## Abstract

This paper takes a person-in-context approach to explore how the neoliberal university, embroiled in discourses of 'progress', influences academics' narrativization and navigation of career. Whilst aware of the role 'progress' plays in framing a 'traditional career', academics find themselves having to navigate the contours of the university – where matrices shout to the tide of 'progress' and where what gets measured supposedly gets done. Such matrices, providing a violent quantification of reality (Gee, 2020), reduce pedagogy to lustful percentages of satisfaction, research to star status – mirroring the aspirations of a McDonald's 'Diningroom Server' - and community engagement to a hurtful simile of impact. This research engages in dialogical-biography to provide insight into career turning points and meaning-making, with attention to broader contextual and conceptual dimensions. The paper explores tensions between 'social justice' and 'progress' with the aim of furthering debate within career-studies on the paradoxical relations of 'career' and 'progress' in academia today and considering the implications for human resource development.

**Keywords:** academic careers; neoliberal university; performance management; Research Excellence Framework; human resource development

## Introduction

As the academic literature within Career Studies has established, definitions of career can vary from the sociological lens of life histories (see Barley, 1989) to an evolving sequence of a person's work experiences over time (Arthur, 2002). Such conceptions of career indicate its temporal dimension, where activity is accounted for and traced within an imagined boundary of a 'life-project' (Savickas, 2000) - one likely to be peppered with fateful moments and episodes (Gee, 2017, 2019). This charting of time is invariably informed and shaped by institutional mechanisms, where the contemporary interconnected fields of education and the labour market are likely to adhere to notions of 'progress' (see Gee, 2016, 2017, 2019, 2022a, 2022b; Gellner, 1972). Progress is central to the idea of the 'traditional career', or what Gellner (1972) describes as a middle-class life. As noted by McCash (2008), notions, discourses, and tracings of career are invariably gendered, classed, racialized, and Westernized, where the traditional career – welded to the notion of progress – favours the 'white male breadwinner'. It is no coincidence that progress is also a central driving force of the 'enlightened' project of modernity, our supposed "secularized salvation" (Gellner, 1972).

Utilizing interconnecting case studies of four academics, the paper explores the connections of 'career' and 'progress' and the tensions/paradoxes that arise from grappling with the pervasive agenda of 'progress' in the British neo-liberal university system. The neoliberal university asserted here is one shaped by neoliberal ideology (having its roots within the work of Hayek, 1976) and marketization of education, informed by supranational organizations (e.g., OECD and EU – see Jelonek, 2021; Stoten, 2020), a site which promotes human capital to serve the precarious labour market (see Gee, 2022b). Following a discussion of relevant literature at the intersection of 'career', 'work', 'human resource development', and 'progress', the paper explains the methodological aspects of our research. Reflections are then elaborated along two threads: the influence of academic cultures on individual academic careers, and the influence of personal characteristics on navigating career progress. Finally, some closing thoughts on the *value* of the exercise undertaken will be advanced, both for academia and beyond, with consideration of our individual self-critiques against the backdrop of academia's own disturbing 'career trajectory' over the past half-century (see Fleming, 2021). The paper closes with implications for human resource development (HRD) in the Academy, where it asserts that HRD practice needs to reflexively consider how it may consolidate and

reinforce discourses of progress and how this may reinforce power dynamics that serve the status quo, exacerbating the rhetoric of equality, diversity, and inequality.

## Literature review - What is an Academic 'Career'?

> By tying people to labour markets and employment in ways that are both personally meaningful and beneficial to work organizations and society, career is … part of the rhetoric that supports the ideologies of society and thereby contributes to its stability (Collin & Young, 2000, p. 1).

It is difficult to think of the term 'career' outside of the context of work, and in particular paid work. But it is only within the past 200 years, since the advent of industrial capitalism, that work has gone beyond the mere satisfying of human needs for survival and become synonymous with paid employment (Edgell, 2006). Work has become imbued with important facets of modernity, its undercurrents of accumulation, and the profit motif. Industrial capitalism brings to the fore the importance of clock time, where advents such as the factory, the electric light bulb, and data transfer machines allow for an intensification and extension of working practices (Watson, 2017) to enhance the efficiency of production and increase accumulation, where time becomes money and speed becomes of utmost importance. The betterment of the balance sheet shapes the sense of 'progress' at play here, married with the modern institutions that coerce such action, framing one's sense of worth and achievement. With paid work becoming a central occupation of time for modern workers, guided by scientific management such as 'Taylorism' (Watson, 2017), it is hardly surprising that it has become a linchpin for personal identity and the evaluation of self-worth.

As highlighted by Gellner (1972), a 'traditional career' is analogous to the 'middle-class' life that is intrinsic to modernity. A middle-class life is trained to seek 'progress', via educational credentials and the climbing of company rungs, with a correlating ascension in material wealth. Gellner rhetorically asks what could be more satisfying than the life of mankind, or indeed the life of the cosmos, following a similarly gratifying pattern (Gellner, 1972, p. 13)? The universe and thus history become configured along the linear trajectory of 'progress'. Gellner describes this as the World Growth myth, with human collectives moving from clans to tribes to metropolises, and individual progress being framed by the parameters of a middle-class career, becoming a 'secular salvation'. With such a schema comes an attempt

to negate religious and superstitious forms of heaven, but life nonetheless aspires towards an upward slope, where each person and generation yearns to become better over time. In addition, our children and others left behind after our death become our intentional salvation, our secular form of heaven. Such mainstream views of career place paid work and progress central to their operationalization. Illustrations are endless, but to mention a few: a previous UK Universities Minister recently referred to universities' responsibility for "improving progression to graduate employment" (Donelan, 2021); the UK National Curriculum describes career as "an individual's lifelong progression through learning and work" (UK National Curriculum, 2007); and dictionaries define career as "a course of professional life or employment, which affords opportunity for progress or advancement in the world" (Online Oxford English Dictionary), or "the job or series of jobs that you do during your working life, especially if you continue to get better jobs and earn more money" (Online Cambridge Dictionary).

There have certainly been important challenges to such views, for instance from within social psychology, where Super (1994) understands career to be "the sequence and combination of the roles we play within the lifespan", or most notably the Chicago School of Sociology (see Barley, 1989), where career encompasses a wide spectrum of activity beyond paid employment, including leisure, housework, care, health, etc. (Gee, 2017, 2019; Oldridge, 2019). Doing so weakens the hold of paid employment, which often exploits to gain surplus value for the capitalist class (Granter, 2009). Challenges to work and progress-centric views of career acknowledge that even when career is focused on paid work, it rarely follows a nice and neat linear progressive schema for most people – what Bowman, Hodkinson, and Colley (2005) describe as the "folk theory of career progression". There are contributions within the literature from the late twentieth century to expose the fragmentation of the traditional career, to acknowledge the post-industrial influence that provides a 'careerquake' (Watts, 1996), whether that is the boundaryless career, protean career, or concertina career (Arthur, 2002; Hall, 1996; Savickas 2000; Whitchurch et al., 2021). Significant developments in this vein have more recently arisen through research on the conceptualizations of women's careers. This literature recognizes that careers are not always linear, such as the life-career model (Pringle & McCulloch Dixon, 2003), the three phases of a woman's career (O'Neil & Bilimoria, 2005) and Kaleidoscope careers (Mainiero & Sullivan 2005, 2006). Furthermore, recent research by Williams and Mavin (2015) highlighted impairment effects as a career boundary for disabled academics and the impact on career decisions. However, such schemas frequently continue to view career through the lens of paid employment and a latent form of progress (see Gee, 2016, 2019). What becomes apparent to the critical eye is the residue left by the traditional career, an

exclusive form of 'career' which in the age of precarity is becoming harder to gain and maintain (Gee, 2022a). The required resources for such a traditional career are not evenly distributed, yet shape many of the framings of 'professional careers' pathways that one is supposed to follow, if they are 'lucky' enough (Gee, 2022a).

More recently, we have seen the rise of the 'sustainable career'. This is where work aligns with interests and strengths; provides continuous learning opportunities; employability security; and adapts to account for work and life being interlinked over the life-course (Valcour, 2017, p. 22). In so doing, it involves three interconnecting dimensions of the *person* and their career, the *context* in which they live and work, and the recognition that careers are created and recreated over *time* (De Vos et al., 2020 cited in McDonald et al., 2022, p. 184). This is found to be particularly relevant to the more flexible types of work in the twenty-first century, particularly post-pandemic (McDonald et al., 2022).

So, what of the 'academic career' and its context, one that is rooted in traditional (and predominantly male) notions of 'profession' and immersed within HE institutions based on New Public Management (Fleming, 2021) that rely heavily on notions of 'progress', be it via the grades and outcomes of students, star ratings of publications, or grant capture and impact case studies? Literature recognizes the performance culture of the neoliberal academy "whereby benchmarks are characterized by upwards incremental creep, with academics self-managing their careers around the achievement of internationally ranked outputs and accolades for their progression within academic advancement systems" (Harris et al., 2019, p. 708). The neoliberal university is one informed by the neoliberal philosophy of Hayek, seeking an individualization of society to serve what Hayek (1976) calls "the game of catallaxy" - the overcoming of convention to create new information, knowledge, and values through the process of discovery (Romar, 2009) - so as to promote human capital and thus the capitalist mode of production (see Jelonek, 2021; Stoten, 2020;). In such a context individual careers are coerced toward the meeting of sector metrics, including research metrics. As Ooms et al. observe (2019, p. 1285): "academics have the best chances of climbing the academic ladder all the way to the top when they succeed at bridging between the quest for fundamental understanding and socio-economically relevant applications of their research". Academia is thus well and truly incorporated into the 'entrepreneurial' endeavour of the knowledge economy. But for many academics committed to developing and applying their critical faculties, especially those who question the prevailing order and existing modalities of oppression, this is a problem – a source of tension, paradox, and contradiction. How does one deconstruct progress yet at the same time rely on its material form to provide all important resources to

enact one's specialism? And how might this translate across to other segments of the labour market outside of HE? What of the implications for human resource development in the Academy in the wake of calls for sustainable careers? It is here that the paper leads to the reflections of its participants, as a means of provoking and synthesizing articulations of such tension and paradox.

## Methodology

This project initially started as a coming together of four academics that shared an interest in 'progress' – a concept that they each approached from different and multiple perspectives. Two of the academics were initially from the School of Social Science and two from the Business School at Nottingham Trent University (a post-1992 institution), a 'naturally' occurring convenience sample (Yin, 2011). Halfway through the project one of us moved to another English post-1992 university. All of us have permanent contracts ('tenured' positions) with our institutions. Recognizing that academic careers are bound by institutional, social, and personal factors (Ylijoki & Henriksson, 2017), we were very much aware from the outset that our experiences were somewhat narrow in scope and would differ from those in other institutions and on other kinds of contracts, especially those precariously employed (McAlpine & Emmioğlu, 2015).

The initial conversations that occurred brought into play our own enactment, how this engages with 'progress', and how such an important aspect is embraced or resisted within 'career'. Two of us have specific publications focusing on career whilst the other two have produced research indirectly related to this concept, with a focus on work and community organization. One of us is a Senior Lecturer, another an Associate Professor, one a Reader and one a Professor. We agree that 'progress' is a cultural imperative that intrudes upon people's careers where many institutional mechanisms of the Academy play to this schema. As a result, after much contemplation on the potential direction of the project, the decision was made to not seek funding for the research to protect the critical space for its inquiry and evade at least some of the nets of progress. Furthermore, in responding to calls for academics to resist and write 'differently' (Edwards et al., 2023; Pullen et al., 2020) we started this project by reflecting on our own careers. That being said, we remained mindful of the near impossibility for our work to entirely escape the traditional schema of career progress, not least through the benefits gained from producing outputs such as this one.

The project leaned on a fluid form of planning and negotiation, crystallizing towards us sharing perspectives on our thoughts and reflections of career and progress and how it links to our academic endeavours, initially by way of a short-written piece of free writing (between 500 and 1000 words) on career and progress. This task was purposively vague and lacking in pre-agreed structure, with an epistemological stance informed by 'verstehen' and interpretation (Weber, 1947). This approach gave free licence for all of us to construct our own framing and content, a form of reflection that resists the neat symmetry found in much of the reflective practice literature (see Gee & Barnard, 2020). The form of reflection advocated was in line with Ghaye (2000, p. 7) who suggests that reflection allows "a way of trying to make sense of the uncertainty in our workplaces and the courage to work competently and ethically at the edge of order and chaos". The reflection invited is one that seeks to open the political and historical parameters of 'career' and 'progress' to allow for the inevitable tensions and contradictions to be traced then shared, to seek both unique and similar themes.

The methodology positioned us to reflect upon many strands of 'career' enactment to allow consideration of how the 'work career' of the academic is not formed in isolation but connects with other facets of life-enactment (see Gee, 2016, 2017). There is a wealth of literature in this sphere, with a variety of foci on life histories, oral histories, life articulation, and individual case studies (see Goodwin, 2012). Biographical methods are particularly concerned with the individual's life experiences and the meanings and interpretations they ascribe to their own life history or biographies, and in the case of the academic to also allow insight into theoretically informed reflections, to acknowledge the place of theory as an aspect of identity and a shaping of enactment. The important point that unifies such approaches as biographical is that they are a means of giving a 'voice' to individuals (Roberts, 2002, p. 3), and in the case of this research project a means of synthesizing the articulations gained, taking account of person, context and time (De Vos et al., 2020 cited in McDonald et al., 2022, p. 184) in order to seek unique forms as well as areas of intersection. Below highlights our joint findings to provide voice for the participants to feed into the broader literature.

## Findings, or Rather, Reflections Upon Reflections

Taking a collaborative approach, not dissimilar to Edwards, Ridgway, and Oldridge (2023), we reviewed each other's pieces of writing, discussing both similarities and points of tension, identifying diverse experiences. Following this, the first author proceeded with the additional

steps of a thematic analysis, identifying initial coding, searching for and naming themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). These themes were then reviewed and discussed, which allowed for exploration of where emergent themes appeared in the texts as well as those relating to the literature espoused in the opening sections of the paper. The themes that initially emerged were:

- The influence of academic context and academic metrics
- The influence of personal characteristics
- Meaning making
- 'Career' intent
- Theoretical influences
- Fateful moments / episodes

Although relatively brief, the initial self-reflections conducted by the participants raised several complex issues fertile for deeper digging. Summarized in this section of the paper are those reflections that spoke to (a) the influence of academic cultures on individual academic careers, and (b) the influence of personal characteristics on navigating career progress, due to the specific focus of this article.

## The Influence of Academic Cultures on Individual Academic Careers

As previously noted, prior to the commencement of this project the individuals involved devoted a great deal of time and effort to reflecting critically on the notion of progress. Regardless of this, however, it would be difficult to deny that 'progress' operates as a given in an academic context, a non-negotiable framework that orders academic existence and activities. This is most certainly true at the institutional level, where the mantra of progress is essentially beyond reproach and un-questionable. Indeed, if questioned, adherents might ask: "What would the viable alternative be?" Pontificating on the finer points of 'progress' and its effects would most likely be considered by managers in academia as a luxury they cannot afford, and cannot afford 'their' staff to engage in. But entertaining alternatives to progress is not merely 'madness' or 'un-thinkable', it can also be *career threatening*. Engagement with the 'game' of progress therefore becomes part of the cost of doing business, and the matter quickly becomes one of how best to negotiate this game – not only for external 'success', but perhaps more importantly, for battling internal demons. When reflecting on our academic journeys, each of

us spoke about how we navigated this external game and internal battle at different stages of our career. At play, it seemed, was the following paradox: How does one successfully navigate and challenge the framework of progress simultaneously, and if these two activities are necessarily at odds, then what should one do?

In her reflections, Louise noted how she rapidly came to recognize the metrics that matter for survival in an academic context, and success. In her words:

> As academic careers develop, factors such as funding, external recognition, alongside publications drive promotion. I feel that this then sets the scene of the parameters within which academic career progress is conceptualized. (Louise)

Of course, for many academics these metrics are not only used to assess who should get promoted, but also who might get demoted or encouraged to retire, bringing the commonplace phrase 'publish or perish' into stark relief.

Extending on this experience, Louise notes how she is often told by colleagues how things have changed over time, prompting her to ask: "Do individuals' motivations to embark upon an academic career align with their experiences, and how they conceptualize progress?" Tied up in this question are a number of strings. When embarking on an academic career, how do individuals conceive of and deploy the notion of progress when reflecting on what is to come? How does that square with the reality of academic careers, and to what extent is all of this determined by shifts in the broader structures of academia? While it is to be expected that some youthful naivety will be replaced with jaded realism over time, Louise's question would suggest that irrespective of this personal development the game has simply changed.

Steve's reflections also homed in on the issues of context, time, metrics, and how academia has changed over the course of his career. Quoting at length, he remarked:

> I was fortunate during that time that the way metrics played out were primarily quantitative the more you taught, wrote, and supervised PhD students etc., the more likely you were keep moving. Because I liked doing all those things, I saw it as a 'pact' with the institutions I worked for. However, when I first became a professor, I saw it initially as my part of my role to advise colleagues I worked with on how to manage those kinds of arrangements. My central piece of advice has always been "you can't possibly do everything – so what do you want to

fuck up?". It helped that I worked in a School which veered between irony and outright confrontation in its relationship with the broader university. Over time, I came to realize that the conditions had changed so much during the course of my own 'career' that this was no longer adequate guidance. In particular, the shift towards quality judgements rather than purely quantitative metrics (e.g., around journal outputs) has been comprehensibly destructive. I also got that balancing success and failure around so many criteria could be ethically corrosive. I started to do a lot more training around leadership, mentoring, and so on. But the more I did of it, the less confident I became in my own practice. And the less certain I became that my own experiences and practices were in any way relevant to inform someone embarking on a career in HE nowadays. (Steve)

When it comes to metrics, quantitative metrics are sometimes an easy target for kicking, but as Steve points out they can be useful for some people – indeed, it is often the case that those who don't like them happen to be on the wrong side of them, whereas those who do well out of them are in favour or at least ambivalent. But at a deeper level, Steve's comments show how in an earlier part of his career there seemed to be a simple, if somewhat crude, correlation between quantity and career progress. Gaming the system, in this state of affairs, was about knowing which numbers mattered the most and how to enhance them. Steve's realization that the game had changed, however, prompted him to question the value of his knowledge and advice about how to navigate the system.

Also instructive in Steve's above comments was his observation that metrics in academia were no longer preoccupied with 'quantity' but increasingly moving in the direction of 'quality', with some negative consequences. For example, in the various subject areas related to Business, academics in the UK are pushed to publish in journals that have a high-quality ranking (i.e., those listed on the much-debated ABS journal guide). The UK Research Excellence Framework is another obvious illustration of the increasing focus on quality over quantity. But who is it that determines the value of quality, how, and to what end? Who wins and who loses in this game of quality ranking, and is academia, and society, really better off for it? Indeed, what implications does this hold for the human resource development function of institutions?

Looking back on the period following the completion of his PhD, Craig reflected on the gymnastics he felt compelled to perform in order to twist his academic profile into a position

that could deliver a secure job. By the time a student finishes their PhD they are often an expert in a niche area, due to the requirement that PhD research deliver specialized 'original' knowledge. But some niches, he came to realize all too well, are better placed for leading to employment than others. Aside from contextual disciplinary prejudices, the vagaries of student numbers in this or that course have a major influence on where the work is, and where it isn't. The task therefore became, as he saw it: How can I repackage my expertise, achievements and interests in a way that they will be more palatable and hopefully attractive to academic decision makers? Depending on the circumstances, this at times involved *hiding* some of his academic achievements, in order to divert more attention to particular aspects of his profile. It also involved a 'trial and error' process of figuring out how best to tell the narrative of his academic career – the perfecting of the 'story' he wanted to sell, and the various versions of it for different audiences. Affiliated with this, Craig also came to realize the importance of speaking about things that people could easily connect to, ideally without having to overly stretch themselves, as well as the demand made by many academics that new ideas always be situated against and within existing orthodoxy. In fact, it was this very deliberate, if not cynical, attempt to advance his career that explicitly brought him to the idea of progress in the first place:

> After many years of producing research that was respected within niche academic communities but ignored by the rest of academia and society, I realized that one way of articulating my research interest in a way that made it meaningful to a broader spectrum of people was by focusing on *the idea of progress and its manifestations in society*. (Craig)

In Craig's case, the critique of progress became a way of achieving it in his career. He is of course not alone in this – all of the authors share in this paradoxical tension, illustrated most immediately by the production of this paper. That being said, such moments of 'self-critique' are perhaps infrequent; they certainly happen from time to time, but at the day-to-day level of work one mostly just 'gets on with it', leaving reflections of their hypocrisy for another day. In this respect, retaining integrity in academia is not easily done. As Ricky remarks:

> This brings forth notions of reflexivity, our networked position in a neo-colonial world, how we may unwillingly take heed to institutionally inscribed pathways that evoke individual, collective, and institutional 'progress' via quantifiable

metrices of achievement that must progress, a movement that at times loses sight of academic integrity. (Ricky)

## The Influence of Personal Characteristics on Navigating Career Progress

Comparing across their reflections, it is clear that academic cultures have shaped the participants' experiences in similar ways. Nonetheless, it is no less apparent that their experiences have differed respective to each of their personal characteristics, such as age, gender, and ethnicity, whilst also taking into account the larger neoliberal and longer historical contexts; notably the white, phallocentric nature of academia (Cunliffe, 2022). As the only woman in our group, we have been acutely aware that Louise's experiences of career and its progress will have differed from the rest of us. Whilst much has been written on how gender impacts the progress of peoples' careers, Louise very usefully points out that perhaps more could be said on how gender, and other demographic characteristics, shape the way that academics *conceptualize* career and progress:

> As research has highlighted, including during the pandemic, women disproportionately manage care responsibilities for both children and adults, which can make it more difficult to subscribe to traditional and linear career paths. Indeed, much has been written on women in academia and their experiences and outputs during COVID-19. Thus, it would also be interesting to consider how demographic characteristics and human capital variables influence academics' conceptualizations of career and progress. (Louise)

In a similar vein, Ricky reflected on the impact of ethnicity, from a historical and sociological perspective, bringing to the fore political questions regarding how career can be read. Put in the form of a question, how does the colonial history and racial aspects of academia impact the ease with which different individuals are able to navigate academic institutions? In his view, a critical reading of career is required to influence others and bring about change on these issues. To this end Ricky asks for a

> challenge to narrow views of career and progress … the rational enlightenment myth of progress, what Gellner (1972) describes as a 'secularized salvation'.

Western 'enlightenment' is built upon European thought via thinkers such as Kant, Hegel, Locke, and Hume, what Andrews (2021) describes as "White identity politics". Such 'foundational' thinkers bring forth the western celebrated achievements of 'democracy, science and politics', yet as Andrews (2021) points out these come from the exploits of coloniality, genocide, and slavery and the whitewashing of African Scholars. From a local perspective this brings into question the funding of institutions such as universities, as outlined in the Nottingham Universities and Historical Slavery project, bringing into question the foundations of wealth for Nottingham via tobacco (John Player, Imperial Tobacco), lace (plantations of cotton) and the mills within the regions (see Seymour, et al. 2015). Globally, The UN, IMF, World Bank, and World Trade Organization all play their part in administering colonial logic and neo-colonialism (Andrews, 2021, pp. xiii) all singing to the tune of 'progress' where a justification for neo-colonialism is "utterly indispensable to Western progress" (Andrews, 2021, p. 2) … decolonization of the western myth of progress, brings forth a decolonialization of 'career', to broaden career to the notion of "any social strand in a person's life" (Goffman, 1961, p. 127), so career can radiate in numerous directions, to evoke rhizomatic movement, not a confined simplified linear progression, and can include numerous activity, work, citizenship, art, creativity, family, health, and activism, as outlined in Gee (2016, 2017, 2019, 2020, 2022a). (Ricky)

As someone more 'advanced' or 'senior' in their career, Steve's positionality afforded him greater opportunity to compare the manner in which he navigated and viewed career across different stages of his life. When it comes to how one navigates and views career progress, and how they view the career progress of others, it matters where one is at in *their own* life-course and career, and its specific context. In other words, if things are different now compared to the start of Steve's career, it's not only because academia has changed, but also because *he* has – his circumstances, priorities, and ambitions:

My relationship to the notion of career has primarily been experiential. I am a beneficiary of the expansion of HE in the 1990s. At that time, and in the areas I worked in, it was possible to slide from final year of PhD studies to first Lectureships if you were able to demonstrate a research trajectory. During the

early years I had two small children with a partner who had gone back to study. We had little by way of income and took on a lot of debt. My principal motivation for career development was to get promoted in order to get us towards something resembling a secure financial footing. (Steve)

What becomes apparent in these reflections is how career is open to a broad range of facets outside of paid working activities. The reflections furthermore highlight how different positionalities not only influence one's career and its progress (or lack of it), but also how one *conceives* of it.

## Further Discussion

The reflections that emerged from within this project might be characterized as speaking to a broad ambivalence with the notion of 'progress' as an apt descriptor of how academic careers are experienced, in context, and over time. Whilst progress is non-negotiable in the sense that the individual performance indicators that constitute the primary way in which higher education institutions relate to their employees are fixed, the complexity of the ways these indicators operate in practice means that progress is typically a matter of understanding the 'game' which is played out at each point around them. This game is not stable, but changes in nature as one moves between various career points, in the manner of an extended process of 'levelling up' where the meaning and rules change with each successive stage. This means that unlike a traditional process of skill development, where there is assumed to be linear sequence of skills developing and unfolding, what is learnt at each 'level' may or may not be of value for the next. An academic career in retrospect is then the cumulative learning of having negotiated an individual trajectory across levels, with the prospect of a multiple further levels with as-yet-unspecified degrees of difficulty and complexity.

This is, of course, not the whole story. Each of the reflections orients to a broader range of values and to the personal and shared intellectual projects in which these are embedded. But these are to a certain extent parallel to the process of 'levelling up' in such a way that they sometimes mutually reinforce and at other times conflict. Indeed, the very sense in which these two forms of movement can be jointly considered appears to be variable and reflects both personal characteristics and where one currently feels one is in relation to a specific employer and to the higher education sector more generally. This raises the interesting question of what

progress 'feels like' in the distinct moments of convergence and divergence between levelling up and the development of an intellectual project. For instance, it is possible to feel that one is brought about at the cost of the other, or that 'progress' in one may ultimately secure the ability to return to the other. What seems to come across in the reflections in this project is the sense that career progress is marked by a series of progressive costs incurred by the efforts to hold levelling up and intellectual development together.

What then is the value of reflecting upon this process? At one level, reflections of this kind can be treated as research in the sense that they constitute emic data gathered from inside the process of academic progress. In a sector which is governed by an almost obsessive commitment to consultation, feedback, and dashboard management 'pulse checks' of staff and student opinions, providing descriptions of career experiences outside of a normative framework remains novel. There is typically very little space for discussion of career within the sector that is not, always, already structured in advance by some notion of professional development, in much the same way that there is very little actual physical space left on many university campuses which is not entirely functional (e.g., when even green space is marked as facilitating student or staff 'wellbeing'). The reflections might also be taken as a contribution to practice. But here again, this would be to establish in advance their meaning in relation to an established framework. For example, they are likely to speak to A5 (continuing professional development) and V4 (implications for professional practice) in the UK Professional Standards Framework. But what is actually at stake here is what the gesture of having to code the tension between levelling up and intellectual development as A5 and V5 means in relation to experiences of career progression. In this case professional standards seem to heighten rather than ease the paradoxes experienced.

Perhaps instead this is a kind of therapeutic practice that needs to be conducted off to the side of professional experience. Some of the reflections certainly seem to read that way, mixing the tone of confessional with a sense of becoming entwined in a 'knotted' situation without obvious resolution. Therapy is in itself a contested terrain in neoliberal economic orders. It is comparatively easy to view it as a process of 'fixing' up employees such that they can maintain or resume productive work as soon as possible (this is the explicit rationale underpinning the Improving Access to Psychological Therapies frontline intervention programme that is at the heart of NHS psychological therapies in the UK). This would be of a piece with the spirit of the kind of wellbeing and stress management programmes on offer in the UK HE sector, which focus on encouraging employees to manage their own responses to

difficulties at work rather than addressing the structural conditions and tensions which are most often the root causes of negative impact upon wellbeing.

There is one element of therapeutic practice that is particularly relevant here, which is the notion of 'self-critique'. The idea of the university as a site for critical reflection on political economy, which is so pithily captured in Stuart Hall's well-known phrase "the university is a critical institution or it is nothing", is currently seriously under question. Here there is a convergence between external pressures such as the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) government bill, which has significant implications for the very possibility of HE to support critical discourse, with internal pressures manifesting as widespread course closures and job cuts in the humanities and the purging of critical approaches in the social sciences (such as at the University of Leicester School of Business). Yet it is difficult to see how universities may be able to perform this crucial function as critical institutions in the future when the employees on which this depends find it difficult to formulate a meaningful critique of *their own* career trajectories. The work of developing a critical relation to the paradoxes of progress may then be seen to be part of the broader work of reflecting on what exactly it is that a university is for, beyond that of workforce training and societal impacts with economic value.

Recent works such as Peter Fleming's *Dark academia: How universities die* (2021) offer a bleak although highly resonant analysis of institutions that have been entirely re-tooled as engines of the neoliberal project. As a consequence, a significant proportion of employees find themselves engaged in working conditions and agendas that are not merely antithetical to their own values but are also actively corrosive of their own aspirations and wellbeing. Fleming writes of an "intense undercurrent of resignation" (2021, p. 5) sweeping universities, a sense that the sector is beginning to confront its own demise. But this 'end' has been long foretold, with precedents in Bill Readings' *The university in ruins* in 1991, and even earlier in E. P. Thompson's landmark *Warwick University LTD* in 1970. Attentive commentators on the HE sector in the UK have not lacked for evidence that the sector has been embarked on its own very particular career path for some time, and that it has taken only a decade more than the average working life to bring this towards something approaching completion. The real paradox of academic careers, at present, may then come from the sense that any individual wins in 'levelling up' are part of this slightly longer game of 'cashing out' at a sector-wide level. The further question becomes how such tensions and paradoxes might manifest in other areas of the labour market where the imperative of 'progress' is felt and shapes career development. The hope is that this paper can provoke a discussion of how progress is an imperative of career development in the twenty-first century and how we might critique this concept, especially

important given career studies recent social justice turn (Hooley, et al., 2018). Perhaps, the Academy could reflect upon the notion of sustainable careers (Valcour, 2017), and consider at an individual level, how careers are personal, develop within specific contexts, and over time, which may not always be in the linear way much careers literature refers to? This clearly has implications for HRD practice where it needs to reflexively consider how it may consolidate and reinforce discourses of progress and how this may reinforce power dynamics that serve the status quo, exacerbating the rhetoric of equality, diversity, and inequality.

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