Work or Alienation? A Conceptual Understanding of Academic Labour Process in Neo-liberal University System

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Author's contribution

The sole author designed, analysed, interpreted and prepared the manuscript.

Review Article

ABSTRACT

In recent years, universities in Nigeria, and indeed elsewhere, have continued to face challenges on how to deliver more quality services to the stakeholders; both within and outside the University's communities. These challenges have had to do with the ways in which Universities are funded and managed which consequently have implications on how the Universities organise and control academic work i.e. teaching, administration and research. These main responsibilities for academic staff in the Universities are conceptualised as academic labour process. Within a more generic understanding of Higher Education's (HE) Management, Universities are therefore expected to device more efficient means of managing, and organising academic work process. In this context, "quality" has come to convey improved processes which define the performance of Universities. However, these are not without implications on leadership roles, work experiences, quality of work-life balance, and employability of the academics. The Paper provides a conceptual review and theoretical understanding of academic labour process in the universities. It evaluates the normative assumptions, and the implications of academic labour process on the lived-work experience of academics.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Within the context of regulatory framework, policy directions, and work processes of the University system in Nigeria, and elsewhere, "quality assurance" is expected to create a "culture of continuous organisational and professional self-development and self-regulation" [1]. Delivery of Higher Education (HE) services are also expected to respond to global challenges of "knowledge economy" and "learning society".

Inevitably, this has been accompanied by erosion of "frontier of control" [2], for academics in the Universities. Increasingly, the academic freedom which traditionally characterised academic work process has waned. When confronted with "fiscal crisis", State and other actors in the sector have resolved to align academic labour process more closely to the goals and measures of market determination [3]. Consequently, increased "financial accountability" "close surveillance", and "quality assurance"; with the "reverse-side" of work intensification are emerging features of Higher Education (HE) management. In Nigeria, and elsewhere, provisioning of higher education has entailed new values; concerned with productivity, quality research out-puts, prudent financial accountability, and flexibility form of internally generated revenue (education commodification). This has also required "greater functional management of intellectual labour" [3].

The flagship of quality assurance in higher education provisioning has compelled Universities in Nigeria to become "learning organisation", engaged in continuous "self-development" in terms of teaching, learning, research practices, and students support services. However, embedded in the call for professional development and empowerment for quality assurance processes are growing sense of anxiety, stress and alienation being experienced by the academics [4]. Also, as De Groot argues "quality has precipitated a growing sense of separation between work and personal identity being experienced by many academics, arising from the loss of control or even influence over many aspects of teaching, learning and research" [4].

In this research work, we explore the impact and consequences of "embedding" quality assurance into higher education system in Nigeria. We explore, using labour process analysis, the growing dimensions and implications of academic labour process in contemporary University system in Nigeria. It is argued, from labour process perspectives, that "modernisation process", "reforming", or quest for "quality assurance" in the context of contemporary mainstream managerial practices in the Universities, in Nigeria, are driven by "quasi-market values", intensifying the commodification of higher education, with the attendant consequences of subjecting academic labour to managerial dictates. Its "reverse-side" is work intensification.

The conceptual understanding for the study would therefore involve extensive review of literature on Labour Process Theory (LPT) and its "new waves" and "strands" on academic labour process. This would involve a critical review of extant literature on quality assurance and implication on academic labour process in the institution of Higher Education.

2. QUALITY ASSURANCE AND ACADEMIC LEADERSHIP: A SOCIOLOGICAL INSIGHT

In the context of reforms in the management of Higher Education, the research proposal evaluates the dimensions of "discursive regulations" governing academic work process in the University system in Nigeria. The normative assumptions of "macro-process" of quality assurance put emphasizes on accountability, surveillance and standards regulations" [4], and this on the other hand gives understanding of the "micro-process" of managerial practices and control, social relations of knowledge production system, the subjectivity and self-identity formation of academics [4]. As noted by Morley [4], quality assurance in higher institutions has become a "universalizing metanarrative"; in which its discursive regulations of academic work process are also implicated.

The "totalizing power" of quality assurance as argued by Morley [4], represents the "prism"; illustrating other defining features of contemporary academic work in the universities. Quality assurance has therefore become a signifier of emblematic "governance" in the universities; regulating the professional conducts expected of academics in their daily academic and administrative work. Its "currency's" and

indeed, "resilience" in the management of universities has made it a "power technology"; performing a "panoptic" surveillance and functions over leadership roles and management. As a "political technology", with normative roles and processes of how diverse remits of academic work should be organised and managed, it seeks to reform the "academic habitus" itself [4]; a "rehabilitation of work" with diverse implications on the subjectivity, self-identity, and agency of academics, in which the self-identity and agency are re-shaped and reproduced, which not only influence their "knowledgebility", but also with potentials for "creative contribution" and "creative resistance."

This sociological praxis as analytical tool further privileges our understanding of quality assurance as "power asymmetries' and "regime of control" being experienced by academics and universities' managers. In the context of management of Higher Education in Nigeria, "benchmarks" and "periodic auditing" are set and defined by the regulatory agency of "ownership and control", which ultimately are meant to hold the university management accountable, in the process of knowledge production. The "discursive turn" surrounding normative assumptions of quality assurance has taken on an "orthodoxy hegemony", with much "symbolic and material implications" [4], not only on the epistemic foundation of contemporary university education itself, but also on how it is being managed. The "public good" that forms the core mandate of universities are increasingly expected to be legitimated by quality assurance.

As noted by Deem [4], the legitimating role of "quality architecture" has produced new organizational culture and professional orientations that need to "re-prioritize" the "exchange and use value of higher education". In the quest for "fitness for purpose", quality assurance; with its "epistemological presumptions" has elevated the mandate of higher education processes and outcomes to "consumerism and commodification" [4].

The embedded "power asymmetries" of quality assurance is thus conceptualised as power relations between "observed" and "observer" [4]. And this manifest itself as "invisible web of power" in which the norms governing quality assurance become internalised; back up with "discourses" that are more difficult to recognize and contest by the observed [4]. The "insidious"

processes of quality assurance shape and reshape the work experience and self–identity of academics, and make "open coercion" unnecessary (Butler, 1997).

In the emerging context, the roles and relations between the State and Universities have been "redefined". The State has now able to re-assert its responsibilities more as 'controller' of what should constitute intellectual activity, than a "promoter" [4]. Also, as noted by Vidovich and Slee [4], State has re-asserted its enormous "power and control over universities through a series of accountability policies using funding and status-levers as drivers". This consequently, has implications for what constitute the relations between other layers of stakeholders .i.e. Employers (universities'-management), academics, students and their parents.

3. CRITICAL TURN IN UNDERSTANDING HE MANAGEMENT AND TRANSFOR-MATION: A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS (CDA)

Away from mainstream discourse and analysis of Higher Education (HE) management and transformation, much of Marxian Labour Process Theory and analysis provides a political economy understanding of higher education provisioning and management. In re-engaging with Marxian praxis, Hall, R and Bowles, K (2016) introduce the concepts of Formal and Real Subsumptions to provide analytical tool to understand the "governance" of HE management, and the valorisation that characterised academic labour in the universities. As noted by Hall, R and Bowles, K (2016: 30), "through the imposition of architecture of subsumption, academic labour has become a source of overwork and anxiety". In other words, the discourse and processes of Quality Assurance, for instance, further embeds academic labour into overall discourse of HE management.

The embedded academic labour not only has implications for the "academic voice", but also the lived-work experience of academics. In the context of "on-going modernisation" of HE, which resonates with neo-liberal academic transformation, universities' academics globally, have had to deal with uncertainty and anxiety. This is more so, when the transformations are profoundly in response to the "global financial imperatives" (Hall, R and Bowles, K.2016). In particular, HE management is now characterised with tension [5], and the tension has to do with

balancing challenges of delivering "public good', and the ensuing "re-priotization" of HE management for "successful marketization" for relevance in the context of neo-liberal imperatives. The re-priotization has consequently entailed a reduction in the funding of public institutions including universities; increasingly reshaped and characterised by "entrepreneurial turn" [6].

Indeed, the ensuing marketization logic of HE undermines the traditional essence of public institutions (HE) to deliver on "socially-just" educational outcomes [7]. Increasingly, tensions emerged in the attempt by the management of HE to "internalize" certain policy discourse in the process of delivering public education. Much of the emerging imperatives and the implications tend to "suture" national system of education into the global HE models, with the main objective of transforming educational opportunities into "tradable national assets" [8,9]. Also, the imperative of HE "modernisation process" has succeeded in "conjoining" administrative labour, as part of overall process of "re-purposing" management of academic labour. In the usual understanding of the "danger" facing contemporary HE; the endemic and persistent "sense of budgetary crisis" that characterised HE management can only be resolved through the "governance architecture" that seeks to redefine the purpose and direction of HE.

4. ACADEMIC GOVERNANCE ARCHITECTURE: A NORMALISED CULTURE OF ACQUIESCENCE?

The governance architecture of HE, and its regulatory mechanisms e.g quality assurance and other numerous processes of metric and evaluations system subsume academic labour into inner logics and imperatives of HE commodification. The discursive interventions in HE management, specifically, the introduction of "performance metrics" have compelled HE institutions to "repurpose" their mandate in their survival strategies within the context of "volatile international market place for educational services" (Hall and Bowles, 2016:31).

Both at National and International levels, teaching and research are increasingly "governed" by discourse of "innovation", "productivity" and "efficiency"; a value-added service improvement discourse (Hall and Bowles, 2016). The discursive influence of Quality Assurance, Strategic Planning, and Mission

Statements of Universities are therefore expected to crystalize into developing globally competitive and relevant graduates for contemporary labour market. Increasingly, HE systems have been recoupled into national productivity ethos, driven by same imperatives of global dynamics that underpinned New Public Management (NPM) imperatives. However, these are not without implications for "agentic-identification" and subjectivity of actors involved .i.e the academics and students. In the emerging context, the "agentic expression" of discontent, anxiety and distress come from those who work and study under the ensuing imperatives of HE management. However, and as noted by Hall and Bowles, (2016:31), this may have "crystallised into normalization of competitive practices, in a noble profession founded on ideals of collegiality"

In moving beyond mainstream orthodoxy and understanding of HE transformation, the concept of "Subsumption" (Marx; 1964; 1993a; 2004) becomes analytical tool to account for the embedded implications on academic labour and institution of HE. As noted by Marx [10], subsumption is the process through which inherent constraints on the labour capacity of a particular sector of the economy are "overruled" and "subordinated" to the logics of capital. In the process, the concrete expenditure of labour is thus privilege to the domineering influence of capital. In making a distinction between "formal" subsumption and "real" subsumption, Marx characterised the pre-capitalist labour process of subsistence agriculture and guild-based craft-work as formal subsumption, in which the established labour process are manipulated to "extract surplus value" from the concrete expenditure of labour power (Hall and Bowles 2016). As "advanced capitalism" came in, capital re-concretises its domination of labour through the application of sophisticated methods of labour process manipulations, and through the application of human capacity assistance .i.e. science and technology, to increase capitalist productivity, and consequently, capitalist social relations is reproduced as a "terrain of domination" [11].

Through the application of general intellect in modern capitalism, the labour process becomes the instruments of the valorization of relative surplus values from the mode of production (Hall and Bowles 2016). Further on HE labour process under subsubmption thesis, the agency of labour is impersonated without any capacity for

autonomy; with less creativity and overarching presence of "central surveillance" (Hall and Bowles 2016). Under the emerging surveillance architecture, institutional outcome is the reproduction of "automated, repetitive institutional responses to teaching, research, assessment and even administrative tasks as structural systemic features", often designed to advance the discourse of HE management (Hall and Bowles 2016). The growing waves of HE "marketization" are thus situated within the discourse of "structured architecture" of academic labour subordination and domination. The subsupmtion thesis explains the on-going "recalibration" of academic labour, and the dynamic process for continuous subordination of labour. The "disciplining regime" which characterized each wave of HE management has also normalised and regulated the embedded "anxiety and alienation", being experienced by the academics. The instructive technical history of subsupmtion serves as analytical tool to understanding the imposed demand for labour-power extraction; originating from formal subsupmtion which eventually matured into practices of immanent real-subsupmtion of academic labour (Hall and Bowles).

The anxiety and alienation currently manifested in academic labour and HE system is inherent in structured system of real subsupmtion; driven by discourse of Quality Assurance and Performance Metrics. Thus, the "circuit of discourse" inside HE management have inevitably launched phases of work intensification and reproduction of anxiety and alienation of academic labour. The "technical history" of subsupmtion as enunciated in Marx analysis provides the understanding of the connection between the idea of "social labour, capital domination of labour, and the eventual co-option of the general intellect or socially-useful knowledge" by capital (Hall and Bolwes, 2016:33).

As enunciated further by other writers, [12,11] subsupmtion thesis further explains the relations between "valorization and abstract labour, the cognitive capitalism and general intellect" (cited in Hall and Bowles, 2016:34). The instructive insights from this thesis is the understanding of academic labour and practices as part of larger reproduction of surplus values and hence profits, in the context of contemporary HE management system, As noted by Hall and Bowles, (2016:34), "this process of valorization ensures that subjectitvity and autonomy must rest with the logics of capital". In the emerging context,

traditional expectations of academy autonomy become "inredeemable".

As academic labour is valorised, capital, and not the individual is set free to reproduce itself for value (Hall and Bowles 2016: 34). In the process of this valorization and reproduction of values, capital succeeds in subordinating all the landscapes of production, by "transforming and coopting"; so much so that the productivity and value-added imperatives are internalised, both by those who own labour and those who manage the labour process (Hall and Bowles 2016: 34). From Marxian perspectives, the embedded character of a commodity is that of "use value and exchange value", and this also applies to academic products e.g teaching, research, and students supports services.

Instructive therefore from Marx analysis; the academic work process can be "used or useful in and of themselves" and thereby generate new forms of exchange value in the "market-space" of knowledge production. The pivotal role of "exchange value" remains central to the "development of capitalist social relations through the purchase of labour power from the labourer" (Hall and Bowles 2016:34). Thus, in the context of academic labour process, academic labour forms the "critical" and "dynamic commodity" which also enabled the processes of its valorization through knowledge production, "creativity" and "innovation" in the market-space. As in all phases of capitalist process of production, valorization of academic labour process is also undergird by contradictions of "identity-formation", alienation and anxiety, as academics are continuously challenged by imperatives of science, technology, "entrepreneurship" and innovation.

In understanding the dimensions of contradictions, even in the context of academic labour process, it is instructive to locate this within the concepts of "formal and real subsumptions" which underscore the continuous forms of reforms of academic work and HE management. Drawing on Marx analysis on the historical development of subsumption as a process of transformation and its relationship with abstract labour and valorization, Vercellone's work [11], is able to link "formal and real subsumptions" as "cognitive capitalism" of contemporary HE management. His elaborations allow a renewed understanding of the process of academic work and its embeddedness into HE management; in particular in the transformation

of academic labour and practices into "productive surplus-value". In Marx's interpretation, outcome of academic work of both knowledge production and research are understood as 'commodity" with "use-value and also as an exchange value". Elaborating further on this, Hall and Bowles (2016:34) argue that the "commodity" can be "used and useful in and themselves…..and indeed, generate new forms of exchange".

In engaging with this strand of analysis, the concepts help to understand further, how the "continuous reform" of HE and the embedded academic labour; in the context of emerging global imperatives valorizes its" use-value" (academic labour), even as academics and their work are to align with these imperatives. Formal subsumption sets the ground-work for real subsumptions. For, as noted by Marx and Angels [10], "work that set outside capitalist social relations is brought into direct relations with capital through the purchase of labour-power" (cited in Halls and Bowles 2016:34) Increasingly, the content and objectives of academic work has been re-purposed towards "entrepreneurial creativity". This then intensifies academic work into anxiety, with "subsequent abstraction and alienation through real subsumption" (Halls and Bowles 2016:35). To be clear, "real subsumptions" of academic work in the context of HE transformation reproduce and re-integrate both scholarly work of research and innovation into academic labour process. However, as academic work is "re-calibrated", "work experience is damaging to those who work and those (students and other stakeholders) who are drawn into the reproduction of their working capacity" (Hall and Bowles 2016:36).

5. DISCUSSION

Away from mainstream discourse understanding, analysis in this paper has so far provided a different insight into the emerging dynamics and imperatives of what HE transformation entails; the new imperatives of university governance, the entrenched metric system, and the institutional benchmarking (Hall and Bowles 2016: 37). The imperatives "ratchet" the implementation of "efficiency measures", within the internal institutional structure in HE management. However, as contemporary HE management systems seek to be "creative and innovative" in administrative practices in light of "austerity budgeting", in many core areas of the administration, the disciplining impact on academic labour comes to "center-stage".

Traditional academic/scholarly values and practices become key target of "budget-tightening" in the process of managing institutional competency and efficiency. In the context of "unconstrained" global market dynamics to "unbundle" educational services, knowledge production and scholarly practices become monetised", for value-addition to the institutions. Increasingly, the subordination of academic labour to the logic of market imperatives remain engrained and pervasive as HE seeks new ways of adding values to institutional governance, .

New management practices rooted in efficient academic practices; teaching, research and student support services create a process of domination and subordination for both academic and students. As knowledge production is transformed through the imperatives of value, a radical tension is created within the institutional system of HE management. The "public good" and socialized value of scholarly work is "recast" as "globally tradable knowledge–commodity". In the process, academic work is alienated.

The contemporary demand, and provision for mass education, "recalibrates" academic labour as relative surplus value, within the global imperatives to which HE must respond. The historic imperatives and conditions for the reproduction of capitalist social relations across all sectors of modern production process are also "visible in multiple innovations of the forces of academic production" (Halls and Bowles 2016: 38), where the logic of "surplus-values are also extended to terrain of teaching and scholarship.

Indeed, as part of management of academic labour, constant evaluation of academic labour in relation to research and publication, citation, teaching and students support services, reveal the constant search for "value" and "appropriation" of academic labour within the overall management of HE. The diverse educational outputs are therefore commodity capital; an appropriated intellectual work. The imperative of marketization of education and entrepreneurial educational outputs constantly widen the process of intellectuality, with the attendant consequence of tensions and anxiety. The marketization logic consistently re-shapes academic labour and "re-territorize" higher education (Halls and Bowles 2016: 38). Contents of academic identities and orientation for academics are also re-shaped in the context of emerging imperatives.

Insightful from Marx and Engels [10], therefore is that the "particularity of academic labour is subsumed under the abstract nature of the universal logics of value valorization" (cited in Halls and Bowles 2016:38). And for the "re-territorization" of higher education to proceed and subsequently succeed, there must be concomitant provision of instrumental, institutional policies and benchmarks, designed to work on, and through the identity of academics in the universities, in order to earn and retain relevance (Ball, 2003).

From mainstream orthodox understanding, contemporary university system must embrace Quality Assurance and Metric Systems in order to retain the relevance, and advance their reputations. Included in the process and procedures are inventory system and policies that appropriate delegation of authorities along the hierarchy of institutional processes, application and monitoring of standards; including the management of staff, broadly, and regulation of formal academic conducts (Halls and Bowles 2016:38). The institutional policy apparatus is re-presented as institutional process and procedures to be internalised by academics as "academic dressage"; informing and exemplified in their workplace and non-workplace, formal and informal interactions [13]. In a sense therefore, academic labour is not only alienated, but also subsumed in the process.

Instructive from Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), as utilized in this paper, are the broad implications of this "total subsumption" and "architecture" on the academics, with "grater anxiety, hyperactive and repetitive institutional responses as endemic systemic/structural features of academic excellence" As traditional academic labour is "sutured" under the emerging dictates, the traditional shared-sense of scholarly purpose has also been undermined. In the search for academic excellence, academics in the universities are subjected to all types of pressures in which pure scholarly work and expressions have been re-coupled with quest for "educational commodification". In the circumstance, "abstractions of values" and the process of real subsumptions reshape identity of academics as "entrepreneurial academics"; further creating a "disciplined-identity" under educational commodification.

In the context of educational commodification, we now have a situation of "precarity" of academic labour, with diverse and nuanced implications on academic and lived-work experiences of academics. Constant demand for "performativity" and "reconstruction" of academic orientations towards "productive educational identity" remains; languishing academics into anxiety and alienation. The search for excellence in teaching, evaluations/assessment, research and publications are also expected to align with "normative architecture of academic governance" (Ball, 2003, cited in Halls and Bowels 2016: 39). A palpable tension is thus created in maintaining a balance between academic autonomy and entrepreneurial academy. What we see is a contradiction between scholarly work and entrepreneurial academics; a contradiction between concrete academic work for teaching and knowledge production for "public good" and commodification. In the context, an intensification of academic labour process is magnified.

The entrenched insidious dimensions of academic labour have been described as emergence of the university as "anxiety machine", calibrated to the expectation and satisfaction of governance architecture (Bowles 2013). Indeed, as noted by Plan, C [14], there is a violence unleashed on daily work-experience of academics in form of real subsumption and subordination of academic labour; "denying them opportunities for rest". The increasing need to "perform simultaneously as a scholar, a teacher, a collegiate, researcher and administrators [14] are emerging realities facing academics for relevance; collapsing both present and future academic demands.

For Grollman [15], a "dissonance" from this reality has been unresolved tension inside academic labour process. A fatigue ensues between "social solidarity" of work as "public good" and personal identity for survival, and for job security. The challenge for "visibility" through research work and output, for instance, continue to create tension for academic relevance and identity. In the prevailing circumstance, academic "work-lives" become a "reified" one; a moment of courage and also a moment of tension and anxiety, (Hall and Bowles, 2016). As noted by Gollman [15], while experiencing a "self-learning" behaviour, the governing architecture of academic work "normalised" this through expectations of career progression, rather than seeing it as "disordered and inflicted injury" of dissonance governance.

The discourse entails the internalization of "new academic-normal" and process, for academic

activities. As the new academic-normal dominates, a reproduction of "surplus value" ensues as "free-falls" form of academic labour. In the context also, academic managers and administrators not only reproduce their academic labour, but also of their students and colleagues. As academic managers, they are expected to design curriculum, conform to regulations and also expect students and colleagues to reproduce the "performativity" attitudes in their roles [16]. Here, the "insidious dimensions" of higher education governance generate and reproduce anxiety and alienation. This emerged as normalised response to academic labour process.

6. CONCLUSION

In this paper, the discourse of HE management and transformation have been re-engaged and interrogated through the analytical tool Marxian and Critical Discourse Analysis. In particular, the thesis of formal and real subsumptions are brought in to argue that the traditional free academic work of learning and research (knowledge production) have been re-organised and subordinated to free-falls of reproduction of "labour values". Normalisation of academic overwork in the context of neoliberal academic "enclosure" not only intensifies the very academic labour that reproduce the labour value, but also function to normalize anxiety, under real subsumption of academic work. As noted by Hall and Bowles, (2016:41), critical to the real subsumption process is "depletion of agency", and less of autonomy under conditions of HE policy governance. Mainstream understanding of HE management not only "mimics" robotic compliance and "energises" the governance architecture through generation/reproduction of "academic surplus values". The implication is the "bleaching out" of traditional values and creativity of scholarly work. A corrosive impact of real subsumptions of academic labour, as argued in the paper, is the "erosion" of academic agency and creative identity for academics. The argument is made further that the narrative of HE management and its architecture represent critical "junctures" of real subsusumption that intensifies academic work in terms of quality assurance, curricula designs and the metric systems. The overall intensity, as argued in the paper, represents moments of the tensions between absolute surplus value, on the one hand, and overwork, and relative surplus value of anxiety, on the other hand, (Halls and Bowles 2016:42) .

The, paper challenges the logic and discourse of HE, as existing and functioning as "engine of nationally competitive productivity". Rather, contemporary HE should be re-conceptualized as a coercive mechanism; "re-forged" to strip more values from academic work, with implications for learning, teaching and research, which are the core values of traditional academic labour.

While this paper is exploratory and analytical; providing theoretical and conceptual insights into understanding academic labour process, further research work for empirical evaluations and illustrations, to account for "lived-work" experiences of academics in Nigerian Universities remain instructive, but beyond the remit of this Paper.

DISCLAIMER

COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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Peer-review history:
The peer review history for this paper can be accessed here:
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