

Lost in the Metrics: The Human Cost of Performance Culture in UK Alternative Higher Education

Christian Atabong Nchindia, PhD (Corresponding Author)

University of Suffolk, GBS Partnership,

Manchester Campus, United Kingdom

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8098-2048>

Kennedy Obohwemu Oberhiri, PhD

Leeds Trinity University, SSS Partnership

Birmingham Campus, United Kingdom

&

PENKUP Research Institute, Birmingham, United Kingdom

Oluwadamilola Tayo, MPH,

Oxford Brookes University, GBS Partnership,

Leeds Campus, United Kingdom

Charles Leyman Kachitsa, PhD

Leeds Trinity University, GBS Partnership,

Manchester Campus, United Kingdom

Supriya Subhadarsini Sahoo, PhD

Canterbury Christ Church University, GBS Partnership

Manchester Campus, United Kingdom.

Olusunmola Osinubi, PhD

Oxford Brookes University, GBS Partnership,

Birmingham Campus, United Kingdom

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Abstract

This study explores the lived experiences of Black and Minority Ethnic (B.A.M.E) academics working in a UK alternative higher education provider (AHEP), with a specific focus on the pervasive theme of metrics and performance. While the wider research examined multiple aspects of working in AHEPs, this article reports only on findings relating to performance cultures, given their prominence in the data and growing significance in higher education debates. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with 20 B.A.M.E academics across six campuses, the study employed a thematic analysis supported by NVivo software. Participants consistently described teaching as being reduced to Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) such as attendance, retention, and progression, often outside their control. The dominance of these measures was perceived to erode professional identity, undermine autonomy, and exacerbate stress and burnout. Career progression was reported as tightly bound to KPI performance, with systemic inequities further constraining opportunities for B.A.M.E academics. These findings resonate with existing critiques of performativity and audit culture, while also highlighting how alternative providers intensify these dynamics. The study concludes that accountability frameworks must be rebalanced to value the human side of teaching, with institutional and policy reforms required to ensure that widening participation agendas are not undermined by rigid, metrics-driven cultures.

Keywords: Alternative Higher Education; Performance Culture; Metrics and Performativity; Academic Identity; B.A.M.E Academics; UK Higher Education

1. Introduction

The expansion of market logics and performance cultures in higher education has generated a substantial body of scholarship interrogating how teaching, research, and academic identity are reconfigured under regimes of accountability. Central to this critique is the recognition that the increasing emphasis on measurable outputs – attendance rates, progression data, retention figures, and student satisfaction scores - has redefined the very meaning of academic labour. Ball (2003) describes this shift as the “terrors of performativity,” in which value is determined less by pedagogical quality or scholarly contribution and more by compliance with institutional metrics.

These dynamics are not confined to traditional universities; they are particularly acute in alternative higher education providers in the UK, where performance management systems often operate with heightened rigidity. For academics in these institutions, especially those from Black and Minority Ethnic (B.A.M.E) backgrounds, the experience of teaching is mediated through constant monitoring, intensified workloads, and systemic inequities in recognition and progression. The human dimensions of teaching – care, intellectual curiosity,

and professional identity – risk being overshadowed by the demand to produce measurable outcomes.

This study argues that in alternative higher education providers in the UK, a performance-driven culture centred on metrics erodes academic autonomy, undermines well-being, and exacerbates systemic inequalities, thereby marginalising the human side of teaching that is essential to meaningful higher education.

2. Literature Review

Scholars have consistently highlighted how performativity restructures the purposes and practices of education. Shore and Wright (2000) describe the rise of an “audit culture,” in which universities are governed through technologies of measurement and evaluation. Within such a culture, academics are increasingly required to demonstrate their worth through compliance with indicators, often disconnected from the complex realities of pedagogy. These audit mechanisms are not neutral but actively shape behaviour: lecturers devote significant time to ensuring that attendance registers are up to date, that progression statistics look favourable, or that Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) are met, sometimes at the expense of meaningful engagement with students (Morley, 2003). The emphasis on measurement can create perverse incentives, such as pressure to inflate grades or retain disengaged students, practices which undermine the ethical and relational aspects of teaching (Strathern, 2000).

A recurring concern within this literature is the erosion of academic autonomy and the redefinition of scholarly identity. Deem (2004) has shown how the “managerial university” has restructured roles so that academics are governed less by collegiality and more by hierarchical systems of oversight. The introduction of rigid monitoring mechanisms - including clock-in/clock-out systems in some non-traditional institutions - treats academics less as independent professionals and more as employees in a bureaucratised organisation. Gill (2010) describes this transformation as the rise of a “new spirit of academic capitalism,” in which intellectual labour is increasingly subordinated to organisational imperatives. The cumulative effect is a narrowing of what counts as legitimate academic work: research becomes marginalised unless it contributes to institutional reputation metrics, while teaching is valued primarily through measurable student outcomes rather than its transformative potential.

This shift has significant consequences for academic well-being. A growing body of research documents the psychological and emotional toll of working in such highly monitored environments. Loveday (2018) captures the figure of the “neurotic academic,” describing the anxiety and self-doubt fostered by constant evaluation and precarious employment. The sense of never doing enough, or of being judged against criteria outside one’s control, generates chronic stress. Morrissey (2015) further notes that the intensification of academic labour, particularly the expectation to be constantly available to students and management alike, undermines work-life balance and contributes to burnout. These findings resonate strongly with studies that link managerialism and metrics-based assessment to high levels of mental health difficulties within the sector (Kinman & Wray, 2013). The human costs are often obscured by the very audit cultures that produce them: while institutions may provide well-being initiatives or welfare services, these rarely address the root structural causes of

stress – namely, the relentless pressure to perform against abstract indicators.

Importantly, the experience of performativity is not evenly distributed. There is now an established literature demonstrating that minority academics, and particularly Black and Minority Ethnic (B.A.M.E) staff, face compounded challenges within performance-driven institutions. Rollock's (2019) landmark study *Staying Power* highlighted the systemic exclusion of Black female professors in the UK, documenting barriers to promotion, isolation, and the need to consistently demonstrate competence beyond that required of white peers. Similarly, ECU (2017) reports on race equality in higher education, underlining that B.A.M.E academics are underrepresented in senior roles and disproportionately employed in teaching-only contracts, roles which are often subject to rigid metrics and heavy workloads.

Ahmed's (2012) work on institutional whiteness provides a useful frame for understanding why such inequities persist despite official commitments to diversity. She argues that diversity is often institutionalised as a form of "happy talk," where policies and statements exist, but everyday practices reproduce racial hierarchies. In performance-driven cultures, this manifests in promotion practices that appear meritocratic – advancement linked to KPI attainment – but in practice disadvantage B.A.M.E academics whose cohorts, contexts, or opportunities are structured differently. For example, lecturers teaching larger groups of students from widening participation backgrounds may face additional challenges in achieving attendance or retention targets, outcomes which then hinder their progression. Thus, the ostensibly neutral mechanisms of audit culture reinforce systemic inequalities.

The classroom itself can also become a site where performance cultures intersect with racialised experiences. Scholars such as Mirza (2018) have shown how B.A.M.E academics often confront student prejudice, ranging from challenges to authority to microaggressions related to accent or appearance. These dynamics require additional emotional labour, as lecturers must constantly prove their legitimacy in ways that white colleagues are not required to. In a system where progression depends on student satisfaction metrics, such biases can translate into quantifiable disadvantages. This echoes research by Wright, Thompson and Channer (2007), who found that B.A.M.E academics reported disproportionate student complaints and challenges to authority, with knock-on effects for evaluation scores.

At the same time, it is important to note that non-traditional and alternative providers of higher education - such as those serving widening participation cohorts - also offer unique opportunities. As some scholars have noted (Burke, 2012; Reay et al., 2010), such institutions can expand access to groups historically excluded from higher education, and academics often find deep meaning in working with these students. Several studies emphasise the satisfaction of seeing students from disadvantaged backgrounds thrive, and the potential for teaching to serve as a vehicle for social justice (Archer, 2008). However, when this mission is subsumed under a performance-driven culture, the emancipatory potential of such teaching can be curtailed. Staff are caught between a desire to nurture student growth and the pressure to meet retention or attainment targets, with the latter often taking precedence in institutional logics.

The literature also points to how managerialism reshapes career trajectories. O'Connor et al. (2015) argue that promotion processes in academia are structured around narrow definitions of

merit, privileging certain forms of output (such as high-impact publications or KPI achievement) while devaluing others (such as pastoral care or community engagement). For B.A.M.E academics, this narrowing is particularly problematic, as their contributions often include invisible forms of labour – mentoring minority students, serving on diversity committees – which are rarely rewarded in promotion criteria (Thomas & Cooper, 2017). The finding that many B.A.M.E academics perceive “glass ceilings” or “unwritten codes” aligns with the broader critique that performance cultures can conceal and legitimise structural discrimination under the guise of objectivity.

A further strand of literature examines how audit cultures alter the relational dimensions of academic work. As Blackmore (2014) observes, the emphasis on competition and individual performance undermines collegiality, replacing collaborative scholarship with a culture of self-surveillance. The participant accounts of being reluctant to seek support for fear of being perceived as weak mirror this broader dynamic: within a culture that prizes measurable success, vulnerability is stigmatised. This resonates with Gill’s (2010) argument that the neoliberal university engenders a “silenced suffering,” where academics internalise failure as personal weakness rather than as a structural effect of impossible demands.

The racialised dimension of this silencing has also been noted. Bhopal (2018) documents how B.A.M.E academics frequently feel pressure to remain silent about discrimination, both to avoid being labelled as troublemakers and because institutions often reframe their complaints as individual failings. The accounts of participants who described being offered “training” rather than having grievances addressed echo Bhopal’s findings, illustrating how managerial responses can deflect attention from systemic issues to individual deficits. In this way, the performance-driven institution manages dissent by recasting it as a need for further professional development.

Taken together, the literature underscores the deep tensions inherent in contemporary higher education. On one hand, metrics and performance measures are defended as mechanisms of accountability and quality assurance. On the other hand, a substantial body of scholarship demonstrates that they undermine academic autonomy, damage well-being, and perpetuate inequality. For B.A.M.E academics in particular, the performance-driven university is experienced as a doubly constraining space: they are required to constantly evidence their value through metrics that are not designed with their contexts in mind, while simultaneously navigating institutional and student biases that place additional burdens on their labour.

2.1 Rationale and Gap

Despite this growing body of literature, there remain notable gaps. Much of the research on performativity and audit culture has focused on mainstream universities, with relatively less attention given to the experiences of academics working in private or alternative providers where KPIs are often enforced more rigidly. Moreover, while studies of race and higher education (e.g., Rollock, 2019; Bhopal, 2018) have highlighted systemic inequalities, fewer have explicitly connected these inequities to the logics of performance-driven management. The intersection of race, academic labour, and performativity, therefore, remains under-explored.

This study addresses that gap by centring the voices of B.A.M.E academics working within a performance-driven institutional context. By foregrounding their lived experiences, the research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how metrics not only reshape teaching but also exacerbate existing inequalities in career progression, well-being, and professional identity. In doing so, it highlights the human costs of a culture “lost in the metrics,” and underscores the urgent need to re-centre the relational, intellectual, and ethical dimensions of academic life.

2.2 Research Questions

The following three research questions were formulated to give the study focus and direction:

1. How do B.A.M.E academics at an AHEP perceive and experience the influence of performance metrics on their teaching and professional identity?
2. What are the personal and professional consequences of working in a performance-driven academic culture at an AHEP?
3. How do systemic inequities, particularly around race, intersect with performance-driven management in shaping B.A.M.E academic careers at an AHEP?

3. Methodology

This study adopted a mixed-methods design; however, the present article reports exclusively on the qualitative findings related to metrics and performance. While the broader study explored multiple aspects of B.A.M.E academics’ experiences in an alternative higher education provider (AHEP) in the UK, the theme of metrics emerged with such prominence and urgency that it warranted a dedicated paper. Other findings concerning inclusivity, systemic inequities, and institutional support are reported separately.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 20 B.A.M.E academics working across six campuses of the same alternative higher education institution. Purposive sampling was employed to ensure variation in participants’ roles, career stages, genders, and ethnic backgrounds. Five members of the research team each conducted four interviews to maintain consistency while sharing the data collection workload.

The interview schedule contained 12 open-ended questions organised into four broad thematic areas: (1) systemic barriers in non-conventional universities; (2) inclusivity and institutional support within alternative providers; (3) career progression, job satisfaction, and mental health; and (4) unique challenges and opportunities in alternative higher education. These areas were shaped by a systematic literature review previously undertaken by the research team, which is published elsewhere.

All interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent and transcribed using Otter.ai and Evernote. The resulting dataset comprised 45,610 words (104 pages). Analysis followed Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-phase approach to thematic analysis, supported by NVivo software. NVivo’s integrated tools enhanced the efficiency and transparency of coding, allowing the team to systematically identify recurring themes and map interconnections.

For this article, we concentrate specifically on the theme of metrics and performance, which appeared extensively across the dataset and resonates strongly with current debates about accountability, performativity, and the human cost of audit cultures in higher education.

3.1 Ethical Considerations

This study received approval from the Research Ethics Committee of an Alternative Higher Education Institution and was conducted in line with the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2018) guidelines, the UK Data Protection Act (2018), and the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR, 2016). All participants provided informed consent after receiving detailed information about the study, and their participation was entirely voluntary. To safeguard anonymity, pseudonyms were used for individuals, and the institution itself was anonymised by being referred to simply as “*this institution*.” Sensitive data were securely stored on password-protected systems, with retention limited to five years.

Given the sensitive nature of the research, participants were reminded of their right to withdraw without consequence, and measures were taken to minimise psychological risk, including neutral interview language and signposting to support services where needed. Organisational permission was obtained prior to data collection, and only anonymised, aggregate findings are reported in publications.

3.2 Data Visualisation

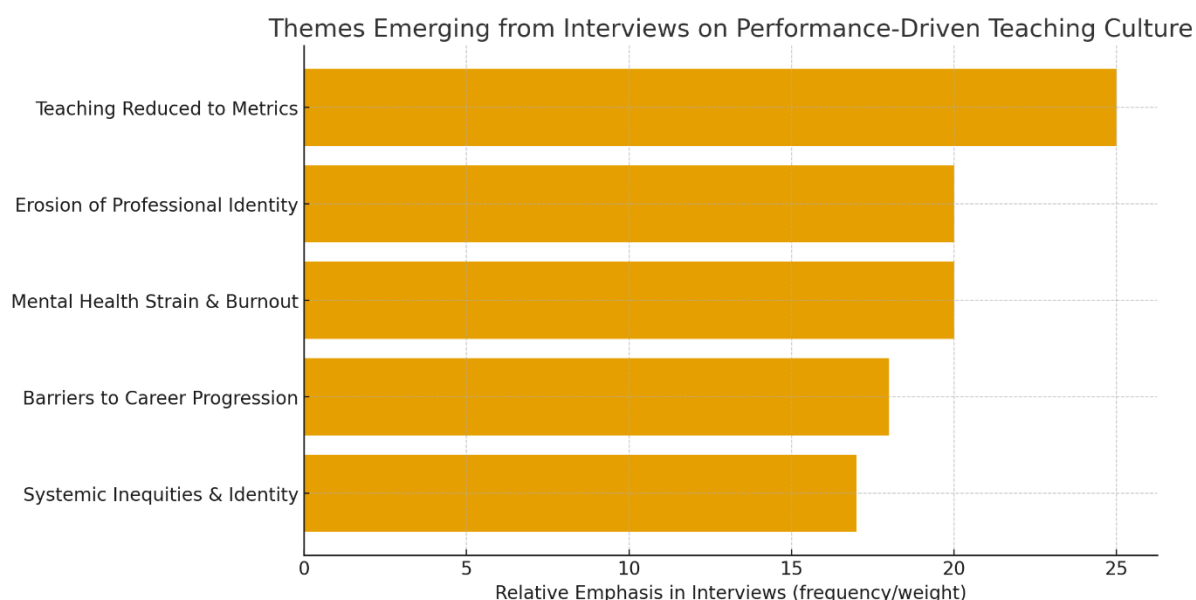


Figure 1. Themes relating to performance-driven culture

Thematic Map: Impact of Performance-Driven Culture on Teaching

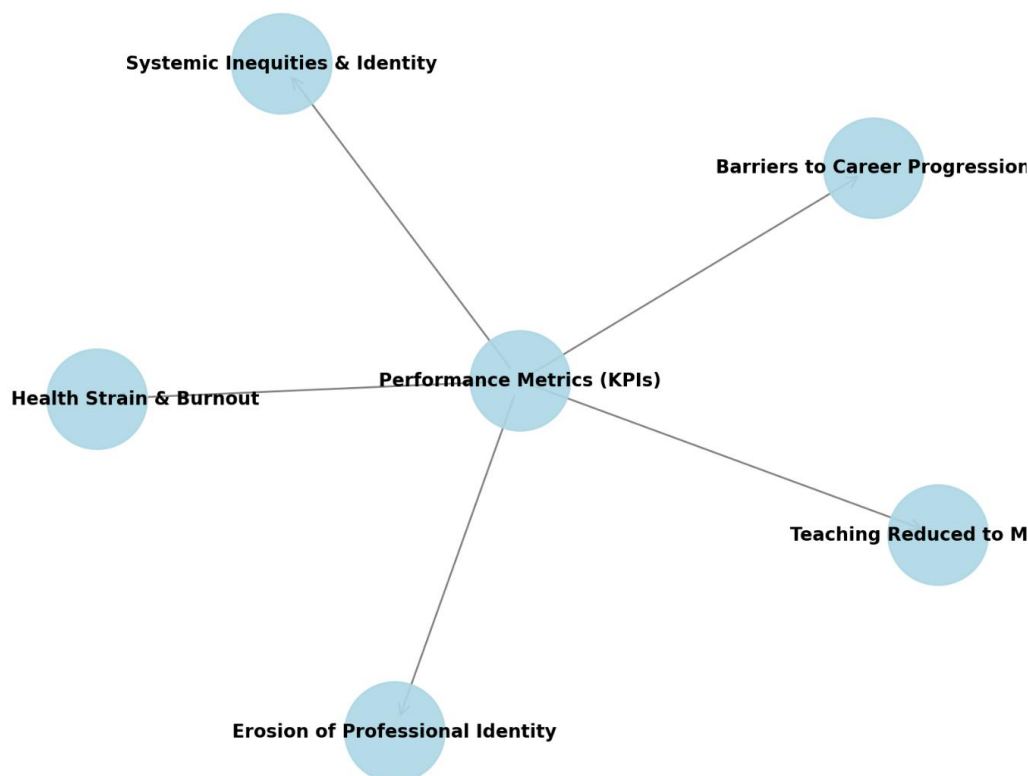


Figure 2. Thematic map indicating performance-driven themes from the dataset

Figure 1 above indicates the theme frequency weight. The longer the bar, the more references made relating to the indicated theme. Figure 2 above is a conceptual thematic map. *Performance Metrics (KPIs)* is placed at the centre, with arrows to the five themes that emerged, showing how metrics shape professional identity, well-being, career progression, and systemic inequities.

4. Findings

This paper presents the findings of the study, focusing on the lived experiences of B.A.M.E academics within a performance-driven higher education culture. The analysis is structured around five interrelated themes: (1) Teaching Reduced to Metrics, (2) Erosion of Professional Identity and Autonomy, (3) Mental Health Strain and Burnout, (4) Barriers to Career Progression, and (5) Systemic Inequities and Identity-Based Barriers. Each theme is supported with direct quotations from participants, illustrating how performance pressures intersect with personal, professional, and identity-related challenges.

4.1 Teaching Reduced to Metrics

A dominant narrative across interviews was the extent to which teaching has become reduced to measurable outputs, primarily through Key Performance Indicators (KPIs). Academics expressed frustration that their professional competence was judged not on the quality of

teaching or student engagement, but on numerical measures often outside their control.

Academic 6 described this tension vividly: *“Some of the KPIs... are outside our control, for example student attendance. A student decides not to come... but at the end of the day the lecturer gets the blame”* (Academic 6). Similarly, Academic 5 reflected on how metrics overrode professional merit: *“If I missed 3% [on KPIs] ... it doesn’t matter how many complaints are there about [others’] behaviour or lack of experience... they will just be pushed forward for the promotion”* (Academic 5).

These accounts underscore how a performance-driven culture creates a disconnect between the lived practice of teaching and the institutionally recognised measures of success.

4.2 Erosion of Professional Identity and Autonomy

Another strong theme was the perceived erosion of academic identity. Several participants lamented that managerial systems treated them less as professionals and more as employees bound by surveillance and compliance.

Academic 5 drew a sharp comparison: *“Academics... need that freedom and independence. And that is not available in this institution... it’s like I have to clock in on a certain time and clock out... these are the things which might be unsettling for a lot of people”* (Academic 5). Similarly, Academic 8 reflected on the institutional prioritisation of form-filling and attendance monitoring over scholarship: *“If an academic is involved too much into formalities like chasing attendance and resubmissions, then definitely they are not utilising their brain into research”* (Academic 8).

These narratives highlight how managerialism has reshaped academic life, eroded autonomy, and shifted professional identity away from scholarship toward administrative compliance.

4.3 Mental Health Strain and Burnout

The consequences of a metrics-first culture extended into the personal lives and well-being of participants. Many reported exhaustions, work spilling into family life, and a lack of institutional recognition of these pressures.

For example, Academic 2 described the toll of micromanagement: *“Mental health – I find working at this institution challenges your mental health purely due to micromanagement type e.g. KPIs – blunt instrument to make you feel that you are responsible for the whole Faculty”* (Academic 2). Similarly, Academic 3 shared: *“The work is too much, you work overtime, and it affects your mental well-being”* (Academic 3).

Even when support systems were advertised, they were widely regarded as superficial. As Academic 2 noted: *“Lots of people say support is available... but you are reluctant to use them. When we use them, you realise there is no support there. When you ask for support, it is often seen as a sign of weakness”* (Academic 2).

These findings emphasise the deep psychological cost of working in an environment where performance is prioritised over care.

4.4 Barriers to Career Progression

Career progression was described as tightly bound to KPI performance, leaving participants feeling trapped or overlooked. While some acknowledged limited upward mobility, many perceived systemic obstacles.

Academic 7, for instance, described opportunities as “unattainable”: *“There are opportunities, but there is also a lot of hesitation to give that to you. Even if you apply... you are given additional tasks... the expectation is much higher for you”* (Academic 7). Similarly, Academic 3 expressed resignation: *“There is no opportunity, and I am not expecting it. Only doing the job to pay my bills”* (Academic 3).

For Academic 5, the system was overtly inequitable: *“Within this institution... if you do not hit the KPIs, then it doesn’t matter how good you are, your experiences, you actually cannot get promoted”* (Academic 5).

These accounts demonstrate how performance cultures constrain career growth, not only by rigid KPI targets but also through inequitable practices that favour some groups over others.

4.5 Systemic Inequities and Identity-Based Barriers

Finally, the performance-driven system intersected with identity-based inequities. Many participants highlighted patterns of exclusion from leadership and systemic bias against BAME academics.

Academic 3 was emphatic: *“Systemic separation of Blacks from Management. Hardly any Black in Management Team – 99% is White, while approximately 99% Blacks are teaching. A glass ceiling... it is systemic!”* (Academic 3). Academic 5 offered a comparative example: *“Externally recruited [non-BAME staff] are promoted from day one, with higher salary... while BAME staff are told all the time that their numbers are not good”* (Academic 5).

Even in classroom contexts, academics experienced prejudice. Academic 7 described students’ implicit bias: *“When you go to class for the first time... because of your appearance or the way you speak, you are judged beforehand... Every new class is again difficult because of that”* (Academic 7).

These experiences suggest that the human cost of performance culture is not evenly distributed but compounded for B.A.M.E academics who navigate both structural metrics and systemic bias.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study highlight how a performance-driven culture reshapes the lived realities of B.A.M.E academics. In line with Ball’s (2003) theorisation of performativity, participants described how Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) increasingly dictate the meaning of “good teaching.” The accounts of Academic 6 - *“Some of the KPIs... are outside our control, for example student attendance”* - and Academic 5 - *“If I missed 3% [on KPIs] ... it doesn’t matter how good you are”* - exemplify how metrics operate as what Shore and Wright (2000) call the technologies of an audit culture. Here, academics are judged not

by the depth of their pedagogy but by numbers that often lie beyond their control.

This metrics-first orientation is also eroding professional identity. Academic 5's frustration with clock-in systems - *"Academics... need that freedom and independence. And that is not available"* - resonates with Gill's (2010) argument that contemporary academia is marked by the casualisation and intensification of labour, stripping away autonomy. The bureaucratic workload described by Academic 8 - *"If an academic is involved too much into formalities like chasing attendance... they are not utilising their brain into research"* - illustrates what Deem (2004) refers to as the "managerial university", where scholarship is subordinated to administrative compliance.

The mental health costs identified by participants also mirror broader scholarship on the emotional toll of audit cultures. Academic 2's account of *"micromanagement type e.g. KPIs – blunt instrument to make you feel responsible for the whole Faculty"* and Academic 3's admission - *"The work is too much, you work overtime, and it affects your mental well-being"* - echo Loveday's (2018) findings on the pervasive anxiety and burnout experienced by academics under constant monitoring. In this context, "support" systems were described as performative themselves - visible in policy, but, as Academic 2 noted, *"when you ask for support, it is often seen as a sign of weakness."*

Career progression emerged as another site where metrics and inequities intersect. The sense that opportunities are "unattainable" (Academic 7) or "non-existent" (Academic 3) reflects findings from Rollock's (2019) "Staying Power" report, which shows that B.A.M.E academics are less likely to access promotions despite equivalent or stronger qualifications. The linking of promotions to KPI performance (Academic 5) illustrates how audit cultures can reproduce inequality, where structural disadvantage is masked by the language of "neutral" numbers.

Finally, systemic inequities were not only statistical but experiential. Academic 3's stark observation - *"Systemic separation of Blacks from Management... a glass ceiling... it is systemic"* - resonates with Ahmed's (2012) critique of institutional whiteness in higher education, where diversity is celebrated rhetorically but resisted in practice. Similarly, Academic 7's description of being judged in the classroom based on accent and appearance points to what Mirza (2018) terms the everyday racism of the academy, where B.A.M.E academics must continually prove their legitimacy.

Taken together, these findings illustrate how the human side of teaching - the relational, intellectual, and emotional labour that sustains higher education - is increasingly devalued in a culture governed by performance metrics. Moreover, for B.A.M.E academics, the costs are compounded by systemic inequities that shape access to opportunity, recognition, and well-being.

6. Conclusion

Across the accounts, a coherent picture emerges in performance-driven cultures, the human side of teaching is overshadowed by metrics. KPIs dominate how value is recognised, eroding professional identity, damaging mental health, and stalling career progression. For

B.A.M.E academics, these pressures are intensified by systemic inequities and identity-based barriers.

The findings highlight a profound tension at the heart of contemporary higher education: while metrics provide accountability, they risk erasing the relational, intellectual, and emotional labour that constitutes the true human side of teaching.

7. Recommendations

The findings suggest several key recommendations. Institutions should rebalance performance frameworks by valuing qualitative aspects of teaching, including pastoral and relational labour, alongside quantitative metrics. Workload models must be adjusted to address structural drivers of stress, moving beyond surface-level well-being initiatives. Career progression systems should be transparent, equitable, and sensitive to the challenges faced by B.A.M.E academics, supported by mentoring and leadership programmes. More broadly, AHEPs and policymakers must ensure that accountability frameworks do not undermine widening participation missions, but instead foster inclusive, human-centred teaching practices that recognise and reward the full spectrum of academic labour.

8. Limitations

This study is limited by its focus on a single alternative higher education provider, which, while offering rich insights, constrains the generalisability of the findings to other contexts. Moreover, the article reports only on the theme of *metrics and performance*, selected due to its prominence in the data and relevance to current debates; this focus inevitably narrows the analysis, with other themes reported separately elsewhere. The reliance on self-reported interview data also introduces the possibility of bias, while the cross-sectional design provides only a snapshot in time. Finally, the positionality of the research team, though addressed through reflexivity and thematic rigour, may have influenced both interpretation and emphasis.

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Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

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