

Case Report

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The Malta Experience of Being a University Academic: A Thematic Narrative

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Case Report

The Malta Experience of Being a University Academic: A Thematic Narrative

Abstract: This paper shares research results of an explorative study investigating a Malta context university lectureship experience. The qualitative research findings, based on thematic analysis of 10 interview transcripts, describe the experience of being a university academic as an ever-changing journey of time passages in space and time. The journey is characterised by the strong theme of teaching along with the two other primary themes labelled identity and un/belonging. Identity feeds on teaching and the sense of un/belonging, but not only. Profession/Practice and Research/Publication are two other themes that in this study emerge as feeding the primary themes. These research findings unsettle privilege portrayals of tenure track university lectureship. They confirm the emphasis on teaching in this local context and increased administration obligations. Distinctively, they expose another identity dimension additional to the teacher and researcher attributions highlighted in mainstream literature. These findings suggest that university academics need to be supported for keeping alive differentiated identity dimensions which are not in opposition to each other yet in competition for time. While the limitations of the study are acknowledged, several recommendations deriving from this study for the local context are shared.

Keywords: university lectureship; academic experience; higher education; Malta context

1. Introduction

Two decades ago, [1] pinned down the need to attend to the university lecturers' academic experience to what was being observed as a changing university context. She pinpointed the increasing student population, diminishing resources, and the pressure to perform better with less. These observations remain true today and with them there are now added the intensifying managerialism and the pressure to keep current in a world infused by increasingly smart digital technologies powered by artificial intelligence. The long-term effects of the recent Covid19 global pandemic and increasing demands for sustainability continue to exacerbate matters. In these fast changing and unsettled times, it remains important to also give due attention to the university lectureship experience and the university academics who are key actors in taking forward and shaping the higher education sector, which "has a unique position at the crossroads of education, research and innovation, serving society and economy" (European Education Area [online], <https://education.ec.europa.eu/education-levels/higher-education/about-higher-education>).

This paper reports on an explorative study of the university lectureship experience at a Malta university context. The study forms part of a larger project comparing the university academic experience at three different European universities located in Malta, Finland and Estonia. The research is in part funded by xxxxxx xxxxxx and led by the xxxxxxxx research group from this xxxxxx university. This paper shares the findings of the Malta study. These findings exposes where the occupational effort is mostly directed, motivations, preoccupations and concerns in living out the profession of being a university academic in this local context.

In this writing, the terms university lecturer and university academic are used interchangeably. Within the university context of the concerned study, the university lectureship position contractually carries teaching, research and administration responsibilities in equal measure. Teaching is only part of the occupational charge of being a university academic. Research and publication are especially important for career progression along with gaining recognition as a knowledge field expert. Distinct from the 'Academic Reader' position that demands sole focus on research and knowledge creation, and the recent addition of the academic position of 'Teaching

Associate' obliging teaching only commitment, the university lectureship position commands teaching commitment alongside research engagement and administration responsibilities. This study turns the spotlight on the experience of following this academic pathway on the university lectureship tenure track.

2. Research Background

HE specialists have long been drawing attention to the ever-changing landscape of the HE context and hence the instability of what it means to be a university academic [1–3]. Based on an empirical study in a Finnish context, Siekkinen, Pekkola [4] claim a picture of change and continuity in academic life – change in managerial attitude of control and evaluation and continuity in professional authority & academic identity. Managerialism, control and evaluation building the neoliberalist trend in HE [5–8] has long been flagged and continues as a hot topic [9–12]. Among others, this trend has led HE researchers to ask questions about how university academics cope, survive and thrive in this harsh environment to teach and engage in research development and publication. Juusola [11] uses the coping strategies outlined by [13] including compromise, avoidance, defiance, and manipulation to investigate how university lecturers are managing their identity. She reports that they are simultaneously “selectively coupling” and “decoupling” in accommodating and resisting practices and goals of conflicting institutional logics. She also reports “mental decoupling” and “manifest decoupling” in their struggle to survive and thrive. Larsen and Brandenburg [12] draw attention to the reduced transition time early career academics nowadays have for resolving the identity struggle and liminality that this transition brings with it. The transition from one career occupation to another takes time and besides different people experience such life transitions differently. Through case study research, [14] draws attention to the emotional, ideological, and subjective struggles in presenting the story of a new recruit who is alienated to the point of leaving the academy. In another research article, Dickinson, Fowler [15] highlight the difficulty of shifting from being a field professional to being a university academic and the in-between state of being a ‘pracademic’. Referencing another research author, they affirm that this transition is best considered as a continuum. The academic literature on the university lectureship occupation critically shows up the experience from the onset a roller-coaster of identity struggles and strife to fit in for being and becoming.

Amid this turbulent emergent picture there is detected a positive sliver that university lectureship still holds privilege at least when looked at from the outside, and university academics continue to be respected as knowledge architects, creators, consultants and disseminators. Investigating the academic profession across European universities, [16] point to characterisations of distinction that push back on disempowering forces: (i) the long and highly selective initiation process to attain full membership as part of the academic profession, (ii) the worldwide accord fueled by self-activism that freedom of research and self-regulation of the universities are effective strategies for achieving top-quality and relevant academic work, (iii) the academic profession as the key player in the development of the academic knowledge system and the moulding of topmost knowledge steering all sectors of society, and (iv) the cruciality of a close link between teaching and research to guarantee that teaching is in touch with the search for new knowledge and shaped by the most recent research developments. Specifically focusing on the scholarship of university lectureship, Bennett, Hobson [17] use the metaphor of chimera to explain what they see as the multifaceted academic identity in being a university academic. They point out the monstrous three-headed academic identity as the lion-head in being a teacher, the goat-head in being a disciplinarian, and the serpent head in being an educational researcher. Like Archer [2], Lea and Stierer [3] pinpoint reconstruction of academic identities in tandem with the shifting academic workplace. They also identify “new articulations of disciplinarity” and “moving on from the golden age” as other explanatory themes. On moving on in becoming and being an academic, Benz, Bühlmann [18] put a spotlight on academic career trajectory varieties distinguishing between what they call direct careers, seniority careers, conversion careers, and parallel careers. These studies emphasize that there is not one path leading to the university lectureship profession and becoming a fully-fledged university academic.

Significantly, the profession itself demands the mind-bending task of concurrently grappling with different paths striving to keep up with occupational responsibilities and demands coming from within the workplace setting and without.

Fueled by events in broader society and global contexts, the corpus of literature on the university lectureship experience recently saw an increase in research studies on inclusion issues such as gender discrimination, racism, dis/ableism and identity studies, as well as a greater attention to early career university lectureship [2,19–24]. These studies emphasise that within academia we continue to contend with issues of supremacy, inequity and social injustice not so much unlike the broader tensions of the surrounding realm. Broader societal matters, regional and global geo-political situations highly impact the university academic lectureship experience at times with dire consequences for university lecturers as highlighted by frequently occurring news items on international media. The emerging literature on the university lectureship experience and news articles on unfolding events as they happen present the university academic profession as a difficult terrain of “super complexity” [25] wherein one struggles to adjust and adapt to a changing surrounding environment concurrently grappling to be a participant in it.

The academic literature specifically on the university lectureship experience in the Malta context is meagre. Writing on the same university context of this study, [26] recently drew attention to the diminishing gender imbalance in academic career progression of University of Malta (UM) lecturers. He arrived to this conclusion by statistically analysing data spanning more than 3 decades. From the same specific university context, Cutajar [27] focused on academic lecturers’ experiences using networked technologies for teaching. This research led to a phenomenographic description of qualitatively different university lecturers understand and approach integrating digital technologies in teaching ranging from peripheral enhancements to seamless entanglement shaped by the understanding of affordances of digital technologies, pedagogical attitudes, and teacher roles. The adhoc search of the academic literature corpus on the university lectureship experience in Malta did not yield any further research studies. It appears that this research is a first comprehensive render of the university lectureship experience in the Malta context. In the broader global picture, it adds to the growing literature body adding a recent description of the university lectureship experience contextualised in a Southern European context. The following section outlines the research methods used for this study.

3. Research Methods

An interpretative approach within the qualitative paradigm was assumed for conducting this first exploration of how University of Malta (UM) academic lecturers experience themselves at the university. This research approach permitted the pursuit of a rich dataset of university lecturers’ perspective and the configuration of a comprehensive description of what university lectureship stands for.

Methodical Procedures

This research was conducted in the past year starting in early January 2023 interviewing consenting UM academic lecturers after obtaining research ethics clearance from my Faculty Research Ethics Committee (FREC) and the permission to conduct research at the university from the UM Rector. The UM Communications Office acted as an intermediary sharing the information letter with a request for expression of interest to council appointed university academic staff. It is recognized that the self-selecting participant recruitment procedure possibly factored in bias (Sharma, 2017). This is taken into account in the data analysis keeping in mind that the dataset is only representative of those who saw themselves as having something to say and were willing to share their opinions and have their voice heard. The resulting sample was balanced in terms of gender (with 4 identified with the female gender and 6 with the male gender), occupational rank (ranging from assistant lecturer to professorial grades) and experience (ranging from a few months in the tenure track position to more than 3 decades of service). All participants were full-time university academics so making the research outcomes a description of tenure-track, university lectureship. The

data analysis was based on automated verbatim transcripts of 10 interviews. Two interviews were conducted by the research author and the rest done by a research officer purposely recruited to assist in the data collection and the first level data analysis. A qualitative approach following thematic analysis methods outlined by Braun and Clarke [28] was used for the data analysis. The first level of analysis consisted of the 3 three steps (i) familiarisation with the data, (ii) neutral coding, and (iii) categorisation generating themes and subthemes. Qualitative data analysis software and subsequently an electronic spreadsheet application were used to manage the data coding and the categorisation of themes and subthemes. For this first level of systematic data analysis, the research author worked alongside the research assistant familiarising herself with the dataset of interview transcripts listening to the recordings, coding a transcript for comparative purposes thus confirming coding consistency, and engaging in the creation of themes and subthemes independently of the research assistant, thus persisting to build in the internal validity and reliability of data analysis process. The authoring researcher then followed up with another 3 steps (iv) reviewing and revising initial themes and subthemes (v) refining and finalizing the set of themes and subthemes creating thematic network mappings, and (vi) writing narrative descriptions answering the several research questions asked. Each distinct step incorporated several iterations going through the unabridged transcripts. The following section shares the resulting thematic research findings responding to the research question: “How do university lecturers experience themselves at the university?”.

4. Research Findings

The overarching conceptualisation responding to how university lecturers experience themselves at the university is what one might refer to as JOURNEY of multiple parallel, diverging and converging ventures forming a stream of time passages. This JOURNEY is constituted by the 3 primary themes of TEACHING, IDENTITY and UN/BELONGING. These 3 core aspects describing how university lecturers experience themselves are not mutually independent. The core aspect of IDENTITY is shaped by TEACHING and UN/BELONGING along with Research/Publication and Profession/Practice as other constituent themes. These two subthemes correspondingly also feed into the primary themes BELONGING and TEACHING. At the same time TEACHING and UN/BELONGING emerge as equally strong primary themes describing how university lecturers experience themselves. Furthermore, teaching and research/publication are conceptualised as potentially supporting each other.

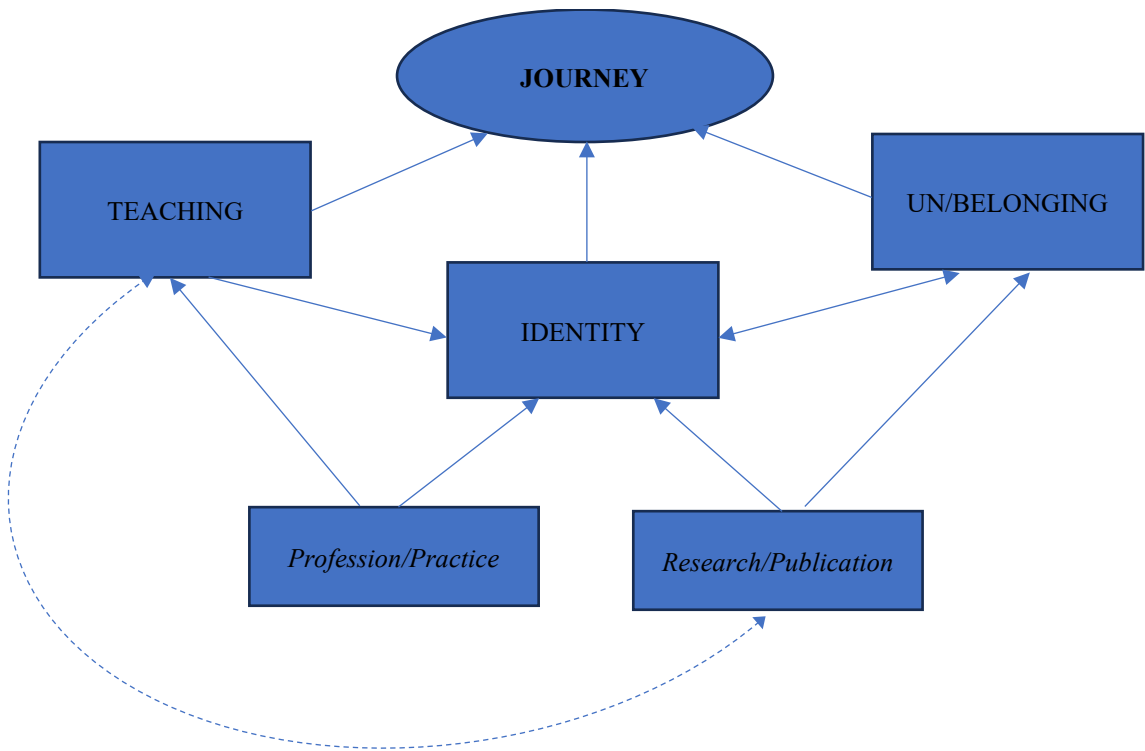


Figure 1. Thematic description of university lectureship as configured from UM university lecturers' accounts.

Journey

The transient nature of the state being a university lecturer in this research study arises through the discerning consideration of being in time – past, present and future; for being a teacher, for developing a multifaceted identity (assuming different identities for demands of expertise in different knowledge areas and practice roles and visible credibility as a professional), and for growing belonging (in the university academic community developing a voice and getting it heard at the same time building connections across the academy and profession bodies).

The Quest for Tenure

The preliminary time passage shaping the journey is the quest leading to tenured university lectureship. Except for a participant who started out as an academic researcher, all research participants referred to accumulated experience in profession practice before taking up a full-time university lectureship position. 8 out of 10 research participants spoke about a preliminary commitment to casual visiting lecturing at the university before eventually applying for a fulltime lectureship post that matched their knowledge expertise hence moving into tenured employment. A participant recounted a disappointing experience of more than a decade working as a visiting lecturer and accumulating an extensive teaching workload before securing tenured lectureship. And this was only achieved after a high-risk move abruptly giving up on all commitment which meant losing the only source of income. As Himmelsbach [29] comments in his writing on the university academic experience, there is no guarantee that the effort committing to non-tenured academic work eventually leads to tenured lectureship. Still, it is a popular, and evidently a strategic route generally, for who is thinking about a career being a university academic and securing tenured lectureship, to first commit to university teaching in some visiting lectureship capacity.

The Doctorate

Before, along with, or past the venture to secure tenure as a university lecturer, there is the time passage of the doctoral journey. For the case of the university context of this study, a doctoral degree is a requirement for tenured lectureship. A new recruit who is not yet in possession of the award is offered conditional employment. This milestone is fleetingly considered by research participants who completed their doctorate before applying for a university lectureship post. But those who secured conditional tenured lectureship talk about delays, restarts, isolation, relational power tensions and extensive teaching assignments hampering completion of the doctoral thesis. These participants elaborated on the difficulties that prevented them from finding the time to focus on their research work. Especially teaching demands make it very hard for one to avoid the doctoral research project dragging on for years beyond the planned timeframes. Two participants specifically talked about the teaching demands of their respective departments prohibiting them from availing themselves of the university policy permitting university lecturers who are still in the process of completing their doctorate to enjoy reduced teaching duties assignment. Three participants pinpointed relational power tensions directly or indirectly slowing them down. A participant recounted being forced to postpone doctoral studies until a senior colleague completed his doctorate because of departmental teaching demands. Another participant talked about the multiple times being forced to change the research study area and find a new supervisor because of discipline territoriality and supervisor desertion. Yet another participant divulged sacrificing weekends because she was left with no time to work on the doctoral thesis during the work week. For tenured university lecturers, teaching demands surface as the most taxing obstruction slowing down the obligatory attainment of the doctoral award. Hindrances surface as unfortunate and exceptional situations but amply common. Beyond the milestone of securing a tenured university academic position and completing the doctorate, if not already achieved before tenure, the university academic experience unabatingly remains a journey in the space of time.

The Struggle Juggling Academic Work Obligations

All participants of this study describe difficulties in keeping up with the work. There is emphasised the time-consuming teaching commitment hindering research engagement. Participants elaborated on how teaching assignments and the teaching demands of their department leaves them with hardly any time, if at all, for the pursuit of research and publication. Especially the more recent recruits also strain to learn about procedures, regulations, and the unwritten organisational culture.

Recent recruits talk about this initial part of the journey as one of enculturation, learning about the processes, procedures and regulations. T8 acknowledges that “all the information is out there (on the institutional website)”. He also alludes to the hierarchical organisational structures at the same time the academic autonomy while reflecting on the unfamiliar ways of doing things at the university comparing strategies to what he was used to when working in the private sector a few years back:

“And I think, every day, I encounter new things that I didn’t know and, um, yeah, and I learned. And that’s the journey, I suppose at the moment”.

Two research participants make explicit references to the 3 work obligations of the university lectureship including teaching, administration and research (according to the employment terms adopted by the university contextualising the study). In this study, university lecturers are portrayed as expending a lot of energy for administration tasks that is eating into their time to engage in other academic commitments. Four participants draw attention to the excessive amount of administration work. Topping teaching demands, several participants also talked about being overwhelmed by administration tasks. A participant who had substantial experience as a visiting lecturer before winning a tenured position, commented on how she was overwhelmed with administration work precluding her from doing research when she secured a tenured position as an academic lecturer:

“To be honest, um, I’ve barely, had the time to touch two papers to read apart from those I need to, to prepare my lectures, because there’s a lot of admin. It’s crazy. I never thought it would be like this, you know. I thought when I’d be a lecturer, I would have time to research. But in actual fact, I don’t really have time” (T11).

Another long-established participant commented on how progressively more and more administration work is now being piled on academic lecturers consuming their (precious) time that could otherwise be used to pursue knowledge development in teaching and research.

From this dataset, university lectureship work obligations are portrayed as highly demanding, and alongside the felt need to keep up and remain visible as a professional. Prompted and unprompted, all the research participants refer to the different dimensions of their work obligations to some degree recounting teaching, student research supervision, the provision of student support beyond the lecture rooms, doing research, engaging in writing and publication, making oneself visible in the profession, participating in community outreach and undertaking administration tasks as required.

On the provision of student learning support outside classes, 2 participants divulge providing students with needed “pastoral care” (T1, T11). Two participants who shared a lot of detail on their efforts participating in community outreach lamented the lack of recognition of their efforts by university management. Especially teaching emerges so strongly in this study that it was configured into a primary theme. Research emerged as a subtheme shaping the theme identity and in turn belonging. These themes are discussed in more detail in the following sections elaborating further on the themes and subthemes.

Interestingly, a participant who accumulated decades of tenure reflected on these three distinct work obligations compelling the university lecturer to become an all-rounder: “[they are] opportunities to grow ... like, an academic becomes a bit of an all-rounder” (T9). The same participant also observed these 3 dimensions of university lectureship serving as a means of well-being:

“It stresses me when I feel a bit overwhelmed with this volume, you know. But generally, I have a sense of wellbeing, and as we said, as I said before, the fact that we change what we’re doing. It’s a bit of research, a bit of admin, and a bit of teaching. There’s a lot of variety”.

The above quotation also shows that this positively constructive view does not preclude recognition of time periods when the sheer volume of the work is overwhelming. But the time passage persists as one of hope.

Teaching

Teaching commitment was by far the most prominently talked about work obligation, confirming that it occupies these participants' minds and time most pervasively. All participants in some way or another commented on their enjoyment of teaching. Several participants multiple times made explicit remarks about it: "I enjoy teaching" (T1, T3), "As I already told you, I enjoy teaching" (T1) "I do see myself as a natural teacher" (T3), "I always wanted to teach ... the mission of teaching was always there" (T2). All participants of this study claimed some degree of teaching experience before eventually taking on fulltime lectureship. As aforementioned, the trend at the university context of this study is for one to commit to casual teaching as a visiting lecturer before seeking to apply for a more permanent lectureship post. 2 of 10 research participants were found to have pedagogical knowledge by way of their profession. But generally, those employed to teach at the university are assumed to know how to teach:

"I find it ridiculous frankly that at universities, people who hold a PhD are expected to know exactly how to teach (T8).

This same participant several times also referred to the professional development teaching course he was obliged to read when newly recruited as a fulltime lecturer hence revealing that this situation is changing. The study participants critically reflected on their teaching. They highlighted personal effort to move away from the traditional lecture of information dissemination. 7 of 10 participants described alternative dialogic, experiential and/or inquiry-based pedagogical methods. Several participants also shared how they are incorporating the use of digital technologies to enhance face-to-face teaching and taking on a pastoral care role to provide further learning support to students. Remarkably, when prompted to consider well-being at the university, the research participants talked about care and welfare of students and students' learning completely overlooking the issue of self-care.

Teaching is conveyed as a significant part of the university academic journey with extensive teaching assignments. Participants noted that going into the tenured track as university lecturers forced them to turn their focus almost exclusively on teaching. This substantial preoccupation with teaching eats away on the university lecturer's time impeding research and publication pursuits. This limits the possibility to progress careerwise being a university academic. Three participants shared troubling stories of impedance in trying to work on doctoral research while in a full-time lectureship position. Some participants were apologetic about their lack of research and publication pursuit claiming excessive teaching and related administration work. There appears surfacing Juusola [11]'s "manifest decoupling" for surviving the demands of teaching. From what the participants of this study disclosed, teaching duty is especially prioritised and more compellingly pursued.

Identity

In this study, IDENTITY is constituted as another primary theme shaping the overarching concept of JOURNEY. All participants to some extent reflected on the multifaceted nature of university lectureship. Striving to be part in the university community in becoming a university academic compels a multidimensional identity. Teaching is one of the several roles university lectureship obliges, even is as abovementioned, all the participants of this study focused mostly on their teaching role in being university academics so prioritising their identity as university teachers. As the university academic navigates different assignments, commitments and missions progressing through the journey being a university academic, the discernment of the different roles and identities in selfhood shifts and deepens. Two participants explicitly talked about assuming multiple identities distinguished between the teacher role and the role as a professional worker in the enfolding community. One of these participants argued that different identities are not in opposition to each other but complement each other in the sense of informing each other. This participant also

elaborated on the teaching commitment and increasing managerial commitments making it impossible to keep alive the professional practice commitment. Another participant confessed that in his capacity leading others, he encourages colleagues to keep practicing as a professional worker in the community concurrently that they are university lecturers. Three other participants elaborated on the importance of remaining visibly active professional workers to students and other field professionals as otherwise you risk losing your credibility as a knowledge expert. Clearly, in this local context, university lecturers see it as important to keep alive their identity as professional workers, which they also see as relevant for fulfilling their role as university teachers.

There were only 3 participants who spontaneously talked about themselves as researchers and elaborated on their researcher roles in an integrative way being university academics. One participant who is a long-established university academic describes himself as a researcher at the same time he expresses his long-standing passion for teaching. He openly talks about an evolving small group of early career colleagues whom he sees as continuing the legacy of knowledge development in the disciplinary area past his retirement. Contrastingly, another participant who also identifies as a researcher as well as a university teacher talks about her efforts trying to keep up the research and publication commitment collaborating with an international group of peers. Although there was not explicit articulation of the researcher identity as for the case of being a university teacher and being a field professional, clearly there is also consideration of the researcher role in being a university academic even if for some this role is confessed to be on hold. 7 of 10 participants did not spontaneously speak about the research aspect of being a university academic. Probing revealed that 3 of these participants do have research and/or publication work in progress but they struggle to find the time for it. The other participants either apologetically noted that they were abandoning research and publication because of lack of time or imaginatively claimed what was being achieved in postgraduate research supervision as their research effort as well.

Remarkably, although several participants commented on the substantial administrative tasks they are expected to do, there was little or no personal identification with the administration roles as a university academic. A participant reflected on the obligatory administration duties and managerial roles one takes up as one of the 3 work obligations of university lectureship so only vaguely linking the university academic identity also tied to administration and management roles. 2 other participants who specifically spoke about their involvement in university governance did not identify with the administration and managerial roles they are taking up.

Generally, in this study participant comments emphasised the multiple identities that a university academic assumes in being a teacher and a professional practitioner in the community with a few participants also identifying themselves as researchers. There is agreement with the literature on university lecturers' identity on claims of fragmented identities (Barnett, 2000; Henkel, 2005). These findings show the notion of identity is fluid and explainable by the changing combination and blend of distinct roles the academic is assuming feeding into the configuration of identity [30]. Distinctively they also expose the "pracademic" identity fragment and a subdued researcher identity along with the very strong teacher identity.

Un/Belonging

UN/BELONGING is configured as another constituent primary theme of the overarching JOURNEY. The theme is with reference to the sense of belonging in the academy but emerges with a flipside in its configuration which is the sense of unbelonging and/or alienation from the rest of in the academic staff community. The sense of belonging and unbelonging comes across the whole data set as a strong theme even if there were only 3 of 10 research participants who explicitly spoke about being part of the "university community" (T1, T2, T9). One participant several times declared that the university is "one whole family" (T2). Six other participants emphasised that their links to the institution go back to their young adulthood years as undergraduate students at this university. The attention some of these participants gave to the interim period in professional practice and pursuing postgraduate studies before returning to this university propagated a sense of unbroken attachment. A participant explained how he kept the link to the university going since his enrolment as a young

undergraduate student many years before almost without any interruption. Another participant who returned after a period studying and working abroad declared a feeling like “home” when taking up a visiting lectureship position before she secured a fulltime lectureship post. The belonging that goes with being part of the community of the university academic staff is seen leading some university lecturers to reflect on their worth. While 3 participants confidently project themselves as well integrated and actively participating in taking forward the university as a learning community, another 3 participants express feelings of disconnectedness either whether this is perceived self-worth, a chosen state of being and not. One participant expressed self-doubt candidly remarking that: “I still suffer from the impostor syndrome. So sometimes I feel I shouldn’t be there”. Two other more self-confident participants contemplated the possibility of a career change - one participant multiple times stressed that he would walk away the minute he was not happy, and another participant confessed looking at other career possibilities that may potentially help her face increasing difficulties trying to reconcile work and family demands. This latter comment echoes Bowyer, Hodgson [31]’s arguments that while strategies and policies might be in place, we are still far from reaching gender equality and social justice for the case of women working hard to juggle an academic career alongside wider life family responsibility and care. The dataset also featured disclosures referring to disconnections from faculty colleagues, marginalisation, and isolation from the rest of the academy and its resources. Despite the disappointing realities of un/belongingness, the same participants mostly conveyed a sense of accomplishment in being fulltime university lecturers at this local university. While recent recruits expressed the need of more actions to foster connections within their department and faculty, more established participants expressed the need for institution-wide actions that cultivate a sense of belonging, for getting your voice heard, making yourself matter in being a member of the university community, and being recognised as a worthy member contributing to its development. The sense of un/belonging appears deepened for the case of participants who hold many years of tenure and are well established. These participants projected an even greater sense of communal attachment concurrently expressing doubt on the extent to which they belong to the academic staff community and align to how it functions. Through the course of time, there seems to be deepening the sense of un/belonging as part of the university and extending to the broader community in trying to make things better in profession practices positively improving society at large and leaving a legacy to better society and the knowledge area ensuring that it keeps developing and expanding in being taken up by younger field colleagues. It appears that navigating un/belonging persists across the space of time. The sense of un/belonging in being part of the university community surfaces as a time passage rethinking connectedness, feeding into the other primary theme of identity in being a university academic, and overarchingly the journey of being a university academic in the space of time.

Profession/Practice and Research/Publication

The subthemes PROFESSION/PRACTICE and RESEARCH/PUBLICATION contribute to the themes IDENTITY and TEACHING.

The subtheme PROFESSION/PRACTICE presents the notion of profession knowledge – being knowledgeable about the profession and being competent as a practitioner in the profession. Participants spoke about profession practice experiences bringing up the issue of profession knowledge. Directly or indirectly, all research participants talked about the need to keep relating to professional practice. Half of the participants explicitly reflected on their profession practitioner identity alongside their identity as a university teaching. They emphasised that it is crucially important to keep relating to the profession for keeping current on content knowledge and to keep on being active in profession circles and/or practicing the profession for preserving one’s credibility with students and others in the profession circles. These comments call to mind a pracademia orientation [32] and similar to Dickinson, Fowler [15]’s participants reside in a liminal space grappling with the different identities of being a profession practitioner and a university academic. A participant confessed that at one point it was impossible to keep on practicing the profession because of the teaching workload and the increasing administration and managerial responsibilities

he was taking on. He had to choose to put his identity as a professional practitioner on hold while participating more actively in university governance and editorial work related to academic publishing alongside teaching.

The subtheme RESEARCH/PUBLICATION denotes the university lecturers' commitment engaging in research and publication work. Two of those who spontaneously talked about their research/publication effort revealed that they are extremely stressed trying to find the time to complete their doctoral research. Six out of 10 participants had to be explicitly prompted to speak about their research/publication endeavours. They all talked about the lack of time. Three of these participants contemplated the idea of pursuing publication in co-authorship with their postgraduate research students to address this limitation. In their disclosures, participants at times talked about writing for publication as a form of research – desk-based research, so the combined RESEARCH/PUBLICATION label. A long-established participant remarkably distinguished between 2 types of research in fulfilling academic work: research in relation to teaching and teaching preparation including the periodic updating of learning materials and the exploration of new teaching methods, and research taking the form of investigative work that one would seek to secure funding for carrying out. Interestingly, most of the participants understood research (and publication) to be of this latter type; not necessarily linked to funding but, from their disclosures, implicitly associated to their occupational identity as a university academic. It was this observation that led this author researcher to configure this subtheme feeding into the primary theme IDENTITY.

5. Discussion

These findings show up the university lecturers as experiencing themselves as on a journey of time passages denoting the strong preoccupation with teaching and the pursuit of several other identity pursuits in trying to be a university academic; becoming a valued member of the university academic community where one's voice matters in the university and in the broader community.

The prevalent focus of teaching within and across all transcripts suggests UM to be predominantly a teaching university. Heavy teaching and administration duties limit the possibilities of university lecturers to pursue research and publication which are a substantial determining factor when it comes to academic career progression. This study also reveals that in this local context there is distinctive pressure from within and without to remain active as a profession practitioner in the community as a way to safeguard personal credibility as a field expert. The university lectureship experience emerges as an impossible mission to keep up with all identity pursuits, and with no consideration for bringing work life balance into the equation. To survive, university lecturers are choosing to focus on teaching and the piling administration work giving up on research/publication pursuit or profession/practice activism, or both (especially when university academics take up managerial and governance roles. Those who venture taking up a fulltime university lectureship position while still pursuing doctoral studies are in dire straits. So far it looks as if in this local context the tendency is to continue to persevere in this exhausting work occupation but nevertheless this study exposes contemplations of departures from the university lectureship profession as has been reported in other countries (for example consider Bryant (2020)). The university lectureship profession is no longer what was traditionally a profession of privilege permitting one to pursue teaching and the development and creation of knowledge in a disciplinary field one is passionate about. It might well be that we are looking at a future where those who have what it takes to be high quality university academics are alienated from staying or even considering the profession. The sense of belonging to the university academic staff community surfaces mostly as a sense of enculturation and acculturation – becoming assimilated into the system. For university academics who are critically reflective on being a university lectureship experience and their knowledge expertise relative to others, this leads to a feeling of unbelonging. The Un/belonging is a forever transient and changing state of being. Perhaps as academics we need to adopt that critical reflective attitude but importantly it needs to be infused with an attitude of kindness and mattering for ourselves and others. From the findings of this study, the university lectureship experience in this local context emerges as an arduous, never-ending journey of time passages rife with competition, primarily with oneself in

becoming an established university academic in a surrounding environment that is becoming increasingly hostile with unrealistic occupational demands.

Additional Observations

These research findings led to several additional observations. Entering and navigating the university lectureship occupation in this local context is politically imbued. Several participants openly shared having a powerful insider who initially invited them to take up university teaching as a visiting lecturer before an open call for a lectureship post matching their area of expertise was issued. For a small island context, it appears that there is far less chance of securing a full-time university lectureship for one who is totally new to the university scene and the powerful senior academics who highly influence governance and management. Another observation relates to the participants' attention to teaching competence and the need to move away from the traditional lecture. Participants' comments mostly implicitly suggest more space for student self-directed learning. Few of the research participants went further explicitly describing student-led peer learning activities. In congruence, the attention to digital technologies for teaching and learning was mostly in consideration of efficiency, accommodation, and affordances for supporting student self-direction in learning. A third observation relates to the issue of emotional and social mistreatment and subtle misuse of power differences among university lecturers. Both men and women may end up at the receiving end, but women are more plainspoken about what it is. Evidently, relational power reigns over collegiality.

Implications and Recommendations

These findings suggest a number of implications and possible recommendations. Especially early career academics who struggle to achieve a balance of roles are potentially supported having a senior academic acting as mentor, and events that bring senior and junior university academics to share experiences and help create mutual support to make the transition and the forever issue of being and becoming a university academic less exhausting. Possibly this helps everyone involved to achieve more productivity and at the same time a sense of well-being.

Especially the university lecturers conditionally on the tenure track pursuing doctoral research need to be supported in practical terms. The policy exists but they need to be explicitly told about it and accommodated rather than leave them in the dark about it or worse still choose to block it to avoid exacerbating their teaching scheduling problems. In the long run this potentially even works better as it prevents university lecturers in this challenging position from excessively extended years of distress to complete the doctorate. Perhaps, as much as it can be helped, one should avoid committing to a full-time tenured position of university lectureship before completing the doctorate unless there is upfront commitment that the university keeps its commitment to support new recruits conditionally employed as fulltime lecturers to complete their doctorate.

The picture of overwhelming contact teaching and administration commitment demands suggest that the efforts need to be given due recognition in the criteria for promotion to professorial grades and career progression. Additionally, there is substantial effort that some university lecturers expend building quality courses and supporting students learning or reaching out in the encompassing community to help promote, advance and/or improve the profession and its practices.

It is a conflicting situation that on the one hand the university urges all this, but on the other hand calculates the university lectureship effort solely on the lecturing and supervision contact hours and research assessment, and founds career progression to professorial grades on one's academic activeness in international circles and the number of publications.

This study suggests that there is also a need to work against the strong undercurrent of individualism, territoriality, and competition for creating a culture of collaboration. Besides, as recommended by some of the participants we need to create spaces and places for university academics to meet and networked so help build social and collegial relationships. Besides, well-being services – possibly more outreach to academic staff – are also recommended to raise awareness of the

services offered. This can be considered as a prevue of the specific research question asked as part of this broader investigative study.

The research findings and the implications that derive from them are especially significant for informing local stakeholders. Firstly, there are the university academics themselves, especially those who are new to the profession and those who continue to struggle in trying to understand their academic trajectory. The holistic description of being a university academic sought by this research potentially helps bring some clarity and possibly inspire personal trajectories taking positive constructive directions. The research outcomes potentially serve administration and managerial staff of the concerned institution and the broader small island concerned authorities for planning and university lecturer support provision. The research findings potentially also serve to inform external funders who have a vested interest – the research context of this study is a public university, and as one of the old European universities dating back to the 1500s is guarded as part of the national character.

Limitations and Future Research

The research presented is limited and further work is needed. The work is based on the transcripts of 10 interviews with university lecturers who responded to the expression of interest. There may be several other views, issues and concerns that remain hidden because of the limited participant numbers and the limiting recruitment procedure. Although the insider research author did her best to hold in check her own biases their potential influence cannot be denied in this interpretative study although most results directly or laterally concur to literature claims and in bits and pieces concur to similar studies in international contexts. The study is also limited in consideration of the representation of these results across disciplines. The research participants came from 6 faculties out of the 14 faculties and several institutes and centres of the specific Malta context of this study. Furthermore, the study is limited to one university institution in the Malta context leaving out other higher education institutions in the Malta context. All this calls for further research that brings in a greater number of research participants, participants who come from a greater range of disciplinary areas, and participant sample that covers the whole of the university lectureship population in the Malta context. Such research is required to corroborate and possibly extend the emergent description of university lectureship in Malta obtained by this research study.

The research presented in this paper is only a part of the broader research study on the local context. Further report articles will share other aspects of being a university academic that were studied, including post pandemic teaching and learning enhanced and mediated by digital technologies, relations and relationships in being a university lecturer, and university lecturers' well-being.

6. Conclusions

This research adds to the academic literature corpus focusing on the university lectureship experience with a description from the Malta context. Distinctively, these research findings expose university academics in this local context prioritising teaching in trying to keep up with institutional demands hence drastically slowing down and, in some cases, forsaking their possibilities for career progression and gaining recognition as field experts. This is exacerbated by territoriality and power relations fueling competition and individualism leaving one struggling in isolation from others to keep up. Perhaps, the biggest take-away from this research locally is the need for a discerning reflective and reflexive mood starting off a collective effort to nurture a culture of peer support that can help boost the academic productivity and well-being of all, and truly striving to become a sustainable learning community.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The research data is unavailable due to privacy issues.

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