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**Why do academics do unfunded research? Resistance, compliance and identity in the UK neo-liberal university**

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**Abstract**

This article explores the understandings of academics who carry out unfunded research and the nature of their academic identity, in a context where research funding is realigned to government and corporate needs, and the academic career is recast as an entrepreneurial project. It draws on in-depth interviews with academics working in UK universities, at different career stages in a range of disciplines. Main findings include that research is ‘self-funded’ rather than unfunded, and that participants often decided not to apply for external funding. A major reason for this was a sense of resistance motivated by intellectual creativity and flexible autonomy. At the same time, unfunded research also could be compliance with a neo-liberalised university agenda, viewed as entrepreneurial. Unfunded research can be viewed as a way of managing tensions between wanting and needing to do research, throwing light on the identity of being a contemporary intellectual-entrepreneurial academic in the neo-liberalised university.

**Keywords:**

Unfunded research, resistance and compliance, neo-liberal university, academic identity, knowledge economy

**Introduction**

It has been estimated that over a quarter of all research is unfunded, and that there is a budget deficit amounting to 37 per cent of research income in British universities (Olive 2017). Nonetheless, universities are said to have strong incentives to underwrite loss-making research because research performance underpins national and international university league tables and institutional reputation, and academics’ career progressions are strongly linked to their research output. Similar budget sustainability concerns have been noted for higher education in other national contexts (e.g. Australia: Norton 2015; Canada: Polster 2007).

Decreasing state support for higher education means that stress is placed on academics acquiring external grants to support their research. This has several implications. One is that research becomes as much about revenue generation as it is about generating knowledge (Cheek 2008; Feldman and Sandoval 2018). Another is that application rates and/or success rates decline as academics compete for funding from a shrinking pot (Cheek 2008). These success rates are not equally distributed either institutionally or among academics. Analyses show significant disparities in the rates and size of grants secured by women, disabled and ethnic minority applicants for UKRI (United Kingdom Research and Innovation) Research Council funding as compared to their male, non-disabled and White counterparts (Jebsen et al. 2019; UKRI 2018; TIGERS 2019). There are knock-on equalities effects too, where the equation of research grant funding with institutional reputation for academic excellence is extended to individual academics in gaining, keeping and advancing in academic posts.

There are concerns that universities may impose different contracts on academics who do not gain funding, and that their institutions may be informing them that they should not pursue research activities that are not funded (Cheek 2008). Nonetheless, David Kernohan estimates that “significantly more than half of all [UK] academics are not in receipt of external funding for their research”, conducting unfunded research perhaps without institutional knowledge or even in contradiction of their (teaching only) employment contract (2015, unpaginated). This ranges from an estimate of 49 per cent of science, 68 per cent of arts and humanities, and 76 per cent of social science academics being unfunded. Others have carried out analyses of funding acknowledgements for academic journal articles[[1]](#endnote-1) and/or surveyed article authors, usually USA science/medical-based, and found a good proportion of these are based on unfunded research. Examples range from 23 to 84 per cent depending on the discipline concerned and the methodology used in the analysis (Berman et al. 1993, 1995; Stein, Rubestein and Wachtel 1993; Mai et al. 2013). There are indications that unfunded research may hidden away in funded grant time (Stein, Rubenstein and Wachtel 1993), or undertaken at evenings and at weekends, with particular detriment to women, and perhaps with institutional tacit approval (Barrett and Barrett 2011; Kernohan 2015; Mai et al. 2013).

There is a silence in many of these discussions, however – the understandings and rationales of those academics who carry out unfunded research. In this article I explore experiences of undertaking unfunded research, drawing on in-depth interviews with academics working in a range of disciplines in UK universities.[[2]](#endnote-2) In particular, I consider whether unfunded research is:

* a reaction to external funding bids being unsuccessful, or;
* resistance to a neo-liberal knowledge economy and the pursuit of creative activity outside of the funding system, or;
* compliance through being entrepreneurial and pursuing an individualistic positioning for CV, publications and promotion, and;
* how this is linked to the intellectual or entrepreneurial nature of academic identity?

The context for my discussion is UK higher education but the small body of literature addressing unfunded research indicates that there are likely to be resonances internationally.

**The entrepreneurial or resistory academic?**

Drivers for undertaking unfunded research may be found in commentaries on the nature of the neo-liberal university and requirements of its academics. Claire Polster (2007) remarks that the increased significance of research funding income has seen a shift in the social relations of higher education, including from administration as facilitating the work of university academics to academics as facilitating the work of their institutions. There is a substantial literature on the way that neo-liberalism is shaping the content and practice of higher education globally. Neo-liberalism is described as both economic and ideological: a theory of political economic practice that is advanced generally by entrepreneurism and free markets, and in the public sector by the application of the logic of market competition. Marketisation is the link between neo-liberalism and higher education. Features include calculative technologies that foster competition such as performance management, target setting and research assessment based on income, publications and impact. Universities have become business-oriented markets and entrepreneurial projects, displacing public good models of governance and collective values with individualised incentives, competitive metrics, monitoring, and targets. Within neo-liberal academia, individual academics embrace or are exhorted to comply with competitive ideas about what constitutes success, with both success and failure framed and understood as personal accomplishment, disconnected from the wider social, economic and political context. (See e.g. discussions in Ball 2015; Brown 2018; Cannizzo 2018; Feldman and Sandoval 2018; Mahoney and Weiner 2019; Radice 2013.)

This context has interlocking reshaping effects on the nature of research and of knowledge and, consequently, on the nature of core values of academic identity. In terms of research, funding shifts from a patronage model, where researchers apply for funding for ideas they decide for themselves, to an investment model (Cheek 2018). Research grants become aligned with the needs of government and business. Research Councils shift from funder to contractee, allocating greater proportions of the funding available to bids focusing on specific government and business defined research topics or ‘challenge-led approaches’ (Radice 2013; Olive 2017). The academic career is recast as an ‘entrepreneurial project’ (Cannizzo 2018). Academics are incentivised to focus on research, ‘capturing’ external funding, publishing peer-reviewed articles from the resultant projects, and ensuring economic and social impact from the research. It benefits institutional reputation and ranking, and thus in turn their individual careers because they are doing valuable activities in the university’s terms (Brown 2018; Feldman and Sandoval 2018).

The UK Research Excellence Framework (REF) forms a key research performance feature at institutional and individual academic levels. A neo-liberal technology for demonstrating productivity and grading quality of research, it is also concerned with assessing impact for wider society. Universities submit published outputs from academic staff, and Impact Case Studies, which are then graded and funding allocated to the institution on this basis. Mark Olssen (2016, 139) argues that the REF ‘constitutes an extension of the neo-liberal project from how academics have met their responsibilities to control over the content of research itself’.

The nature of knowledge production in universities also is altered, with funding bodies dictating institutional research priorities, and institutions shaping individual research priorities, diminishing researcher autonomy and stifling creativity. Researchers operate in a research marketplace driving the world of universities, where research is ‘bought’ and ‘sold’ (Cheek 2008, 2018). Research becomes enterprise and aligned with the short-term, goal-oriented agendas of funding agencies and non-academic ‘users’ of research. Scientists have expressed concern about the consequences for ‘blue-skies’, curiosity-driven research (e.g. Bhattacharaya 2012), and social researchers about the prioritising of quantitative over qualitative methods in a neo-liberalised climate (Bradburd 2006; Cheek 2008). Academics may switch their attention to well-funded areas and change their methodology to increase their chances of funding success (Polster 2007).

Yet there is also some evidence that academics can adopt strategies to create and protect spaces of independence within the higher education system (Feldman and Sandoval 2018; Mahoney and Weiner 2019). This may include conducting unfunded research as the freedom to pursue topics outside of narrow policy and business relevant preoccupations (Cheek 2017). James Smith and Sara Delamont’s edited collection of ‘lost ethnographies’ (2019) includes academics pursuing unfunded research because they have tried and been rejected for funding, think that their idea does not fit funder objectives and so do not bother to apply, or simply ‘just wanted to do it’ out of intellectual curiosity.

The reshaping of research and knowledge has consequences for how academics may perceive and reconcile tensions concerning an essential aspect of their identity. Mary Henkel’s influential work on academic identity refers to it as articulating with and reflective of the context of the shifting higher education system in which it is formed, and as continuously adapting over time (e.g. 2005, 2009). Its fluidity under changing circumstances means that what it is to be an academic is ambiguous, multi-dimensional and incorporates apparent contradictions, involving both continuity and change. This dynamism is collective and individual, with academics holding a sense of what has, does, could and should comprise the academic identity and its values. The contemporary sector context for this continuity and change in academic identity, as Jennie Billot points out (2010: 712) is challenges to the longstanding core value of ‘the academic’s sense of freedom’ by ‘revised institutional mores, which demand the ideological engagement and endorsement of economic and managerial priorities’. Specifically, for academic research identities this raises a set of questions at the heart of this article: is the activity of unfunded research a compliant response in a competitive context by entrepreneurial academics, or a resistory challenge by intellectually-driven academics to the confinement of scholarly creativity, and thus what can unfunded research tell us about academic identities in the contemporary academy?[[3]](#endnote-3)

**Methods**

The research underpinning this article on unfunded research is unfunded – a sort of participatory action research conducted out of intellectual interest. I issued calls for research participants via various lists on Jisc (formerly the Joint Information Systems Committee), the UK’s national academic mailing list service, and on Twitter, explaining that I was undertaking a piece of unfunded research exploring the experience of UK-based academics who have carried out unfunded research. I interviewed 30 participants who responded to the call (mainly via Twitter) and agreed to participate, with a fairly equal gender split (I asked about pronoun preference and no-one identified as they). This is important given the literature pointing up gendered inequalities in gaining research funding at the same time as gendered constraints in fitting unfunded research around work hours.

In the context where the literature also suggests that early career academics may have less funding success, at least in the sciences (Mai et al. 2013), there was a fair range of career stages represented: senior, mid- and early career (see Table 1). Career-stage can be a fluid understanding though; I felt that some of those who referred to themselves as mid-career could be regarded as senior in the position that they held, and as one lecturer remarked: “I worked for 20 years outside academia before entering and I found myself being identified as somebody in the early stages of their career”. Two senior career participants and one mid-career who had gone freelance provided retrospective only accounts of their unfunded research, but the rest discussed current as well as past projects. Participants were also employed on a range of contracts: teaching and research (T&R), with between 20 and 40 per cent of time allocated for research; teaching and scholarship (T), with minimal research time allocated; and research contracts (R), where close to 100 per cent was spent on funded research and participants were conducting their own unfunded research while employed on a research contract. Only a few (5) participants were on fixed term contracts, mainly research, but those on permanent contracts could be on research as well as T&R and teaching.

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

Participants were located mainly in older universities (pre-1992), often characterised as research oriented, with a third in new institutions (post-1992), often positioned as teaching oriented. They were drawn largely from a variety of social sciences (23 participants) but also from humanities (3), medical (3) and physical science (1) disciplines, and about half saw themselves as interdisciplinary. As Paul Trowler has argued (2014), the idea that academic values and research practices are strongly shaped by their ‘disciplinary tribe’ has less purchase where new managerialism is in the ascendency and entrepreneurial activity has intensified. Participants also tended towards qualitative methods – an issue given suggestions in the literature that qualitative research may be less attractive to funders: 17 used primary qualitative methods such as participant observation and interviews as well as secondary sources such as archives; 4 employed quantitative methods such as primary social or geophysical surveys, as well as secondary data analysis; and 9 adopted both qualitative and quantitative methods. The discussion below of unfunded research and academic identities reflects the specificities of the participants in this exploratory study.

I gained ethical approval for the project from my University without any issues (despite suggestions that unfunded research may have difficulties in gaining institutional ethical approval: Bradburd 2006).[[4]](#endnote-4) The only matters that participants mentioned about ethical approval for their own unfunded research where they required it was that their institutional processes assumed a defined (funding) completion date, or that unfunded might be given lesser priority in the ethics assessment queue for consideration. Participants raised some ethical issues for this present research though, with some noting that what they said implicated other academics, while others were concerned about being identified by their institutions: “Please take care in how you report what I say. I think there’s some interesting ways in which you can set up pots of money in universities …”. I have done my best to ensure that no-one can be identified, holding back on specificities of research topics in particular.

For all but three participants, I conducted in-depth interviews remotely with those who responded to the call and were willing to participate, using Skype or Zoom.[[5]](#endnote-5) There is debate about the strengths and drawbacks of synchronous online video interviewing for research, such as whether rapport is affected (e.g. Jenner and Myers 2017; Weller 2017). Being an academic interviewing other academics about their research can involve different sorts of concerns, where on the one hand they are familiar with the research process (especially those who use interview methods themselves), and on the other hand I am an insider and may have unexamined assumptions.

Interviews usually lasted between 30-40 minutes, and given the exploratory nature of the research were open-ended, discursive exchanges (Kvale 1996). The interviews covered rationales for, experiences and assessments of conducting unfunded research projects, and collegial and institutional conditions for funded and unfunded research. Thematic analysis of the interview material proceeded iteratively, reflexively oscillating between deductive matters identified in the conceptual and empirical review of small body of unfunded literature, and inductive issues arising from the data. Notably, I began searching transcripts for broad topic summary themes of resistance and compliance, and then generated sets of shared meaning themes within these, with the overarching theme of academic identity inductively identified in this process, finally returning to the data to refine these shared patterns of meaning and the overarching theme.

**Is unfunded research really unfunded?**

From the standpoint of higher education institutions, academics spending their time on unfunded research equates to a budget deficient in terms of research income (e.g. Olive 2017). Viewing unfunded research from the standpoint of the academics who conduct it, however, provides a different set of issues about where costs may fall and whether or not such research is really ‘unfunded’.

Unfunded research was viewed by several participants on T&R contracts not as income that was ‘lost’ to or a drain on their institution, but as a fundamental part of being an academic who was doing their contracted job. This point was largely mentioned by academics in senior positions:

I mean I’m still funded to do the research because I receive a salary from my institution … you know, research is part of our contract. You know, we are ultimately meant to be doing this. And if we were not researching, then I think we would in effect be in breach of contract.

(Man, senior, T&R contract, humanities)

Indeed, as well as the time taken for unfunded research, institutions could also support some of the costs of academics fulfilling their contracted activities (even if unknowingly). While some participants could feel that their unfunded research did not need much in the way of financing, especially those whose research methods involved secondary statistical analysis, online surveys, local ethnographic observation, or online archival work, others occasionally called on small pots of departmental or other institutional money to help with covering, for example, transcription of interviews. Unfunded research could also be supported through resources that piggy-backed on a funded research project or research centre grant that they held or were employed on.

Most notable among the participants in this research study, however, was the extent to which unfunded research was often self-funded, in terms of finances and investment of time. Participants were using their own money to underwrite research expenses and pursue what several wryly referred to as a ‘hobby’. They undertook their research activities outside of their working hours, in evenings, weekends and holidays:

When you’re doing fieldwork, when you’re doing empirical work, you have to kind of fit it in as and when you can … you know, evenings and weekends as well as kind of any time off during the day that I can manage … I started to add up once how much I was actually paying to do my job and then stopped because I thought I would be better off not knowing … obviously I’m relatively privileged due to the fact that, you know, paying to travel to do fieldwork out of my salary is something that I can afford to do, not everybody’s in that position. But time, it’s a drain on the time, you know, doing all of your own transcriptions, not having kind of any sort of level of research assistance and fitting it around everything else.

(woman, mid-career, T&R contract, social sciences)

Concerns that women in particular may not have the flexibility to undertake unfunded research by fitting it into evenings and weeks (e.g. Barrett and Barrett 2011) are unlikely to be picked up in a study of those who do unfunded research. Where mentioned, lines protecting evening and weekend time for children were referred to by both women and men in this research. But gender was a factor in mentions of the implications for family budgets of self-funding your research, being raised by male participants, with breadwinning implicit.

Given the drain on personal resources of time and money that unfunded research could represent for participants in this research, there is the question of why they did it? It certainly points to undertaking research as a significant feature of how academics think about the nature of what it means to be an academic and what they should be doing. But what sort of nature of meaning, given the reshaping of research and knowledge in the contemporary sector context?

**Why do unfunded research?**

Research is regarded as part of being an academic, as a fundamental feature of their identity: “That’s what we do” (man, early, T&R, social sciences). The competition for funded research, however, is intense. Being unsuccessful with a bid was certainly one reason why academics committed to pursuing the research issue they had proposed would then undertake the work unfunded – to sustain an identity as an academic researcher despite being unable to secure funding. But quite often the participants in this research had not applied for a grant for the projects we discussed. They could feel that the amount of effort that went into writing a bid and the high likelihood of failure meant it was not worth the attempt. Some felt that funding application timeframes were not suited to a research opportunity arising that required quick action, and/or that their topic did not fall in the current preoccupations of funding bodies, especially critical policy approaches, and qualitative researchers could echo suspicions that their methods were not attractive to funders:

Sometimes you just kind of think, well, I’m just going to do it anyway because, you know, getting research funding is such a lottery and certain topics are more trendy than others and it gets to a point where you just think, well, this is an issue that I think needs research and my chances of getting external recognition to the fact that this needs research is so slim I might as well just, if I think it needs doing then I’m just going to do it … You know, health funders quite often are looking for quantitative stuff whereas I would situate myself as a qualitative researcher … [And] they’re interested in kind of new challenges which I get … [but] even though there are new things to look at around [established] issues, they don’t seem to get as much attention.

(Woman, mid-career, T&R contract, social sciences)

Pursuing unfunded research was not necessarily and only a response to an inability to gain funding or assessment of rejection (and indeed some participants had and were doing funded work). There is the issue of, to borrow a phrase from the quote above, the belief that the research ‘needs doing’, and that it is a fundamental part of academic identity. There were two main perspectives on why research needed to be done, with implications for the nature of an identity as an academic, that were evident in the participants’ accounts of undertaking unfunded research. These coalesced around activities of resistance and of compliance.

***Unfunded research as resistance***

Notions that the pursuit of unfunded research is a resistory act in a context where academic identity and the activity of knowledge production has become framed by institutional and corporate goal-laden agendas and priorities (e.g. Cheek 2017) was a strong feature of participants’ accounts. The majority, across all career stages and contract types, voiced a sense of resistance drawing on ideas of the academic as an autonomous scholar pursuing ‘the thrill of ideas’ and making a contribution to knowledge, within a wider system that can stifle. Again and again, the motivation of being creative and intellectually-driven was stressed as a core part of academic identity, and value placed on the space to be flexible and independent in the practice of research outside of the funding system:

You know, one of the reasons I wanted to be an academic was because I wanted to do research, that’s why … I really do enjoy the whole process of just finding out … You know, the stuff that I’m doing unfunded is the stuff I really have always wanted to do, and I don’t have to be accountable to anyone else in relation to that.

(Man, mid-career, T&R contract, social sciences)

[A local charity] were basically just looking for someone to come and do any kind of research on it … so I thought that sounded like a really good thing to do, it’s something I’m really interested in … I think that you’re not beholden to deadlines in the same way [doing research unfunded], yeah, so whilst I still had a bit of a deadline with the [charity] I kind of didn’t as well because deadlines came and went and came and went, and there was a final, final deadline which I met … There’s something around the freedom to really do the piece of work that you want to do if it’s something that sounds really interesting.

(Woman, early career, T&R contract, social sciences)

But , as the quote above, from the woman early career academic above indicates, the motivation of intellectual creativity and autonomy does not mean that social usefulness is not part of an academic identity, and that non-academic user interests are not a feature of unfunded research. Indeed, it might be that the only way of seeing through a commitment to projects that would benefit communities where no funding was available:

[Most of my unfunded projects], they’re often small groups who would like, you know, a trial [project] done … A lot of the time it’s also out of interest for me … I think that you definitely get to choose what you want to do versus what you think the department would approve of and versus what is in vogue with research councils at the moment … It gives me a warm fuzzy feeling [to help small groups] and I actually just am interested in this sort of stuff.

(Man, early career, T&R contract, physical science)

I think I struggle with the push to bring in research funding … So there was something about rejecting that I think or doing something different to that. I also feel quite strongly that we shouldn’t be paid twice. So, because [the University] in theory allocate me two days a week to do research and I’m paid for that I feel quite uncomfortable then taking money from local charities for those two days a week … The [local community] project didn’t have a great deal of funding, they would’ve struggled to get an evaluation done independently so I was happy to help out. And then the other thing is I’m interested in different types of evaluation research and how we can do evaluation differently, and this was an opportunity to talk to a project and kind of put some of those interests into place.

(Man, early career, T&R contract, social sciences)

While the strong motivations towards practising unfunded research as a resistory practice, holding values of research as a creative, independent and socially useful process, were tempered by their location in a corporate neo-liberal institutional system. Lack of structure and resources, and the prestige provided by gaining funding especially for promotion prospects, were noted as downsides:

If it’s unfunded I think the pressures are greater because you’ve not been given the time or the money to help you do [it] … All the university cares about on a day-to-day level is REFable outputs, as they call them. But if you want a promotion you need to have funded research on your CV. I think if you only did unfunded research then because its one of the criteria it would stop you climbing up the greasy pole.

(Woman, mid-career, T&R contract, social sciences)

The pursuit of an academic research identity shaped by the motivations of creative intellectual autonomy could not be practiced aside from any engagement with the knowledge economy of the neoliberal university. Participants’ concerns about prestige and promotion key into a second major set of reasons why academic do unfunded research.

***Unfunded research as compliance***

Ideas about the neo-liberalised university include the way that research funding and performance has been reshaped, with an academic career becoming an entrepreneurial project (Cannizzo 2018). Experiences of conducting unfunded research could be incorporated into this identity framework, as part of being an entrepreneurial academic, with research participants looking to enhance their individual CV and REFable publications. Producing good quality research contributing to league tables and REFable publications, and ultimately the corporate endeavour of the university, are the sorts of reasons that universities are said by some implicitly to accept academics conducting unfunded research and its consequent outputs (e.g. Olive 2017):

Well I think personally for my career it’s been massively beneficial because it was something that was very clearly led by me … in [the university] promotion structure if was contributory because they don’t demand something has to come from your own [external project] funding.

(Man, mid-career, research contract, medical sciences)

So the university we’re at, if you are definitely going into the REF then you get an increased [research workload] allowance … [my unfunded research] is going to help my research profile.

(Woman, mid-career, T&R contract, humanities)

But in the same way that practicing an academic identity as an autonomous and creative researcher was tempered by the neo-liberal knowledge economy, nor was an entrepreneurial academic identity untouched by ideas about an intellectual one. Compliance with a neo-liberalised agenda in proactively boosting your CV and publication profile through undertaking unfunded research was not necessarily separate from thinking of unfunded research in a resistory fashion. For example, a woman, early career on a research contract in the social sciences, referenced the space for creativity and independence that unfunded work allowed while also noting the drawbacks of that, and being concerned with enhancing her CV and career at the same time as being aware of the nature of being an entrepreneurial academic:

I think the machine of funding and the machine of the university do end up bogging you down in lots of things don’t they? … Because often the unfunded projects are things that you feel passionately about … It is all very entrepreneurial … [But] I think without those external things [associated with funded research] giving you a reason to make an output, it is easier to deprioritise that because you don’t have someone making you do it … Obviously when it comes to publication you are less likely to get it published open access so it means obviously there are all the implications of that, in terms of it being REFable as well as who can read it. … The early career researchers do still do research that is unfunded, but funnily enough it is often about their own social practice or associated to a hobby or a personal interest … I guess a cynic would say that’s the neo-liberal academic where even your hobby becomes a research site, and the pressure to publish means you might as well publish something you are interested in. But I can’t think of many senior or mid-career academics that write these kind of personal journal articles that emerge from informal research, and certainly without funding.

Relevant to the above early career academic’s view that academics in the early stages of their career pursue unfunded research for career purposes, practising an entrepreneurial academic identity, is another’s question for my research about early and senior career academics having different motivations:

I’d be interested to know about career stages, like whether they’re early career like myself and others that I know, biting off more than we can chew and trying to do everything, and those later in their career using this opportunity and their stability to do things they’ve been long term interested in outside of kind of REF cycle pressures.

(Man, early career, T&R contract, humanities)

It is the case that few senior career participants made explicit reference to enhancing their CV but nonetheless, as the quotes at the start of this section demonstrate, mid-career academics certainly framed their unfunded research in terms of instrumentally meeting institutional expectations. It is also the case the early career academics were driven by a sense of intellectual creativity and flexible autonomy, creating what Louise Archer refers to as ‘important moments and spaces of resistance’ for their academic identity (2008: 282). As Henkel suggests (2005, 2009), what it is to be an academic is indeed multi-dimensional and infused by apparent contradictions. In my concluding comments, I suggest that unfunded research is a space in which to confront and address the tensions generated by forms of academic identity pulling in different directions.

**Conclusion**

Neo-liberalism, it is argued, is shaping the content and practice of academia, and the identities of academics within it. In particular, the nature of research funding and performance in higher education has become framed by institutional and corporate goal-laden priorities. Stress is placed on academics as entrepreneurs, acquiring external grants to support their research. Nonetheless estimates reveal a high proportion of unfunded research is still carried out by academics in the UK and elsewhere. This raises questions of whether undertaking unfunded research is motivated by a resistance to the dominant neo-liberal knowledge economy, as a valued creative and independent activity and academic identity outside of the funding system, or is an effort at compliance with the academic identity and career as an entrepreneurial project, with unfunded research pursued as an individualistic positioning for CV and publications?

Interviews with academics working in UK universities, at different career stages in a range of disciplines, show that rather than being (only) a reaction to an unsuccessful application for external research funding, often participants decided not to apply. A major reason for this was a sense of resistance and identity motivated by making a creative and intellectually-driven contribution to knowledge, valuing the space to exercise flexible autonomy, including a commitment to social usefulness, albeit they had to engage with the drawbacks of lack of prestige and resources accorded this unfunded activity in the neo-liberal university. At the same time, unfunded research also could be practiced as compliance with a neo-liberalised university agenda, pursuing an entrepreneurial academic identity. Participants viewed themselves as creating opportunities to enhance their CVs and publications, albeit not necessarily their promotion prospects. There were then tensions in reasons for undertaking unfunded research, with indications that this was especially for mid- and early career researchers, those most subject to the reshaping of research and knowledge forged by corporate priorities in the neoliberal knowledge economy.

The discussion here also shows that, rather than being unfunded, such research is often underwritten by personal resources of time and money. A recurring rationale for self-funding’ of research was because it is an intrinsic element of being an academic: “it’s what we do”. The ‘doing’ of unfunded research in higher education, though, is characterised by both a longstanding academic identity as a researcher inhabiting autonomous intellectual space, and as fulfilling the requirements of the institutionalised knowledge economy. Unfunded research then can be viewed as a way of managing tensions between both wanting and needing to do research, throwing light on the nature and meaning of being a contemporary intellectual-entrepreneurial academic in the UK neo-liberalised university. Significantly, the space created by unfunded research reframes “it’s what we do” on both sides of the tension. On the one hand, the longstanding academic identity built on the image of autonomous intellectual researcher becomes reframed in unfunded research. It moves away from an integral value of being an academic *per se* towards a resistory intellectual academic identity operating outside of the neo-liberal funding system and able to exercise freedom in the subject and content of their research. On the other hand, the contemporary academic identity as an entrepreneurial fulfilling corporate goals and thus building their career project becomes reframed somewhat. It slides away from compliance with the logic of the neoliberal knowledge economy and university agenda of revenue generation to meet institutional metrics of reputation and ranking, at the same time as fulfilling aspects of personal accomplishment through high quality output. Unfunded research then highlights and provides a space for academics to negotiate the dynamics of apparently contradictory dimensions of an identity as a contemporary intellectual-entrepreneurial academic in the neo-liberalised university.

It is also the case that while universities regard unfunded research as a budget drain and often of little weight for promotion, they benefit from it. There is evidence that, in line with the resistance theme, the more research autonomy academics feel they have, the more ambitious and innovative the research they pursue (Horta and Santos 2019). Speaking to the compliance rationale, high quality publications can result from unfunded research and clearly are submitted to the UK’s REF, and several of those I spoke to said that the social contribution of their unfunded research was being developed into Impact Case Studies for REF submission. These will reap returns in REF-allocated funding and symbolic rewards in university league table positions. Universities would do well to recognise explicitly the contribution of autonomous and creative unfunded research, investing in the costs of time and expenses currently individually incurred, and valuing the activity for promotion.

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Table 1: Interviewee characteristics by gender, career stage and contract type

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| *Gender* | Early career | Mid-career | Senior | *Total* |
| MEN | 5 | 7 | 5 | 17 |
| T&RRT | 3-2 | 52- | 5-- |  |
| WOMEN | 4 | 7 | 2 | 13 |
| T&RRT | 121 | 412 | 11- |  |

1. The messiness of resources in unfunded research calls into question the rigour of a methodology that assesses the extent of unfunded research simply by reviewing funding acknowledgements for journal articles (e.g. Berman et al. 1993). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Several people undertaking self-funded doctoral research were interested to participate in this project. There is a minimal literature on the topic, and it is another area that deserves investigation. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. There are also resonances with debates on academic as a profession, e.g. Shattock 2014; Schneijderberg 2017. This paper, however, concentrates on unfunded research as part of academic identity. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. University of Southampton , approval reference 53823 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. The last few interviews were necessarily conducted remotely because of the UK’s Covid-19 lockdown. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)