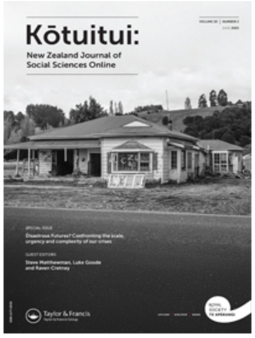

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Early career academics navigating the ecology of the university: a collaborative autoethnography

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ABSTRACT

Early career academics (ECAs) are negatively affected by the neoliberal university which encourages performativity, competition and a 'publish or perish' mentality. In this paper a group of four ECAs in the Aotearoa New Zealand context explore and navigate the neoliberal university through a collaborative autoethnography. Collectively, we adopt Barnett's [2018. *The ecological university: A feasible utopia*. Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.] five dimensions of ecologies framework to study our own experiences. Findings suggest that as ECAs, we seek connection to academia, experience workload and power imbalance, and actively learn how to navigate roles. We also describe how our research group created a supportive environment within the competitive space of academia that fostered feelings of belonging and offered support in navigating the university ecology. Furthermore, working in initial teacher education, as a high service discipline, created unique challenges for us such as high service and teaching roles which may negatively impact ECAs. Through this lens of initial teacher education, we in turn make recommendations for universities to better support early career academics.

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Early career academics (ECAs); university ecology; neoliberalisation; initial teacher education

Introduction

Negative impacts of neoliberal university systems on the work of academics have been widely discussed in the literature for Aotearoa New Zealand and globally. These impacts include pressures to publish, high workloads requiring a balancing act between teaching, research and service, a focus on performativity and efficiency, and encouraging competition between colleagues for funding and workloads (Kenny 2017; Riding et al. 2019). Early career academics (ECAs) appear to be negatively affected by the neoliberal infrastructure as they attempt to establish themselves in their new roles. Accompanied by a sense of feeling 'lucky' to have secured an academic position in an increasingly competitive environment, ECAs often accept poor working conditions as standard practice (McKay and Monk 2017; Crome et al. 2019).

In this research, we seek to contribute to this literature on how ECAs experience the neoliberal university. This is an important area of exploration as ECAs may perpetuate

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harmful work conditions in academia as they are socialised into their first university positions (Trowler and Knight 2000; Hollywood et al. 2020). We aim to make three contributions to the existing literature. First, we provide empirical evidence on how ECAs navigate the ecology of the university Barnett's (2018) five dimensions of ecologies framework including impairment, potential diversity, responsibilities, restoration and interconnectedness. While existing scholarship has documented the pervasive challenges of precarity, excessive workloads, power imbalances, and impacts on wellbeing for ECAs (e.g. Kenny 2017; McKay and Monk 2017; Crome et al. 2019; Hollywood et al. 2020), this study extends this work by offering novel insights through the confluence of theoretical framing, methodological approach, and contextual focus. Specifically, we move beyond identifying these issues, to holistically explore the dynamic interplay of ecological factors affecting ECAs and their agency within the context of teacher education in Aotearoa New Zealand. While individual aspects such as identity (Barrow and Xu 2023; Zhang and Gong 2024) or performance pressures (McKay and Monk 2017) have been examined, our application of Barnett's (2018) five dimensions of ecologies offers a more holistic and nuanced understanding. This framework allows us to illuminate not just the presence of issues, but the complex, systemic relationships between them – how impairments in one area (e.g. workload) impact potential diversity or trigger specific restorative practices. This holistic ecological lens reveals the dynamic and often contradictory ways ECAs navigate the university.

Second, our use of collaborative autoethnography (CAE) (Chang et al. 2016; Roy and Uekusa 2020) grounded in an ethics of care approach (Visse and Niemeijer 2016) is not merely a methodological choice but a key site of insight. While many studies seek ECAs' perspectives, our approach provides a unique window into the lived, collective process of sense-making and support-building from within. This study contributes by demonstrating how such a collective endeavour itself becomes a form of active, albeit imperfect, restoration within the challenging university ecology. It highlights the agentic ways ECAs can co-create micro-ecologies of support, even as they critically analyse systemic impairments, offering a perspective that diverges from accounts focusing solely on individual coping strategies. This CAE approach has gained traction amongst ECAs for its potential to illuminate shared experiences through reflexive and dialogic inquiry (Nordbäck et al. 2022).

Third, we contribute by focusing specifically on ECAs within initial teacher education in Aotearoa New Zealand. While challenges for ECAs are widespread, the nuances of navigating a high-service discipline (Love 2024), with its distinct demands for practicum supervision, partnerships with schools, and the importance of modelling professional practice, remain under-explored. This context allows us to investigate how the already well-documented pressures of neoliberal universities are uniquely intensified by specific disciplinary expectations and responsibilities, offering insights that may not be apparent in studies of ECAs in other fields. This deepens the understanding of how the broader 'ecology of the university' interacts with specific disciplinary ecologies.

The research question that guided our study is: How do we, as ECAs, experience the ecology of the university? It is important to note that we use the term early career *academic* to describe our role, as opposed to similar terms such as early career *researcher* or emerging *researchers* to highlight the multiple responsibilities we hold including teaching, research and service (McKay and Monk 2017). The contested roles of ECAs have been studied in a multitude of different contexts, without a common definition. Furthermore, the precarious nature of contracts for ECAs has complicated what constitutes *early career*, including the potential for perpetual early career status. In Aotearoa New Zealand, early career is defined as up to eight years after the beginning of an academic appointment or from the completion of the highest research qualification (The Royal Society 2024).

To investigate our research question, we used CAE (Chang et al. 2016; Roy and Uekusa 2020) including five focus group conversations and a collective data analysis process. As follows, we explore the existing literature on ECAs in the neoliberal university internationally. To facilitate our exploration, we in turn explain the theoretical framework adopted – Barnett's (2018) dimensions of ecologies framework, and finally, in acknowledging the role that specific contexts play, we in turn classify the higher education context in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Early career academics in the neoliberal university

The roles and responsibilities of ECAs vary widely depending on the national context, the institution and academic disciplines. For many, their roles usually involve a combination of teaching and research. A commonality for most ECAs is the challenge of learning to navigate their new career in a complex environment and 'holding individual career aspirations whilst simultaneously managing performance against targets' (Hollywood et al. 2020, p. 999). Research has shown the importance of the preliminary years as an academic, which are recognised as being pivotal in attaining future academic achievement and feelings of overall success (Laudel and Gläser 2008). At the same time, negative experiences during those first years can lead to employment dissatisfaction and leaving the profession (Sutherland 2015).

The impacts of neoliberal university reforms on academics and academic practices have been comprehensively studied. In the Aotearoa New Zealand context, the neoliberal reforms have manifested in managerialism, an audit culture, and performativity – requiring universities 'to deliver a bewildering plethora of government priorities and strategic economic and social objectives whilst simultaneously carrying out their traditional roles in teaching, research and scholarship' (Shore 2010, p. 1). These reforms significantly impact the roles of academics, for example, decreasing opportunities to get to know students and meet their needs, brought about through increased administrative tasks for academic staff, the introduction of online/hybrid teaching, large tutorials and lectures classes, overreliance on casual tutors, and decreasing numbers of academic appointments (Kidman and Chu 2017). Ultimately, this means academics do not have enough time for research as the burden of teaching and administration compete for their time. This is especially pronounced for ECAs who are establishing their research programme. While the roles of teaching and administration continue to grow, academics are primarily assessed on their research outputs (Nguyen et al. 2023). This further exacerbates poor work life balance for ECAs where researching on evenings and weekends is normalised (McKay and Monk 2017).

Navigating the ecology of the university

The conceptual framework we used for the research described in this paper, is Barnett's (2018) five dimensions of ecologies framework. According to Barnett (2018) the university is an ecology, a complex, interconnected system prone to impairment by human actors. He argues that this ecology exists both within itself and as part of the university's interaction with a wider system of other ecological zones including: the knowledge ecology; the ecology of social institutions; persons; the economy (where the economy is considered to be an ecology); learning; culture; and the natural environment. Barnett uses the term *zone*, instead of ecosystem, to recognise and acknowledge the limitations of a *systemic* view of the ecology. In moving past definitive boundaries, ecological zones are used to 'denote spaces and allow for movement in and out. Zones can overlap, fade from view (while still being present). They can be sites of power and even intimidation' (Barnett 2018, p. 56).

In the present research, we are primarily focused on one of these zones – ECAs as persons. To acknowledge persons' engagement and interaction with the other zones, we adopt Barnett's proposed five dimensions of ecologies framework; interconnectedness, potential diversity, impairment, responsibility and restoration (Table 1). In alignment with Barnett, we view these dimensions as interrelated and affecting one another. The idea of the university being an ecology that is characterised by interconnectedness, diversity and responsibilities that can be impaired and restored, aligned with our initial experiences as ECAs. Thus, in keeping with the idea that an ecological approach is committed to restorative action (Ellis and Goodyear 2019) we used Barnett's dimensions of ecologies framework to formulate our research question, and to guide our data collection and analysis.

The Aotearoa New Zealand context

In this section we will present the Aotearoa New Zealand university context, providing an overview of the line management and accountability systems in place. We will also discuss some of the more recent policies developed that are affecting academics in all Aotearoa New Zealand universities.

Most Aotearoa New Zealand universities have a line management system with department heads having a responsibility for ECAs including induction at the outset of their academic career. In line with most Aotearoa New Zealand universities, the workload allocation is governed by a 40:40:20 model, whereby academic staff are expected to spend 40 per cent of their time researching, 40 per cent teaching, and 20 per cent on administrative and services responsibilities. While research and administrative responsibilities can vary

Table 1. Dimensions of ecologies framework (Barnett 2018).

Dimension	Description
Interconnectedness	The interconnectedness of all things is inherent to an ecological perspective which means to resist the temptation to oversimplify and taking a systems approach to understand the complexity of underlying phenomena.
Potential diversity	Diversity is viewed as a strength within a balanced ecological system or approach. Importantly, the reduction of diversity without understanding the consequences results in potential impairments.
Impairment	A loss of ecological balance results in impairment. Reduction of the potential diversity of an ecosystem is one way in which impairment may manifest.
Responsibility	Identifying impairment(s) triggers concerns about responsibility. What has caused the associated impairment and who should do what to fix things?
Restoration	The power of an ecological disposition comes from the drive to recognise responsibility and take restorative action.

significantly, there is a system in place to ensure equity in the allocation of teaching workload, the Equivalent Full-Time Students (EFTS) system. The EFTS system is used to distribute teaching workloads based on a calculation between papers' credit weighting (i.e. the percentage of a student's full-time study) and the number of students enrolled in a paper. In addition, academics must meet the Performance-Based Research Fund[1] (PBRF) criteria, which was introduced to Aotearoa New Zealand in the early 2000s, as an accountability measure, allocating resources based on research performance (Sutherland and Marshall 2023). Despite PBRF's significant place in the university funding system, workload is allocated through the EFTS system. The tensions between such systems have been shown to result in pressures on ECAs in the formative years of their academic career, creating high levels of stress when they are trying to establish themselves in the academy (Hollywood et al. 2020).

Recent policy shifts in Aotearoa New Zealand have also impacted the relationship between academics' research and teaching. For example, in December 2024 the government announced a refocus of the primary research fund – Marsden, on 'core scientific research' (Collins 2024). The impact on academics in the humanities, arts and social sciences is significant (Sarpong 2025). Without decreased access to funding, alongside the increasing responsibilities associated with teaching and service, research in the humanities, arts and social sciences is further marginalised.

Methodology

The primary aim of this study was to understand the experiences of a group of ECAs. To achieve this aim, we developed the following research question which guided our study: How do we, as ECAs, experience the ecology of the university? In this study we adopted a CAE (Chang et al. 2016; Rinehart and Earl 2016; Roy and Uekusa 2020), which allowed us to collectively explore our own experiences as ECAs, working within the ecology of a university. In the following, we introduce our research collective and how it was underpinned by CAE, our data collection and data analysis processes, and ethical considerations.

Our research group and collaborative autoethnography

Our group consists of the four authors of this research who are currently all ECAs at the University of Waikato in Aotearoa New Zealand. All members were in their first or second year of their full-time, permanent academic positions at the time the research was undertaken. The group includes two women and two men, ranging from their early thirties to mid-sixties. Two of the authors are New-Zealand European, and two have recently immigrated from Europe. Furthermore, all members worked as primary or secondary school teachers before their academic appointment.

The research project described in this paper is underpinned by CAE, an approach whereby multiple researchers collectively explore their experiences using a 'carefully organised research design and systematically collected and analyzed data' (Roy and Uekusa 2020, p. 386). In contrast to autoethnography, which is undertaken individually, '… collaborative autoethnographers combine their energy and data to create a richer pool of data from multiple sources' (Chang et al. 2016, p. 89). CAE is characterised by a flexible approach, representing the voices of each member of the research group and giving members authority over their own narratives by being involved in conceptualising the research, collecting and analysing data, and sharing results (Norris 2008; Norris et al. 2012). The research project included five main phases, which were fluid and developed throughout the project through conversations between authors which is a key characteristic of a CAE approach. The first phase, unstructured conversations, involved several conversations between research group members, initially around coping with transitioning into the ecology of the university and later about sharing our experiences with other ECAs. During these conversations, we began reading the literature concerning ECAs, where our attention turned to ways of describing assimilation and/or acclimatisation to university systems. This led to our second phase in which we began to formalise a research question and adopted Barnett's dimensions of ecologies framework. In phase three, we collected our data through five audio-recorded focus group conversations, followed by phase four during which we collectively analysed data using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2022). The final phase consisted of collaborative writing and dissemination of findings in form of conference presentations and journal articles.

De-privatising data collection, analysis and dissemination

Our data collection, analysis and dissemination were characterised by a process of de-privatisation. This means our process involved a deliberate sharing and collective examination of experiences that might typically remain private. This 'built-in process of internal peer reviewing' (Roy and Uekusa 2020, p. 388) makes the *personal* public for collective reflexivity, a central characteristic of CAE. De-privatisation included sharing leadership of focus group conversations, openly discussing our previous practices of data collection, analysis and writing and critiquing each other's research strategies. This process involved dialogic tensions, allowing us to question, affirm or expand on each other's writing and interpretations which were '… productive because they force intellectual dialogues among the team and remind the participating researchers that they must critically reflect on their own role in knowledge production' (Roy and Uekusa 2020, p. 388). Our use of CAE was characterised by ethics of care, creating a supportive and safe space for sharing our experiences, deep listening, feedback, mentoring, and navigating the research process as a collective which allowed us to share workload and support one another in times of need (Chang et al. 2016; Askins and Blazek 2017; Lapadat 2017). Furthermore, the collaborative aspects of CAE allowed us to 'broaden the gaze from the lonely traumas of the self to locate them within categories of experience shared by many' (Lapadat 2017, p. 599) which was particularly helpful in making sense of systemic issues which impacted all of us.

We carried out five focus groups which took between 50 and 80 min each. Each focus group was attended by all four members of the research group with alternating focus group leadership which included introducing the topic for our conversation, keeping the conversation going and prompting participants if necessary. We developed the focus group question guide (Supplementary Material 1) collaboratively with each focus group directed at one of Barnett's (2018) five dimensions of ecologies. The focus groups aligned with the participatory, emancipatory and narrative approach of autoethnography by allowing all members of our research group to shape our focus group questions, share their narratives, engage in conversations with each other and being part of the analysis of focus group data.

Data analysis was done by all members, supported by regular data analysis meetings and underpinned by reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2022). In reflexive thematic analysis researchers have an active role in interpreting data and constructing knowledge, influenced by prior experience, theoretical constructs, and ideological assumptions. We were guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) six steps for analysing qualitative data which include data familiarisation, code generation, theme generation, theme review, theme naming and reporting themes. After converting our recorded focus groups into transcripts and immersing ourselves into the transcripts, we uploaded them on NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software tool. Using Barnett's (2018) dimensions of ecologies framework, we each systematically and comprehensively coded one focus group transcript by assigning codes to all participant comments associated with Barnett's five dimensions (see Table 1). During this process we had regular meetings to share, reflect on, and critique each other's coding strategies and initial codes. We also coded one transcript together to start with to create a shared understanding of the process. After each focus group transcript was coded, we collated all codes on a shared spreadsheet by compiling all codes from across transcripts for each of Barnett's dimensions. Then we moved into theme generation, using whiteboards and posters first within each of the five dimensions ecologies (see Figure 1 for the diversity dimension) and later across the five dimensions (see Figure 2).

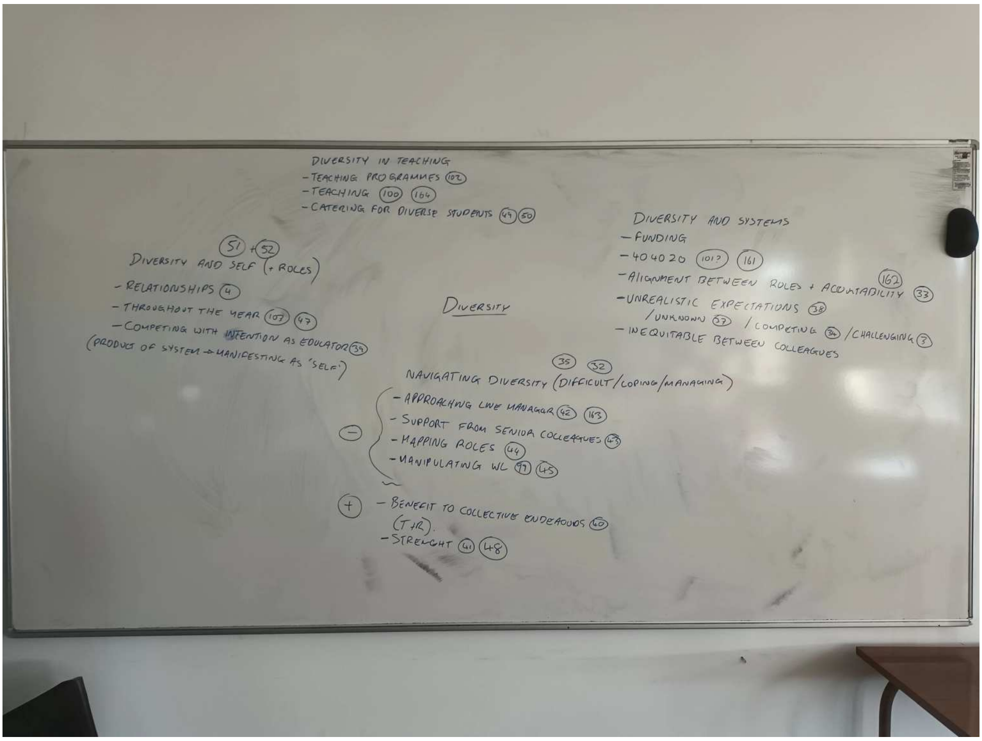
DIVERSITY IN TEACHING
- TEACHING PROGRAMMES (102)
- TEACHING (100) (164)
- CATERING FOR DIVERSE STUDENTS ㊾ ㊿
(51) + (52)
DIVERSITY AND SELF (+ ROLES)
- RELATIONSHIPS ④
- THROUGHOUT THE YEAR (107) ㊼
- COMPETING WITH INTENTION AS EDUCATOR ㊴
(PRODUCT OF SYSTEM → MANIFESTING AS 'SELF')
DIVERSITY
DIVERSITY AND SYSTEMS
- FUNDING
- 40 40 20 (101?) (161)
- ALIGNMENT BETWEEN ROLES + ACCOUNTABILITY (162) ㉝
- UNREALISTIC EXPECTATIONS ㊳
/ UNKNOWN ㊲ / COMPETING ㉞ / CHALLENGING ③
- INEQUITABLE BETWEEN COLLEAGUES
㉟ ㉜
NAVIGATING DIVERSITY (DIFFICULT/COPING/MANAGING)
- APPROACHING LINE MANAGER ㊷ (163)
- SUPPORT FROM SENIOR COLLEAGUES ㊸
- MAPPING ROLES ㊹
- MANIPULATING WL (97) ㊺
−
+
- BENEFIT TO COLLECTIVE ENDEAVOURS ㊵
(T+R)
- STRENGHT ㊶ ㊽

Figure 1. Theme generation on impairment within Barnett's (2018) framework.

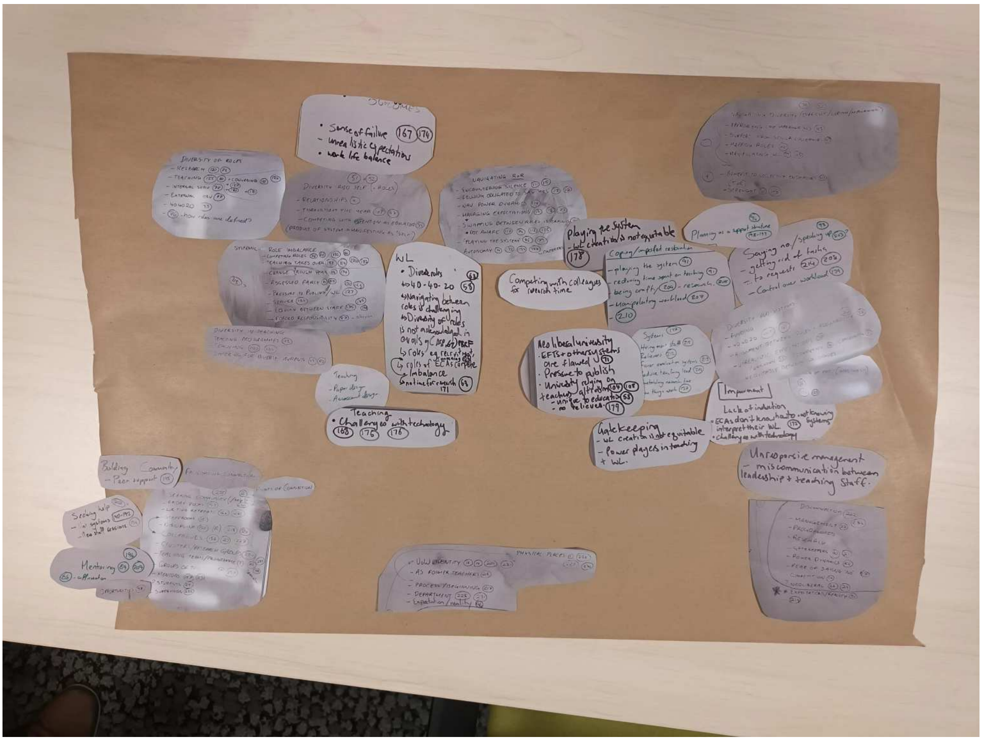
Sense of failure 167 174
– unrealistic expectations
• work life balance
Diversity and self (– roles)
Navigating R+R
Playing the system
– WL creation is not equitable
178
Planning as a support structure
Saying no/speaking up
– getting rid of tasks
– to requests
– Control over workload
WL
• Diverse roles
40-40-20
Navigating between roles is challenging
Diversity of roles is not acknowledged in evals
Imbalance
no time for research
Competing with colleagues for research time
Coping/imposed restoration
– playing the system
– reducing time spent on teaching
– being crafty
– manipulating workload
Neoliberal university
· EFTS + other systems are flawed
· Pressure to publish
· University relying on teachers altruism
– unique to education
– no relievers
Teaching
– Paper design
– Assessment design
Teaching
• Challenges with technology
Gatekeeping
– WL creation is not equitable
– Power plays in teaching + WL
Important
Lack of induction
• ECAs don't know how to interpret their WL
• not knowing systems
• Challenges with technology
Unresponsive management
– miscommunication between leadership + teaching staff.
Building Community
– Peer support
Seeking help
Mentoring
Physical places
Dissemination

Figure 2. Theme generation across Barnett's (2018) dimensions of ecologies framework.

After this process we developed four initial themes which we then refined and re-organised into three themes through a series of conversations. Theme reviewing also included several discussions about naming themes, as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2022). In line with the collaborative nature of this project, we also developed disseminations as a collective, often writing in the same physical or virtual space and providing feedback on each other's writing.

Ethical considerations

We have gained ethical approval from our University's Education Ethics Committee to carry out this research. All participants in this project are insider researchers (Sikes and Potts 2008; Poulton 2023), both as researching our workplace and through exploring our shared experiences as a group. Being insider researchers means we had to take care when navigating sensitive issues that arose during our focus groups, in relation to colleagues, department and university leadership, and the institution we work for (Lapadat 2017). The relationships we have with each other served as a strength when navigating this ethical issue. This was because we could express our opinions freely during focus groups and decide prior to the dissemination process where to apply caution to protect our own identities and the identities of our colleagues. To further help with this, we use gender neutral pseudonyms (Ryan, Charlie, Taylor, and Sam) when referring to ourselves in the research. Finally, we decided to seek advice and feedback, but importantly, not permission, from more senior staff members at our institution before we submitted this work. This was to ensure that we protected our identities, and the identities of any colleagues we may refer to.

Findings and discussion

Throughout our analysis, we identified three key themes describing ECAs' experiences of the ecology of the university: (1) ECAs seek connection within the academic ecology, (2) ECAs are impaired by workload imbalance, and (3) ECAs' diverse responsibilities result in imperfect restorative practices. In this section, we refer to ourselves using pseudonyms and/or using the term 'participant' to make a distinction between our role as researchers and our role as participants in this research.

ECAs seek connection within the academic ecology

The first theme we identified in our analysis concerned ECAs actively seeking points of connection to academia. There were two main ways in which connection was sought. First, physical places within the university acted as points of connection. The variety of these places ranged from 'offices', 'corridors', communal spaces such as the 'staffroom' to recurring staff events and services such as learning technology support sessions. Ryan, for instance, states 'One of the places that makes me feel connected is my office, because it's a physical place at the Uni[versity] that has my name on the door, that's where I am'. This seemingly minor detail symbolises a stake in the institutional space, reflecting Barnett's (2018) notion of interconnectedness and the importance of recognising someone's individual presence within a broader system. The physical proximity to colleagues, as noted by Ryan, ' … then there's like people next to me, physically, and I feel connected to them, because we're on one floor,' further highlights how spatial arrangements can foster a sense of interconnectedness and wok against academic loneliness (Jauhiainen et al. 2009).

Second, connection was sought with various academic communities, both internal and external. Division-wide writing retreats, for instance, were identified as important opportunities. As Charlie describes, such initiatives, which provide dedicated time and space for research alongside peers, had a positive effect: ' … the writing retreats that are in a really similar way of having to timetable something in, everyone in a room doing the same thing. You have lunch together, it's just for me, it's worked really well'. In addition, a regular forum for new staff convened by the Division, gave the opportunity to receive new information and have any questions answered regarding this information, for as Sam described, 'I always knew that [on] Thursday morning … without fear of judgment, there were things we could go back over, which meant that we move better forward'. These forums and retreats can be seen as attempts at restoration, creating supportive micro-ecologies that foster scholarly engagement and collegiality amidst the often-isolating pressures of academic life (McKay and Monk 2017). They allow for the cultivation of interconnectedness that might otherwise be difficult to achieve.

However, building these connections, particularly within specific disciplines, was not without its challenges. This process differed significantly between participants, influenced by their knowledge of the national context and the alignment (or misalignment) with expertise within the Division. Our findings suggest that 'build[ing] that sort of connection with the discipline' (Charlie) is a demanding process, often complicated by existing academic silos:

> 'I thought I'd come in here, and my department is all actively researching in my field. But it's just not like that. We all have our own little areas; you need to go beyond the doors of your university and make those connections'. (Charlie)

Charlie's experience points to potential impairments within the university ecology. If the internal environment is characterised by *niches* that make broader disciplinary connection difficult, it can limit the potential diversity of interactions and collaborations available to ECAs (Belkhir et al. 2019). This forces them to expend considerable energy seeking external links, an individual act of restoration to compensate for feelings of disciplinary isolation. This connects to the ethics of care approach (Visse and Niemeijer 2016) that underpinned our research group, which itself became a site of actively fostered connection and mutual support. As Charlie notes, ' … once you know, a few people, it's easier to build on that' indicating that initial connections, however they are made, are crucial for expanding one's network.

ECAs are impaired by workload imbalance

This second theme illustrates how ECAs experienced impairment within the university ecology, particularly in relation to systemic issues related to workload and performance via an audit culture. Participants identified significant inequities inherent in models like the EFTS and the PBRF system, which directly impacted their ability to succeed. ECAs described their roles as multifaceted, encompassing diverse dimensions: 'being like a teacher or lecturer, being a researcher, being a service giver that's somebody doing service at the university outside in the academic community, local community' (Charlie). This aligns with Barnett's (2018) recognition of the potential diversity within academic roles. However, participants consistently reported an imbalance, as Sam described 'wrestling with the magic numbers, the 40:40:20', and the requirement to apportion research, teaching and service to this ration, which often resulted in research being relegated to a secondary position. As Ryan described, 'because of the diversity of my role, often those things [research] have to take a backseat'.

This marginalisation of research due to other pressing demands is a clear impairment, particularly problematic in an environment where performativity and research outputs are heavily emphasised (Kenny 2017; Riding et al. 2019). This misalignment was of significant concern for ECAs, as they are trying to initiate their research programme. Furthermore, this imbalance is exacerbated by a misalignment between the work ECAs do and how they are assessed by university accountability measures. Participants felt that these measures did not adequately represent their contributions, as for example, stated by Charlie ' … I feel like the way we are currently measured, is not representative of what we do […] its focus is your outputs. What's the journal article that's been accepted?'.

This narrow focus on specific outputs, particularly peer-reviewed publications as prioritised by systems like PBRF (Nguyen et al. 2023), creates systemic impairment. It forces teaching and research into 'direct competition with each other' (Charlie), rather than fostering an interconnected relationship between the two. This conflict led to frustration and even made ECAs question the value of their pedagogical contributions: 'The fact that PBRF doesn't account for teaching makes me think […] is my teaching important?' (Ryan).

Despite awareness among both staff and management of the inequities within workload models like EFTS, these systemic impairments persist. Charlie recounted:

> … my line manager was saying to me on paper, your workload looks okay. But we all know that in reality, it's different because I had five different teams to work with. Five different papers to teach. And there are small numbers. I mean, we all know that that's not a good workload to have. But the EFTS system doesn't reflect that.

This gap between the documented workload and its lived reality represents a significant impairment. The inability or unwillingness of the system to adapt, despite acknowledging its flaws, raises questions about institutional responsibility for creating a sustainable and equitable working environment (Barnett 2018). The lack of effective systemic restoration leaves ECAs to navigate these imbalances, often leading them to relegate research to evenings and weekends (McKay and Monk 2017). The temporal dimension of workload, with intense teaching periods, as described by Taylor '… there are months of the year, where my teaching is 0%. I must force myself to remember when I'm 80%, teaching … ', adds another layer of complexity to managing these competing demands.

The specific discipline of Initial Teacher Education appeared to exacerbate workload tensions. For ECAs with prior experience in school, the impacts of a feeling of altruism in connection to teaching was identified. As Taylor reflected:

> You want to give your time to students on giving detailed feedback, or an extra 20 min visiting a school, a student and practicum. You can see the rewards for the student in that. So, it's a story that is played upon by the model. And the intention, in other words, taking advantage of your altruism, knowing that even though it's only 40% [of your time].

This exploitation of educators' intrinsic motivation, especially in high-service disciplines like teacher education (Love 2024), is a critical impairment. The system, as Charlie suggested, may even rely on this: 'And that's how the university makes money. By assigning us too many classes, therefore saving money relying on our altruism and passion as educators … '. As a result, ECAs are pushed towards survival or coping mechanism, often resulting in feelings of defeat, as ECAs strive for high-quality teaching but are constrained by systemic pressures.

These challenges are not isolated to individual roles or institutions, but reflect broader, systemic impairments within higher education. Charlie's disheartened observation captures this sense of systemic inertia:

> … there seems to be no way out of it in a way because you can talk to your line manager, but then they are also within this model […] It's just what it is. And you know, we're all unhappy with it. We're all struggling. It's not a positive work environment, but nobody can change it. It's frustrating.

This sentiment highlights a failure of institutional responsibility to enact meaningful restoration. The persistence of these prevailing issues can lead ECAs to internalise these conditions as normative, potentially perpetuating harmful work practices as they become socialised into academia (Trowler and Knight 2000; Hollywood et al. 2020).

ECAs' diverse responsibilities result in imperfect restorative practices

The final theme discusses ECAs' attempts at restoration in an environment characterised by competing responsibilities and significant systemic impairment. Navigating multiple roles simultaneously was a demanding process, manifesting as a 'balancing act' (Ryan). Charlie articulated this struggle:

> … thinking about the diversity of different roles I'm supposed to have as one. It feels like there's so much overlap and like I'm being pulled into lots of different directions … it's sometimes hard to navigate those roles.

This difficulty in managing the potential diversity (Barnett 2018) inherent in their academic positions is compounded by the perceived lack of interconnectedness between these roles. Instead of synergy, roles often felt fragmented and competitive. Significant effort is required to switch between them, as Taylor described needing a 'recovery' period after intensive teaching before engaging with research '… it's very difficult to jump straight into research [from teaching] … the first two of those [weeks] were taken up recovering from the teaching'. This constant juggling and recovery contributed to negative 'physical and psychological effects' (Charlie) widely reported among ECAs (Hollywood et al. 2020).

The power dynamics within the university ecology further complicated ECAs' attempts to manage their workload. Participants expressed hesitation about saying 'no' to requests, fearing negative interpretations or future repercussions. Ryan's anxiety about declining additional teaching illustrates this: 'I knew that that also meant that I was going to possibly look unfavourably to them as well. So that was really uncomfortable … I still worry … '. This fear, as Ryan elaborated, was linked to the 'power dynamic of them being in a position of power and me being new'. Such anxieties reflect findings by Crome and colleagues (2019) and McKay and Monk (2017) on the vulnerable position of ECAs. This reluctance to decline, even when workloads are excessive, is a survival strategy in a competitive neoliberal environment (Kenny 2017) but ultimately impairs ECAs' well-being and their capacity for genuine restoration. Charlie's pointed comment, '… it's not just us applying the word no … it's listening to the word no,' highlights that the onus is not just on ECAs to assert boundaries, but on the system and its actors to respect them.

Approaching management with concerns over workload yielded mixed results. While management was often receptive, tangible support in navigating roles or reducing workload was scarce: '… giving you encouraging words and telling you if you need a day off … they're nice and everything, but they're not reducing the workload, which is the thing you actually need … ' (Charlie). This experience points to a critical gap in institutional responsibility for effective restoration. As previously discussed, not just ECAs but also management are working within the constraints of a neoliberal system that restricts their agency. Nevertheless, sympathetic words without concrete action fail to address the underlying systemic impairments, leaving ECAs to devise their own coping strategies, which we term 'imperfect'.

One such coping strategy involved attempts to 'play workload systems,' particularly the EFTS model. Taylor described selecting teaching based on workload efficiency rather than direct expertise alignment, to create research time:

> I've selected papers that I'm perhaps not very interested in, or that are not best aligned with my expertise. But I've selected them because I know the workload associated those papers, and the allocated EFTS […] simply because it will make more time for research.

Ryan echoed this pragmatic, albeit reluctant, acceptance of manipulating the system: 'I'll be doing the same. I'm not ashamed of that … we have to work with what what's in front of us, and we're working within a neoliberal university system'. These actions are clear individual attempts at restoration, aimed at carving out space for research, which is ultimately what counts in performance assessments (Nguyen et al. 2023). However, as participants acknowledged, these strategies are flawed. They can create ethical tensions (teaching outside one's core expertise), negatively impact colleagues by fostering competition for 'easier' allocations, and critically, they do not address the root causes of the impairment. Such individualistic restoration efforts, stemming from of systemic pressure, risk perpetuating a system that rewards 'playing the system' over genuine academic contribution and can normalise practices ECAs themselves find problematic (Trowler and Knight 2000). It should also be noted that the ability to successfully 'play the system' was not universal. Charlie's experience of taking a stand on workload but seeing 'nothing happened' demonstrates that power imbalances persist, limiting the effectiveness of individual restoration attempts for some. This unequal capacity to navigate or manipulate the system highlights another layer of impairment within the university ecology, suggesting that fairness and equitable opportunities for restoration are not guaranteed. These individualistic and often ethically challenging strategies contrast with the more collective and supportive restoration sought through the formation of our research group.

Implications and recommendations

In this final section we want to further discuss the implications of neoliberalisation in the context of high service disciplines such as initial teacher education and make recommendations for university leaders. While the challenges that ECAs face in neoliberal university contexts are well understood, contextual factors such as specific disciplines as well as their implications are less explored. As a high service discipline (Love 2024), initial teacher education entails unique demands on academics, including evaluative visits of teacher education students undertaking practicum (travel to and from schools), leading entrance interviews (a requirement specified by the Teaching Council), and on a more metacognitive level, the need to be effective role models for teacher education students (modelling effective pedagogical, feedback and assessment practices). Such demands affected participants in this research significantly, and while the challenges manifested as the imperfect restorative practices discussed, direct impacts on the teaching profession in Aotearoa New Zealand may be less apparent. For example, a recent report (Education Review Office 2024) cited increasing levels of teacher education students feeling unprepared for the profession and has opened a national debate about the utility of university-based teacher education (Gerritsen 2024). While speculative, the links between academics increasing workload and adopting reductive approaches to teaching – via imperfect restorative practices, and such approaches negatively impacting their students are not difficult to draw. As a result, it is perhaps unsurprising for the quality of student teachers to be called into question. A similar trend occurred in the

English national context over the past 15 years, whereby the current market driven orientation has led to challenges in teacher education, in tandem with the place of initial teacher education in universities being questioned (Ellis 2023). Albeit from private organisations, calls for a similar apprenticeship approach based on critiques of the current university-based model have been made (Johnston and Martin 2023). While we contend with these proposals, it is clear to see how the findings of this research, namely the effects of neoliberal ideals on the quality of teaching in the university, may result in more critical views on the provision of teacher education from universities. The prevalence of disciplines specific effects on ECAs was not anticipated to play such a significant role in this study. Future research should consider how university policies and structures are experienced across different academic disciplines, in particular, high service disciplines.

The research presented herein contributes to the substantial body of literature identifying the challenges associated with the neoliberalisation of higher education (McKay and Monk 2017; Crome et al. 2019). In response to these challenges, we seek to turn attention towards restorative approaches that offer more support for ECAs. Echoing the extant literature, participants consistently emphasised the importance of cultivating connections – within their departments, across the university, and within their broader disciplines. These connections fostered a sense of belonging and identity, improved well-being, and enhancing research outputs through the collaborative group we developed as part of this project.

Based on our findings, we offer the following recommendations. First, it is crucial to acknowledge the deficits caused by the neoliberalisation of academia and to challenge these structures and ideologies where possible. While ECAs have some capacity to challenge these structures, it is important that those in a position of power also challenge the status quo. Second, while systemic change may be slow, institutions can still adopt practical and restorative measures to better support ECAs within the existing context. From the findings presented herein, the following approaches warrant consideration. (1) Establishing formal and informal networks that prioritise collegiality, collaboration, and mutual care – such as writing retreats and new staff forums to facilitate connection. (2) Creating spaces where ECAs can engage critically and reflectively with institutional structures and policies – such as though ECA specific consultations and mentoring. (3) Encouraging and facilitating time for practices grounded in an ethics of care – not as a panacea, but as a restorative framework that fosters empathy, mutual understanding, and collective resilience, such as the research group discussed herein. While these approaches may be imperfect, our findings indicate that they can offer meaningful support to ECAs navigating the complex ecology of contemporary academia.

Note

1. At the time of writing the PBRF system is under review.

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