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# Entrepreneurial Universities and Risk-Averse Academic Practice

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# Abstract

This paper examines the tension between institutional ambitions to position universities as entrepreneurial and the performative conditions shaping everyday academic work in post-92 higher education. Drawing on Ball's (2003, 2015, 2016) concepts of governmentality and performativity, the study explores how academic practice is organised within marketised environments characterised by audit, metrics and risk management. Sixteen semi-structured interviews were conducted with lecturers across five universities in Scotland and Wales, focusing on how participants encountered institutional expectations commonly framed through the language of creativity, agility and risk.

The findings show that practices often described institutionally as entrepreneurial are experienced less as innovation and more as pragmatic responses to constrained working conditions. Creativity was oriented towards sustaining teaching quality and student engagement, frequently requiring additional and unrecognised labour. Agility appeared as a reactive necessity in volatile environments shaped by shifting priorities and resource limitations. Risk-taking was largely avoided, with participants describing organisational cultures that encouraged caution and prioritised visible performance over experimentation.

Rather than confirming a shift towards entrepreneurial academic identities, the study highlights a structural tension between entrepreneurial institutional discourse and risk-averse academic practice. The analysis introduces the concept of safe innovation to describe how adaptive practices become oriented towards stabilising performance and managing exposure to evaluation rather than driving institutional transformation. The paper contributes to debates on academic labour by showing how performative governance reshapes professional practice within devolved higher education systems and by identifying implications for institutional leadership, workload governance and policy frameworks seeking to balance innovation with sustainability.



## Key Words

Performativity; Academic practice; Entrepreneurial universities; Risk governance; Marketisation; UK higher education


# Introduction

In recent decades, UK higher education has been increasingly shaped by academic capitalism, with universities adopting market-driven practices that embed business

principles and competitive performance metrics into their operations. This shift, rooted in wider neoliberal reforms, positions competition, efficiency, and profitability as guiding values for public institutions.

These conditions, slowly over time, have intensified demands on academic staff. Research highlights escalating workloads (Sabri, 2013; Fleming, 2021), the repositioning of academics as service providers (Nixon, Scullion, and Hearn, 2018; Wong and Chiu, 2019), pressure to recruit and retain students irrespective of academic standards (Feldman and Sandoval, 2018; Richmond, 2018), and the imperative to secure external research funding (McClure, 2016). Within this environment, lecturers are expected to align their work with institutional indicators that demonstrate measurable value. Johnston (2024) notes that these metric-driven demands erode autonomy, diminish professional identity and reshape what it means to be an academic.

Ball's (2003, 2012, 2015, 2016) work offers a critical account of how higher education is governed through audit, accountability and measurement. Performativity describes how judgement and comparison steer practice towards externally defined indicators of success (Ball, 2003), becoming embedded in institutional systems that organise workload and signal what counts as valued academic activity (Ball, 2016). In these conditions, academics are encouraged to demonstrate worth through visible contributions to institutional priorities, often at personal and professional cost (Jones, 2022). This does not mean that some cannot flourish in systems that often value the visible over the invisible (Kanisoy et al., 2024; Warren, 2017).

This paper uses Ball's account of neoliberal governance and performativity to examine academic labour under performance regimes. Focusing on lecturers in Scotland and Wales, it explores how audit, metrics and risk management shape everyday teaching practice, and how staff respond through professional judgement and adaptation. The findings suggest that expectations articulated through the language of creativity, agility and risk are often experienced as pressures to sustain teaching and manage exposure to evaluation, rather than as opportunities for entrepreneurial transformation.

# Literature review

## From Robbins to Marketisation: A Historical Context

The trajectory of UK higher education since the Robbins Report illustrates how staff expectations have shifted alongside structural reforms. Robbins (1963) set out four aims for expansion: employment skills, cross-disciplinary problem solving, advancing learning, and promoting citizenship. Whilst these aims are not neoliberal in origin, they emphasise the economic relevance of higher education. Moser (1988) documents how

these aims shaped the first 25 years after Robbins, embedding functionality within the sector. Later reforms signalled a decisive shift highlighted by the rise of internal cost centres, annualised funding and stronger managerial oversight, which aligned universities with principles of efficiency and accountability (Radice, 2013). Radice frames these developments as part of a wider New Public Management approach, through which universities became increasingly organised around audit, competition and managerial control.

McGettigan (2013) argues these changes restructured the financial model of the sector, particularly through tuition fees, student choice, and loan systems, reframing higher education as a private investment rather than a public good. These reforms laid the groundwork for entrepreneurial logics to become embedded, creating institutional environments where staff were increasingly expected to demonstrate flexibility, creativity, and responsiveness, often framed through managerial and policy language. Yet, as later sections show, these traits were not expressed as free entrepreneurial choices but as adaptations to increasingly constrained conditions.

## Metrics and Managerialism: Reshaping Academic Practice

A growing dependence on student income has entrenched a customer-service ethos in universities, placing recruitment and retention at the centre of institutional strategy (Fleming, 2021; Walker et al., 2019; Radice, 2013). Shore and Wright (1999) argue that audit and quality assurance frameworks create systems that are efficient yet tightly regulated. These mechanisms reframe excellence as a measurable commodity, defined less by academic standards and more by income and performance outcomes (Collini, 2012; Williams, 2013). National instruments such as the National Student Survey (NSS), Research Excellence Framework (REF) and Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) returns have intensified these pressures, embedding performative measures that reshape teaching, research and professional priorities (Ball, 2016; Thiel, 2019). Student surveys, particularly NSS metrics mirrored in internal feedback systems, function across devolved contexts as policy technologies that narrow definitions of excellence (Bell and Brooks, 2018; Sabri, 2013). Academics often invest discretionary effort to sustain metric success, though this labour remains largely invisible (Johnston, 2024). In such environments, academic work increasingly requires adaptability and judgement in order to manage competing demands (Sabri, 2013; Smith, 2012).

## Audit, Performance and the Individual Academic

Audit and performance systems increasingly individualise academic labour, positioning lecturers as responsible for managing institutional expectations and outcomes. Within these conditions, links between career progression, external engagement and income generation (Schulze-Cleven et al., 2017; Murray et al., 2024) can incentivise strategic

compliance among academics seeking advancement. Kanisoy et al. (2024, p. 2) suggest that those who embody entrepreneurial qualities and express “creativity, independent thinking, taking calculated risks” are more likely to be rewarded. At the same time, the intensification of these expectations can produce strain and withdrawal, leading some academics adopting a survival mentality whilst turning away from career progression (Warren, 2017). Market-driven approaches therefore risk stratifying academic careers, rewarding visibility for some while limiting opportunities for others.

“Rock star” academics are described as individuals who secure substantial research funding, industry links and institutional visibility, enhancing organisational prestige (Smyth, 2018), though this visibility may involve commodification of personal and professional identity (Page, 2020). Such individuals may be afforded highly individualised working arrangements that exempt them from routine responsibilities (Jones, 2022). These dynamics are frequently framed through entrepreneurial language, positioning externally engaged academics as models of success judged through funding, income generation and profile rather than teaching or collegial contribution (Cannella and Koro-Ljungberg, 2017). In this way, performance regimes not only reward particular forms of work but help to normalise and reproduce narrow definitions of academic value.

## The entrepreneurial university

The dynamics discussed above are rooted in the longer literature on managerialism in higher education, understood here as the technocratic organisation of academic work through targets, accountability, efficiency and performance management. Entrepreneurial university discourse is treated as related but distinct, it is the language of innovation, agility, growth and responsiveness that often gives a positive gloss to managerial expectations. In this article, the entrepreneurial university is therefore not approached as a separate or fixed institutional type, but as a discourse that gives positive value to practices that are operationalised through managerial and performative systems.

To understand how these individualised expectations emerge, the literature on the entrepreneurial university describes institutions as emphasising organisational flexibility, managerial leadership and engagement with industry, government and regional innovation networks (De Silva, 2016). Strategies include income diversification, research commercialisation and internal managerial transformation, positioning entrepreneurship as an institutional response to changing policy and funding environments rather than a neutral description of academic work (del Cerro Santamaría, 2019). Studies of entrepreneurial university architecture further suggest that institutions construct infrastructures and governance arrangements that categorise

and support “entrepreneurial” activity (Kanisoy et al., 2024), indicating that entrepreneurialism reflects institutional framing as much as individual disposition (Cunningham et al., 2022).

Entrepreneurial capacity is frequently presented as a complement to academic expertise, enabling alignment between knowledge creation and external engagement (Audretsch and Belitski, 2022). However, this perspective foregrounds institutional strategy while paying less attention to how such priorities translate into uneven pressures and risks for academic staff (De Silva, 2016).

These agendas are operationalised through audit and performance regimes that translate policy pressures into systems of reward and recognition. Expectations are organised structurally through promotion criteria, workload allocation and managerial oversight, shaping which forms of activity become visible and valued. In this context, accountability and productivity are reframed as markers of efficiency, even where they sit uneasily alongside vocational commitments (Collini, 2012). As Fleming (2021, p. 70) suggests, such arrangements encourage academics to act as “independent business owners”, curating a quantified representation of their value within marketised environments.

While this literature illuminates how universities define and reward entrepreneurial activity, it offers less insight into how lecturers experience and navigate these expectations in everyday practice. To address this gap, Ball’s conceptualisation of neoliberal governance and performativity provides a lens for analysing lived academic labour under performance regimes in Scotland and Wales.

## Conceptual Framework: Neoliberalism ‘Out there / In here’

Neoliberalism is commonly understood as a politically constructed economic ideology that seeks to reduce the role of the state and emphasise individual responsibility (Harvey, 2005). The provision of choice is presented as a mechanism through which individuals can influence the scope and quality of services. Yet such choice depends upon data technologies that render performance visible and comparable. In higher education, metrics make departments and individuals legible to market-based evaluation and accountability. Stephen Ball’s work provides a framework for analysing how academics navigate professional roles within these conditions.

Drawing on Foucault’s concept of governmentality, Ball (2003, 2015, 2016) conceptualises neoliberalism as operating both externally (“out there”), through accountability mechanisms, and internally (“in here”), through self-surveillance and the

reshaping of professional identity. ‘Out there’ mechanisms include systems of measurement that rank and define institutions and individuals, such as the Research Excellence Framework, Teaching Excellence Framework and National Student Survey. These external drivers are mirrored internally through quality assurance processes, impact assessments and monitoring practices that align everyday academic work with metric priorities. In this environment, performative demands encourage comparison as a means of incentivisation and control. As Ball (2016, p. 1050) observes, such systems “do not just change what we do, they also change who we are.” Academics are increasingly required to govern themselves through comparison, calculation and performance, aligning professional conduct with institutional priorities (Ball, 2003). This framework is used not to assume that academics adopt entrepreneurial identities, but to analyse how such expectations are articulated and negotiated within academic work. Within performative governance, accountability becomes individualised and organisational risk is often displaced downward, encouraging cautious practice and anticipatory self-regulation.

## Research Context

This study examined how lecturers in Scotland and Wales navigate the performative demands of their institutions. While these devolved systems position higher education as a public good, they remain subject to UK-wide accountability mechanisms such as the National Student Survey, Research Excellence Framework and HESA returns. This produces a dual policy environment in which market-driven pressures coexist with inclusive policy rhetoric, shaping the conditions under which academic work is organised, evaluated and justified.

The study adopted a qualitative design, using semi-structured interviews with lecturers across a range of disciplines, institutional types, and career stages. This approach enabled exploration of both the structural forces influencing academic work and the practical strategies staff employ in response.

Using Ball’s conceptualisation of neoliberal governance as an analytic lens, managerial language can be understood as a key mechanism through which expectations about academic work are articulated and normalised. Such language does not merely describe practice but operates as a technology of governance that structures how academic labour is organised, evaluated and rendered accountable. As Jones (2022) argues, for example, agility is frequently framed within managerial discourse as the primary means through which staff are expected to respond to constraint, shifting responsibility from institutions onto individuals. Similarly, creativity under conditions of audit and market governance is valued predominantly when it can be rendered visible

and aligned with targets, rather than when it reflects professional judgement or intellectual depth.

Importantly, this study does not analyse managerial discourse itself, nor does it assume that such concepts meaningfully capture academic practice. Instead, references to creativity, risk and agility are treated as discursive entry points that reflect the institutional language informing the interview prompts. The analysis focuses on how participants describe encountering and responding to this institutional language in their everyday work, rather than treating the concepts themselves as explanatory categories. Ball's framework therefore functions as a sensitising lens for analysing how neoliberal and performative expectations are articulated and mediated within academic labour.

## Research Questions

The research was framed by three questions:

1. What performative demands do lecturers in Scotland and Wales face, and how do these shape their professional roles?
2. How do lecturers make sense of the language universities use when talking about academic work and expectations?
3. How do academics perceive institutional support in responding to these expectations?

## Methods

This study employed a qualitative design based on semi-structured interviews with lecturers working in higher education in Scotland and Wales. These contexts enabled comparison across devolved systems that position higher education as a public good while remaining subject to UK-wide accountability mechanisms.

Sixteen interviews were conducted across five post-92 universities. Participants were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling and required a minimum of two years' teaching experience to ensure they could reflect on institutional expectations over time. Interviewees represented a range of disciplines, primarily within the social sciences, alongside applied health and information technology.

Data were collected between September and December 2024. Interviews were conducted online via Microsoft Teams and followed a semi-structured format. Initial questions invited reflection on participants' roles and working conditions. Subsequent prompts drew on language commonly used in higher education policy and managerial discourse, including references to creativity, agility and risk (Ball, 2003; Fleming, 2021; Jones, 2022). These terms served as reference points through which participants reflected on how institutional expectations are communicated and negotiated in everyday practice.

All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were checked for accuracy, anonymised and stripped of identifying details prior to analysis. To support rigour, both authors engaged in iterative transcript review and reflexive discussion. Quotations are attributed by role, discipline and location (for example, Marketing Lecturer, Scotland) to preserve anonymity while enabling comparison across contexts.

## Ethics

The research received ethical approval from Wrexham University's formal ethics review process. Participation was voluntary, and all interviewees were provided with an information sheet and consent form prior to taking part. Data were anonymised at transcription, with identifying details relating to individuals, departments and institutions removed. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage without consequence. The study was conducted in accordance with established ethical standards for research involving human participants.

## Data analysis

Data were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Boyatzis, 1998), with NVivo used to organise and code transcripts. An iterative process was adopted in which transcripts were read closely and inductive codes generated to capture recurring tensions and significant ideas across participants. These codes were grouped into broader themes reflecting concerns such as performative pressure, resource constraints, professional commitment and precarity.

Interview extracts have been lightly edited for clarity, with ellipses indicating omissions while preserving original meaning. Although analysis was conducted inductively, interpretation was informed by the study's theoretical framing of academic capitalism and performativity, enabling themes to be situated within a wider understanding of how institutional expectations shape academic work without presupposing entrepreneurial behaviour as an organising category.

## Findings

This section examines how lecturers describe navigating the performative demands of post-92 universities in Scotland and Wales. It considers how institutional expectations, often celebrated in entrepreneurial and managerial literatures, are encountered and reworked in everyday academic practice. Across participants' accounts, these expectations were less associated with innovation than with pragmatic strategies shaped by constrained working environments.

Limited time, funding and staffing influenced how teaching and professional responsibilities were managed, with adaptability emerging largely as a reactive response to shifting demands. Rather than driving growth or transformation, academic work was organised around sustaining teaching quality, meeting immediate pressures and maintaining professional values within a sector structured by market and performance logics.

## Work priorities under performative pressures

When asked to describe their "perfect day" at work, participants consistently emphasised two core activities: engaging with students and conducting meaningful research. These accounts contrasted sharply with their descriptions of a typical day, which they characterised as dominated by administrative tasks, email management, and institutional bureaucracy. Direct interaction with students, whether in classrooms, one-to-one support or informal conversations, was described as energising and intellectually rewarding and formed the part of academic work most closely tied to professional purpose.

Research was similarly valued, particularly when aligned with personal interests or broader social impact. Participants spoke of uninterrupted time for reading, writing, and critical reflection as rare but deeply motivating. These visions of the "perfect day" highlighted a desire to prioritise activities that allowed for creativity, intellectual engagement, and disciplinary contribution.

In contrast, administrative workload was described as draining and largely disconnected from the motivations that drew participants into academic careers. Many noted that form-filling, constant email demands, and compliance-focused processes eroded their ability to focus on teaching and research. This "administrative noise" was experienced as a significant barrier to productivity and wellbeing.

These accounts illustrate a tension between the kinds of activities that sustain professional identity and those prioritised by institutional performance regimes. For many participants, forms of creativity and agility were channelled into maintaining teaching quality and research engagement despite these competing pressures, rather than being deployed in pursuit of institutional innovation or growth.

## Innovation and hidden labour in teaching

For many participants, discussions of teaching and student support reflected a perceived shift in what counts as effective academic practice. Lecturers described increasing pressure to perform teaching in ways resembling engaging content creation, where visibility, creativity and student engagement become markers of professional competence. As such, creativity was experienced less as a freely chosen pedagogic

approach and more as an expectation tied to how teaching is performed, evaluated and made visible. One participant reflected on the growing pedagogical expectation:

»I.think.we''re.under.increasing.pressure?as.academics?to.be.creative.in.what.we.do¡.It''s.no.longer.good.enough.to.stand.at.the.front.and.speak.for.a.couple.of.hours¡.We.need.to.engage.the.students.through.being.creative¡‹ .(Sports.Lecturer?Wales)

This framing positioned creativity not only as a teaching strategy, but as a professional expectation tied to visibility, engagement and the projection of an enterprising academic identity. Some participants described teaching practices they considered creative as emerging from pedagogical values rather than institutional expectations, particularly in relation to inclusion, care, and critical reflection. As.one.lecturer.explained¿

»I.often.use.music.to.make.points.in.terms.of.things.like.stereotyping¡.So?when.we.hear.certain.pieces.of.music?how.does.that.link.through.to.how.we.stereotype.the.person.that.listens.to.it?.So?when.we.rock.up.to.someone''s.house?as.a.social.worker?and.we.can.hear.a.song.coming.through.the.window?who.do.we.expect.to.open.the.front.door?‹ .(Social.Work.Lecturer?Wales)

These examples illustrate how teaching practices described by participants as creative were oriented toward pedagogical purpose rather than display, yet were rarely supported or rewarded institutionally. This lack of recognition often translated into significant personal cost, as one lecturer described:

»I.used.to.organise.trips.to.London• .to.try.to.be.creative.and.innovative.in.many.ways¡.But.the.time.and.emotional.cost.of.those.things.will.be.down.to.you?right?.It.will.be.down.to.your.extra.hours.of.work.or.your.emotional.management.of.the.tensions.and.anxieties.that.those.changes.can.bring¡‹ .(Hospitality.Lecturer?Scotland)

Other accounts reinforced this sense of hidden labour:

»I''m.constantly.coming.up.with.new.material.because.it''s.quite.important.that.I''m.talking.about.new.and.relevant.TV.programmes?and.the.TV.industry.has.changed.remarkably.since.I.worked.in.it.full.time¡.I.feel.obliged.in.a.way.to.keep.up_to_date.and.to.change.all.of.my.teaching.materials.to.reflect.that¡‹ .(Media.Lecturer?Scotland)

Several participants described covering gaps with their own resources:

»Making.up.for.deficits.of.the.university.[is.frustrating]¡.In.previous.years.I''ve.just.gone.out.and.bought.the.things.that.I.need.so.that.I.can.do.that.session• .it.meant.that.the.students.had.a.much.better.experience¡‹ .(Criminology.Lecturer?Wales)

In these accounts, teaching quality and student engagement were sustained through additional and often unrecognised work undertaken under constrained conditions.

While participants widely described such practices as indispensable, their contribution remained largely invisible within workload models, promotion criteria, and institutional definitions of value. Participants also stressed that this work could not be carried out in isolation. Unpredictable workloads, shifting expectations, and diverse student needs required continual adjustment to teaching and professional practice, with much of this labour directed toward sustaining core academic responsibilities under conditions of ongoing change. The following section explores how lecturers described adapting to these pressures, highlighting the forms of agility and negotiation required to navigate increasingly unstable academic environments.

## Adapting to instability

Participants described working within a context shaped by ongoing volatility in post-92 universities, where shifting institutional priorities, unpredictable demands, and increasingly diverse student cohorts created continual pressure on everyday academic practice. In this environment, responding to change was experienced less as a deliberate orientation and more as a practical necessity. One lecturer described this pressure as persistent but rarely made explicit:

»So.there.is.this.unspoken.pressure?really¡.And.that¾s.the.thing¡.It¾ll.never.come.in.an.e_mail¡.It¾ll.never.kind.of.be.written.down¡.But.you.can.feel.it.every.time.we¾re.talking.to.colleagues¡.It¾s.how.are.you.doing.on.numbers?.How¾s.recruitment.and.retention?.What¾s.your.achievement?‹ .(Social.Work.Lecturer?Wales)

These unspoken pressures filter into the everyday, requiring lecturers to make continual micro-adjustments in practice, as observed:

»You.might.have.one.student.and.from.day_to_day.they¾re.completely.different.to.what.they.were.the.day.before¡.And.we.have.to.adapt.our.approach?even.how.we.speak.or.our.tone¡‹ .(Business.Lecturer?Wales)

At other times, participants described being required to respond to larger-scale and unforeseen disruptions, often at short notice:

»We¾ve.had.COVID?we¾ve.had.massive.IT.systems.failures?we.lost.a.colleague.very.suddenly• .there"s.been.massive.changes.in.the.uni.and.we"ve.had.to.find.ways.to.come.back.and.continue.to.deliver.what.we"re.meant.to.do¡‹ .(Marketing.Lecturer?Scotland)

Participants also described being required to reconfigure their teaching in response to structural constraints generated by institutional decisions, particularly where growth in student numbers outpaced available infrastructure:

»As.soon.as.you.get.more.than.96.students.in.a.class?you"re.bigger.than.any.lab.we.have• .So.you.want.more.students?.That"s.brilliant?and.that"s.more.money¡.But.as.soon.as.you.go.past.96?you.can"t.teach.them.in.the.same.class.anymore• .so.then.you"ve.got.

to.change.the.way.you.teach?maybe.more.online.stuff.to.start.with• .pre_record.a.few.things.just.to.cope¡‹ .(IT.Lecturer?Wales)

These accounts point to a pattern of internal regulation, in which lecturers described continually adjusting their practice in response to anticipated, rather than explicitly stated, evaluative pressures. For some participants, these anticipated pressures were closely tied to student feedback and its perceived consequences within institutional evaluation processes:

»Student.feedback.can.become.detrimental.or.it.can.empower.you• .and.that.feedback.eventually.gets.to.higher.management¡.It.also.impacts.whether.your.course.gets.put.under.a.spotlight¡.If.the.National.Student.Survey.is.negative?that.can.trigger.scrutiny.and.even.course.closure• .So.as.an.academic?I"m.always.thinking?is.this.good.enough?.I"m.hyper_focused.on.reactions.in.the.room?on.engagement.levels?and.as.soon.as.that.dips?I"m.adapting.my.practice¡.The.main.thing.isn"t.necessarily.about.meeting.student.needs.entirely?it"s.about.what.happens.if.that.feedback.becomes.negative¡‹ .(Education.Lecturer?Wales)

Across participants' accounts, adaptation was described as routine and embedded in everyday practice, shaped by the need to anticipate and manage largely unspoken evaluative pressures. Participants located these adjustments within the context of performative institutional expectations, rather than as discretionary or entrepreneurial activity, with several describing how continual adaptation encouraged caution and narrowed the scope for experimentation in teaching and assessment.

## Caution and constraint in academic practice

This section examines how academic work is shaped by institutional risk aversion. In participants' accounts, risk was discussed primarily in relation to pedagogical and assessment practices, such as experimenting with teaching approaches, altering assessment formats, or introducing less predictable forms of student engagement. Rather than being framed as something to be embraced, such forms of risk were described as conditions to be managed inside organisational cultures that limited experimentation and tolerated little failure. For some participants, this organisational caution was experienced most acutely during periods of institutional change, where uncertainty encouraged restraint rather than experimentation:

»I"ve.had.to.be.a.bit.more.restrained.in.my.risk_taking• .We"ve.had.a.restructure?lost.staff?changed.line.managers• .It"s.been.a.case.of?don"t.make.a.big.commotion?just.meet.the.targets?don"t.be.seen.as.a.problem.child¡‹ .(Business.Lecturer?Wales)

This sense of caution was reinforced by leadership practices that pushed responsibility downward, shaping how risk was understood and managed in practice:

»There.is.no.risk_taking.in.the.vocabulary.of.leadership.or.management?they.want.to.wash.all.risk.away¡.It"s.a.Teflon.approach¿nothing.sticks.to.management·.fault.is.always.passed.down?never.up¡‹ .(Music.Production.Lecturer?Scotland)

This distancing of responsibility was also reflected in more practical constraints, where lecturers described limited time and space to experiment in ways that felt manageable or supported:

»You.think?›I"d.love.to.take.a.risk.and.change.that"?but.you.just.don"t.have.enough.time¡.The.system.doesn"t.give.you.the.space.to.develop.new.processes.in.a.way.that.you.can.be.confident.the.risk.is.controlled¡‹ .(Hospitality.Lecturer?Scotland)

For some participants, these constraints produced direct tensions within teaching itself, particularly where expectations to encourage experimentation sat alongside institutional intolerance of failure:

»In.the.(art).studio.we.talk.about›you.must.take.risks"• .but.then.there"s.a.problem.with.taking.risk.because.you.could.fail¡.Which.means.you.could.fail.the.programme¡.So.how.much.risk.do.you.actually.want.me.(as.a.lecturer).to.take.(in.encouraging.student.risk.taking.with.their.practice)?‹ .(Fine.Art.Lecturer?Wales)

Where risks were taken, they were often principled rather than entrepreneurial, rooted in maintaining academic and professional standards. In some cases, participants described resisting institutional pressure to recruit up to externally funded cohort limits on capped programmes, particularly where high application numbers intensified expectations to maximise income despite concerns about standards:

»We.knew.lowering.the.bar.would.compromise.our.standards.and.we.couldn"t.accept.that¡.It.could.create.issues.later.on.when.students.don"t.pass?or.worse?go.into.practice.as.unsafe.practitioners¡.That.would.have.consequences.for.the.public¡‹ .(Social.Work.Lecturer?Scotland)

Across participants' accounts, risk was generally avoided rather than embraced, particularly where visibility was perceived as carrying potential personal or programme-level consequences. Participants described exercising caution not out of resistance to change, but as a rational response to performative environments in which scrutiny, metrics, and responsibility could impact upon individual reputations and security.

The findings point to academic work shaped less by entrepreneurial aspiration and more by anticipatory self-regulation. While institutional discourses may promote innovation and growth-oriented activity, participants' accounts suggest that everyday practice is instead organised around responding to performative pressures. Creativity, adaptation, and caution were described as pragmatic responses deployed to sustain teaching, protect standards, and manage exposure to ongoing evaluation under conditions of limited institutional support. These accounts suggest that entrepreneurial expectations highlighted in the literature are reshaped in practice by performative

institutional conditions, resulting in academic practices focused less on innovation and more on carefully managing risk, visibility and responsibility.

# Discussion

This study examined how expectations associated with entrepreneurial discourse are encountered and negotiated in everyday academic practice. Rather than confirming a shift towards entrepreneurial academic identities, the findings suggest that performative governance reshapes how such expectations are experienced within post-92 universities. Practices that appear institutionally as creativity, innovation or risk-taking were described less as entrepreneurial aspiration and more as ongoing negotiation of scrutiny, competing responsibilities and limited support. The discussion considers how these dynamics complicate dominant narratives of the entrepreneurial university by highlighting how academic agency is exercised within performative constraints.

## Performativity and the Shaping of Academic Practice

To situate these findings, it is useful to return briefly to Ball's account of performativity and governmentality in marketised higher education. Ball (2003, 2015, 2016) argues that neoliberal logics of competition, audit and metrics are internalised by institutions and translated into governance practices that regulate staff behaviour, a process he terms governmentality. Through performativity, staff are evaluated through measurable outputs, with value tied to their ability to meet key performance indicators (KPIs). Under these conditions, institutional priorities and the wider policy environment converge to shape how academics organise their work (De Silva, 2016). Duties and workloads become aligned with activities most likely to influence pressing KPIs, such as student satisfaction, recruitment, research income and graduate employment. This individualises responsibility for institutional success while obscuring structural constraints, producing a subjectivity that mirrors the entrepreneurial ideal: self-reliant, output-focused and accountable for results.

In this context, the patterns described by participants do not reflect reluctant entrepreneurial agency (Crighton and Shepherd, 2024). Instead, they reveal academic practices oriented towards remaining safe and viable within employment roles. Pressure to sustain performance under metric scrutiny meant that the language used to promote entrepreneurial thinking (De Silva, 2016; Kanisoy et al., 2024; Fox, 2024) was experienced less as opportunity and more as expectation within a sector shaped by financial precarity. Academics appear increasingly positioned as units of enterprise, with responsibility individualised and risk displaced downward (Fleming, 2021), a dynamic reflected in participants' descriptions of creativity, agility and risk-taking.

Creativity was described in functional terms, directed towards maintaining engagement and protecting key metrics rather than pursuing radical change. Agility appeared as anticipatory self-regulation, with participants adjusting practice to pre-empt evaluative consequences. Risk-taking was largely avoided where visibility carried potential sanction, reinforcing cautious alignment with institutional expectations rather than experimentation.

## Visibility and Accountability

Participants' accounts, echoing Ball's analysis of performative visibility and accountability, highlighted a distinction between how institutions frame academic work as "entrepreneurial" and how lecturers describe their everyday practice. This tension reflects earlier discussions of how entrepreneurial university architectures categorise and support activity through organisational infrastructures and governance arrangements (Cunningham et al., 2022). While universities invoke creativity, adaptability and innovation through entrepreneurial language (Fleming, 2021; Jones, 2022), lecturers more often articulated their conduct as pragmatic efforts to sustain teaching, protect standards and manage workload under constraint. Entrepreneurial language thus operates less as a personal attribute and more as a framing device for adaptive conduct shaped by academic capitalism.

Murray and Palladino (2021) argue that entrepreneurial capacities depend upon organisational investment and collective infrastructure if they are to produce meaningful innovation. Participants' experiences suggest a disjuncture between this ideal and everyday practice: entrepreneurial language circulates, but material supports remain limited. Responsibility is consequently displaced onto individual academics to keep programmes viable, with creativity directed more towards maintaining performance than pursuing transformation.

Participants described adapting pedagogic approaches to accommodate larger cohorts or modifying delivery to maintain continuity, often in response to student satisfaction metrics. In this context, agility functioned less as strategy than as practical adjustment, with responsibility for sustaining performance devolved to individual lecturers. As Ball (2016) suggests, academic labour becomes oriented towards maintaining measurable outputs rather than enabling longer-term experimentation, with much of this work absorbing additional time and effort that remains unrecognised.

## Safe Innovation and Strategic Compliance

The findings point to what we term safe.innovation: practical changes academics make to their teaching or wider work that are creative or responsive, but still cautious, manageable and acceptable within institutional expectations. The concept captures the constrained ways academics seek to sustain educationally meaningful practice while minimising exposure to scrutiny. These practices involve incremental change,

repackaging existing approaches and forms of visible responsiveness, such as minor assessment adjustments or updated materials in response to feedback, that protect key metrics and limit professional exposure to risk. Innovation, in this sense, functions less as a route to institutional transformation and more as a stabilising practice within tightly monitored environments.

While institutional discourse frames creativity and agility as markers of entrepreneurial innovation (Fox, 2024; Kanisoy et al., 2024), participants' accounts suggest that everyday academic practice is shaped by performative pressures (Ball, 2016) that encourage cautious adaptation and strategic compliance. Lecturers described adjusting materials, delivery and assessment in ways that sustained student satisfaction and programme stability while navigating metric scrutiny. These adjustments were sufficiently visible to demonstrate responsiveness, yet calibrated to avoid personal or institutional risk.

Rather than pursuing large-scale change, participants spoke of compensating for structural limitations in order to keep teaching viable, often at personal cost. Such practices were experienced less as transformative innovation and more as ongoing work to sustain professional standards and credibility within performance-driven contexts. This pattern echoes Furedi's (2011) critique of "defensive education", in which teaching becomes oriented towards minimising complaint and dispute. However, the accounts presented here suggest that such defensive adaptation extends beyond consumer pressures to encompass metric scrutiny, performance management and anticipatory self-regulation. In this sense, safe innovation reflects a broader logic of risk governance within marketised higher education systems.

## Devolved Contexts and Shared Pressures

Policy frameworks in Scotland and Wales have positioned higher education more explicitly as a public good. In Scotland, undergraduate tuition is funded by the Scottish Government, while in Wales a stronger system of maintenance grants and widening participation initiatives distinguishes its approach from England. Welsh higher education has also been noted for greater collaboration between institutions, suggesting a more collegiate ethos (Diamond, 2016). These structural differences, however, did not fundamentally alter how participants described the pressures shaping everyday academic work.

Participants indicated that these inclusive approaches could bring additional pressures for staff, particularly in supporting first-generation students and sustaining high levels of pastoral and tutorial provision. This often created an "always on call" feeling that blurred professional boundaries and intensified workloads. Although market logics are less overt than in England, structural constraints remain. Smaller applicant pools and limited funding continue to drive managerial practices, while UK-wide accountability mechanisms such as the NSS, HESA returns, and the REF impose comparable performance demands.

As a result, the performative pressures outlined by Ball (2003, 2015, 2016) remain firmly embedded in Scottish and Welsh contexts, shaping how academic work is organised and evaluated. In practice, participants described creativity, adaptability and caution emerging not as celebrated markers of innovation, but as constrained responses to structural and institutional pressures.

## Implications of the Findings

The findings suggest that universities should recognise that practices framed as creativity and adaptability are frequently mobilised to compensate for structural deficiencies rather than to deliver entrepreneurial growth. If innovation is to move beyond stabilising performance, institutions must provide material support, including protected time, administrative infrastructure and clear assurances that experimentation will not carry disproportionate professional risk. Without such support, adaptability risks becoming an informal survival mechanism rather than a sustainable practice.

At a policy level, accountability frameworks such as the NSS and REF warrant reconsideration to ensure that performance measures do not inadvertently incentivise caution and defensive practice. Balancing metric evaluation with protections for academic autonomy and workload sustainability would create conditions in which innovation can occur without destabilising professional security.

## Conclusion

This study examined how lecturers in Scotland and Wales respond to institutional expectations framed through entrepreneurial discourse. The findings suggest that practices described as creativity, agility and risk-taking operate less as entrepreneurial aspiration and more as adaptive responses to constrained, performative working environments.

These dynamics reveal a structural tension between entrepreneurial institutional rhetoric and risk-averse academic practice. The concept of safe.innovation captures how adaptive work becomes oriented towards stabilising performance and managing exposure to scrutiny rather than pursuing institutional transformation.

Although based on a relatively small sample concentrated in post-92 and social science contexts, the study highlights how performative governance reshapes professional practice across devolved higher education systems. Future research should examine how disciplinary, institutional and national contexts mediate these dynamics, including how more explicitly market-driven systems shape the relationship between entrepreneurial rhetoric and academic practice, and explore the conditions under

which innovation can occur without exposing academics to disproportionate professional risk.

# Disclosure Statement

Wrexham University Faculty of Social and Life Sciences REC, Application 1349 (approval date: [15 August 2024]); written informed consent obtained from all participants.

Generative AI (ChatGPT, OpenAI; accessed September 2025) was used solely for light language editing to improve clarity. The authors reviewed and take full responsibility for all content. No AI was used to generate data, interpret data or perform analyses.

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.


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## Data Availability Statement

Data are not publicly available due to participant confidentiality.

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Dr William Shepherd is an Enterprise Lecturer at the University of West of Scotland, with a background in blue chip FMCG marketing and innovation. He has spent the last decade blending his lecturing with running his own management consultancy. A passion for innovation led him to spend time in Cambodia, working with over 15 different NGOs and projects, including developing financial models that adjusted for pig pregnancy and leading an innovation project focused on delivering food security through microentrepreneurs working on frog farms.

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