11th International Critical Management Studies Conference

Stream Title:

**‘Academic failure’: Challenging how academic career success is understood, and imagining alternatives**

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Academics in the contemporary University allegedly suffer many ills: they are increasingly pressed for time (Menzies & Newson, 2007; Vostal, 2015); they tend to experience important life-work conflicts (Dorenkamp & Süß, 2017; Ylijoki, 2013), and as an occupational group, they are highly at risk of experiencing various personal difficulties (Glick *et al.*, 2007) and health issues, such as professional burnout (Zábrodská *et al.*, 2018). Less visibly, the audit culture associated with new public management (Tourish *et al.*, 2017), and the normative and homogenising pressures of journal rankings and university rankings and league tables (Mingers & Willmott, 2013) have all contributed to creating a profound sense of identity insecurity (Knights & Clarke, 2014) – something exacerbated in the case of early-career academics, who often experience the effects of the system in a particularly brutal way (Robinson *et al*., 2017). Middle-career and senior academics are not spared either in the Darwinian-like dog-eat-dog world of academia. Recently in the press, Oswald (2018) noted that academics in their forties are at greater risk of suicide than the rest of the population (Oswald, 2018). Oswald suggested that university life since the 1970s has become “psychologically unhealthy and status-obsessed”. He said: “It is almost as though we have consciously designed a system to maximise stress and fear”. In the quest for high student satisfaction scores and highly-ranked journal publications, many individuals are left feeling worthless. The theme of the conference, ‘Precarious Presents, Open Futures’, seems a particularly apt opportunity to reflect on the existing career norms governing the life of academics, and imagining alternatives.

Faced with difficulties, frustrations, and a general sense of inadequacy, academics can turn to a wide literature geared at helping them adjusting to this reality and achieving a ‘successful’ career, whether it is in the form of career advice from established scholars (e.g. Frost & Taylor, 1996), technologies of the self (e.g. Eden, 2008), or writing guidance (e.g. Jensen, 2017; Silvia, 2007). What these texts generally fail to do is to question and challenge the norms underpinning them – namely, what it means to be a successful academic, and the reasons why one should follow the dominant norms of career success. They also seem to lionise academic success and overlook the sheer ubiquity (and virtues) of academic failure. In the search for excellence and success, there is a reluctance in academe to confront and, dare we say it, even celebrate failure. And we have to admit that success may bring more than we had bargained for. This paradox is something that the literary world, more than the world of academia, has been willing to consider. In *The Catastrophe of Success*, Tennessee Williams, acknowledged that “Security is a kind of death”.

It is not surprising that in recent years, alternative views which challenge those norms have emerged. This has taken numerous forms, such as: documenting the heterogeneity of practices and career projects in the contemporary University (Gale, 2011), analysing practices of resistance and attempts to lay one own’s path (Bristow *et al.*, 2017), challenging the culture of speed characterising contemporary academia (Berg & Seeber, 2016) where there is little time to care for students and colleagues (Clarke & Knights, 2015), counter-spacing (Jones, 2018), rejecting the ethos of ‘excellence’ in research (Butler & Spoelstra, 2012), or intervening to counter the long-terms effects of physical and mental strains – the ‘hidden injuries’ as embodied and affective detrimental states (Mountz *et al*., 2015).

Contributions to this stream could include but not be limited to answering one of the following questions:

* What are the alternatives to the dominant narrative of academic career success? How can these alternatives be enacted and sustained? How to create space for them?
* How is the dominant narrative of academic career success resisted? What are effective strategies of resistance? How can options be widened?
* How are alternative narratives of academic career and success gendered?
* How do career narratives vary across different national university systems? What about the understandings of ‘success’ and ‘failure’?
* What is the ‘ideal’ academic, and how are those norms transmitted and shaped by universities and by career management practices?
* Do we valorise success and overlook the creative opportunities of failure, and should we regard failure more as a creative virtue?
* How can the practice of caring and the ethics of care transform the narratives of academic career?
* How can the embodied injuries challenge the dominant narrative of academic career success?

We hope that the sessions will attract different kinds of contributions: conceptual or empirically-based, but also polemical, essay-based, and aiming to critically intervene and change practices.

Please submit a **500 word abstract** (excluding references, one page, Word document NOT PDF, single spaced, no header, footers or track changes) together with your contact information to **Olivier Ratle (olivier.ratle@uwe.ac.uk)**. The deadline for submission of abstracts is **January 31st 2019**, and we will notify you of our decision by the end of February.

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**Convenors’ biographies**

**Olivier Ratle** (contact organiser) (olivier.ratle@uwe.ac.uk) is a Senior Lecturer in Organization Studies at the University of the West of England, where he teaches change management, and research philosophies and methods. His research is underpinned by a deep concern for intellectual pluralism, and the attacks it is regularly subjected to. He currently researches the politics of methodology, and the predicament of early-career academics. His work on ECAs has been published in Organization Studies, and Ephemera.

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