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## The quality of working life of academics: A scoping review

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### **Abstract**

*This article aims to explore the scientific literature on the quality of the working life of university teachers. For this purpose, a scoping review methodology was used, which involved the systematic search of articles by relevant words on five databases. The theoretical perspective is the Theory of Duality of Technology formulated by Orlikowski (1992), so the analysis of the eligible articles was done following the three components of the theory: institutional properties, technology, and human agents. The results reveal rich literature regarding the intensive application of the neoliberal doctrine in universities and the effects on the working life of teaching staff. The literature also addresses the issue of systematically disadvantaged professionals within universities, such as women, early career professionals, and minorities. Closely related to institutional properties, the position of teaching staff as human agents is also analysed; most of the articles explicitly propose measures at the institutional level and/or approaches at the individual level to reduce the undesirable effects of the new public management. The subject addressed in a small number of articles is technology, its relationship with institutional properties, and its influence on the quality of the professional life of academics.*

### **Keywords**

*Academics; Quality of working life; Neoliberalism; Technology;*

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## Introduction

The commodification of tertiary education is a process that began thirty years ago (Wilkinson and Wilkinson, 2023), but is still ongoing. The narratives that teaching staff present regarding their professional life differ according to variables such as the size and specificity of the universities, the field of study, and the priority areas of the university (Ylijoki and Ursin, 2013; Hermanowicz, 2016), which reveals the favouring of some areas of study (such as STEM fields) and activities (such as research activities) and the obsolescence of others. Overall, the change in the objective of tertiary education from providing a public good to maximizing profit by selling a private good has entailed the modification of the entire tertiary education system: universities have gradually adopted business-specific strategies (Luka *et al.*, 2015; Hermanowicz, 2016), cost minimization became an imperative and this was achieved including by outsourcing costs to students and teaching staff (Jayasuriya, 2021), the organization of work in universities intensified and expanded in time and space, and it became more standardized and modularized (Ivancheva and Garvey, 2022).

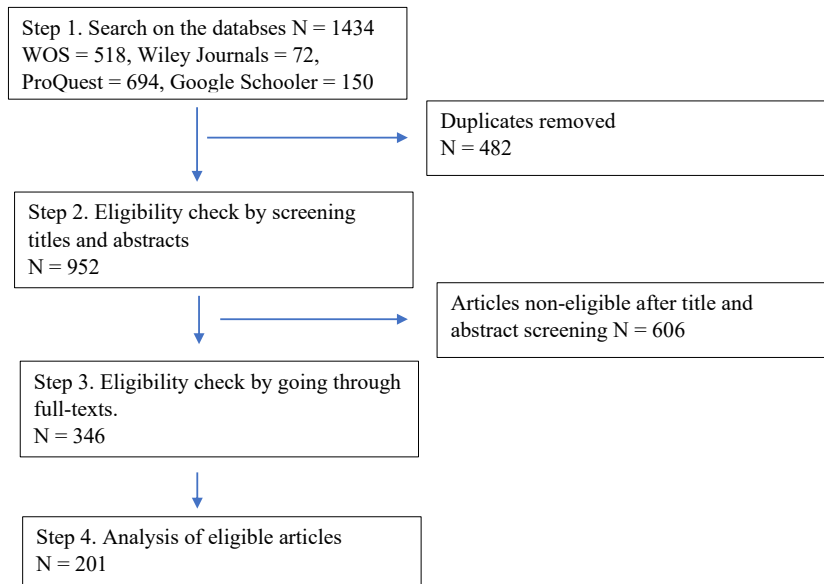
The transformations seem to negatively influence the quality of the working life of academics because in countries such as Australia, Finland, and Great Britain, almost 45% of teachers intend to quit their jobs (Padilla-González and Galaz-Fontes, 2015).

Technology in general and digitization in particular can be used as tools of the new public management (Gill, 2014; Feldman and Sandoval, 2018; Collins, Myers and Glover, 2019; Zhou and Xiang, 2021; Antonopoulou and Dare, 2022) in the process of the subsumption of the academic work to the capital (Hall and Bowles, 2016; Ivancheva and Garvey, 2022). The penetration of technologies such as Big Data and artificial intelligence in universities in the context of the deepening commodification of tertiary education is an unexplored topic.

This article explores the scientific literature on the quality of working life of academics. The research perspective consist on the Theory of Duality of Technology (Orlikowski, 1992), so the analysis of the eligible articles was done following the three components of the theory: institutional properties, technology and human agents.

## Methodology

A scoping review methodology was used (Munn *et al.*, 2018). A systematic search on five databases – Web of Science, Wiley Journals, ProQuest, Scopus and Google Scholar – was conducted in January 2023. The search was done in English. We searched for *articles written in English* that use the phrases ("quality of employment" OR "decent work" OR "quality of work" OR precarious\*) AND (higher education OR academics) *in the Abstract*. Additional inclusion criteria were applied to the ProQuest database to improve the relevance of the results. Since Google Scholar does not have the option to search only in the abstract, the body of the articles was searched. For this reason, only the first 15 pages of results were included in the analysis, after page 15 the articles generated were irrelevant to the topic studied. The time range set was 2008-up to date.

**Figure 1. Flow of article search and analysis**

Source: Diagram made by the author

From the total number of articles identified, articles were excluded from the analysis based on the following criteria: do not address any aspect of the quality of life of university teachers, are written in a language other than English, books or book chapters, articles for which full text was not found.

## Results

### ***The structural characteristics of the tertiary education system and the effects on the quality of life of academics***

#### *Neoliberal doctrine in universities*

Since the second part of the 20th century, the tertiary education system has been permeated by the neoliberal doctrine that assumes the permanence and deepening of the organization of social relations according to the free market model (Ashcraft, 2017; Mercille and Murphy, 2017; Vernon, 2018). The knowledge economy, in which knowledge becomes an economic good, legitimizes applying neoliberalism in universities (Courtois and O'Keefe, 2015). Tertiary education is transformed from a public to a private good, and the university takes the form of a corporation (Luka *et al.*, 2015; Hermanowicz, 2016; Ashcraft, 2017).

In the spirit of the neo-liberal doctrine, the new public management is gradually replacing the traditional model of public administration. The new public management involves "the application within public services of the principles of the market economy" (Hodgins and Mannix-McNamara, 2021) and the stimulation of the "entrepreneurial spirit of public services" (Santiago and Carvalho, 2008). Obtaining funds for academic and

research activities is going through a process of decentralization (Santiago and Carvalho, 2008). The direct intervention of the state in the financing of universities is substantially reduced, and it is gradually replaced by indirect intervention through financial instruments (e.g. student loans) (Jayasuriya, 2021). Thus, universities become dependent on private funding from students, similar to the quasi-privatization of tertiary education (Schwartz, 2014). The lexicon of the free market penetrates the academic field (Hermanowicz, 2016), the student becomes a customer (Dashper and Fletcher, 2019), and the teaching staff becomes a kind of "academic entrepreneur" (Oliver and Morris, 2020). The relationship between university/professor and student becomes a producer-consumer relation (Hall, 2018; Hodgins and Mannix-McNamara, 2021).

The new public management is applied through managerialism that consists of the marketization/privatization of educational services, increased competition between professionals, and excessive use of efficiency and effectiveness measurement, auditing, and surveillance (Ashcraft, 2017; Hodgins and Mannix-McNamara, 2021).

In some regions of the world, the oppression of authoritarian state leadership regimes (Sirat, 2010; Vatansever, 2018; Aktas, Nilsson and Borell, 2019; Biner, 2019; Tutkal, 2022) or the social instability (Sundar, 2018; Lima, 2019) added to the neoliberalism in universities, which further reduced the independence of the academics.

The new organization of the tertiary education system creates the context for academic precariousness. Academic precarity is an organizational practice (*doing precarity*) that shapes the subjective experience of professionals in the field (*being made precarious*). Reduced public funding for education and research, neoliberalism, market ideology and meritocracy ideology, reduced availability of secure and well-paid jobs are reflected in temporary work contracts and under-budgeted research projects, expectations of self-resourced excellence, the prevalence of the quantitative performance criteria at the expense of qualitative criteria, practicing fast-science culture etc. (Albayrak-Aydemir and Gleibs, 2023). The intensification of competition for resources, students, and funding sources proves its destabilizing effects, often leading to institutional bullying - repeated, systematic behaviours whose intention is to undermine dignity, self-esteem, and health (Archer, 2008; Hodgins and Mannix-McNamara, 2021). Low collegiality and work relationships are among the main barriers to professional advancement (Santos, 2016) and one of the main stressors for young people at the start of their careers (Allmer, 2018a).

### *Temporary and precarious work*

The institutional austerity imposed by the application of market discipline in universities has led to the outsourcing of education costs from the state to different social categories, one of them being the teaching staff (Jayasuriya, 2021). The status of university teachers has become precarious primarily through the erosion of traditional forms of employment (Santiago and Carvalho, 2008; Ivancheva, 2015; Ashcraft, 2017; Doughty, 2018; Hodgins and Mannix-McNamara, 2021). The situation is similar concerning the research staff (Papoulias and Callard, 2022) or doctoral students (Rao, Hosein and Raaper, 2021). Permanent jobs that have social benefits attached and increased job security are fewer in number, while

temporary forms of work become the most frequent work opportunities available (Brownlee, 2015; Allmer, 2018a; McCartney and Metcalfe, 2018; Stringer *et al.*, 2018; Rose, 2020). Initially considered a situation specific to the professional debut, temporary employment tends to become a "continuous present", a "permanentization of temporariness" (Gill, 2014; Bone, 2019; Wang, 2020). Job stability becomes the responsibility of the employee, ceasing to be the shared responsibility of both the organization and the employee (Herschberg, Benschop and van den Brink, 2018).

Temporary university employees are in a particularly precarious situation. In order to continue their activity in tertiary education, academics move from one city to another, from one university to another, where teaching positions are available (Stoica *et al.*, 2019; Valletly, 2019). They accept multiple part-time, fragmented jobs (Allmer, 2018a) and work a significantly higher number of additional hours than their colleagues in permanent and full-time positions (Frei and Grund, 2020).

The status of these employees is precarious under several aspects: they benefit from limited institutional resources, and are only partially entitled to benefits and social insurance, additionally, they are excluded from the institutional decision-making process and are marginal to professional social networks and (O'Keefe and Courtois, 2019). During the pandemic, the limited access to information resources was exacerbated for this category (Willson *et al.*, 2022).

Job instability leads to income insecurity (Courtois and O'Keefe, 2015; Allmer, 2018a; Kouritzin *et al.*, 2022). Increased wage inequalities between temporary and permanent positions are a characteristic of the countries where neoliberalism is intensively applied in universities, such as the United States and Great Britain (Angermuller, 2017) or Australia (Bergami, 2022).

The general context of insecurity, characterized by the stagnation of wages, the reduction of social security, and the possibility of professional advancement (Ryan and Bhattacharyya, 2016; Santos, 2016; Bozzon *et al.*, 2017) also affects personal aspects of the lives of contractual employees, their decisions regarding housing, friends, children, family, and life (Bone, 2019; Wang, 2020; Alderson *et al.*, 2022; Spina *et al.*, 2022).

Exploited through an unethical strategy called cruel optimism, young professionals relate to aspirational professional identities, hoping that their effort and dedication will lead to fulfilling these aspirations (Bone, Jack and Mayson, 2018).

Job insecurity affects to different degrees the categories of professionals in the field and the disciplines of study. Women, ethnic and racial minorities and the humanities and social sciences concentrate a considerable proportion of temporary posts (O'Keefe and Courtois, 2019; Rose, 2020), but this is discussed more fully in another section of the paper.

Ironically, simultaneously with the work precariousness in universities, there was an increase in the number of professional administrators (professional administrators), who impose themselves as the new ruling class of neoliberal universities (Schwartz, 2014). Power and autonomy are transferred from teachers to managers, and technology and digitization are tools of the new public management (Collins, Myers and Glover, 2019).

The COVID-19 pandemic has increased financial pressure on universities and accelerated the trend toward institutional austerity, leading to an acceleration of fixed-term employment, budget cuts, layoffs, and even the closure of some educational institutions in the United States (Jayasuriya, 2021; Hordósy and McLean, 2022). The situation has been even more destabilizing in countries such as Australia, where a large proportion of university income is due to foreign students (Jayasuriya, 2021).

The neoliberal practices in universities reduced the demand for academic work. Concomitantly, the European Union's policies increased the supply of academic work by promoting the participation in doctoral studies (Carvalho, Diogo and Vilhena, 2022).

### *The tyranny of performativity and The Rule of Excellence*

*The tyranny of performativity* represents another imperative of the new organizational management (Hodgins and Mannix-McNamara, 2021). To access institutional resources and permanent positions, academics must prove their excellence in as many aspects as possible: publishing in the most visible scientific journals, obtaining funding for research, innovation in education, etc. Conjuring dominant models of success in advance leaves little room for individuality, understanding past and present circumstances that lead to outcomes, and reduces equity and social justice (Bunn and Bennett, 2020). Since excellence in all aspects is an unrealistic expectation, and institutional conditions for professional advancement are increasingly limited (for example, the reduced availability of permanent jobs), teachers often face success (Santos, 2016). Although from the perspective of neoliberal ideology success should increase the motivation for work, these greedy institutions of excellence at minimal costs (Rogler, 2019) lead to the use of various adaptation strategies: some of the employees resort to extreme dedication and commitment, the culture of extended hours becoming the norm, others adopt the strategy of negotiation without challenging the status quo, carefully choosing tasks and benefits (Bone, Jack and Mayson, 2018), some prioritizes research to the detriment of teaching (Archer, 2008; Grüning and De Angelis, 2022; Mula *et al.*, 2022), while others adopt opportunistic behaviours or become discouraged, cynical and isolate themselves from the professional network (Tulubas and Göktürk, 2020; Hodgins and Mannix-McNamara, 2021; Anabalón Schaaf, 2022).

The Rule of Excellence refers to relationships that are established through the "progressively competitive application of managerial and audit technologies to assess research productivity and quality (e.g., performance reviews, journal rankings, citation indexes)" (Ashcraft, 2017) and can be considered an aspect of the tyranny of performance standards. This rule proves its shortcomings: the prestige of the journal becomes more important than the topic addressed and turns into a proxy for the quality of the articles, quantitative criteria take precedence over qualitative evaluation, the area of studied topics is narrowed to publish in journals with visibility, etc. (Eacott, 2016; Ashcraft, 2017). In other words, the shiny results (*shiny things*) are valued at the expense of other important themes, but less visible (Hermanowicz, 2016).

### *Intensification and extensification of work*

In the institutional context characterized by the reduced availability of decent jobs, the increase of competition and the sovereignty of standards of excellence, the work of academics intensifies and expands at the same time (Gill, 2014; Ashcraft, 2017; Allmer, 2018b; Hodgins and Mannix-McNamara, 2021). Regarding the intensification of work, in order to increase productivity, the universities rely on *accelerated time regimes*, in which being efficient every moment becomes the norm and total dedication is an imperative (Conesa Carpintero and González Ramos, 2018). The extensification of work occurs both temporal - overtime work, on days off and holidays - and spatial. Spatial extensification of work refers to the use of atypical spaces for work, such as cafes, dining areas, etc. The spatio-temporal division between professional life and family life is blurring (Allmer, 2018a; Mitchell-Eaton, 2021) and the temporalities of work change (Bozzon *et al.*, 2017). The extension of work in universities also occurs due to the inclusion by academic work of activities that traditionally do not belong to academics, such as building the university's brand (Dhanpat, 2016; Hodgins and Mannix-McNamara, 2021).

Digitization is an important factor in the extensification of work since it allows the creation of a new "space" dedicated to working - the virtual space. The culture of presenteeism is deepened by the possibility of working online even in previously inaccessible conditions (for example, sick leave), giving birth to a new forms of presenteeism – virtual presenteeism (Hadjisolomou, Mitsakis and Gary, 2022).

### *Emotional health*

The new academic context is characterised by the reduction of the institutional resources available to teachers (Ryan and Bhattacharyya, 2016; Santos, 2016; Bozzon *et al.*, 2017) and their overload with tasks and responsibilities (Ylijoki and Ursin, 2013; Hermanowicz, 2016). Thus, teachers experiencing insecurity, anxiety, stress, and professional dissatisfaction (Gill, 2014; Knights and Clarke, 2018; Loveday, 2018b; Teixeira, Marqueze and Moreno, 2020) is not surprising. Young professionals are even more vulnerable. They report stress, fatigue and even exhaustion, irritability, frustration, disillusionment, depression, anger, discouragement, blockage, and hopelessness (Courtois and O'Keefe, 2015; Allmer, 2018a; O'Keefe and Courtois, 2019). The COVID-19 pandemic has amplified these emotional states among academics (Oldfield *et al.*, 2021; Stewart *et al.*, 2021; Bitter and McCrea, 2022).

Paradoxically, for employees with a temporary employment contract, overload is a predictor of commitment at work (Pace and Sciotto, 2020), which can create the conditions for burnout according to prior cited research. But for most of the academics the increased state of vulnerability and the decreased state of resilience (Ferris, 2021) favour the abandonment of the academic career (Padilla-González and Galaz-Fontes, 2015). The decision to leave is associated with emotions of anger, fear and even shame (McKenzie, 2022), being considered a personal failure. Not establishing a connection between their own performance and the institutional or economic context in which they live and work,

temporary workers internalize failure, attributing it to a lack of personal qualities and insufficient work (Loveday, 2018a; Robson, 2023).

#### *Professional identity and job satisfaction*

The reduction of institutional resources, the increase of pressure to work and perform, the internalization of new roles not traditionally specific to teaching staff in universities shape the professional identity of academics, especially of the young professionals (Crozier and Woolnough, 2020). Undesirable effects of the new organization are the erosion of the social prestige and professional autonomy in the effort to "please customers" (Knights and Clarke, 2018; Chhaing, 2022). The academic self is at risk of deterioration (Hodgins and Mannix-McNamara, 2021), and the professional identity of teachers is characterized by *restlessness* (Knights and Clarke, 2018; Nordbäck, Hakonen and Tienari, 2022).

The transformations of the tertiary education system affect academics unevenly. Some of them present progressive narratives referring to the possibilities of mobility and their agency within the institution. Due to their position in strategic departments of prestigious universities, to which substantial institutional resources are directed especially for carrying out research in visible fields such as STEM (the teaching activity being secondary), these professionals enjoy a so-called immunity from institutional pressures, having the possibility to decline unfavourable requests; they report high job satisfaction and have positive attitudes towards work (Ylijoki and Ursin, 2013; Hermanowicz, 2016).

Less work satisfaction and less favourable attitudes are reported by professionals in medium-sized universities, which divide resources between teaching and research, and by professionals in teaching-based universities; they present a regressive narrative regarding recent institutional changes citing insecurity and overload (Ylijoki and Ursin, 2013; Hermanowicz, 2016).

#### *Gender, racial, ethnic discrimination and the intersectionality of vulnerabilities*

The gender, the race, the position in the institutional hierarchy, the type of work contract, the migrant status, having disabilities are all predictors of the quality of professional life and of the attitudes towards work (Punia and Kamboj, 2013; Bahrami and Habibzadeh, 2017; Jovanović, 2018; Touhouliotis, 2018; Waterfield, Beagan and Weinberg, 2018; Luczaj, 2022; Remennick, 2022; Trbovc *et al.*, 2022).

The activity of feminist organizations and their visibility in the media exerted pressure for the implementation of gender equality policies in universities, which narrowed the gap in women's access to leadership positions (Ruggi and Duvvury, 2022). However, this did not completely solve the issue of gender equality in access to academic leadership positions, nor the issue of gender equality in universities in general.

Women are more often nominated to leadership positions in unfavourable institutional contexts (*glass cliff*) (Peterson, 2016). Women are still under-represented in permanent positions with normal working hours and are over-represented in precarious jobs (Stringer *et al.*, 2018). Furthermore, women stay longer in temporary contract



arrangements compared to men (Courtois and O’Keefe, 2015). Women publish fewer articles than men (Jameela, Moynihan and Witham, 2021).

The barriers in women's professional life are diverse. The intensification and the extensification of work give rise to so-called *accelerated male time regimes*. This work regime disadvantages women (Conesa Carpintero and González Ramos, 2018; Poggio, 2022), especially mothers (McKenzie, 2022) who traditionally have household and caring responsibilities beside paid work. The COVID-19 pandemic has disproportionately affected university women (Walters, Bam, Armand, and Tumubweinee, Philippa, 2022) by increasing the workload of caring for children and other dependent family members. From a metric point of view, during the health crisis, women's performance decreased (Mavin and Yusupova, 2020; Oldfield *et al.*, 2021; Bartkowiak *et al.*, 2022; Dunn *et al.*, 2022; Kriger, Walters and Jansen, 2022), although the volume of work performed by them has increased considerably.

In the neoliberal university, the distribution of unpaid work, especially the work of raising and caring for children is considered an aspect that must be managed at the individual level (Nikunen, 2012; Santos, 2016) and treated superficially by public policies regarding gender equality (Ivancheva, Lynch and Keating, 2019; Ruggi and Duvvury, 2022; Villar-Aguilés and Obiol-Francés, 2022).

It is not just the traditional private roles that influences women's professional success, but the competing professional roles too. On the one hand, permanent reconfirmation of professional skills is expected from women, on the other hand they are expected to take over more administrative activities, which reduces the time allocated to teaching and research activities (Santos, 2016).

Masculinity as a model of success and the social networks built around it are another obstacle to women's professional development. Practices and characteristics considered masculine, such as self-confidence, self-centeredness and competitiveness represent the stereotype of success (van den Brink and Benschop, 2014; Veelen and Derks, 2020). Formal and informal networks are built around this successful model. Through a mobilization of masculinities (*mobilizing masculinities*) these gendered social networks are activated when looking for a new team member or when negotiating new responsibilities (van den Brink and Benschop, 2014; Santos, 2016). Thus, women seen as deficit men have fewer professional opportunities comparative to men (Morley and Crossouard, 2015). The perception of not matching this model of success (*lack to fit*) leads to decreasing identification with the profession, reducing work engagement and perceived effectiveness, burnout, and the intention to leave the profession (Veelen and Derks, 2020).

Universities in the Anglo-Saxon space are still dominated by Caucasian identity (*whiteness*), where academics belonging to ethnic and racial minorities are marginalized and exposed to microaggressions (Lander and Santoro, 2017; Oliver and Morris, 2020; Arday and Jones, 2022; Schofield, 2022). Teachers who belong to ethnic and racial minorities feel hypervisible and invisible at the same time (Lander and Santoro, 2017; Oliver and Morris, 2020). They must continuously prove that they meet the performance standards in the field. Language skills are often considered an indicator of professional skills and are subject to evaluation and criticism (Lander and Santoro, 2017). The body

(posture, gesture, clothing, etc.) also becomes an indicator of integration. Feeling that they are outside bodies who risk being considered unsuitable for the professional context in which they find themselves (*failure to fit*), people belonging to this group, especially women, engage in a permanent activity of self-observation and self-disciplining one's own body to conform to dominant cultural landmarks (Oliver and Morris, 2020). The surveillance by others and the need for constant reaffirmation of their integration makes professionals feel hypervisible. At the same time, these people feel that their presence and performances are often invisible or marginalized (Lander and Santoro, 2017; Oliver and Morris, 2020). Teachers' practice of student assessment reproduces gender and racial stereotypes, reduces teacher autonomy, and increases the workload for teachers who belong to disadvantaged groups (Smele, Quinlan, and Lacroix, 2021).

Sometimes the situation of employees belonging to ethnic or racial minorities is paradoxical: while their presence gives the university the status of an institution that encourages diversity, these professionals are deprived of access to permanent positions, assimilated social benefits, guidance in teaching work, etc., the result being their alienation from the university (Miller *et al.*, 2019). The lack of institutional support is compensated by women with migrant status (*double outsiders*) through agency, entrepreneurial spirit, and professional connections (Sang, Al-Dajani and Özbilgin, 2013).

### **Technological development in universities**

#### *Technology as a tool for subordinating academic work*

Technology, especially digitization, which is the most widely used technology in universities, has transformed all aspects of teaching and research work (Woodcock, 2018). The use of technology in universities is not neutral, but strongly rooted in the culture of surveillance and managerialism. Combining digitalization, Big Data and artificial intelligence may transform universities into data-driven corporations (Antonopoulou and Dare, 2022). Thus, digitization is understood as a potential tool of managerialism in the process of auditing, measuring, and controlling the work of professionals in the academy (Gill, 2014; Feldman and Sandoval, 2018; Collins, Myers and Glover, 2019; Zhou and Xiang, 2021).

Currently, the workforce in the tertiary education sector is undergoing a process of being subsumed by capital (Hall and Bowles, 2016; Ivancheva and Garvey, 2022). In this process, technologization and institutional transformations are used to reorganize work so that it generates as much added value/capital as possible (Hall and Bowles, 2016).

Digitization has permeable the boundary between the working life and the personal life of academics (Zhou and Xiang, 2021), so that work expanded in the space and the time previously dedicated to personal life (Hadjisolomou, Mitsakis and Gary, 2022; Ivancheva and Garvey, 2022). Digitalization also favoured the intensification of work, by facilitating indirect ways of monitoring, control, and evaluation (Woodcock, 2018).

The division of academic labour, especially the clear division between teaching work and research work helps with the subsumption by the capital of the academic work (Ivancheva and Garvey, 2022). The teaching work was standardized and modularized

through the learning platforms such as Massive Open Online Courses – MOOCs, which also created the context for applying algorithmic management and some forms of precarious work (Ovetz, 2021; Ivancheva and Garvey, 2022).

Currently, learning platforms such as those developed by Harvard and MIT do not constitute a disruptive innovation because they are not a direct competitor to universities, do not have a higher performance than classical universities, and their financial viability is not proven; in the future, however, they may attract masses of students from classical universities (Weller and Anderson, 2013; Al-Imarah and Shields, 2019).

#### *Technology as a tool for increased performance and connectivity between academics*

At the opposite pole are the studies that analyse the potential of digital platforms to increase the comparability of authors' scientific results and the beneficial influence on work productivity (Amjad *et al.*, 2016), and their potential for connecting academics (Dean, Harden-Thew and Thomas, 2017).

#### **Teachers as human agents**

##### *The quality of life of teaching staff in universities*

Studying the quality of life of academic teaching staff is one way of understanding the transformations in the academic profession, especially when the changes are analysed in relation to the properties of the tertiary education system. Some of the articles examine the theoretical framework of the concept of quality of life of university teachers in universities (Jain and swami, 2013), others measure this concept in specific contexts (Tsheola and Nembambula, 2014; Fernandes *et al.*, 2017; Suong, Thanh and Dao, 2019; Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Azman and Abdullah, 2020; Abbasi, Yasmeen and Sajjad, 2022; Henríquez-Mendoza *et al.*, 2022; Sardi and Carvalho, 2022; Srinivasaiah, Swamy and Nanjundeswaraswamy, 2022).

Contrary to the assumption that continuous performance measurement and competition are conducive to professional development, teachers in tertiary education appear to be motivated by the intrinsic meaning of their work (Schrijver, Brady and Trockel, 2016). Autonomy in decision-making, clarity of role expectations and transparency of managerial decisions, fair compensation, working conditions, institutional support, and a pleasant, professional climate, as well as job stability are important for the quality of the working life, motivate academic teaching staff and increase commitment in their work (Tabassum, Rahman and Jahan, 2012; Bos *et al.*, 2013; Taher, 2013; Dorasamy, 2015; Stankovska *et al.*, 2017; Mudrak *et al.*, 2018; Khanna, Dasmohapatra and Yadav, 2019; Osibanjo *et al.*, 2019; Rizki, Supriyati and Akbar, 2019; Romero-Caraballo, 2019; Subbarayalu and Al Kuwaiti, 2019b, 2019a; Mohammadi and Karupiah, 2020; Mudrak, Zabrodskaja and Machovcova, 2020; O'Neil and Gopal, 2021; Verma and Sharma, 2021; Nikkola and Tervasmäki, 2022; Tuasikal, Perwana and Suhud, 2022). Decent work stimulates work dedication for university teachers (Graça *et al.*, 2021; Kashyap, Nakra and Arora, 2021), and

teamwork leads to better results than individual work (Ebadi and Schiffauerova, 2016). Excessive work, strained relationships with colleagues, and salary represent stressing and demotivating factors and favour the resignation of university teaching staff (Conklin and Desselle, 2007; Teixeira, Marqueze and Moreno, 2020). Authoritarian leadership and lack of institutional support reduce young professionals' loyalty to the institution and their ambition to professionally advance (Allmer, 2018a).

#### *Objectifying the experience of teaching staff in universities and the call to action*

Publications that objectify the structural characteristics of the tertiary education system and the effects on the working life of academics are ways of contesting the new order. These publications draw attention to the undesirable effects of the new public management and managerialism on professional life: increased competition to the point of institutional bullying, job insecurity, and precarious incomes, the commodification of education and the effects on the professional identity of teachers, the use of unfaithful proxies for the evaluation of research work such as quantitative evaluation and the prestige of journals at the expense of qualitative analysis of publications, the narrowing of research areas towards visible topics and the neglect of less visible but equally important themes, the systematic disadvantage of women, of professionals at the beginning of careers, of minority persons, of persons with disabilities and even of fields or subjects of study considered specific to women, etc. (Gill, 2014; Ashcraft, 2017; Burkinshaw and White, 2017, 2017; Maistry, 2017; Doughty, 2018; Bono, De Craene and Kenis, 2019; Steinþórsdóttir et al., 2019; Oleschuk, 2020; Rose, 2020; Hodgins and Mannix-McNamara, 2021).

Self-reflexive scientific works that describe the personal experience of teachers facilitate the reader's emic understanding of the experience of university professionals (Cummins, 2005; Kern et al., 2014; O'Flynn and Panayiotopoulos, 2015; Gill, 2016; Ashcraft, 2017; Williams, Christensen and Occhino, 2017; Hofmann, 2018; Jagannathan and Packirisamy, 2019; Dick and Painter, 2020; Di Niro, Muslera and Walker, 2020; Gedro et al., 2020; Oldfield et al., 2021; Stewart et al., 2021; Oliver and Morris, 2022; Schofield, 2022). The urge to reflect jointly in scientific papers on the concepts of precariousness, resilience, shared responsibility, and solidarity represents a form of challenging the neoliberal university (Stoica et al., 2019). The works aim to create discursive space for topics not yet addressed or insufficiently addressed (Lundström and de los Reyes, 2021), which can contribute to the formation of collective identity and the organization of a response (Vatansever, 2022).

The objectification of the impediments encountered by teaching staff is followed by calls for activism (*scholarly activism*) (Murphy, 2015; Rhoades, 2015; Birdsell Bauer, 2017; Schwaller, 2019; Sadlier, 2021). Outside the academic space, teachers, especially those at the beginning of their careers, have organized themselves in action groups and trade unions with a presence in the media, on social networks, and even in the legal actions (Hughes and Bennett, 2013; O'Flynn and Panayiotopoulos, 2015; Oldfield et al., 2021; Aranguiz, 2022). Literature and art are also used for this purpose (Crimmins, 2016; Henry, 2018; McConnell, 2018; Manley, 2022).

The concrete proposals to improve the quality of working life of academics are organized on several levels. The first level is that of public policies or institutional policies. Some of them refer to gender unbalances in universities: the upgrade of the institutional norms, the support at the institutional and community level of female teachers who have children and those at the beginning of their careers, the reconsideration and clarification of expectations regarding the performance of these categories of professionals (Oleschuk, 2020), the transparency of evaluation criteria and the abandonment of the binary, reductionist perspective in the evaluation of academic work (Eacott, 2016), the implementation of policies to balance private life with work life and anti-discrimination policies, the introduction of the gender perspective in research and teaching activities (Ramos and Lechuga, 2015; Poggio, 2022). Other proposals target the category of fixed-term employees from universities and professionals at the beginning of their careers: institutional policies for remunerating these employees for the extra work, the opportunity to be included in paid projects and professional development courses and mentoring, changing the way hiring them as permanent employees (McAlpine *et al.*, 2017; McComb, Eather and Imig, 2021). In this context, the role of human resources specialists from universities is emphasized, they have the responsibility to make the academic situation known and to actively contribute to the creation of a conducive professional environment through proposals for public policies and human resources management strategies (Qudah, Davies and Deakin, 2018).

Actions at the individual level are also formulated. Among the proposals is the creation of "spaces" to relax and challenge norms through alternative publishing, art, and the use of the concepts of care and qualitative assessment (*qualculation*) (McHardy, 2017). Other proposals aim to reduce the danger of alienation by appealing to a logic of thinking and working together (*thinking collectively*) because, for the university field, ideas and innovation are valued through collaboration (Tian, 2019). Feminist collaboration between people at different stages of their professional life is also possible (Mullings and Mukherjee, 2018; Breeze and Taylor, 2020). The approach challenges the neoliberal logic that postulates competition as the engine of the upward professional trajectory and also challenges the dualism of precarious/privileged versus non-tenured/incumbent. Using an anti-oppressive feminist discourse in pedagogical practice (*Black feminist pedagogy*) represents another way of contesting the neoliberal university (James-Gallaway and Turner, 2021). It is also discussed the importance of the ethical behaviour of administrators, full professors, and supervisors who, through individual practices, reinforce, challenge or mediate the mechanisms that make the work of early career professionals precarious (Bone, Jack and Mayson, 2018; Touhouliotis, 2018; Smithers *et al.*, 2022).

Other resistance strategies consist of organizing reading groups and professional learning and support networks, conferences, educational seminars, workshops (O'Flynn and Panayiotopoulos, 2015; Dean, Harden-Thew and Thomas, 2017; Sheridan *et al.*, 2020; Ahmed *et al.*, 2022), women's support networks in higher education, such as Athena SWAN (Scientific Women's Academic Network) and OWHE (American Council on Education and its Office of Women in Higher Education) (Baltodano *et al.*, 2012; Tzanakou and Pearce, 2019).

### *Barriers to contesting precarious structures*

Academics, especially those with a role in the organization and development of universities, are human agents who through their own actions, confirm or challenge the structures of dominance (Roxå and Mårtensson, 2017). Through reduced reflexivity regarding the new institutional context, the reiteration of institutional practices, the defence of the existing system in order to maintain one's own position, the encouragement of "alternative" universities, symbolic violence, etc. teachers legitimize the new organization of the tertiary education system (Roumbanis, 2019; Albayrak-Aydemir and Gleibs, 2023). Studying how teaching staff gets involved in challenging the new order reveals the fact that the internalization of success, only partial awareness of the extent of the phenomenon of precariousness in the academy, the conviction that the trend is irreversible, the risk of losing the professional positions and the more advantageous working conditions of the established academics compared to young professionals constituted barriers in their involvement in the delegitimization of precarious structures (Schwartz, 2014; Bono, De Craene and Kenis, 2019).

The behaviour of contesting the vulnerable normative structures has strong implications, as it increases the pressure on teaching staff, who on the one hand challenge this structure, and on the other hand must reach academic performance standards (Wright-Mair and Museus, 2023).

### **Conclusions and discussion**

The quality of working life of academics is studied in most articles in relation to the neoliberal doctrine, and the undesirable effects of this context on university work are generally highlighted. Technologization in universities is analysed closely with the new public management, for which it can become an effective tool for monitoring and controlling work. A considerable number of articles expand the discussion not only on the necessary measures to be taken at the system or institution level, but also on the actions that university teaching staff can undertake at the individual or collective level to reduce the undesirable effects of the intensive application of the new public management in universities.

Education becomes from a public good to a predominantly private good, and universities gradually take the form of enterprises and assume their specific goals. The work of university teachers is changing. First, it begins to include new activities, not traditionally specific to academics: marketing and branding activities for universities. Then the work intensifies and extensifies at the same time. Digitization is a powerful facilitator of the expansion of work in space and time by creating a new space dedicated to work - virtual space - which can be accessed at almost any time and from almost any location. Digitization also facilitates work intensification through the possibility of thorough monitoring, control, and evaluation of the activity. Another characteristic of digitization that allows the intensification of work in universities – an aspect not discussed in the analysed articles – is the speed with which the exchange of information is carried out.

Didactic and research work is information-based and done mainly through collaboration. The revolving window of information itself generates a certain intensity of work.

The intensive application of the financial efficiency in universities, together with the increase in the supply of work in universities as a result of EU policies to improve participation in doctoral studies has undesirable effects on job stability and income: an increasing proportion of academics are employed with precarious forms of work, and the income the gain is below the limit of a decent living.

The organization of the tertiary education system under neoliberalism transform not only the work itself but also the relationships between colleagues, which change from collegial relationships to competitive relationships and even institutional bullying.

The professional identity is also transformed, from the traditional image of a university teacher to the open refusal of this identity.

This context affects the emotional health of teachers who report anxiety, anger, hopelessness, etc. Anxiety is an emotion specific to precarity (Standing, 2011) and the subsumption of work by capital (Hall and Bowles, 2016; Ivancheva and Garvey, 2022).

Not all categories of professionals are equally affected. Professionals whose main activity is research, specialized in the STEM fields, adopt a discourse favourable to the transformations in the tertiary education system. Professionals in fields that are not considered a priority, women, ethnic and racial minorities, and professionals at the beginning of their career are the most affected by the undesirable effects of applying the new public management in universities.

The relationship between technology and the quality of life of university teachers is little studied, especially the effects of the application of technologies such as big data and artificial intelligence.

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