**‘I’m my own biggest critic’ – an autoethnographic reflection of an early-career researcher’s first year as a Lecturer in Law**

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Embedding my discussions in the wider literature around the neoliberal university and adopting an autoethnographic approach (the keeping of a diary), I explore the thoughts and feelings that I have felt over my first year of teaching and researching in my first permanent lectureship, post PhD during the midst of a global pandemic and where strike action is evidently present. Using an inductive thematic analysis, I highlight three recurring themes: (1) Anxiety; (2) Imposter syndrome; and (3) Catastrophising – all of which are heavily interlinked and evidently present across the neoliberal higher education system. I use these themes to highlight how this has affected my own understanding of what it’s like to work in academia as a Lecturer in Law and in turn, how this has affected my feelings towards my job and more importantly, towards my teaching and research – aspects of my job which commonly come into conflict with each other. The final parts of this article puts forward suggestions on what early-career researchers can do to tackle their own insecurities and what individuals in the academy can also do to better support colleagues to create a form of collectiveness within the modern Law School.

Keywords: autoethnography; teaching and research; supporting early-career researchers

# Introduction

As with most law students starting their first year of a law degree, I envisioned my future as a solicitor. But it was never meant to be. Work experience with a legal firm cemented for me that being a practising lawyer, in its traditional sense, was not my calling. So why then academia? Simply, I love learning. I am also fascinated by the law and want to strive for social justice. Being an academic lawyer allows me to do a job I love, whilst also making a difference in the world – whether that be to law students or influencing public policy.

I am currently in my first permanent teaching and research law lectureship following the completion of my PhD in April 2020 at Keele University. Prior to my current permanent post, I was a temporary teaching fellow at a Russell Group University and before that, a GTA at a post 92 institution, on a three-year contract – all based in the UK. So, as you can imagine, getting that luxury permanent contract post-PhD was exhilarating. But even so, starting any new job post-PhD can be daunting. However, starting that position during a global pandemic and where strike action is evidently present, the daunting feeling that only an early-career researcher (ECR) can truly feel can be excruciating.

Mainly for my own mental health and taking inspiration from the work of Wilkinson[[1]](#footnote-1) and Holt,[[2]](#footnote-2) throughout the first year of my permanent lectureship I kept a diary of my thoughts, feelings, and activities during this period. It is only through utilising Gibbs’ model of reflection,[[3]](#footnote-3) that I noticed recurring themes in my own thought patterns. It was only upon this reflection that I noted the growing pressures I feel as an ECR, particularly as an ECR in law in England and Wales, where legal education is changing.[[4]](#footnote-4) This, of course, is extremely personal, but I feel it is important to share this process not only for those in the same position as me, but also for students.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Adopting an autoethnographic approach, in this paper I explore the thoughts and feelings that I have felt over my first year of teaching and researching law, embedding this in the wider literature around the neoliberal university. Though similar studies have been conducted,[[6]](#footnote-6) this paper offers a unique perspective of not only what it is like to be an ECR in their first permanent post, but also starting that position during a global pandemic, where strike action is common across the sector.[[7]](#footnote-7) Using an inductive thematic analysis, I highlight three interlocking themes: (1) Anxiety; (2) Imposter syndrome; and (3) Catastrophising. I use these themes to highlight how this has affected my own understanding of what it is like to be an academic lawyer and how this has affected my feelings towards my teaching and research. The final parts of this article outlines suggestions on how ECRs can tackle these issues and what individuals in the academy can also do to better support those working in academia for the first time.

**Contextualisation: The State of Higher Education in the UK**

There is no doubt that higher education in the UK is in a state of fluctuation. Strike action, audits and significant emphasis on student satisfaction is evidently present across all higher education institutions. Factors that are not just unique to the UK but present across the globe.[[8]](#footnote-8) Over the last 40 years, there has been an increasing trend in the number of students attending university, whilst at the same time funding has decreased.[[9]](#footnote-9) As a result, pressure continues to be placed on academics as we struggle to adapt to the continued expectations placed on us, particularly for ECRs:

The expectations of ECRs are multiple and demanding. They include, but are not limited to, providing: a multitude of measurable outputs and skills, publications, income generation through the acquisition of external grants, international collaboration, and teaching excellence, as well [as] proving that one can do all these things in combination and at pace.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Pressures I continue, and often fail, to balance. For Acker and Wagner, higher educational institutions are now ‘[…] operating on quasi-business principles in order to increase efficiency in the face of progressive under-funding by government[s] […].[[11]](#footnote-11) A clear consequence of the neoliberal university.

***The neoliberal university***

Neoliberalism can be defined as a form of reason that configures all aspects of existence in economic terms and is present in all aspects of public life, not just in universities. Put simply, neoliberalism is a political approach that favours free-market capitalism, deregulation, and reduction in government spending. There is a wealth of literature available on the neoliberal university, not just in the UK, but from across the world, with most writers critical of neoliberalism and higher education. In 2015 a public letter was signed by 126 senior academics in the UK concerned about universities becoming akin to small businesses.[[12]](#footnote-12) Yet the neoliberal university continues to flourish, whilst academics continue to buckle under the pressure.

Knowledge, including knowledge of the law, is no longer considered a useful tool in its own right, but used in exchange for money with academics being ‘forced to accept that metrics have become the currency of performance management in universities.’[[13]](#footnote-13) Arguably you could say this about most forms of employment – there is an exchange of services or knowledge for money. But the university setting *should* be different because ‘[…] space for critical thought, slow contemplation and transformative becoming for both student and university worker’[[14]](#footnote-14) *should* underpin the ethos of any educational system:

As a consequence, many university workers, academics, students and support staff, lament the recent changes as having ruined university culture and the very essence of what a university education was meant to deliver: graduates who learned civic responsibility and who could think and work positively toward a collective future without profit-making at the centre of every conversation or activity.[[15]](#footnote-15)

A notion I often struggle with. To be legally educated, is a privilege but currently ‘educational opportunities and services are transformed into tradeable national assets.’[[16]](#footnote-16) Audit ranking, both informally and formally, are part of the norm of being an academic. Nothing demonstrates this more in the UK than the Research Excellence Framework (REF).

‘The REF is the UK’s system for assessing the quality of research in UK higher education institutions’[[17]](#footnote-17) and is carried out by four UK funding councils responsible for research and higher education. Here, academic outputs, including journal articles, book chapters, monographs and impact case studies are ranked. The higher a university scores in REF, the more money it is allocated from the government. For academics who have research included in their contract, including myself, REF is something you cannot escape, though often comes last on the ‘to-do list’, as increasing student numbers, student satisfaction surveys and admin responsibilities are seen as priority.[[18]](#footnote-18)

But it is not just those on research contracts who feel the pressure of audits in the UKs higher educational system. As universities become more akin to small businesses, significant emphasis is placed on student satisfaction through audit ranking systems. Increased pressure to get students to complete the National Student Survey (NSS)[[19]](#footnote-19) and the creation and implementation of the Teaching and Excellence Framework (TEF)[[20]](#footnote-20) across universities in the UK, has placed further pressure on academics.

These audit ranking systems produce an ongoing sense of anxiety amongst academics and are a key driver in work-related stress within academia. As noted by Morrish:

The six-yearly cycle of the Research Excellence Framework (REF), its shifting regulations and requirements, the commonly understood threshold of 3\* quality outputs for submission, the implications of competition, the fear of repercussions for ‘failure’, as well as the inevitable anxiety which attends the detailed work of knowledge production, all add to stress among academics […] The Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) […] has increased pressure, with the requirement that student satisfaction, especially with assessment and feedback, be continually enhanced.[[21]](#footnote-21)

Audit ranking systems are the embodiment of the neoliberal university, in which the academy has now become ‘part of a wider system of anxiety production arising as part of the so-called “soft governance” of everything.’[[22]](#footnote-22)

Audit ranking systems are not just unique to universities in the UK, they are evidently present across the globe, as neoliberalism rises in other countries. For example, similar systems exist in Denmark,[[23]](#footnote-23) Iceland,[[24]](#footnote-24) and the Netherlands.[[25]](#footnote-25) Outside of Europe, audit systems exist in Australia,[[26]](#footnote-26) and India.[[27]](#footnote-27) All of which have had a profound effect on academics, including myself, whether research or teaching focused, or like me, a mixture of the both, with Castree *et al* arguing that neoliberalism and audits, across the globe, have deeply affected academia..[[28]](#footnote-28) The most significant consequences include:

[…] transforming the academic subject from labourer to human capital; favouring the market valuation of academic scholarship; fostering short-termism (in grants, in writing, in publishing) so as to be seen as ‘path-breaking’; necessitating monitoring and accounting systems to ensure both ‘value-for-money’ and ‘control of control’ for those who fund research and teaching […].[[29]](#footnote-29)

This has led to a culture of overworking and significant mental health issues.

***Overworking and Mental Health***

As the neoliberal university has flourished, the working conditions of academics have withered. Overworking is now evidently present, with the average academic in the UK giving around 3 months of free labour each year.[[30]](#footnote-30) Workload increases have almost obliterated the boundaries between work and non-work. Indeed, there is a significant gap between contractual work hours and hours actually worked,[[31]](#footnote-31) felt throughout universities.[[32]](#footnote-32)

For Maisuria, a significant consequence of the neoliberal university is the continued cuts in funding.[[33]](#footnote-33) Yet,

[…] academics are nevertheless expected to display an ever-rising record of grant-getting, project-managing, output-publishing and impact-demonstrating, often while also taking on a full complement of teaching and administration.[[34]](#footnote-34)

This increased pressure to succeed means often that we, as academics, feel like we have no choice but to complete tasks in our own time, particularly given that ‘[a]cademic work is typically characterised as individualised, self-managed and intrinsically motivating, with high levels of personal commitment.’[[35]](#footnote-35) All of which continues to put a strain on the mental health of those in higher education today, with the mental health crises in academia, for both staff and students, being well documented.[[36]](#footnote-36) Indeed, it has been reported that university staff in the UK are more stressed than the average British worker.[[37]](#footnote-37) A report commissioned by the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) found that 43% of academic staff exhibited symptoms of a least a mild mental health disorder.[[38]](#footnote-38) With many academics who suffer from mental health issues, directly blaming their heavy workloads, lack of support and isolation as driving forces for the deterioration in their mental health.[[39]](#footnote-39)

The HEPI report conducted by Morrish further highlighted the escalation in poor mental health amongst university staff, concluding, by reference to the work of Hall and Bowles, that higher education is creating an ‘anxiety machine’,[[40]](#footnote-40) linked to excessive workloads and matrix dominance. For Hall and Bowles, the anxiety machine of academia is not a coincidence, as articulated by Morrish:

[…] anxiety is designed into management practices so that it becomes a permanent feature of the academy. The calculated exploitation of employee anxiety about job security, promotion and performance adequacy is a key part of its business model.[[41]](#footnote-41)

Between 2009 and 2016 referrals for counselling for university staff, including academics and professional service staff, in the UK rose on average by 77%. Referrals to occupational health services, during the same period, rose on average by 64%.

Like neoliberalism, the rise in mental health conditions amongst university staff is not unique to the UK. Nor is it a new phenomenon. For instance, a study conducted in Australia in 2003 found that mental illness in academic staff was three to four times higher than that of the general population.[[42]](#footnote-42) More recently, research conducted in Canada, highlights the demands of the neoliberal university, which has placed significant physical and psychological tolls on staff.[[43]](#footnote-43)

The drive towards neoliberalism in higher education has resulted in:

‘constant revolutionising of production’ in tandem with significant ‘disturbance of all social conditions’ [wedging] universities into a state that is fairly described as ‘uncertainty and agitation’.[[44]](#footnote-44)

In turn, overworking and mental health issues have become the norm across the sector, both inside and outside of the UK, as often our careers depend on us being able to do it all, whilst maintaining positive metrics. Issues, which upon reflection of this research, underpin my own decision-making processes.

# Methods and Data Analysis

To conduct this research an autoethnographic approach was used. An autoethnographic study blends autobiographical and ethnographic methods, to create a therapeutic output for the researcher to reflect upon. As potently put by Ellis, Adam and Bochner

[a]utoethnography is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze [*sic*] (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno).[[45]](#footnote-45)

This form of research emerged following a ‘crisis of confidence’ in traditional scientific forms of research in the 1980s and was highly influenced by postmodernist approaches to research.[[46]](#footnote-46) It allows the researcher to write using their own voice, drawing on their own personal experiences and reflect on how these experiences have influenced their behaviours since, or in my case, how my experiences have influenced my own teaching and research practices, thereby linking my own ‘personal experience to issues in [my] social situation’ as an academic lawyer.[[47]](#footnote-47)

Autoethnographic research is contentious and has been criticised for ‘[…] being self-indulgent, narcissistic, introspective and individualised.’[[48]](#footnote-48) Indeed, Poerwandari suggests:

[…] a researcher might choose autoethnography not because they realize [*sic*] that they have a lot of stories to share to construct knowledge, but because they are lazy or unwilling to do their best to collect data.[[49]](#footnote-49)

Claims I fundamentally disagree with. As eloquently put by Hamden, autoethnographic studies are grounded in:

‘privileged knowledge,’ […] because it presents accounts from insiders or people with direct experience of the phenomenon, which at the same time can lead to better analysis of the complexity of problems.[[50]](#footnote-50)

Further, to counteract the claims that such research is ‘lazy’,[[51]](#footnote-51) ‘emotional’,[[52]](#footnote-52) or ‘selfish’,[[53]](#footnote-53) I have grounded my findings within the broader academic literature to illustrate the wider significance of my experiences, and ultimately to facilitate conversations.

During my first year of teaching and researching at Keele University I kept a diary.[[54]](#footnote-54) This was kept using Microsoft Word. Though Wilkinson[[55]](#footnote-55) suggests that writing notes on a computer is more akin to academic writing – a negative for them – and thus preferring to take paper notes, for me I found that writing on a laptop or a computer made it feel more like ‘research’ which in turn had a positive impact on my emotions. It felt like I was actually doing something productive on those days when it felt like I had not achieved anything. I started my field notes on 6th September 2021, at the start of the new academic year (6 months after starting my lectureship) and continued to take notes until 1st June 2022.

My field notes were then analysed using an inductive thematic analysis, which allowed for the processing of data coding without a pre-existing coding framework.[[56]](#footnote-56) To do this, I printed my written notes and started to code using a flexible coding system. Once this had been completed, I had 13 codes. To narrow this down, I regrouped my codes using a more rigid approach. So, for instance, instead of ‘organisation’ and ‘admin issues’ as two different codes, I merged these together and gave them the umbrella term ‘anxiety’ after finding a direct link between my anxiety decreasing when I was more organised, and admin issues were at bay, as shown in Table 1. Overall, I reviewed my data 3 times over the course of 4 weeks, narrowing the codes down (see Table 2) to three interlocking themes: (1) Anxiety; (2) Imposter syndrome; and (3) Catastrophising. It was only upon this reflection, that I realised how much my mental health had been impacted by the continuous pressures placed upon me by the neoliberal university.

Table 1. Data codes and themes: first and second analysis

Table 2. Data codes and themes: second and final analysis

**Research Ethics**

Throughout the research and writing process, I ensured my work was underpinned by basic ethical considerations, most notably, do no harm.[[57]](#footnote-57) When referring to others, I use the term ‘student’ or ‘colleague’. Though it could be argued that ‘harm’ maybe generated by the honest reflections of my account, most notably to my career,[[58]](#footnote-58) particularly given that I have not anonymised my institution. Indeed, this form of research ‘can promote vulnerability, nakedness, and shame’.[[59]](#footnote-59) However, I feel it is important that we are open and honest with our experiences in academia because it is only through having conversations that we can enact change.[[60]](#footnote-60) Further it would be counterintuitive to anonymise the institution in which the research took place, as this information is publicly available online.[[61]](#footnote-61)

**Results**

The overall data revealed three interlinking themes: (1) Anxiety; (2) Imposter Syndrome; and (3) Catastrophising.

***Anxiety***

Anxiety can be defined as ‘a feeling of unease, such as worry or fear, that can be mild or severe’[[62]](#footnote-62) and is common across the globe.[[63]](#footnote-63) Anecdotally, it is common in academia,[[64]](#footnote-64) though there is little empirical evidence to support such claims.[[65]](#footnote-65) Many discussions are undertaken anonymously and although mental health issues are now commonly accepted in society in general, arguably academia has a long way to go, as from my own experience of working in the academy for 6 years, it is not spoken about openly.[[66]](#footnote-66)

Feelings of anxiety are normal, especially for me. It is something I have come to accept is part of my personality but it was not until reflecting upon my field notes, that I noticed the extent of my anxiety and how it can be impacted quite quickly by what might be considered ‘trivial’ to others:

Who knew it would be the lack of a computer in my office at work that would break me? … I have a significant amount of teaching over the next few weeks (at least 4 hours every day for the next two weeks – covering an array of topics) where I need to print teaching material[s]. How can I do that without a computer? I feel sick at the thought of teaching again in the morning and my anxiety is high […] I am an organised person, and this is not helping me.

(Diary extract 31/09/21)

Organisation and anxiety are heavily linked for me. This can be considered as part of my own anxiety-provoking assumptions (APAs) – false beliefs that anxiety suffers carry with them (for me, imposter syndrome, fear of failure, overthinking and catastrophising – to name but a few). Indeed, ‘[a]cademic life frequently triggers anxious thoughts and feelings connected to […] APAs: approval, perfectionism, control, vulnerability and dependency.’[[67]](#footnote-67) Control and organisation, go hand-in-hand for me. It is clear from my diary extracts, that I place significant weight on organisation to control my anxiety:

Tomorrow is my first in-person lecture since 2019. My anxiety is through the roof, I feel sick […] I’ve had these notes prepared for at least 2 months now. The more organised I feel, the better I can control the butterflies in my tummy.

(Diary extract, 09/03/22)

This means that I spend a lot of time on my teaching preparation, for what might be in some instances, a class lasting an hour with only a handful of students. This is amplified further by being an academic lawyer, whereby my teaching preparation needs to be continually updated, to reflect the constant changes to the law. It also meant, that due to timetabling issues and my need to feel in control and organised, in the second semester (January 2022 – June 2022) where possible, I pushed my teaching back to March, as it was not known at this point if we would be teaching face-to-face or online due to the rise in Covid cases across the UK.

Though this helped my anxiety in January, come March, I regretted this decision, where my anxiety amplified dramatically as my teaching obligations also increased:

Arrrrr [*sic*] I have so much teaching this month. Why did I put it off? I feel physically shattered, mentally exhausted and just unwell in general.

(Diary extract 01/03/22)

My anxiety therefore did not only just affect my physical behaviour, for instance, being overly organised, it also had a significant impact on my physical and mental well-being, illustrated in the extracts above, where I often mention feeling physically sick. Physical symptoms of anxiety are not uncommon. For me, sickness, headaches, and panic attacks are common occurrences when I am feeling anxious.

***Imposter Syndrome***

In essence, imposter syndrome is a feeling of not belonging. It is often associated with not feeling intelligent enough to be in a role. It is experienced by many working in academia,[[68]](#footnote-68) especially women.[[69]](#footnote-69) It is a feeling, like that of my anxiety, I experience regularly, in both my teaching and research:

I have been working on this article now for the best part of 12 months. It has been bounced back to me so many times, I just cannot bring myself to open the email with the next lot of corrections. I need this article for probation purposes but maybe this job is not meant for me. Maybe I am not good enough to be here. I’ll leave the email for now and complete some admin tasks instead. I know that I am my own biggest critic.

(Diary extract 06/12/21)

Throughout my diary extracts, it is apparent that my fear of failure intertwines directly with my imposter syndrome and in turn, to deal with these intense feelings of not feeling ‘good enough’ I procrastinate. Procrastination is considered the process of putting a task off by distracting yourself with something else, despite knowing that you will be worse off in the long run. Like that of imposter syndrome, it is a common occurrence in academia.[[70]](#footnote-70)

In the extract above, I deal with imposter syndrome by completing admin-related tasks, in this instance, organising the virtual learning environment for one of my modules. My imposter syndrome tells me that I am not good enough for this role and, in turn, procrastination is better than failure.[[71]](#footnote-71) It is important to remember, ‘[w]e [academics] do not enjoy slacking. If we appear to be slacking, it is typically avoidance behaviour coupled with intense guilt for not getting our work done.’[[72]](#footnote-72) In other examples, highlighted in my notes, I tidy my office; I distract myself with assessment marking and message colleagues on Microsoft Teams to see if they were free for a chat.

Not only does imposter syndrome result in procrastination for me, but it also means I spend a considerable amount of time on other tasks that should only take a few minutes to complete. A prime example of this, highlighted throughout my diary extracts, is emails:

I needed to chase [a colleague] about research interviews that I need to complete by the end of the month. But recruitment has been slow. What if I email them and they say that the organisation [omitted to maintain confidentiality] no longer wants to take part? I am just not good enough.

(Diary extract 16/03/22)

I eventually did send the email, but this was nearly 6 hours after I originally thought I need to do this. Similarly, in an earlier extract:

I have spent so much time on this article, maybe I need to go back to the original journal I approached to see if they would reconsider it for publication … but what if they say no? What if I am blacklisted from publishing with this journal ever again? What if this article never gets published and in turn, I fail my probation?

(Diary extract 01/10/21)

I did eventually send the email, almost 8 days later. Arguably, these examples symbolise the culture of perfectionism that the neoliberal university breeds, for both staff and students.[[73]](#footnote-73)

***Catastrophising***

Both my anxiety and my imposter syndrome lead significantly to overthinking and in turn, my ability to catastrophise, particularly when it comes to teaching:

I felt so underprepared before teaching today. The module I am on is very intense … I was wide awake most of the night. I think today’s teaching is going to be bad and in turn, I will be found out (imposter syndrome).

(Diary extract 13/10/21)

Later extracts from the same day reveal that these worries were all in my head:

the worry was for nothing … I DO KNOW STUFF! [*sic*] I was able to get the class to speak for the first time and was thanked afterwards by several students.

(Diary extract 13/10/21)

My ability to catastrophise is evidently present in other parts of my job:

Today has been horrific. From the moment I woke up to the end of the working day, everything and I mean EVERYTHING, seemed to go wrong. I did a radio interview. It went bad. The line kept breaking up. The presenter seemed to dislike me. I felt shut down. Public engagement is a big part of my research and career, I’ve ruined it. I am not going to be asked to do a radio interview again. I have spent the day crying (not helped that I left my laptop charger at work [*sic*]).

(Diary extract 23/02/22)

I carried this worry with me into the remainder of the week, often feeling sick when thinking back to the interview. I was determined I would never do a radio interview again. But just over a month later, I accepted another interview:

Get back on the horse they say. And I did that today. I accepted a radio interview, and it went so well. Even [my colleague] in the university communications department got in touch to congratulate me (I had spoken to [them] previously about THAT interview). Today is a good day.

(Diary extract 31/03/22)

But this feeling of rejoice, upon reflection, often came a little late, the catastrophising had significantly taken hold, which in turn flared my imposter syndrome and my anxiety.

**Reflections**

It is evident that all three themes above are heavily interlinked, the more anxious I feel, the more I feel that I am an imposter within academia and, in turn, the more I catastrophise, as illustrated in Figure 1. Put simply, my feelings are not exclusive and often once one is triggered, it will be closely followed by another. For instance, utilising an example from above, my imposter syndrome around my research and my fear of being found a ‘fraud’ results in my overthinking and my inability to send an email, which in turn results in anxiety. This vicious bidirectionality cycle of anxiety, imposter syndrome and catastrophising impacts every aspect of my working life. From my teaching, where I often experience physical symptoms such as headaches or nausea due to an increase in anxiety, to my research where I may lay awake at night thinking about how I am not good enough for this part of my job. Each has a significant impact on my physical and mental well-being and is heavily underpinned by my imposter syndrome, with Israel suggesting that these feelings I experience, are ‘common demon[s] among academics, although it is not openly expressed.’[[74]](#footnote-74)

Figure 1: The bidirectionality cycle of anxiety, imposter syndrome and catastrophising.

Anxiety, imposter syndrome and catastrophising are inevitable in the neoliberal university, where a ‘publish or perish’ culture has been created in the wake of the growing emphasis placed on the REF, with a third of academics aged 25 to 34 feeling the pressure to publish.[[75]](#footnote-75) As potently put by O’Gorman:

We [academics] work under conditions of surveillance […] Our universities provide us with enhanced opportunities to worry about whether we’re ‘performing’ to the right level. Is this research good enough? Is this teaching good enough? Is this public-engagement work valuable enough? Am I showing ‘leadership,’ doing ‘collaborative research,’ applying for enough grants? Oh, yes, and have I got my ‘work-life balance’ right? [...] The modern university is a breeding ground for worry.[[76]](#footnote-76)

Pressures I continue to feel daily.

Open, honest, and public conversations about the mental health strains of working in academia are hard to come by and where conversations do take place, as noted at the start of this article, these are often done anonymously. However, through informal conversations with colleagues, I know I am not the only one experiencing significant anxiety, imposter syndrome or an ability to catastrophise every little event when it comes to teaching and/or research. It was, however, only upon reflection of my diary extracts, that I noticed that I have found coping mechanisms to deal with these intense feelings, which in turn has helped me attempt to break the bidirectionality cycle.

***Community and collectiveness***

Feeling part of a group can be considered a normal human emotion[[77]](#footnote-77) and in academia, where it can be, as noted by Kenny,[[78]](#footnote-78) incredibly lonely at times, community and collectiveness are important. However, it’s an aspect of academic life that has been heavily impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic.[[79]](#footnote-79) It was not until reflecting on my diary extracts that I realised how much emphasis I placed on community and collectiveness and how this helped reduce my anxiety:

I enjoyed today. A group of us went out after work, a welcome dinner if you will. It was amazing to feel part of something.

(Diary extract 06/10/21)

But this feeling was often short-lived. As the academic year went into full swing, and strike action was on the horizon, I felt the community collectiveness drop and in turn, this impacted my anxiety:

With strike action around the corner, I do not know what to do. I feel guilty for my students, I feel guilty for my career (what if I get behind). I feel like there is no right or wrong answer. Strike action is meant to make you feel part of something […].

(Diary extract 16/10/21)

Strike action is supposedly, anecdotally, meant to make you feel part of a collective group, something I did not feel personally. Instead, I felt isolated and in turn, this increased my anxiety. As the academic year progressed and my colleagues got busier, that isolation continued to play a huge part in my anxiety. This is a significant consequence of neoliberalism as it increases loneliness and compromises our well-being by ‘increasing competition and […] reducing people’s sense of connection to others.’[[80]](#footnote-80)

However, when I did look for a place to belong, I did find collectiveness and community, sometimes it’s just hard to locate, particularly during a vicious bidirectionality cycle of anxiety, imposter syndrome and catastrophising. Most notably, I found collectiveness in writing support groups, a mentor (whether formal or informal) you feel comfortable talking to, an important lifeline for an ECR, and a support system of colleagues – something I always had but mainly due to a mixture of anxiety and imposter syndrome, I was afraid to seek out.

Collectiveness can be found; you just need to find your ‘people’ and ask for help – something that is easier said than done. Established colleagues reaching out to ECRs offering direct support, even when it may look like they have everything together, can provide a lifeline, when imposter syndrome, anxiety and catastrophising is stifling. A colleague reaching out, telling you that you are doing something right, can help with solidifying your place in academia – something we all need to do more of. Indeed, when I eventually got my article published, which had caused me significant worry at various points during the academic year, the sharing of the article across Twitter by academics in the same field as myself, gave me hope that I could do this job. A simple ‘retweet’ can create such joy.[[81]](#footnote-81) Where that community has been lost due to Covid or industrial action, we need to prioritise finding it again.

***Space***

In academia, time to think and the ability to walk away from our research and teaching is important but something I have only just discovered:

This morning, before teaching, I made myself get up early to get to the gym and I feel so much better for it. Teaching went ace [*sic*]. I felt on top of [my] game and the anxiety I have felt all week seems to have lapsed, not gone completely, but so much better than it was.

(Diary extract 04/12/21)

Coming straight into the world of academia from a PhD, it is often difficult to normalise timeout. Making time for myself by going to the gym, my happy place, made me a better Lecturer. It reduced my anxiety and in turn, I felt this during the teaching session. It also made me a better researcher, as it was only when I took some time out that I could find the space to think and later that day, to write – an important aspect of my job that often gets lost in the day-to-day life of an academic in the neoliberal university. But this continuous mantra of being able to do it all is impossible to maintain.

We need to be more open in academia that it is okay to take a break, to in fact, normalise taking a break – especially where it is considered extremely normal for academics to be working evenings, weekends and during annual leave.[[82]](#footnote-82) This way of academic life is unsustainable and though strike action is ‘fighting’ against this, we all need to practice what we preach. Or as potently put by Jonepier and van de Sande, ‘[…] without wanting to engage in “academic victim blaming”, we also need to look at ourselves.’[[83]](#footnote-83)

***Being your own cheerleader***

Support from colleagues can only go so far, we need to recognise and celebrate our own achievements. Though perhaps considered slightly narcissistic to some, over my 6 years of working in academia, I have kept physical copies of my achievements. From a printed copy of my first ever journal publication to a picture of me on the BBC’s ‘The Big Questions’. I use these objects on the days when my imposter syndrome and catastrophising is ripe to prove to myself that I can do this job, and that I am good enough. I know colleagues who have taken a similar approach with emails from students. For Israel she acknowledges how she ‘clings’ to tracking citations, Research Gate Scores and the views on her TED talk as it helps her ‘to persist through bouts of self-doubt.’[[84]](#footnote-84)

Although I do not think the imposter syndrome will ever completely vanish, I found that this approach works for me:

It has been a bad day. An article rejection nearly broke me. I do try but it seems impossible. My imposter syndrome was so strong, I felt the urge just to give up, but then I remembered, whilst looking at the ‘wall of narcissism’ that I have successes and one rejection does not define the type of academic I am.

(Diary extract 05/05/22)

After all, we all need to be our own cheerleaders. In turn, those working in the academy need to normalise failure more. It is fantastic showcasing the success, but we also need to shine a light on the ‘failures’.

# Conclusion

Starting any new position in academia as an ECR can be a struggle, but add to this an ongoing global pandemic, strike action, and a cost-of-living crisis, that struggle is intense. In the midst of a bidirectionality cycle of anxiety, impostor syndrome and catastrophising, it can feel impossible to feel you are ‘good enough’ for academia, especially as the neoliberal university looks like it’s here to stay. For me, all three feelings, anxiety, imposter syndrome and catastrophising, have a significant impact on my physical and mental well-being, alongside impacting my teaching and research. However, this research not only allowed me to explore these feelings in-depth, but it also allowed me to accept that these feelings are ‘normal’ – just not often spoken about publicly. They are in essence, the product of the neoliberal state. But the effects of the neoliberal university are not just felt on academics, students are also heavily impeded as

[…] working on the academic conveyor belt we process student work and students in a manner that is dauntingly benign, unhuman but efficient […] The student experience of being processed through the neoliberal university system can arguably be equally productively efficient, distant, disembodied and numb. Still, everyone is working toward student graduation, at whatever cost.[[85]](#footnote-85)  

With the cost often being the mental well-being of both staff and students.[[86]](#footnote-86)

If we really do want to create change in academia, which support for strike action seems to suggest, we need to be more open about the struggles, whilst also helping to find solutions:

I have never heard anyone talk about work they never published, so it is easy to assume everyone else finished everything they started, that I am the only one who abandoned some projects on the cusp of publication […] Only now that I am accomplished enough to feel like no one will question my contribution to the field can I admit that I questioned it all along.[[87]](#footnote-87)

For me I have found that keeping a record of my successes, no matter how small, allowed me to directly reflect on the ‘good’ instead of the ‘bad’; taking time away from my work made me a better researcher and lecturer; and put simply, just taking the plunge. But the pressure should not just be on the individual to find coping mechanisms when struggling with aspects of academia, there are ways in which those also working in the academy can also support ECRs. For example, retweeting or sharing a person’s work within your own networks; normalising failure; and most importantly, helping to foster a community of encouragement as

[w]ith appropriate guidance and support, challenges can be turned into learning opportunities and a supportive academic environment can make the difference between being overwhelmed and succeeding.[[88]](#footnote-88)

**Limitations and Future Research**

It is acknowledged that this research project only represents the views of one ECR based at one UK Higher Education institution, though where relevant I have used the wider literature to evidence my experiences. Future research in this area would seek to understand the perspectives of other ECRs across other institutions to verify my own experiences.

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# Declaration of Interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

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