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Creating reluctant academic intrapreneurs? A literature review

Crighton, D and Shepherd, W

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intrapreneurs? A literature
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**David Crighton
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About the author(s)

David Crighton and William Shepherd are researchers at the Transformative Enterprise Research Group-TERG in Paisley, Scotland.

Route correspondence to email: will.shepherd@uws.ac.uk

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Kingsley O Omeihe, Editor-in-Chief, TERG Working Paper Series, Paisley,
Scotland. King.omeihe@uws.ac.uk

Executive Summary

This working paper explores the changing roles of university lecturers, who are expected to act as intrapreneurs within their institutions. Through a literature review, this paper highlights the impact of academic capitalism on pedagogy, with lecturers balancing market relevance and academic rigour. It discusses the pressures on lecturers to embrace intrapreneurship, often driven by institutional demands, financial pressures, and performance metrics. These pressures can lead to the emergence of 'reluctant academic intrapreneurs,' who adopt entrepreneurial practices out of necessity rather than enthusiasm.

The paper identifies key areas for further research, including the impact of academic capitalism on pedagogy, lecturers' adaptation to intrapreneurial roles, and innovation management within academic institutions. It also acknowledges the limitations of this theoretical review, emphasising the need for empirical validation to support the theories discussed.

Overall, this paper contributes to the ongoing discourse on the evolving role of university lecturers in a higher education landscape driven by market forces, highlighting the opportunities and challenges of academic capitalism and intrapreneurship.

Background Statement

In recent years, the landscape of higher education has been reshaped by the forces of academic capitalism, significantly influencing universities worldwide. This shift toward market-driven practices in academic institutions has opened new discussions about the role of university lecturers, not just as educators and researchers, but also as potential intrapreneurs. The integration of business principles and competitive market dynamics into higher education poses challenges for academic staff, as highlighted by various authors. For instance, increasing workloads (Sabri, 2013; Fleming, 2021) and the positioning of academics as service providers (Nixon, Scullion, and Hearn, 2018; Wong and Chiu, 2019) contribute to precarious working conditions driven by systems of forced distribution (Smith, 2013; Thiel, 2019). These factors significantly impact the mental health of academic staff (Warren, 2017).

While acknowledging these real concerns, the focus of this paper is to explore how academic staff undertake the role of 'reluctant academic entrepreneur' within this climate, seeking security amidst volatility. Further, this working paper explores how the evolving nature of academic capitalism in higher education can create fertile ground for lecturers to adopt intrapreneurial roles, leveraging their unique position within universities to initiate and drive internal innovations that align with educational and market demands.

A brief history of Higher Education

In 1939, university attendance in the UK was limited to less than 2% of the population, establishing an exclusive educational environment. This exclusivity meant university education was a privilege for a select few, with financial grants available for successful students. From 1939 to 1961, the landscape of higher education expanded, with both the number of institutions and student enrolment increasing, from about 50,000 to 113,000 (Collini, 2012). Despite this growth, demand for university education continued to surpass supply, with more applicants than available spaces. Academic staff had autonomy, were secure in their work, were well remunerated and positioned as the key figures in the university system (Foskett, 2011). This period saw a relatively undeveloped higher education market, as universities experienced minimal market pressures. The consistent excess of demand over supply meant market forces remained limited (Moser, 1988).

The Robbins Report acknowledged growing demand for higher education and introduced four main principles: skill development for work, producing graduates with problem-solving skills, enhancement for learning and knowledge, and developing a sense of common citizenship (Robbins, 1963). Moreover, the report suggested elevating polytechnics to university status and ensuring university access for all qualified individuals. This can be seen as the first steps towards what would become a neoliberal market-based strategy, although the concept didn't take root in western societies until the 1970's (Harvey, 2005). Post-Robbins, a binary system in higher education emerged categorising universities into academic or vocational providers (Collini, 2012), political will had shifted to focus on widening participation.

The 1970s is widely regarded as the decade when higher education in the UK underwent changes that would shape the sector for generations to come. Scholars such as Fawbert (2003), Furedi (2011) and Stuart (2015) describe how government interventions under both the Labour government of James Callaghan and the Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher encouraged academic institutions to rethink their place in society. Of course, Radice (2013) suggests that after Callaghan's speech, the alignment of the higher education sector with the interests of the state could be centrally controlled by negotiating grant income on an annual basis, as opposed to the previously accepted model based on five-year forecasts. This allowed the central government to exert closer control over the sector's direction.

As higher education transitioned from this elite model to a focus on widening opportunities to more students, Universities undertook organisational changes due to the shift in the balance of power within universities. Departments became cost centres with decentralised budgetary responsibility, so that decisions were now influenced by market factors rather than being a purely academic.

This introduction of a neoliberal ideology placed students as key stakeholders in these institutions, recasting them as consumers for the university's services (Dolinsky, 1994; Hartman and Schmidt, 1995; Hill, 1995). Thus, creating value tensions for academic staff and their approach to teaching. As the drive to meet consumer demands intensifies, the environment in which the 'reluctant entrepreneur' can thrive becomes more pronounced.

The role of neoliberalism

At this stage, it is useful to address the vexed problem of the possibility of neoliberalism in higher education. Indeed, neoliberalism is primarily a politically driven economic ideology that champions societal progress through strategies that diminish state intervention and prioritise individual accountability (Harvey, 2005). This ideology, by fostering choice, theoretically empowers individuals, enabling them to subtly influence the quality and variety of goods and services. In this framework, a neoliberal government's role is to cultivate free markets and ensure transparent consumer access to information about goods and services. According to Sandel (2012), this is precisely why, in sectors like education where free markets are lacking, neoliberal regimes tend to establish regulations promoting market activities.

A key aspect of neoliberal policies, as Klein (2015) observes, is shifting financial responsibilities to individuals. In the realm of higher education, this manifests as students funding their studies through fees, fostering a sense of financial self-reliance that parallels entrepreneurial principles. This approach, encouraging students to perceive their education as a personal investment, potentially alters the dynamics of teaching and learning in universities. This underscores why Brooks (2017) suggests that educational policies and campus cultures increasingly position students as pivotal figures, akin to stakeholders in a business enterprise. Sandel (2012) highlights the importance of consumer choice in valuing academic disciplines, mirroring a market-driven approach. Market factors like competition for student recruitment and an emphasis on 'employability' to demonstrate degree value contribute to the vocational tilt in higher education (Collini, 2012). This trend aligns with the entrepreneurial focus on practical skills and market relevance.

Furthermore, the evolution of England's higher education system, influenced by a series of government-commissioned reports (Browne, 2010; Dearing, 1997; Robbins, 1963) and legislative changes, has introduced a paradigm shift. These shifts have not only redefined the role of academics but have also created the climate in which academics can adopt, reluctantly or otherwise, entrepreneurial opportunities within the sector. The current uncertain HE landscapes, therefore, presents possibilities for the 'reluctant entrepreneur', in terms of curriculum design, research and the broader educational experience. Taking this opportunity allows for academics to consolidate their position in a volatile labour market.

Neoliberalism's impact on higher education can be substantially beneficial, as it cultivates an environment of market competitiveness and orientation that spurs innovation and streamlines operations. This philosophy ensures that academic programs are attuned to the evolving needs of the workforce, making them more relevant and tailored to career-oriented goals. It advocates for students to invest in their education, perceiving it as a worthwhile venture, which in theory, fosters a more involved and enthusiastic student body. Importantly, this economic approach creates expansive opportunities for universities. It invites avenues for private sector investment and collaborations, enriching educational resources and driving technological progress. Ultimately, by embracing neoliberal principles, higher education institutions can transform into more agile, market-responsive entities, poised for global competitiveness, and equipped to navigate the demands of a rapidly changing world.

Academic Capitalism

The recent developments in England's higher education sector have significantly steered universities towards a more financially driven focus. Fleming (2021) starkly observes that universities, once grounded in a public service ethos, have transformed into entities prioritising income, growth, and outputs, resembling business enterprises. This shift necessitates efficient internal systems, with vice chancellors operating like CEOs, focusing on extracting maximum value from academic departments (Walker *et al.*, 2019). The notion of departments as mere 'cost centres' has evolved; now they are expected to generate surplus, aligning their viability with their financial contribution to the university (Raddice, 2013; Fleming, 2021).

This transition towards a business-like approach is underpinned by the integration of market mechanisms within the sector, where fostering competition is seen as a means to improve 'quality' (Ingleby, 2021). However, adopting market values can lead to prioritising short-term financial gains, sometimes at the cost of academic standards and over-recruitment (Williams, 2013).

The concept of academic capitalism is influenced by the dynamics of a knowledge economy (Lynch, 2006; Olssen and Peters, 2005; Radice, 2013). This concept involves monetising research outcomes through industry partnerships and private ventures. Universities package and sell knowledge to students as modules aimed at enhancing their future earnings (Collini, 2012; Feldman and Sandoval, 2018; Fleming, 2021; Symes and Drew, 2016). For institutional survival, there is a focus on 'research excellence' and 'world-class teaching,' often reflected in mission statements (Sauntson and Morrish, 2011). However, the pursuit of 'excellence' can become more of a marketing tool than a substantive goal (Collini, 2012), supporting a metrics-driven narrative where excellence needs measurable indicators.

Adopting capitalist ideals at the institutional level leads to adjustments in internal processes to manifest these values. Dependency on student fees (Feldman and Sandoval, 2018) compels universities to maximise teaching output, especially from part-time staff (Mason and Megoran, 2021). This economic necessity influences pedagogical approaches, often resulting in simplified teaching content as efficiency becomes paramount (Olssen and Peters, 2005).

The removal of the binary divide in 1992, allowing former polytechnics to broaden their course offerings, further fuelled market competition and led to a surge in enrolments, especially in post-1992 institutions (McGettigan, 2013). However, this growth coincided with a decline in per capita student funding by the mid-1990s, spurring the national Dearing inquiry. The Dearing Report (1997) sought not only to preserve the accessibility of higher education but also to provide financial security to institutions through the introduction of tuition fees (McGettigan, 2013).

The initial steps towards tuition fees and the switch from maintenance grants to loans did not fully address the financial challenges of the expanding student population (McGettigan, 2013). The Browne Review's proposals for removing student number caps and introducing variable tuition fees were aimed at stabilising the sector financially. Although the government lifted recruitment caps, it limited tuition fees to £9,000, marking a significant shift in university operations towards a model that emphasises financial sustainability and growth (Scott, 2013; Hillman, 2013). This financial orientation has fundamentally changed the landscape of higher education in England, embedding market-driven strategies at the core of university operations.

The student customer

The Higher Education and Research Act of 2017 introduced a rigorous regulatory framework, aligning state goals with those of students, now viewed as customers. This shift places emphasis on universities showing effectiveness in preparing graduates, creating a focus on academic consumerism linked to the concept of sovereignty of the consumer (Slaughter and Rhoades, 2004). In the market-driven higher education environment, the relationship between students and academic staff features tensions from the 'student-customer' concept, conflicting with educational values (Ingleby, 2015; Lomas, 2007). Despite findings from Universities UK (2017) that students do not view themselves as customers, the language and methods of educational institutions and regulators shape a 'student-customer' mindset, catering to and protecting customer needs.

Haywood, Jenkins, and Molesworth (2011a), and Symes and Drew (2016) challenge the idea of managing student expectations. University advertising often attracts students with promises of an ideal future life, focusing on potential careers and material achievements. Haywood *et al.* (2011a) critiques the use of imagined futures in marketing.

This abundance of options results in conservative learning attitudes in higher education (Nixon, Scullion, and Hearn, 2012). That's is why Playle (1996), Collini (2012), and Nixon et al. (2012) express concerns in a neoliberal educational system, where student choices as customers impact subject value, presenting a challenge. Unpopular courses may face closure, pushing educators to prioritise student satisfaction.

From Academic to Intrapreneur

The evolving landscape of higher education presents a complex challenge for academics. As Goh and Abdul-Wahab (2020) highlight, universities navigate a confluence of factors: technological advancements, shifting student demographics (Busch and Schwerin, 2022), and heightened competition (Marginson, 2006; Crammond *et al.*, 2018). In response, intrapreneurship – where individuals act entrepreneurially within their organizations (Antoncic and Hisrich, 2003; Crammond *et al.*, 2022) – has become a central strategy.

Universities are actively pushing lecturers to embrace intrapreneurial roles (Lanford, 2021). This shift aims to maintain competitiveness, secure funding, and drive innovation. However, for academics accustomed to traditional roles, this transition can be demanding. The reward system now incentivizes lecturers to move beyond teaching and research, with career advancement tied to intrapreneurial achievements such as developing new programmes, fostering industry partnerships, or engaging in cross-departmental collaborations (Schulze-Cleven and Olson, 2017; Murray *et al.*, 2024).

Financial constraints further fuel this change. As Slaughter and Rhoades (2004) note, lecturers are increasingly expected to secure external funding through research grants, industry collaborations, or other entrepreneurial endeavors. This financial pressure can lead to a pursuit of intrapreneurial activities, with academics seeking partnerships and revenue-generating projects to meet university expectations. Collaboration is another key driver. Universities are encouraging lecturers to engage in joint projects and cross-departmental initiatives, pushing them outside their traditional silos. While this fosters innovation, it can also increase workload and administrative burdens (Slaughter & Leslie, 2001). The push towards intrapreneurship can feel more like a mandate than a choice.

Universities track these activities through metrics measuring industry engagement, applied research output, and program innovation. Resistance to these changes can translate to job insecurity or limited career advancement in a workplace that prioritizes adaptability and innovation (Lanford, 2021). The combined pull of career incentives, financial pressures, collaborative requirements, and performance metrics creates a powerful force encouraging lecturers to embrace intrapreneurship. Even hesitant academics often find themselves with little choice but to adapt to the changing landscape.

However, these pressures risk creating a workforce of reluctant intrapreneurs. When lecturers are pushed into such roles due to institutional demands, financial pressures, or performance metrics (Cantwell and Kauppinen, 2014), their adoption of intrapreneurial practices may be driven by necessity rather than genuine enthusiasm (Schulze-Cleven and Olson, 2017). This reluctance can manifest as a lack of genuine innovation and engagement, with academics fulfilling minimum requirements to maintain job security or career progression.

The consequences of fostering reluctant intrapreneurs can be significant. A lack of full engagement with the entrepreneurial spirit can stifle creativity and collaboration. This, in turn, hinders the ability of universities to cultivate a truly innovative academic environment, ultimately impacting the quality of education and research (Lanford, 2021). Institutions that prioritize compliance over genuine innovation by pressuring lecturers into intrapreneurship risk undermining the very progress they seek to achieve.

Limitations

This working paper primarily serves as a springboard for further investigation into the evolving relationship between academic capitalism and intrapreneurship in higher education. On our part, by raising critical questions and hypothesizing potential dynamics, the goal was to stimulate discussion and identify key areas for future research. This theoretical approach, while valuable for framing the conversation, necessarily results in tentative conclusions that would benefit from empirical validation.

One key limitation is the reliance on existing literature and established theoretical frameworks. While the paper offers a comprehensive review of this intersection, it lacks the depth and nuance that could be achieved through primary data collection. Future research would be strengthened by incorporating case studies or surveys of academics navigating these changes within universities.

However, this limitation presents an exciting opportunity for further inquiry. This paper lays the groundwork for future studies that can explore the real-world experiences of academics, investigate the effectiveness of intrapreneurial initiatives within universities, and ultimately contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of this complex phenomenon.

Areas for further research

To sum up, the point of departure for this paper is the exploration of academic capitalism and intrapreneurial opportunities for lecturers in higher education. On this basis, we believe that the following three areas offer valuable opportunities for further research:

1. *Impact of Academic Capitalism on Pedagogy*- Investigating how the shift toward market-driven practices in universities influences teaching methods and curriculum design. Future research could explore how lecturers balance the demand for market relevance with traditional academic values, rigour, and educational objectives.
2. *Lecturers' Adaptation to Intrapreneurial Roles* - Examining the transition of university lecturers into intrapreneurial roles, including the challenges and opportunities they encounter. More research in this area should examine the skills required and how lecturers can develop these competencies.
3. *Innovation Management within Academic Institutions*- Studying strategies and structures that higher education institutions implement to foster innovation and intrapreneurship among their staff. This could include case studies of successful intrapreneurial projects and how they were managed within the university context.

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