

Seeking balance: An exploration of the affective dimension of academic practice

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Numerous studies have evidenced the increasing stress and workload of academics as they try to meet the escalating performativity measures in teaching, research and service delivery. The neoliberal managerialistic talk of ‘outcome measures’, ‘research targets’ ‘accountability’ and ‘service delivery’ pervading the higher education discourse excludes many of the opportunities for open dialogue on the meaning and moral purpose of teaching and research. In this environment academics are often left feeling increasingly frustrated, alienated and disillusioned. This paper presents the findings of a phenomenological study investigating the lived experience of ten academics teaching in a research-intensive university and their struggle to achieve a balance between the oftentimes competing demands of their role. It examines the ways these academics made sense of the affective dimensions of their teaching role and explores some of the common dialectical tensions experienced in their day to day activities. Key tensions identified through thematic analysis related to; balancing the demands of teaching and research, lecturer- student relationships, the increasing role of technology and online learning, changing student cohorts and expectations, and the wider role of the university in industry and society. We argue that by exploring the affective core of these tensions a greater understanding of the value conflicts facing academics in the current higher education environment can be developed and used to support a deeper engagement with the place and value of teaching in higher education. Rather than getting caught up in the hype on performativity and outcome measures we propose that by re-focussing on the affective domain academics can regain a sense of purpose and meaning in their academic practice.