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Academic anomie: implications of the 'great resignation' for leadership in post-COVID higher education

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Abstract

The experience of the COVID-19 pandemic has ignited a near universal rethink of what is tolerable or desirable in work settings. In higher education—where discontent has been exacerbated by the pandemic—the potential for a 'great resignation' is a very real threat. The long-term impact of a crisis management approach in universities has led to a state of 'pandemia', according to Watermeyer et al., (British Journal of Sociology of Education 42:651-666, 2021b), whereby academics feel alienated and subjected to a 'toxic' work environment that lacks shared purpose and values. This article draws on Durkheim's notion of 'anomie' to explore what leads academics to leave the sector and to consider how the outward migration of staff could be addressed through changes to leadership and management practice. Evidence is taken from an online survey distributed in the United Kingdom (UK), which collected demographic information of $n = 167$ academics and open-text responses to a question which asked respondents to provide their reasons for quitting higher education. Four key themes emerge which elucidate a trajectory of academic anomie: (i) declining quality of academic management, (ii) the pandemic as a disruptive awakening, (iii) the erosion of values and meaning and (iv) a sense of being 'trapped' within academia. Potential resolutions are suggested in respect of what respondents identify as the root cause of staff attrition—toxic management culture. Collective and inclusive governance and commitment from academics at all career stages to the leadership of groups, departments, institutions and the wider higher education sector are advocated as antidotes to academic anomie.

Keywords Academic work · Workforce attrition · Great resignation · Workplace discontent · University leadership · Post-COVID university

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to workers around the world and across all sectors leaving their jobs on a monumental scale. Mourning the millions of lives lost; emergency forced adaption to, and now prolonged use of digitally facilitated and remote forms of working; and immense disruption to the routinisation of everyday working life has provoked a universal 'rethink' (Krugman, 2021) of individual priorities and revaluation of what is tolerable and what is not in work settings. Such reckoning has sparked a crisis of

meaning and dissatisfaction amongst millions of workers across all sectors, with warning of a 'great resignation' (Hill & Jones, 2021) that will further accentuate critical staff shortages. At root, this is a historical problem of employee disengagement which, further aggravated by the pandemic, has led to an overspill of discontent (Gandhi & Robison, 2021). 'Toxic' work culture has been identified as the number one factor incentivising job resignation (Sull et al., 2022a, b) which, alongside a cost-of-living crisis, has in apex neoliberal economies like the United Kingdom (UK) sparked a wave of industrial action across job sectors including health, transport, the fire service and education.

In March 2022, the University and College Union (UCU)—which represents over 120,000 academics and support staff across UK higher education—published findings from a survey of approximately 7000 of its members revealing 'a workforce in crisis'. The survey found that 'two-thirds of respondents said they were likely or very likely to leave the university sector within the next five years because of pensions, pay and working conditions' (UCU, 2022: 3). The survey also found that 'four in five (81%) of the youngest staff, aged between 18 and 29, are considering leaving higher education in the next five years due to lack of progress on pay and conditions' (ibid). Other recent attitudinal surveys of university staff, such as the Times Higher Education's Global Work-life Balance survey, report similarly high projections of staff attrition related to 'excessive workloads'—in this instance 'driven by the blurred boundaries between home and work life' (Williams, 2022b).

No matter wealth or paucity of academic capital, academics at every stage of their career are vulnerable to the cavalcade of neoliberal logic that courses through universities (*cf*. Robson, 2022). Manifestations of 'precarity' linked to the intersection of racialised (Arday, 2018), social (Crew, 2019), gendered (Macfarlane & Burg, 2019; Morley & Crossouard, 2016) and other iterations of inequality have become increasingly prominent during the pandemic (*cf*. Blell et al., 2022; Minello et al., 2021). The inaction of universities on many of these fronts is blamed for exacerbating the subaltern identity of minority communities (Arday & Mirza, 2018) and the perpetuation of academia's homogeneity which makes it unattractive and/or inaccessible to a wider talent demographic.

In studies of the impact of COVID-19 on university communities, a decline has been noted in academics' health and well-being due to severe work intensification and ensuing work/life disequilibrium (Watermeyer et al., 2021a). There have also been reports of how a neoliberal ideology of self-responsibilisation (*cf*. McLeod, 2017) has normalised systemic neglect and the absence of an ethics of care within universities and in turn concealed the prevalence of work exploitation (Watermeyer et al., 2022b). The 'do it all' demands of contemporary academia (Ross, 2022) have been exacerbated by the pandemic and allowed academics to slide too easily towards mental and physical burnout. Meanwhile, much of the labour-intensive invisible service (peer-reviewing, mentoring, public engagement, etc.) that academics 'volunteer' themselves for, and which sustains the research ecosystem, remain undeclared, undefined and overlooked by universities, who nonetheless partake of the prestige spoils such service provides (*cf*. Jimenez et al., 2019; Boodts & Jongepier, 2021; Yarrow & Johnston, 2022).

In the immediate context, UK universities are embroiled within a funding crisis, particularly those in England where a government cap on fees has caused inflationary surges to substantially erode the real value of student fees (Adams, 2023) as the principal stream of institutional income and led to projections of as much as £17billion worth of revenue depreciation over the next 4 years (Hanna, 2024). Recent UK government moves directed at restricted inward migration have also lessened universities' ability to accommodate a domestic fee shortfall by making international student recruitment far harder. Concurrently, efforts to fix a 'broken system' are immobilised by university funding being 'politically

unpalatable' Foster et al., 2023). Thus, we find deteriorating conditions, receding opportunities for sustainable academic work and strong potential of sector contraction.

However, despite ample reasons for staff (both current and prospective) abandoning aspirations for a career in academia, its departure may be neither straightforward nor guaranteed. Leaving academia may be much more than just leaving a *job*—its emotional investment and affective depth (*cf*. Watermeyer et al., 2022a) merge personal and professional identities to the extent that separation can be deeply traumatic. The vocational nature of academia (Barcan, 2019) also serves as a source of dissuasion for those contemplating its exit. Thus, for some, leaving academia will be a process of bereavement and recovery from lost and/or dismembered identity that demands a reimagining and reconstruction of the self. Leaving academia may be thus experienced as much as an ontological bereavement as personal sacrifice. No wonder then that for many, the decision to leave academia is so fraught and for others still unfollowed; easier to entertain a denial of self than its total abandonment.

Research aims and conceptual framing

In this article, we attempt to understand what drives people to leave their jobs in academia and the lessons this presents for (re)investing in university leadership as a means of redress. Based on a survey of individuals who have resigned from their positions in UK higher education since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, our analysis seeks to unpick the conditions that have led them past a point of no return, and how a renegotiation of leadership might arrest the potential of further career casualties. Our discussion is informed by the concept of 'anomie' (Durkheim, 1897; Merton, 1957)—a state of disconnection from dominant and previously accepted norms and values as a consequence of significant social, economic and/or political upheaval. Adapting Durkheim and Merton's formalisations, we propose 'anomie' as the calcification of neoliberal goals—a consequence of the macro-structural destabilisations of the pandemic and inter-related events such as a higher education funding crisis and the repercussions of Brexit—which have intensified the enervation and displacement of non-monetaristic and/or non-marketized values and (idealised) social norms within UK universities. The valorisation of individualistic subjectivity within academia has concurrently engendered decoupling from collective identity, 'normlessness', alienation and precarity. Drawing on Braxton (1993: 216), we propose that the crossing of what we term an *anomic threshold* constitutes the apotheosis of 'alienation from the reward system' and therefore a potentially irresolvable identity rupture which consequently provides the provocation not for crime as per the Mertonian example, but exodus. Anomie, in this sense, articulates the denouement of a long-lasting paradigmatic conflict and the cessation of its tolerance which manifests as retreatism.

In this work, the pandemic is conceived as a 'trigger event' sparking the collapse of academics' accommodation of work-based inequity and inclemency that has hitherto sustained institutional cohesion. Here, we reference what are frequently portrayed as the Kafkaesque effects of academia's bureaucratisation (*cf*. Coccia, 2009) which Durkheim (1984: 307) would recognise as symptomatic of the division of labour in contemporary society, the nihilistic conclusion of the 'lifeless cog'. The anomic state associated with academia's 'great resignation', however, contrasts with what has been identified as the recent reenergising of collegialism within universities (*cf*. Hardman et al., 2022; McGaughey et al., 2022), though this may be claimed as no more than an ephemeral last-ditch phase of crisis resilience, less anomic cure. Ultimately, those who have left academia have crossed not

only the Rubicon but an anomic threshold, their exodus a refutation of the efficacy of resilience. Nevertheless, in leaving their academic roles and identities behind, they contrive solidarity through the synthesis of shared trauma (abundant in social media assemblages such as #leavingacademia and TheProfessorIsOut) which both legitimises their egression and highlights the urgent need for academia's restitution.

Through our survey findings, we propose the reparative contribution of academic leadership as a riposte and way back from academic anomie and its potential to revive community cohesion and purpose. Our framing notes the tendency for leadership theory and practice to over-emphasise the agency of individual leaders and, in so doing, diminish recognition of the potential power and influence of other actors, both within and beyond the organisation (Tomkins, 2020; Tourish, 2014). In the professionalisation of higher education, processes of academic management and leadership have often become conflated and responsibility for both attributed to 'managers' and/or 'leaders' who hold senior positions in the hierarchy (*c.f.* Waring, 2017). Accordingly, in this study, we view leadership as widely distributed across, and beyond, higher education institutions (Jones et al., 2014). We acknowledge that formal leaders/managers may have substantial influence by virtue of their position within the hierarchy—their access to/control of resources and their ability to focus attention on particular priorities and values—yet note that there may be significant limits to their ability to exert power over others in light of external forces and the negotiated nature of leadership and followership in higher education (Lumby, 2019).

The work of Haslam et al. (2020), amongst others, highlights the importance of a shared 'social identity' in eliciting followership behaviours. Where a 'leader' (formally appointed or not) fails to represent a meaningful sense of shared identity and purpose in the eyes of those they seek to lead, they are unlikely to garner much beyond grudging compliance (Reicher et al., 2005). Together, these perspectives offer insight into the social construction of 'leadership' in higher education and its potential reconfiguration in alignment with an ethic of care (*cf*. Corbera et al., 2020).

Methodology

Data were collected via an online survey, which was distributed in September 2022 and kept open for 1 month. This method allowed recruitment of many distinct respondents, while collecting rich information about respondents' perceptions and experiences. It also enabled greater anonymity than traditional qualitative research tools where the identity of those completing the survey was undisclosed to the research team (Erickson & Kaplan, 2000). Ensuring that participants felt comfortable sharing their experiences anonymously was important in mitigating the potential influence of response bias and minimising apprehension in disclosing personal insights. As per all responsible social science research, the research was subjected to ethical scrutiny and received formal institutional ethical approval.

The target population for the survey was 'individuals who have left academic or professional services posts in a UK university since January 2020 or are thinking of leaving academic or professional services posts'. Demographic questions about the respondent's current or previous role and details of their institution determined whether respondents met this criterion. Those who did not were taken to the end of the survey and thanked for their time. Further demographic questions about respondents' gender, age, academic discipline

and years working in the sector were also included. This article focuses on the responses from academics who have left academia, hence responses to the open-text question: '*What were your reasons for leaving UK higher education?*'.

The survey was distributed via professional mailing lists, social media and other online platforms, and with the assistance of higher education trade unions. This convenience sampling method was not designed nor intended to capture a representative sample; rather, data were sought to illuminate general patterns and trends characterising the experiences of the target participant group. Relatedly, we offer no frequency analysis of thematic trends observed within respondents' accounts.

A total of $n=781$ people responded to the survey. Of those, $n=167$ were academics *who had left* academic employment since January 2020. This was determined through responses to the question '*Have you left a job in a UK university since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic?*'. Data from those who are considering leaving are not included within this paper. Tran et al. (2016) argue that in open-ended survey questions, > 150 participants are needed for data saturation. Our sample of academics who have left university surpasses this criterion.

Descriptive statistics were employed to define overall trends in the demographics of academics who had left a role in UK HE since January 2020. While it is beyond the scope of this article—and indeed, sample size and composition—to provide reliable inferences from respondent profiles, we recognise the intersectional significance of social determinants of *inter alia* gender and health to the production of unequal experiences of academic life (*cf.* Dubois-Shaik & Fusulier, 2017; Eileen & Canavan, 2020; Loveday, 2018; Morrish, 2019; Rosa & Clavero, 2021) and for explaining a potential spectrum of employee disenchantment amongst academics.

Appendix 1 shows that our sample of leavers featured a slight gender bias with 60% of respondents identifying as female while 32% of respondents were aged between 36 and 45. Seventeen percent of respondents stated having a mental health condition and 18% a physical health condition. Fifty-four percent of respondents stated working in a pre-1992 institution. Most respondents had worked at the level of 'Associate Professor' (37%) with 80% working full time and 60% having been employed on an open-ended contract. Thirty-nine percent of respondents were now either self-employed or employed in another sector; 15% were now employed in a non-UK university; 17% were unemployed; 12% had retired. The majority of respondents (54%) stated being without caring responsibilities. Open-ended responses to the target question were analysed following a process of iterative thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2021). Responses were read and inductively coded by an initial researcher before being validated by the wider research team.

Findings

Four main themes were identified within the accounts of why academics had left UK higher education since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, as follows.

Declining quality of academic management

The complaint of many respondents about what is wrong in academia relates to perceived deficiencies of management, or more specifically a perception of a proliferation of poor management contributing to a decline in work culture. Respondents like RS1 speak of

managerial 'amateurism' in universities—especially prominent over the course of the preceding 5 years, which include within the UK a period of historical industrial action and the events of the COVID-19 pandemic:

I have worked in HE for nearly 20 years, the last 5 years have been appalling. This is partly down to the general decline of HE in the UK and partly down to total amateurs being in charge at my institution . . . There are some extremely toxic individuals in the university who are fully supported by other toxic management staff. (RS1 - Male, former Senior Lecturer, post-1992 institution)

We also find reports of nepotism and a tendency for 'toxic managers' to move between institutions, leaving behind a trail of devastation:

All too often dangerous managers simply skip from one university to the next causing havoc wherever they go. (RS2 - Male, former Senior Lecturer, pre-1992 institution)

A general decline is also reported of a low threshold of competency in academic management that constitutes both 'failed' academics with limited management expertise and 'failed' managers with little understanding of (or respect for) higher education. Such a culture of managerial impunity led one of our respondents to reflect on universities being:

… like the Wild West where the most pushy and privileged people get to progress at the expense of others' careers, happiness and lives. (RS4 - Female, former postdoctoral researcher, post-1992 university)

Here, we find echoed reflections of the effects of UK higher education's aggressive neoliberalisation and how practices of academic capitalism (incentivised at every level of organisational culture) are argued to have produced a culture of self-responsibilisation, rampant individualism and dissolution of commitment to the common good or shared values.

COVID-19: a disruptive awakening

The experience of institutional life during the COVID-19 pandemic is portrayed by our cohort of 'leavers' as triggering a violent awakening and urge to confront a myriad of systemic abuses they have historically tolerated and normalised:

COVID-19 has probably awoken many people who thought they were happy or just happy to endure the nonsense. HE is broken. (RS5 - Male, former Senior Lecturer, post-1992 institution)

Some viewed the pandemic as a moment of reckoning, saving themselves from themselves:

We're like the frog in boiling water. Fortunately, for some of us, COVID-19 has been the rude awakening we needed. Better jump ship than be boiled alive… (RS6 - Female, former Senior Lecturer, pre-1992 institution)

Others, such as RS7, spoke of the pandemic as having escalated a neglect of care in universities and describe how *since* the pandemic:

There is a lot more ruthlessness, lack of collegiality and general uncaringness… (both from senior managers and also colleagues) despite high levels of rhetoric about wellbeing of staff within academia. (RS7 – Female, former Professor, post-1992 institution)

There is also present within these accounts an admission of fault and acceptance of blame, that the routinisation of unethical work practices committed upon and expected of academics are theirs to own and a consequence of their submission to, and even, valorisation of pernicious workplace practices:

Exceptional pressure to work excessive hours. Dreadful senior leaders, unethical practices. Students and research participants given scant regard. Academic collusion that this toxic environment is 'academia'. (RS8 – Female, former Post-Doctoral Fellow, pre-1992 institution)

However, while some of our respondents acknowledged the connivance of academics within their own alleged exploitation, others spoke of forced compliance and academics tolerating adverse work conditions for fear of otherwise losing their jobs:

Many are too afraid to speak out about the daily abuses and reality of working in UK HE for fear that they'll be next for the restructuring chop. (RS9 – Female, former Senior Lecturer, post-1992 institution)

Notwithstanding, UK academia is unmistakably presented by our survey respondents as a brutal work regime; a contemporary serfdom, where productive output is prioritised well and above any interest or concern in staff welfare:

Had I stayed longer I would have put my health at further risk. I was forced to work >70h per week during term times for more than 4 years. People knew but didn't care as long as the job was done. And if it was not done, they would just push harder until you did it. I felt like a slave. (RS10 – Female, former teaching fellow, pre-1992 institution)

Unsurprisingly, our respondents considered that the:

… people running UK universities seem to think good management is like running a slave ship. (RS11 – Female, former post-doctoral fellow, post-1992 institution)

Yet our respondents apportioned blame—and attributed their leaving academia—not exclusively to the prevalence of exploitative managers within universities (as if they constituted some naturally occurring phenomenon). Instead, they acknowledged the external political context in which higher education sits and the aggression of the incumbent (right wing and populist) UK government ideological approach towards universities compelling management practices that focus indiscriminately on the delivery of performance outcomes no matter their legitimacy or quality of impact:

UK HE is utterly broken with an intrinsically corrupt poorly led business model driven by pseudo-metrics, worsening mediocrity of both academics and students as a consequence, all caused in great part by systematic attacks from multiple governments of late, and with Brexit obviously making it all much worse. (RS12 – Male, former Professor, post-1992 institution)

UK Government hostility to universities—its weddedness to market determinism and privileging of fiscal rationalisation—was accordingly viewed by some like RS13 as the overwhelming source of universities' existential crisis, from which percolates lamentations of gratuitous loss and profligacy. Here, government is decried for academia's lost purpose, lost identity and lost ability to articulate or purpose its contribution in ways other than economic:

I constantly feel like we're fighting too many pointless fronts. Why do we need to defend the notion that education is good for society? Why do we need to defend

the value of the arts and humanities? All of the energy we spend on such pointless fights (and by pointless I mean that these are 'debates' that have been engineered by the government and right-wing media; these questions never needed to be asked) could be directed to tackling the climate crisis or other urgent challenges. (RS13- Female, former teaching fellow, pre-1992 institution)

The erosion of values and meaning

Resolution of the quotidian injustices featured in our respondents' accounts appears non-forthcoming, even dashed. Evidence of motivation to make good on a bad situation is inhibited by a pervasive sense that academia is a lost cause, and resignation to the inevitability and irreversibility of its capitulation. An inability to reverse a bad situation is also explained by claims of university managers being unwilling to hear or act upon the concerns of academics seemingly brave enough to speak up, and/or marginalising them for so doing:

I left the academic role because of bullying and because I had no quality of life outside of work. I had been marginalised for complaining about bullying. (RS15 – Female, former lecturer, post-1992 institution)

Others amongst our respondents described academia's manifold inhospitalities wearing down their professional resilience and that despite '*loving*' and '*taking pride*' in their work they were forced to leave academia for their own wellbeing and that of their families—the latter justification intimating the transmissibility of academia's toxic effects:

I loved my job and am proud of what I achieved. However, I left for the sake of my health and my family. I could no longer tolerate being harassed, bullied, gaslighted, and discriminated against. (RS16 – Female, former post-doctoral fellow, pre-1992 institution)

Seniority of academic position—a proxy for resilience accumulated by experience and 'thickness of hide'—appears inadequate defence against the debilitations of contemporary academic work culture and its impact in cutting careers short:

I would say that, despite being 'successful' in reaching a fairly senior position, my full-time working life was reduced by a decade by my experiences of marginalisation, racism and lack of support in HE. Leaving HE has been one of the best, happiest things I've done. (RS14 – Male, former Professor, post-1992 institution)

While some like RS14 described their sense of relief of having a way out from academia, others reflected on the lack of incentive to remain:

A voluntary redundancy scheme came up and it felt like a huge relief to be able to walk away. My projected pension was such that there appeared to be no benefit to working longer - it was going to be poor, less than half what my husband will get (from industry), whether or not I worked another 10 years. There was no reason to stay. (RS17 – Female, former Professor, pre-1992 institution)

Several respondents noted the resultant implications for aspiring academics:

Creativity has been beaten out of universities… I am not sure the best and brightest choose a career in universities. (RS19 Female, former Senior Lecturer, post-1992 institution)

You can arguably contribute better to the knowledge economy outside the university environment! (RS20 – Male, former Graduate Teaching Assistant, pre-1992 institution)

Without a turnover of talent, respondents warned that:

In 5-10 years' time there will be no experience left, as the 'older' academics retire while the younger ones are not staying in the sector. (RS23 - Female, former Senior Lecturer, post-1992 institution)

The absence of succession is thus explained as academia's epitaph, embellished with stark warnings of the wider implications of its collapse. Here, we find respondents, like RS24, asserting the oft-maligned *utility* value of academia to explain how the strain of work intensification, work precarisation and low pay would ultimately undermine the viability of the sector:

The last 10 years of low pay, ever increasing workload, bullying management styles and job and pension insecurity is going to kill the golden goose of UK academia upon which so much of the country's future prosperity depends. (RS24 – Male, former Senior Lecturer, pre-1992 institution)

'Trapped' within academia

While our survey respondents are equipped with an exit strategy, they acknowledge those without who are trapped within their roles. Some like RS26 rationalised this sense of enclosure on the basis of academia's vocational nature:

Academia is a vocation and largely tied to a sense of identity for many. This is I think largely what makes it hard to leave; people become institutionalised and can't imagine another life. (RS26 – Female, former Post-Doctoral Fellow, pre-1992 institution)

Job mobility is not however a consideration exclusive to older academics but those at the earliest stage of considering an academic career. Such sentiment was surfaced by respondent RS27 who explained their reticence in recommending an academic career based for one, on the deprivations of work culture and remuneration, yet also a need to follow the labour:

I would never recommend academia to postdocs or PhD students because it's just not worth it: horrible work culture, low pay, constant moving for postdocs and other fixed term contracts until you find somewhere (which you may never do) which causes upheaval in every aspect of your life. The constant moving means you cannot settle anywhere and build a supportive network of friends because - seriously, why bother when you're moving in a year or two? (RS27 – Female, former Senior Lecturer, pre-1992, mathematical sciences)

A failure to innovate and promote positive change is a key dimension of our survey respondents' complaint and factor motivating their exit.

Discussion

Cumulatively, these findings provide support for wider critiques of university management and the damaging after-effects and legacy of 'pandemia' within apex neoliberal higher education systems like the UK as conspicuous sites of academic anomie. They

also intimate that hopes for a post-pandemic 'great reset' (Rosowsky, 2022) are fading, alongside motivation and morale within the sector.

In November 2022, members of the University and College Union (UCU) voted unanimously for industrial action on pay and work conditions, as well as continuing a long-standing dispute over pensions. In the absence of a negotiated settlement, academics from 150 UK universities went on strike in February and March 2023, followed by a of marking and assessment boycott from April to September. Central to the 'UCU Rising' campaign was the view that 'while our members have seen their pay cut by 25% since 2009, university vice-chancellors and senior management have been collecting six-figure salaries' (UCU, 2023). From UCU's perspective, and the 70,000 staff who voted for strike action, what's wrong in academia is primarily the consequence of callous and avaricious university leaders.

While the claim that vice chancellors are paid unjustifiably large sums in comparison to their staff may be effective in mobilising a sense of injustice it fails to address the substantive problems outlined by our survey respondents around the paucity of academic management, the stresses and strains of the COVID pandemic, an erosion of values and meaning and the sense that academics may become 'trapped' in toxic work environments. The villainization of senior leaders, while understandable if predictable, places further strain on already fractured relationships within institutional communities. More serious perhaps are the long-term effects of disincentivising those who might challenge the status quo by assenting to formal leadership positions. So too, a singular obsession on the perceived flaws of university leaders obfuscates the (sleight of) hand of external political forces in buttressing higher education's neoliberalisation and encouraging academics' passage across an anomic threshold.

While the success of political campaigning may be attributed to the immediacy and efficiency of its message (e.g. *Get Brexit Done* or *Make America Great Again*), such simplicity ignores the complexity, contradictions and contextual factors that lie behind the appeals exhorted, leaving little space for them to be debated and addressed. The danger thus is that attempts to hold power to account and efforts for restorative justice become trivialised and mired within a blame game that achieves little beyond preservation of the status quo and endurance of simplistic dichotomies which harden cultural dissonance within universities and an impasse which some suggest no form of protest will remedy (Williams, 2022a). The doubling down of institutional leaders and government in response to the strike action of 2023 is a case in point, which may be seen to have contributed further injury to academic working lives and escalated precarity for marginalised individuals. Despite an eventual pay offer that failed to match the rate of inflation, in November 2023, UCU failed to garner sufficient turnout (50%) to continue industrial action into another academic year.

As pertains to our survey respondents, it may be that the perceived ineffectiveness of repeated bouts of industrial action in affecting any meaningful systemic change has saturated feelings of hopelessness and sealed our respondents' decision to leave. The concept of anomie, introduced earlier, helps to explain the grievances of alienation and hopelessness pervasive to our respondents' accounts and the inevitability of their retreatism with the relentless abrasion of humanistic norms and values. It also, however, invites a bolder conversation that might vault pathos and a discourse of blame by committing to a standard and practice of 'academic leadership' as a whole-community endeavour (Bolden et al., 2014). While retreat is an understandable response to the experiences outlined in this study, it is more likely to extend power differentials and inequalities rather than resolve them.

Drawing on ideas outlined earlier, a social identity approach to leadership (Haslam et al., 2020) highlights the need for leaders to be perceived as credible and legitimate representatives of the communities they seek to lead. Within dual identity or hybrid organisations such as universities that incorporate competing values systems (de Boer & Goedegebuure, 2009; Winter & Bolden, 2020), this is particularly difficult to accomplish, especially in times of crisis (Albert & Whetten, 2004) where democratic forms of governance are susceptible to subjugation by autocratic impulses and the potential of anomie is most acute. Yet, if anomie speaks of alienation, detachment and meaninglessness, then its antithesis involves developing a sense of engagement, attachment and shared purpose. There is a need, therefore, when thinking about a crisis of leadership, to pay more attention to the importance of active and engaged followership as a counterpoint to individual and organisational leadership (*c.f.* Chaleff, 2009, Shamir, 2007).

In his analysis of 'the caring leader', Gabriel (2015) highlights the inherently polarising effects of such concepts—where the leader is seen as *either* omnipotent *or* weak, legitimate *or* an impostor, caring *or* selfish and accessible *or* invisible. Such determinations, he suggests, arise not from the innate qualities of leaders themselves but from how followers perceive them in relation to fundamental (fantastical) archetypes. Tomkins and Simpson (2015) provide further analysis of how an ethic of care is presented and deployed within leadership theory and practice. Instead of using the leader/follower binary, however, they invoke a more collective understanding of 'caring leadership', which is based on an organising of self rather than others. In contrast to the prevailing tendency to emphasise an *excess* of agency on behalf of individual leaders, they argue that attention should be (re)directed to a *deficit* of agency more broadly across groups and organisations. This resonates with distributed, shared and collective notions of leadership, whereby leadership is conceived as a relational process that spans the entire organisation and beyond (Jones et al., 2017; Kezar & Holcombe, 2017; Ospina et al., 2020).

Notwithstanding these points, there is a need to address what our survey respondents present as the prevalence of poor human management, limited employee engagement and lack of compassionate leadership in universities so as to detoxify academia and neutralise the threat of anomie. Our survey respondents are unambiguous in apportioning blame for their decision to leave academia to a culture of toxic management under which bullying, harassment, gaslighting and other such injurious behaviours thrive; the prevalence and persistence of which may be explained in various ways.

First may be that academia, organised as a prestige economy, incubates narcissistic behaviours that become especially pronounced amongst those appointed to and/or generally promoted to management positions (*cf.* Oflu et al., 2020). Narcissistic behaviour may be explained as academics compensating for the frailty of their self-concept intensified by an individualistic culture of 'competitive accountability' (*cf.* Watermeyer, 2019; Watermeyer & Tomlinson, 2022), a psychological deficit that may be especially prominent amongst academic managers who, as already discussed, are handicapped by feelings of imposterism; the consequence either of their lacking management expertise or for those coming from outside of academia, lacking understanding of and ability to assimilate into academic culture (*cf.* Coates et al., 2018). Academics as typically 'distrustful of overt organisational leadership' (Oakley & Selwood, 2010: 6) may escalate a fear of being found out and accordingly intensify a self-focusing by academic managers and their incivility towards and intimidation of others, which may even extend to the marginalisation of competent subordinates (*cf.* Omar et al., 2017). The prevalence of narcissistic behaviours amongst academic managers (*cf.* Khoo et al., 2024) also explains an alleged dearth

of empathy, emotional detachment and the ease by which they are seen to make decisions with negative repercussions for their staff.

Second may be that appointment to management positions in universities typically occurs on the basis of promotion and signifies career progression. Management roles as positions of authority within universities tend to be more handsomely remunerated than equivalent academic positions and provide holders with enhanced capital in their institutional settings (Deem, 2003). For some, therefore, following a management track provides a pathway to career longevity, success and status claims. However, while appointment to management positions is made on the terms of recognition and reward in universities, this is habitually unrelated to management achievements or the capacity of the appointee to offer effective leadership. There appears as such a profound misassumption within universities in respect of the translation of academic success into human management competency and/or aptitude for leadership and that those with management expertise but limited experience in academic culture will make successful academic managers. In short, academic managers may lack the relevant skill set and/or motivation to become effective leaders, especially where translation into such roles is egotistically driven. Furthermore, what universities value (and reward) as effective management appears oriented towards productive output or in servicing corporate ends (Piotrowski & King, 2016) and neglects consideration of human management and engagement—crucial to long-term organisational success. The prevalence of toxic management in universities must thus be recognised as an environmental problem and outcome of academia's organisation into a hyper-competitive (*cf*. Twale & De Luca, 2008) and intensively bureaucratised (Kusy & Holloway, 2009) work culture, which has also critically transitioned in large part from a model of collegial to managerial and thus high to low trust governance (Deem et al., 2007; Shattock, 2013). Moreover, it would appear that human management amateurism in universities is compounded by a dearth of opportunities and also appetite for leadership development.

Third, the conflation of academic leadership with formal management positions in universities has the effect of delegitimising and disincentivising leadership by those out with such positions. Despite growing emphasis on collective, distributed and shared leadership within higher education, leadership capacity within universities is often still conceived of in relation to a minority of individuals in management positions who may have limited leadership ability or interest. This no doubt contributes to the persistence of equality and inclusivity issues at senior levels in many universities (*cf*. Gvozdanović and Maes 2019).

Fourth, because of the scale of academia's precarisation, the persistence of toxic management within universities may be explained by the prevalence of staff who conform (for self-preservation) or collude (for self-advancement) (*cf*. Padilla et al., 2007) as *adaptations* in facing the *strain* (Merton, 1957). While academia's environmental conditions provide a seemingly fertile ground for toxic management, there is better need to understand the kinds of toxic personalities that inhabit these roles, and how their ascent to positions of power might be arrested. Pfeffer (2021) argues that understanding how to channel benevolent leaders into positions of authority and educating them to utilise the power of leadership to positive affect is key to not only rescuing academia from its current slide into obscurity but in empowering academics to serve a higher order of public good. Such an approach is not solely about developing skills and knowledge, however, but more importantly about creating spaces and opportunities for academics to engage in 'identity work' (Alvesson, 1994) through which they can (re)align and (re)solve tensions and inconsistencies between differing personal and professional identities. Work on role transitions, which highlights the need to navigate phases of separation, liminality and reincorporation (Van Gennep, 1960)

and to experiment with 'provisional selves' (Ibarra et al., 2010), has equal relevance in understanding the experience of those transitioning into academic leadership roles as well as those leaving academia.

To deepen understanding of these issues further research is required. While the current study provides a snapshot of factors that have led academics to leave higher education in the UK, the methodology does not permit more detailed exploration of the specific circumstances of their departure, nor how this unfolded and their experiences since leaving the sector. A qualitative interview approach could be well suited to such investigation, with particular focus on experiences of precarity amongst marginalised and/or excluded populations. Intersectional analysis that investigates the interconnections between demographic and identity characteristics could also be particularly insightful for providing recommendations that could address well-documented failings around diversity and inclusion within the sector. It would also be valuable to conduct comparative studies in other higher education systems—including those less heavily invested in neoliberal and new public management ideologies—to better appreciate the inter-relation between personal experiences, organisational governance and national policy.

Conclusion

Our survey elucidates how the prevalence of managerial toxicity in universities in the UK as elsewhere, and the extent to which this has been accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, is driving academic anomie and a well-documented exodus and disengagement of academic staff. In this case study of UK higher education, impoverished academic management and leadership, an erosion of values and meaning and job immobility as a corollary of institutionalisation are viewed as catalysing academics, via a post-pandemic awakening, across an anomic threshold. And while the extent of a 'great resignation' is not yet apparent, the strength of emotion propelling them towards and over this threshold appears indisputable.

In response, there are various macro and micro-level strategies to displace and reverse toxic management cultures in universities (*cf.* Smith and Fredericks-Lowman 2020). Success in mobilising these will, however, depend heavily upon academics being able to attribute positives to their working lives, identify what needs to change in universities and thereby reverse the atrophy of values and meaning they decry and assume leadership on these in order to make academia once more hospitable. Humility on all parts is exigent and a genuine commitment to building more inclusive and compassionate leadership cultures, essential. Greater cognitive empathy and aptitude in understanding what is going wrong in academia from *all* perspectives is surely key to realising a paradigm of leadership that is ultimately human-centric. Yet this requires a shift towards more collective and inclusive forms of governance and that members of the academic community step up to play their part in leadership of groups, departments, institutions and the wider sector.

Defeating toxic corporate culture and stepping back from the anomic threshold and reversing its pull is not only a matter of isolating and eradicating poor leaders in universities but mobilising collective action on leadership. The wake-up bomb of the pandemic and staff attrition presented in our survey accounts is thus less a message about dissatisfaction with senior leadership in universities and more about the higher

education community's collective failure in enacting leadership-for-change in response to macro-structural influences that deleteriously impact working lives. Consequently, retreatism—as the consummation of academic anomie—is no more a solution than the querulous disposition and customary howl of armchair agonists to the degradation of working life in universities. Academia needs *more* not fewer leaders and expectation of leadership amongst the many, if not all, in addressing the challenges faced within and impacting from outside its community. Visible others must evolve into the visible many so that shared values and meaning emerge that relieve 'management' of its negative experience (and pejorative connotation) and replace a sense of being trapped within universities with an opportunity to thrive.

Appendix

Table 1 Demographics of 'academics who have left a role in higher education since January 2020', whose responses are included in this analysis

Variable	Category	n	%
Gender	Male	75	45.2
	Female	83	60
	Other	8	4.8
Age	26 – 35	27	16.4
	36 – 45	53	32.1
	46 – 55	40	24.2
	56 - 65	36	21.8
	66 – 75	4	2.4
	75+	1	0.6
Disability	Yes—mental health condition	29	17.4
	Yes—physical health condition	30	18
	None	110	65.9
Former institution type	Pre-1992	91	54.8
	Post-1992	64	38.9
	Other/unsure	11	6.6

Variable	Category	n	%
Former discipline	Medicine and dentistry	5	3.2
	Subjects allied to medicine	11	7
	Biological sciences	8	5.1
	Physical sciences	6	3.8
	Mathematical sciences	3	1.9
	Computer science	12	7.6
	Engineering and technology	6	3.8
	Architecture, building and planning	1	0.6
	Social studies	19	12
	Law	2	1.3
	Business and administrative studies	11	7
	Mass communications and documentation	2	1.3
	Languages	7	4.4
	Historical and philosophical studies	13	8.2
	Creative arts and design	13	8.2
	Education	14	8.9
	Other	25	15.8
Former position	Lecturer (Assistant Professor)	22	13.8
	Senior lecturer/reader (Associate Professor)	59	36.9
	Professor	24	15
	Graduate teaching assistant/fellow	1	0.6
	Teaching fellow	7	4.4
	Academic-related (e.g. academic management and librarian)	9	5.6
Other roles held (e.g. senior leadership and head of school/department)	No	86	58.1
	Yes	62	41.9
How many years worked in HE	0–5 years	27	16.9
	6–10 years	34	21.3
	11–15 years	34	21.3
	16–20 years	20	12.5
	21–25 years	21	13.1
	26+ years	24	15
Former employment status	Part-time	33	20.6
	Full-time	127	79.4
Contractual terms of former employment	Fixed term	48	30.0
	Open-ended	98	61.3
	Zero-hours	4	2.5
	Other	10	6.3
Caring responsibilities	Yes	73	45.6
	No	87	54.4
Employment status after leaving UK HE	Employed in a non-UK university	23	14.7
	Self-employed or employed in an alternative sector	61	39.1
	Retired	19	12.2
	Unemployed	26	16.7
	Other	27	17.3

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare no competing interests.

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