

# Manifesting the academic psychological contract

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**Abstract:** The level of research undertaken on the academic psychological contract, and its influence on academics' behaviour is limited. This paper seeks to consider the academic psychological contract, by reviewing its manifestation within the role and the influence on their undertaking of the role. Particularly important is academics' interpretation of the role and what they consider important. Within this, the paper considers in-role and extra-role activities and what may be the grey areas in which time is spent. The research adopts the combined usage of phenomenology with interpretivist processes to investigate the insights of eighteen academics at nine UK University Business Schools. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data to consider the constructs' manifestation. Key aspects of behaviour were identified as discretionary effort autonomy and managerialism, with links to academic citizenship.

**Keywords:** academics; psychological contract; discretionary effort; autonomy; managerialism; academic citizenship

## 1. Introduction

Modern managers should consider understanding the psychological contract as a fundamental part of their tool bag, which offers a structure for appreciating the features that stimulate the relationship between an individual and their wider organisation (DelCampo, 2007). Fundamentally, allowing managers to oversee their teams and develop effective relationships with individuals by understanding them, their issues, and their feelings about their roles. Ideally, this will lead to increased motivation and improved performance, which should lead to a more effective team and organisation. In addition, we should also expect to see increased levels of job satisfaction and organisational commitment, reducing intentions to leave and, in turn, lowering actual staff turnover. Krivokapic-Skoko and O'Neill (2008) contend familiarity with the psychological contract may assist in aiding improvements in organisational performance.

To be effective in managing the psychological contract, however, requires more than just knowledge of what it is and an understanding of the construct, managers must be able to visualize its manifestation. This paper considers the manifestation of the academic Psychological Contract among academics within United Kingdom universities. The research takes note of consideration of role fulfillment, relationships, and discretionary effort, with emphasis placed on academic citizenship, seeking to address the question of how the psychological contract manifests itself within the world of academia.

## 2. Context

To consider the research, it is important to appreciate the context. As such, the Higher Education Sector has been limited to that of publicly funded universities,

notably, institutions identified by historical status as universities that existed before the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act and institutions that existed in 1992 that now have university status. These institutions were previously known as, or grouped as, Polytechnics or Colleges of Higher Education. Additionally, consideration of the sector requires an appreciation of features that are increasingly fundamental to university life including university ethos and identity, levels of managerialism within institutions, and sector issues related to marketisation and competition, as these features impact the university and individuals in terms of identifying key activities and priorities, and ultimately will shape the academic mindset.

It is pertinent to pay attention to the contrasting perspectives of identity, managerialism, and marketisation and competition. In particular, identity may play a key role in university life, as their identity is an outcome of the university's history contributing to its ethos by identifying key priorities. In doing so, it emphasises certain characteristics that ultimately have an influence on who it attracts to the organisation both students and staff. In particular, this will influence the aspirations of academics. One perspective would suggest that each of these factors aims to improve value for money by enhancing quality and increasing performance (Bryson, 2004). Arguably, this leads to higher levels of student experience and improved research outputs (Deem 2006). Alternatively, academics at an individual level argue that managerialism (Deem and Brehony, 2005) impacts innovation and leads to reductions in academic freedom, which in turn reduces the student's experience and has a negative impact on research quality.

### **3. Literature review**

Differing perceptions of the psychological contract provide alternative stances dependent on the belief as to whether it is idiosyncratic or mutual. Classically, the standard definition proposed by Rousseau (1990) expresses the psychological contract as “the individual's beliefs about mutual obligations, in the context of the relationship between employer and employee,” emphasising the individualistic nature of the construct. Alternatively, others see it as a shared or mutual relationship and define it as “the perceptions of mutual obligations to each other held by the two parties in the employment relationship” (Herriot et al., 1997).

### **4. Psychological contract overview**

Coyne and Gavin (2013) and Shen (2010) highlight the psychological contract's significance and value in providing a picture of the employee's relationship with their employer. See **Figure 1**. Notably, the psychological contract provides an overview of those areas of the employer-employee relationship which are not covered by the contract of employment, and which may be implicit and open to interpretation. As such, this may be critical in determining individual responses within the workplace (Kasekende et al., 2015), including how they react to their role requirements and manager. Furthermore, the resulting discretionary effort can be considered a manifestation of the psychological contract (Kasekende, 2017). Herriot and Pemberton (1997) suggest that it is important for management to be effective, and to harmonise the relationships of individuals with the organisation. Moving away from a “using”

approach to that of a “building” approach (Rousseau and Schalk, 2000) requires effective development of the relationship between employee and employer. This is supported by Wellin (2007), who emphasises the need to embed this into an organisation’s culture. As such, the psychological contract results from the interaction between employer and employee (Kelley-Patterson and George, 2001) and is a dynamic process (Jha and Pingle, 2015).



**Figure 1.** The psychological contract relationship (Johnston, 2017).

Acknowledging the psychological contract as a shared relationship connecting the employer (individual) and the employer (organisation). This raises the concepts of multiplicity (Marks, 2001) and agency (Guest, 1998) as to who is identified as the organisation. This may be the CEO, line manager, or department head, or by acknowledging groups such as Human Resources Departments. Marks (2001) contends that individuals hold differing psychological contracts with different individuals (agents) identified as “the organisation”. See **Figure 2**.



**Figure 2.** Organisation manifestations in the psychological contract (Johnston, 2017).

Tallman (2008) questions the idiosyncratic nature of the psychological contract, signifying individuals are often influenced by elements of group thinking and collectivism that are interspersed with their own personal interpretations. A key feature of this is that is influenced by the interpretation of remuneration and retribution methods set by employers. The combining of expectations, obligations, and promises also creates issues and should only focus on obligations as they may be considered explicit and tangible, while promises and expectations are not so, and may ultimately

lead to obligations, but obligations do not lead to promises and expectations (Rousseau et al., 2018).

## **5. Psychological contract within academia**

A review of the academic literature would place the psychological contract as a prominent theme of research and investigation from the 1990s up to now. This is increasingly coupled with a focus on academia, starting with Bathmaker (1999), who highlighted the “Janus-faced” role of academics and suggested that the academic role is fraught with complexity and may be considered misunderstood by those outside of academia. The tri-focus split of teaching, research, and service (also discussed as administration) drives choices made by individual academics.

Although there has been a plethora of literature on psychological contact over the past three decades, little has focused on academics and their institutions (Nutakki et al., 2015; Sewpersad et al., 2019; Shen, 2010; Tookey, 2013). The overage of academia notes the changing face of academia, and in the same way that the turbulence of the 1980s and 1990s sparked the rebirth of general ideas on the psychological contract, the past 20 years have made the academic domain a key area for investigation. This includes changes to academics’ perception of their role and their aspirations.

Questions are raised as to whether the psychological contract of academics is in line with that of other professionals (Gillespie et al., 2001) and whether traditional models apply (Shen, 2010). Despite this, Shen (2010) contends that a relational psychological contract exists, but with a growing transactional emphasis as the sector has become more turbulent. This follows from the work of Bathmaker (1999), who argued changes in the sector, particularly the post-1992 institutions, were detrimental to the employment relationship. She noted the growing insecurity and decline in identity as fundamental in shifting the institutions to being more business-like, as managerialism became increasingly prevalent and stakeholder satisfaction became a key driver. As such, the feeling amongst academics was one of being devalued, leading to a more transactional nature. Gammie (2006) supported this, placing an emphasis on the notion of politicised control as a key feature of this “new managerialism”, with the introduction of measurement and mechanisation, highlighting the introduction of the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), the forerunner to the Research Excellence Framework (REF), and the introduction of an Inspection Framework. At the same time, pointing to a decrease in academic influence in the decision-making process.

In addition to traditional characteristics that impact the development of the psychological contract, such as nationality, cultural background, and demographics, key features of how academics perceive the academic role, include areas such as the research orientation of the university in which they studied, educational attainment, service length, and career profile, particularly if they have experience working in an industrial (e.g., non-educational) setting (Shen, 2010). Gammie (2006) identified three lenses for how academics may perceive their role: focus on rewards (job orientation); focus on career advancement (career orientation); and working for socially perceived value (calling orientation). As such, emphasis is placed on how institutions have adapted job titles and specified job roles in order to categorise individuals and create “fit”, highlighting the development of Research Fellow roles and Teaching Only

contracts as manifestations of this. While this narrowing of roles and categorisation may be seen negatively, organisations suggest it is a method of relieving the dual pressure that the “Lecturer or Senior Lecturer” role brings in terms of teaching and research. Teaching-only contracts provide opportunities to demonstrate research activity, without the spectre and worry of research ratings. Similarly, research roles (Research Fellow, Research Assistant) remove the burden of teaching, with organisations advocating it as encompassing a making strategy (Miles and Snow, 1984). However, Johnston (2017) notes the tie between publications and research funding and promotion. He raises the question of how REF influences the agenda, with individual academics being pressured to produce, while at the same time, institutions overly concentrate on the availability of research funding, resulting in high research ratings.

A critical feature in the formation of the psychological contract is the workplace experiences individuals have lived through, and a key contributor is the organisation or organisations in which individuals have worked or do work, which is significantly influences individual attitudes (Rousseau and Parks, 1993). Fundamental to this is the individual view of the organisation, and the agents with whom they associate, as this may impact significantly on the psychological contract and will influence their enculturation into the organisation, particularly at an external level. Academics are heavily influenced by their working environment, undertaking a rewarding job role, career opportunities and development, job satisfaction, and job security, and these have a significant influence on the relationships built with employers as they are deemed to be fundamental promises of the institution (O’Neill et al., 2010).

## **6. Methodology**

The research adopted a combined phenomenological (Creswell, 2014) and interpretivist (Saunders and Lewis, 2009) stance, reflecting the impact on individual academics of their psychological contract. The researcher adopted a qualitative approach through semi-structured interviews, while also collecting base data using a questionnaire. This allowed for greater rigour in the research by taking a hybrid approach to the data collection (Guercini, 2014) and allowed for greater triangulation (Saunders and Lewis, 2009) in the process.

Respondents were all academics from UK-based Business Schools at nine universities. The universities were categorised as pre-1992, post-1992, previously Polytechnics, and post-1992, which were previously Colleges of Higher Education. All institutions would be classified as public universities and the research excluded private universities, private providers, and Colleges offering Higher Education (CBHE) due to perceived differences in ethos, approach, and roles and contracts. The eighteen academics, who all held permanent contracts, were split across the universities with two from each of the three institutions within each category. A combined convenience and purposive sampling strategy (Avramenko, 2013) was used to identify respondents.

Interviews were undertaken by adopting semi-structured questioning (Alvesson and Ashcraft, 2012) to collect rich data, alongside core information collected via a questionnaire. Traditional questioning techniques were used, with broader questions

being narrowed to provide focus on key areas. The questions were derived to allow thought processes to interpret experience and gauge opinion and reflection rather than provide facts. Interviews were subsequently transcribed and analysed to identify themes and provide examples of the manifestation of the psychological contract.

## 7. Findings and discussion

### 7.1. Autonomy and managerialism

On the whole, respondents viewed their role as autonomous, excepting for timetabled sessions {R1, R2, R4, R5, R8, R9, R10}, and they were left to get on with the job, recognising themselves as semi-autonomous professionals, which did in some ways contradict the notion of managerialism as portrayed by Bathmaker (1999) and Gammie (2006). Deem and Brehony (2005) further enhance this. However, R4 highlighted the focus placed on the academic calendar, which he argued was a driver as to when things happened, was organised through the centre and inherently by central administrative functions, thus restraining freedom and supporting the ideas of Vardi (2008). R3 emphasised the highest level of autonomy was within teaching, noting, *“It is your classroom you do what you like.”* As such, you are in control of the what and how of teaching your subject as per the syllabus. R1 supported this, stating, *“You were left to get on with it and organise yourself.”*

R3, however, noted that autonomy had been reduced in her setting. In particular, there had been a reduction in freedom of movement and commented on managers *“coming round to see who was in,”* suggesting an increase in presenteeism (Johns, 2009). In support, R4 identified growing *“micro-management and managerialism”* leading to *“less academic freedom”*. He further identified increases in *“being told what to do, when, and how.”* R12 linked this to being *“driven by a performance management system”* which was *“online and mechanical”*. This emphasised the growing influence on performance objectives, which were organisational-based as opposed to mutual, with little if any consultation. These were perhaps more rigorously monitored but were not necessarily supported in achieving {R12}. Particular notices and references were target settings related to grades, NSS, REF, and TEF. It was noted that there was an increased emphasis on student performance without necessarily focusing on student action. Student voice has also become a tool of fear, as customer satisfaction has become increasingly important. This rising level of managerialism supports the notion of Shen (2010) of a shift in the psychological contract to one that may be more transactional.

R2 noted that at their institution, managerialism had not impacted thus far, while R10 suggested autonomy was still high: *“You are encouraged to come up with new ideas, innovative perhaps, and allowed to run with them, within reason of course,”* whereas R4 felt the increase in managerialism was resulting in reducing *“innovation and creativity”*. That said, R6 suggested this may be a result of constraints and pressure on the finale as opposed to managerialist approaches. In addition, R11 and R13 noted the increases in procedures, “rules”, and processes but suggested some flexibility was present.

## 7.2. Discretionary effort

A little mentioned but of notable importance is the discussion centred around discretionary effort. While the term itself was not particularly used, all interviewees made reference to “going the extra” mile without particular reference to the term. As R3 noted, institutions rely “*on the extra effort that is put in, and realistically, the ‘place’ wouldn’t function without it.*” This lack of recognition for the discretionary effort was summed up by R10 as having “*a passion for what you do*” and R11 as recognising it as “*part of academic role*”, pointing out that “*the hours that you are allocated are not a perfect match,*” perhaps to be seen as notional noting you “*do the best you can*” {10} concluding that “*often means doing additional hours*” {14} often during “*evenings and weekends*” {4}. R3 drew on the example of responding to emails at night as “*during the daytime so much is going on.*” R3 further highlighted “*the tight marking turnaround deadlines which meant that often marking needed to be done outside of the normal working hours.*”

R12 recognised the ongoing need for additional effort, often caused by the “*intensity of the work, such as the volume of emails, which takes you away from what you want to do but you still need to do it. So, you end up having to catch up with activities such as teaching preparation or aspects of administration at the weekend*” {R4}.

This occurs through wanting “*to do your best and worry about failing, not because of a culture of fear but a feeling of deficit. You are not coping, or you are failing due to the volume of work and wanting to do your best for students.*”

Most of the discretionary effort discussed is related to student support. This included making yourself available for students {R3, R11}, supporting students {R1, R5, R13}, and accommodating students {R12}, while R11 discussed “*helping students even when he had been given time away from teaching to concentrate writing up his PhD.*” Accordingly, R1 felt this was because they (academics) “*think that it is important for the students... to help them achieve their best.*” In particular, R13 highlighted, “*You may have office hours and do workshops, but you end up providing support outside of these times for the benefit of students.*” R5 emphasised the need to “*do the job to the best of her ability and for the good of the students. If that means doing extra, that’s the job.*” R2 highlighted the bringing of guest speakers, professional bodies, and other extra-curricular activities as “*all part of the job*”. R11 noted that a key feature of their approach was “*influenced by their background and the support they had received.*” R1 noted, “*supporting colleagues was often for the good of the students,*” including “*being collegial*” {R11}.

A particular area of discussion that came into focus centred on research, noting there was not “*enough time to do research during normal working hours, and as such, you end up doing it in your own time*” {R13}, although recognising it as part of the job. R5 pointed out that “*a large element of writing*” for publication involves discretionary effort. Highlighting research is a major aspect of the job, so “*much personal time is spent writing articles and trying to get papers published.*” Of particular note was “*staff who were undertaking their doctorate*” {R4}. In particular, this resonated with Kasekende (2017). In addition, R2 considered its role in attempting to develop a research culture previous employer that maintained an FE culture. His

current role is to do the same, but there are fewer obstacles. This involves extra work; however, the lack of barriers means it does not feel that way; it is just part of the job.

Included in this were aspects of what may be considered academic citizenship (Macfarlane, 2007), such as “*reviewing for journals and conferences*” {R16}, helping a colleague “*prepare for a conference who had never done one before*” {R11}, and “*helping a colleague with statistics*” for their research {R2}. However, this was identified as “just helping a colleague” rather than a discretionary effort. Many examples of this were evident, including “*helping colleagues with events*” {R6} taking on “*additional marking*”. Furthermore, R6 pointed to “*they all muck in,*” while R11 suggested being “*willing to share the load.*” Interestingly, both R6 and R11 worked at differing institutions, but both were former colleges of HE. R7, who also worked at a former College of HE, also noted a willingness to support colleagues within the team and perhaps individuals across the institution; however, acknowledged those “*inside and outside the department.*” R6 shared this view. R1 provided examples of supporting new staff and being a mentor. This came within the context that others “*would do the same for me.*”

R10 suggested a need to “*demark between personal and professional.*” In particular, R10 asks, “*Who is it for?*” R14 suggests that “*90% of the time, discretionary effort is for others.*” Notably, R4 acknowledged avoiding “*doing things at the weekend that he would class as discretionary for others.*” Various respondents acknowledge self-interest as pertinent to the discretionary effort. R4 and R10 made reference to “*professionalism*”, with R5 identifying “*self-promotion*” as a prominent feature, suggesting “*the key to getting on and much of what you do is to benefit your career,*” alternatively R12 described “*CV enhancement*”. R14 is critical of career chasers, highlighting that care should be taken when “*seeking promotion if you don’t have the experience,*” speaking from personal experience.

R10 considered being “*an academic and having passion*”, and it helps “*feel good*”. {R12} may even feel “*you are contributing for the good of the world*” {R8R}. “*Being an academic is what you are so you like doing academic work*” {R13}. This makes some link to the notion of induced discretionary effort as identified by Ramdhony (2014), suggesting that there is an expectation of this additional work and that it has become common in academic work-life (Stone-Romero et al., 2009) acknowledging that clarity around workloads is absent. An interesting note from R14 was that “*teaching and administration are for someone else and you don’t see the benefits, therefore you are less likely to put the discretionary effort in,*” with R13 suggesting that extra effort “*for students to get better satisfaction scores is for yourself.*” R4 and R5 highlighted that discretionary effort also benefits the institution, even when you do it for yourself. Student satisfaction is measured in NSS and TEF, and research links to REF {R5}. Not all discretionary efforts are centred on teaching and research. There was also credence given to the need to undertake some service activities. R2 noted the need to be involved in open days and applicant days even when these involve weekends, “*we all take our share, no rota just voluntary,*” and R7 stated, “*happy to do interviews, open days, inductions, etc.*”



## **8. Conclusion**

The academic role is complex, and we find many facets to that role that require an academic to be a teacher, a researcher, and an administrator. This ultimately means individuals are pulled in multiple directions at differing points in the year. As such, the psychological contract of academics is complex and ever-moving. It does, however, manifest itself in two key areas. Firstly, the protection of an adherence to the belief of autonomy. Managerialism within institutions has attempted to curb that commitment and provides a constant source of tension at several institutions, although it would appear to a lesser extent. Within the UK in recent years, we have seen a growth in industrial action taken by academics, and while often the media focuses on the pay issue, a crucial issue is more associated with conditions and workload. A critical element of this centres around managerial control and the ability of academics to focus on what they perceive as academic work. Many academics, it would seem, feel that there is an increasing burden on them to undertake administrative tasks that are not directly related to teaching and learning, and this, coupled with an increased teaching load, reduces their capacity to control their own daily activities and thus reduces their autonomy, and their identity as autonomous professionals. In particular, it is deemed to eat into research time, which they then find themselves doing outside of normal hours.

Secondly, and most prominently, the psychological contract manifests itself in discretionary effort, and within that, academic citizenship dictates the additional levels of effort and support individual academics give to the multi-faceted role and the people (colleagues and students) around them. Collegiality tends to be a significant mainstay for most academics. The notion of supporting each other to advance knowledge is pivotal in the mindset of most academics. This includes engaging and enthusing students in their subject area to help them achieve, outside of normal classroom time. As such, academics are willing to engage in these additional (yet time-consuming) activities as they are perceived as important.

This willingness to work beyond what may be described as normal working hours is driven by a passion for the role and the subject, a desire to help students succeed, and a desire to progress in their careers. In particular, research activity is often central to promotion opportunities, and it is this element that is fundamentally squeezed. It does, however, raise the question as to whether this has now become the norm and expectation within the workplace, and has become a feature of managerialism and management control, as academics are effectively manipulated into working beyond the norm, to fulfill elements of the role they see as important.

## **9. Implications for practice and future research**

The research has outlined the pressures of workload on academic staff across 9 UK universities, the impact that this has on the psychological contract, and the manifestation that it has on said contract. The data, however, is drawn from a limited sample, and although likely to be generalisable across institutions, a wider catchment (including an international dimension) would benefit the field of study. However, this paper provides a basis for further study and consideration of how the academic

psychological contract manifests within institutions. This paper alerts academics, new to the role, to the challenges that are faced. Allowing them the opportunity to consider the environment around them and providing the insight that may allow them to prepare their own personal defenses for the situations they may face as their career progresses. The paper also opens up the debate for discussion with line managers, senior managers, and HR Departments, as to what is important to academics, how to manage the experience (and thus engagement) better, and highlights this central feature of work overload.

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