teaching and learning can be valued and prioritised. Reflexive analysis of socio-historical forces, the pressures of particular local contexts, and the impacts of the discourses used in discussing teaching, should all be encouraged.

The participants in the present study typically recounted feeling time pressured yet coming to some level of resolution of the complexities and tensions of academic roles is an ongoing challenge that will often be worked out slowly through participants day-to-day academic practice and informal conversations (Knight, Tait and Yorke, 2006; McCune, 2018). Thus time and support need to be provided within academic roles to allow critically reflexive conversations to develop.

In their review, Van Lankveld et al. (2017) found that participation in formal educational development often strengthened teacher identities. Ideally educational development might provide a space where participants can be supported to question the sources of emerging tensions between different aspects of their identities and to critically reflect on how they might act to

challenge the discourses and positions which devalue teaching. Effective educational development would give academics access to richer cultural tools with which to build their own practice. Van Lankveld et al. also noted more negative experiences of educational development including academics feeling suspicious that educational developers might play a surveillance role. Academic developers must therefore consider how their own practice might be contributing to maintaining rather than challenging discourses of surveillance or metricisation in higher education.

With increasing emphasis on accreditation of continuing professional development for teaching - as well as a growing emphasis on recording and reporting participation - there is a danger that these processes could be experienced by academics as adding to the managerialist pressures on their roles. Instead educational development programmes should emphasise providing opportunities for academics to become more reflexive about how they want to develop as teachers and offer communities and contacts that support strong teaching identities. Providing learning spaces which enable collective processes for teachers to develop stronger shared vision, agency and cultural tools for teaching will be necessary for significant change to how teaching is understood and goes forward in higher education (Biesta, Priestly and Robinson, 2015; Lasky, 2005; Wertsch, 1991).

The present study does have some limitations. Although the particular institution where this research was conducted shares many pressures and available discourses with other universities globally, the particularities of this institution

may have encouraged some narratives more to the fore and discouraged others. Future longitudinal research on maintaining strong care for teaching across diverse institutional contexts will be important to build a richer picture of how strong valuing of teaching can be encouraged. Further research that considers how academics' identities as teachers evolve in relation to particular institutional or policy initiatives would also be valuable. Research that looks closely at those moments where academics with strong values in relation to teaching encounter points of struggle and resistance might be illuminating. Such research should consider who bears the emotional cost of this work and what happens when academics are unable to cope with the tensions imposed upon them.

To conclude, deep care for transformative teaching is core to universities continuing to provide students with learning experiences that prepare them fully for a complex and fast paced world full of pressing concerns and competing value positions. Policy makers, institutions and individual academics need to engage in careful reflexive consideration of the discourses, narratives and cultural tools which enable and constrain transformative teaching.

### **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank Catherine Bovill and Daphne Loads for their constructive and helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper. I am also very grateful to the anonymous reviewers whose comments supported me to deepen the critical analysis in this paper. I would like to thank the Institute for Academic Development at the University of Edinburgh for funding this research. Particular

thanks go to my research participants for generously sharing their time to make this study possible.

### **Declaration of interest statement**

No conflicts of interest were identified by the author.

### **References**

Anderson, C. and V. McCune. 2013. "Facing an Uncertain Future: Curricula of Dualities." *Curriculum Journal* 24(1): 153-168.

Archer, M. 2000. *Being Human: The Problem of Agency*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Archer, L. 2008. "The New Neoliberal Subjects? Young/er Academics' Constructions of Professional Identity." *Journal of Education Policy* 23(3): 265-285.

Arvaja, M. 2016. "Building Teacher Identity through the Process of Positioning." *Teaching and Teacher Education* 59: 392-402.

Arvaja, M. 2018. Tensions and striving for coherence in an

academic's professional identity work, *Teaching in Higher Education* 23(3): 291-306.

Ball, S. 2003. "The Teacher's Soul and the Terrors of Performativity." *Journal of Education Policy* 18(2): 215-228.

Barnett, R. 2007. *A Will to Learn: Being a Student in an Age of Uncertainty*. Maidenhead: Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press.

Barnett, R. and C. Guzmán-Valenzuela. 2017. "Sighting Horizons of Teaching in Higher Education." *Higher Education* 73: 113-126.

Beauchamp, C. and L. Thomas. 2009. "Understanding Teacher Identity: An Overview of Issues in the Literature and Implications for Teacher Education." *Cambridge Journal of Education* 39(2): 175-189.

Biesta, G. Priestley, M. and Robinson, S. 2015. "The Role of Beliefs in Teacher Agency." *Teachers and Teaching* 21(6): 624-640.

Boyd, P. and C. Smith. 2016. "The Contemporary Academic: Orientation Towards Research Work and Researcher Identity of Higher Education Lecturers in the Health Professions." *Studies in Higher Education* 41(4): 678-695.



Brew, A. 2003. "Teaching and Research: New Relationships and their Implications for Inquiry-based Teaching and Learning in Higher Education." *Higher Education Research & Development* 22(1): 3-18.

Broucker, B., K. De Wit, and J. Verhoeven. 2018. "Higher Education for Public Value: Taking the Debate Beyond New Public Management." *Higher Education Research & Development* 37(2): 227-240,

Churchman, D. and S. King. 2009. "Academic Practice in Transition: Hidden Stories of Academic Identities." *Teaching in Higher Education* 14(5): 507-516.

Clegg, S. 2008. "Academic Identities Under Threat?" *British Educational Research Journal* 34(3): 329-345.

Cook-Sather, A., C. Bovill and P. Felten. 2014. *Engaging Students as Partners in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education: A Guide for Faculty*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

Curwood, J. 2014. "Between Continuity and Change: Identities and Narratives Within Teacher Professional Development." *Teaching Education* 25(2): 156-183.

Di Napoli, R. and R. Barnett, eds. 2008. *Changing Identities in Higher Education: Voicing Perspectives*. Oxon: Routledge.

Fitzmaurice, M. 2013. "Constructing Professional Identity as a New Academic: A Moral Endeavour." *Studies in Higher Education* 38(4): 613-622.

Grealy, L. and Laurie, T. 2017. "Higher degree research by numbers: beyond the critiques of neo-liberalism." *Higher Education Research & Development* 36(3): 458-471.

Gunn, A. 2018. "Metrics and Methodologies for Measuring Teaching Quality in Higher Education: Developing the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF)." *Educational Review* 70(2): 129-148.

Harris, S. 2005. "Rethinking academic identities in neo-liberal times." *Teaching in Higher Education* 10(4): 421-433.

Hermans, H. (2003). "The Construction and Reconstruction of a Dialogical Self". *Journal of Constructivist Psychology* 16(2), 89-130.

Hockings, C., S. Cooke, H. Yamashita, S. McGinty and M. Bowl. 2009. "'I'm Neither Entertaining Nor Charismatic ...' Negotiating University Teacher Identity Within Diverse Student Groups." *Teaching in Higher Education* 14(5): 483-494.

Jawitz, J. 2009. "Academic Identities and Communities of Practice in a Professional Discipline." *Teaching in Higher Education* 14 (3): 241-251.

- Kreber, C., M. Klampfleitner, V. McCune, M. Knottenbelt and S. Bayne. 2007. "What do you Mean by "Authentic"? A Comparative Review of the Literature on Conceptions of Authenticity in Teaching." *Adult Education Quarterly* 58(1): 22-43.
- Knight, P., J. Tait and M. Yorke. 2006. "The Professional Learning of Teachers in Higher Education." *Studies in Higher Education* 31(3): 319-339.
- Lasky, S. 2005. "A sociocultural approach to understanding teacher identity, agency and professional vulnerability in a context of secondary school reform." *Teaching and Teacher Education* 21: 899-916.
- Leibowitz, B., S. van Schalkwyk, J. Ruiters, J. Farmer, and H. Adendorff. 2012. "'It's Been a Wonderful Life'": Accounts of the Interplay Between Structure and Agency by "Good" University Teachers." *Higher Education* 63: 353-365.
- Loads, D. and B. Collins. 2016. "Recognising Ourselves and Each Other in Professional Recognition" in: J. Smith, J. Rattray, T. Peseta and D. Loads, eds. *Identity Work in the Contemporary University: Exploring an Uneasy Profession*. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.
- Marginson, S. 2009. "The Limits of Market Reform in Higher Education." In Simon Marginson Hiroshima University RIHE 17 August 2009. Hiroshima: Research Institute for Higher Education (RIHE), Hiroshima University.

McArthur, J. 2016. "Assessment for Social Justice: The Role of Assessment in Achieving Social Justice." *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education* 41(7): 967-981.

McCune, V. 2018. "Experienced Academics' Pedagogical Development in Higher Education: Time, Technologies, and Conversations." *Oxford Review of Education* 44(3): 307-321.

MacDonald-Vemic, A. and Portelli, J. 2018. "Performance power: the impact of neoliberalism on social justice educators' ways of speaking about their educational practice." *Critical Studies in Education* DOI: 10.1080/17508487.2018.1428642

McInnis, C. 2010. "Traditions of Academic Professionalism and Shifting Identities" in G. Gordon & C. Whitechurch, eds. *Academic and Professional Identities in Higher Education: The Challenges of a Diversifying Workforce*. London: Routledge.

McNaughton, S. and J. Billot. 2016. "Negotiating Academic Teacher Identity Shifts During Higher Education Contextual Change." *Teaching in Higher Education* 21(6): 644-658.

Olsen, M. 2016. "Neoliberal Competition in Higher Education Today: Research, Accountability and Impact." *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 37(1): 129-148.

Peseta, T., G. Kligyte, J. McLean, and J. Smith. 2016. "On the Conduct of Concern: Exploring how University Teachers Recognise, Engage in, and Perform 'Identity' Practices within Academic Workgroups" in J. Smith, J. Rattray, T. Peseta and D. Loads eds. *Identity Work in the Contemporary University: Exploring an Uneasy Profession*. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.

Riessman, C. 2008. *Narrative Methods for the Human Sciences*. London: Sage.

Robertson, J. 2007. "Beyond the 'Research/Teaching Nexus': Exploring the Complexity of Academic Experience." *Studies in Higher Education* 32(5): 541-556.

Robertson, J. and Bond, C. 2005. "The Research/Teaching Relation: A View from the 'Edge'." *Higher Education* 50: 509-535.

Rowlands, J. and Rawolle, S. (2013) "Neoliberalism is not a theory of everything: a Bourdieuan analysis of *illusio* in educational research." *Critical Studies in Education* 54:3: 260-272

Ryan, M. and Carmichael, M-A. 2016. "Shaping reflexive professional identities across an undergraduate degree programme: a longitudinal case study." *Teaching in Higher Education* 21(2): 151-165.

Sadler, D. R. 2009. "Indeterminacy in the Use of Preset Criteria for Assessment and Grading." *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education* 34(2): 159 -179.

Sfard, A. and A. Prusak. 2005. "Telling Identities: In Search of an Analytic Tool for Investigating Learning as a Culturally Shaped Activity." *Educational Researcher* 34(4): 14-22.

Skelton, A. 2012. "Teacher Identities in a Research-Led Institution: In the Ascendancy or on the Retreat?" *British Educational Research Journal* 38(1): 23-39.

Skelton, A. 2013. "Positively Transformational or Poisoned Chalice? The Impact of a Course on Higher Education Teaching at a Research-Intensive Institution." *Teaching in Higher Education* 18(8): 908-919.

Smith, J. 2017. Target-setting, early-career academic identities and the measurement culture of UK higher education, *Higher Education Research & Development* 36 (3), 597-611.

- Sutton, P. 2015. "A Paradoxical Academic Identity: Fate, Utopia and Critical Hope." *Teaching in Higher Education* 20(1): 37-47.
- Taylor, P. 2008. "Being an Academic Today" in Barnett, R. and R. Di Napoli, eds. *Changing Identities in Higher Education: Voicing Perspectives*. Oxon: Routledge, pp. 27-39.
- Tomlinson, M. 2017. "Student Perceptions of Themselves as 'Consumers' of Higher Education." *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 38(4): 450-467.
- Van Lankveld, T., J. Schoonenboom, M. Volman, G. Croiset and J. Beishuizen. 2017. "Developing a Teacher Identity in the University Context: A Systematic Review of the Literature." *Higher Education Research & Development* 36(2): 325-342.
- Warren, S. 2017. "Struggling for Visibility in Higher Education: Caught Between Neoliberalism 'Out There' and 'In Here' – An Autoethnographic Account." *Journal of Education Policy* 32(2): 127-140.
- Watson, C. 2006. "Narratives of Practice and the Construction of Identity in Teaching." *Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice* 12(5): 509-526.
- Wertsch, J. V. 1991. *Voices of the Mind: A Sociocultural Approach to Mediated Action*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.





**Table 1: Participants in the study**

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Subject area</b>
1	clinical
2	humanities
3	STEM
4	humanities
5	STEM
6	clinical
7	clinical
8	STEM
9	clinical
10	social sciences
11	STEM
12	social sciences