Managerial Governance and Performance Culture: A Case Study of Early-Career Academics' Experiences in a Malaysian Research University

Authors: Nordahlia Umar Baki[1]* Khairunnisa Mohd Pauzi[2] & Shamuni Kunjiapu [3,4]

Affiliation: [1,2]Faculty of Educational Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia, 43400 Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia. [3]Asia-Europe Institute, Universiti Malaya.
[4]Department of Business Management, New Era Universiti College.
*Corresponding author:
nordahlia@upm.edu.my

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ABSTRACT

Early-career academics (ECAs) are often the most affected by governance reforms and performance pressures as they try to establish themselves within increasingly managerial university systems. This qualitative case study draws on interviews with six ECAs to explore how they understand and respond to governance practices and key performance indicator (KPI) requirements in a Malaysian research university. The participants comprise an equal number of permanent and contract academic staff, each with less than five years of academic experience. Grounded in Job Demands and Resources (JD–R) theory, the study examines how institutional expectations shape ECAs' daily academic work and influence their early career development. Ethical principles of informed consent, voluntary participation, and confidentiality were observed throughout the research process. The study focused on how governance and KPI systems influence participants' workloads, priorities, and working lives. Three main themes were identified: structuring of daily academic tasks; perceived realism and fairness of expectations; and governance structures as enablers or constraints. Overall, participants described KPIs as a major source of pressure that intensified workload and blurred work–life boundaries, particularly for contract staff and newly returned mothers. Uneven access to mentoring, guidance, and institutional support further widened these pressures, pointing to the need for more transparent, supportive, and career-sensitive governance practices.

Keywords: Early-Career Academics (Ecas), KPI Systems, Managerial Governance, Job Demands–Resources Theory, Malaysian Research Universities.

1. Introduction

The governance of higher education institutions (HEIs) has undergone a profound transformation over the last three decades, characterized by the rise of the "entrepreneurial university" (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2012; Abreu & Grivenich, 2024). This shift has redirected universities from traditional collegial models of self-governance toward corporate-style managerialism, emphasizing efficiency, accountability, and measurable performance outcomes (Lynch & Ivancheva, 2015). Nevertheless, the concept of the entrepreneurial university remains insufficiently defined, primarily due to the institution's inherently complex and adaptive nature. Universities pursue multiple missions, such as advancing research, providing education, encouraging innovation, and engaging with communities, often through different organisational units that have distinct objectives (Abreu & Grinevich, 2024). These varied activities respond to dynamic external pressures; however, their outcomes are seldom examined holistically within a comprehensive analytical framework. Within this evolving context, a performance-oriented culture has become the common practice, where academic value is increasingly evaluated through key performance indicators (KPIs), research funding achievements, and high-impact publications.

Shifts in governance and performance culture have reshaped institutional priorities and, in many contexts, restructured academic employment practices. ECAs are often particularly vulnerable to these changes. Unlike their tenured counterparts who entered the academy during eras of relative stability, today's ECAs experience uncertain career pathways defined by hyper-competition and employment insecurity (Spina et al., 2020; Burton & Bowman, 2022). This intersection of managerial governance and job precarity creates a state of 'cruel optimism' for junior academics (Bone, 2021), compelling them to perform as 'academic superheroes' meeting extreme metrics (high KPIs, impact publications) driven by the false hope of securing increasingly scarce permanent positions (McKenzie, 2018). These affective pressures are not incidental outcomes but are structurally produced through governance and KPI systems that reward visibility, competitiveness, and constant productivity, while offering limited protection or career security for those at the start of their academic careers. These forces ultimately threaten their professional development and sustainable academic work.

In the Malaysian context, RUs play an important role in this transition, leveraging rigorous Performance Management Systems (PMS) as a strategic tool to enhance their pursuit of global academic standards. Under these frameworks, performance is evaluated across a broad set of expectations, including teaching, supervision, research, publication, innovation, and professional service. The scope also extends to community engagement, industry collaboration, student development, and other contributions beyond formal academic duties, creating a comprehensive and demanding evaluation culture. For ECAs, these multi-dimensional PMS may function not only as mechanisms of performance management but also as systems of monitoring and control (Franco-Santos & Doherty, 2017; Harford, 2021). This environment often manifests as an "audit culture," where the intrinsic value of teaching and scholarly integrity can become overshadowed by the demand for measurable outputs (Power, 1997; Strathern, 2000). As a result, ECAs may feel pressured to prioritise quantifiable outcomes over developmental academic activities, reinforcing a system of performativity that encourages strategic effort to meet institutional accountability requirements (Harford, 2021).

Despite the growing body of literature on the general effects of these structural changes (e.g.,

Bone, 2021; Franco-Santos & Doherty., 2017; Teichler, 2019), there remains a pressing need for in-depth study of how these governance structures affect the daily realities of those at the start of their careers, particularly in research-intensive environments (Hollywood et al., 2020; Lee et al., 2021). Most existing studies focus on quantitative metrics of productivity; however, the human cost and the psychological negotiation of these demands require a more micro-level approach. This study contributes to critical higher education in three ways. First, it provides a micro-level analysis of how governance and KPI regimes shape the everyday organisation of work among ECAs, an area underexplored in predominantly macro-level and policy-focused studies. Second, by applying JD–R theory, it offers an analytically grounded explanation of how performance governance operates simultaneously as a source of work intensification and uneven institutional support. Third, the study contributes empirically by foregrounding the experiences of ECAs in a Malaysian research university, extending predominantly global north–centric accounts of managerialism and audit culture.

To ensure conceptual clarity and consistency, key terms used in this study are operationally defined.

- **ECAs** refer to academic staff with fewer than five years of cumulative academic employment, reflecting the formative stage of academic career development.
- **KPIs/ Key Intangible Performance Indicators (KIPs)** are defined as formal performance metrics used by the institution to evaluate academic work across research, teaching, service, and other contributions.
- **Workload** is understood as the totality of teaching, research, administrative, and service tasks required of ECAs, including both formally recognised and informal or invisible work.
- **Job resources** refer to institutional, social, and material supports (e.g., mentoring, autonomy, guidance, funding) that help ECAs meet performance demands and sustain motivation.

These operational definitions informed the development of the interview protocol (Appendix A), which was derived directly from the study's research question: *How do governance and KPI systems shape early-career academics' daily academic work, workload, and priorities?*

2. Literature Review

2.1. Managerial Governance and Its Impact on ECAs

Managerial governance refers to the application of New Public Management (NPM) principle to higher education institutions, characterised by hierarchical control, performance measurement and strict audit mechanism to ensure strategic accountability (Deem et al., 2007). As the academic landscape becomes increasingly entrepreneurial-driven, academics must navigate an expanding set of performance indicators that now evaluate not only teaching and research but also societal impact. Under this system, academic work is no longer understood as a singular vocation grounded in professional autonomy, but fragmented into a bundle of highly specified and measurable services subject to continuous evaluation. In Malaysian universities, this manifests as an increased reliance on short-term contract positions and a strong emphasis on performance-driven KPIs (Wan et al., 2022), developments often associated with growing financial pressures and intensifying competition in the higher

education sector. While these arrangements may provide institutions with greater organisational flexibility, they can also introduce challenges related to academics' well-being, incentives for scholarly innovation, and sustainable workload management (Li et al., 2025).

The first five years of employment are widely recognised as a critical turning point for ECAs, serving as a fundamental foundation for securing future academic rewards and overall career success (Henkel, 2004; Laudel & Gläser, 2008). Conversely, difficulties encountered during this period are strongly associated with eventual job dissatisfaction particularly when governance structures are perceived as unsupportive or misaligned with their interests. The core pressure stems from the expectation that ECAs must excel simultaneously across a complex, multi-component role. ECAs grapple with the pressure inherent in the competitive and often politicised environments of research-intensive universities (Zhuang & Lin, 2025). This complex mandate immediately generates an unsustainable workload. Past literature highlights that the simultaneous pursuit of these diverse and often conflicting missions inherently generates stress and reduces academics' control over time (Franco-Santos & Doherty, 2017; Li et al., 2025). For ECAs, this pressure is magnified because, unlike tenured colleagues, they have limited institutional power to negotiate their commitments. ECAs often carry disproportionately heavy administrative loads (Spina et al., 2020), thereby severely reducing the time available for sustained, high-impact research, which remains the primary metric for career advancement.

In the contexts of Malaysian universities, this imbalance is acute, as national pressures for high-ranking publications often clash with substantial teaching, supervision, and community and professional service demands (Wan et al., 2022). This situation forces a difficult prioritization dilemma: ECAs compelled to prioritize easily measurable research outputs essential for career progression over less-auditable responsibilities (McKenzie, 2018; Harford, 2021), thereby fundamentally reshaping their daily academic priorities. As a result, work intensification becomes normalised, and boundaries between professional and personal life become increasingly blurred. According to Li et al. (2025), ECAs frequently report sacrificing personal time, family obligations, and leisure to manage their exhaustive list of duties due to a culture of compulsory overwork.

2.2. Job Demands-Resources Theory

The Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) theory was designed to be universally applicable to explain the interplay of diverse elements that affect job performance (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Demerouti et al., 2001). Specifically, it explicitly explains how excessive job demands such as high workloads, time pressure, and performance monitoring interact with available job resources such as institutional support, autonomy, and feedback to shape employee performance, motivation, and well-being. When applied to this study, the theory offers a valuable framework for understanding how governance and KPI systems shape the work, workload, and priorities of ECAs. In this study, ECAs face rising performance demands under managerial governance while simultaneously losing the traditional autonomy that once protected academic well-being.

JD-R theory posits that every job can be understood through two fundamental categories: job demands and job resources. Job demands refer to organizational aspects that require continuous effort, leading to energy depletion and psychological costs. It may result in stress and burnout

when they exceed an individual's capacity (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Bakker et al., 2023). In the "entrepreneurial" research universities, managerial governance and its accompanying KPI systems act as a powerful mechanism for intensifying job demands on ECAs, directly shaping their daily work, workload, and priorities. These demands manifest across multiple dimensions, *i.e.,* quantitative demand, emotional demand, and cognitive demand. Quantitative demands arise from the pressure to simultaneously fulfil the multicomponent academic role of teaching, research, service and networking, often resulting in excessive working hours and unsustainable workloads (Li et al., 2025). Emotional demands emerge when ECAs are expected to perform as "academic superhero" to comply with institutional performance evaluations resulting in emotional labor and psychological strain (Naidoo-Chetty & Du Plessis, 2021). Cognitive demands are evident in the continuous requirement to make strategic prioritisation decisions under KPI pressure, particularly the need to privilege easily auditable performance indicators over deep, developmental scholarly work. This enforced trade-off not only intensifies mental load but also risks compromising ECAs' long-term scholarly development (Lynch, 2015; Strathern, 2000). Collectively, these escalating job demands provide a robust explanatory framework for understanding the heightened stress, work intensification, and performance tensions experienced by ECAs in KPI-driven governance environments (Li et al., 2025).

Conversely, job resources refer to the physical, social, and organisational aspects of work that facilitate goal attainment and personal growth, while enabling performance, buffering the strain induced by job demands, and supporting the fulfilment of fundamental psychological needs (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Bakker et al., 2014). Importantly, the JD-R theory emphasises that an individual's perception of a demands (as a threat or a challenge) is contingent upon the availability of these resources and their coping capacity. Based on the literature review, managerial governance emerges as a dual mechanism that not only intensifies job demands but also actively erodes or restricts the job resources traditionally available to academics (*e.g.,* autonomy and social support) (Ani Marlia et al., 2025; Huang, 2024; Zhuang & Lin, 2025). Highly specified KPIs and centralised control structures operate to constrain academic freedom, consequently weakening the autonomy required for ECAs to independently organise their work schedules (Deem et al., 2007). The inability to negotiate workload or challenge unrealistic targets (KPIs) exacerbates strain, as ECAs are effectively denied the resource of control over their work environment (Franco-Santos & Doherty, 2017). Furthermore, hyper-competitive, performance-based systems, which create rivalries for scarce rewards, might undermine collegial trust and cooperation, thereby eroding social resources (Lynch, 2015). Under the JD–R model, such patterns suggest a dual process in which escalating demands and diminishing resources jointly contribute to heightened strain, reduced motivation, and intensified work effort among ECAs operating within KPI-driven governance contexts. This theoretical reasoning provides the conceptual basis for examining how governance structures shape ECAs' daily work experiences in the present study. The resulting conceptual framework is illustrated in Figure 1.

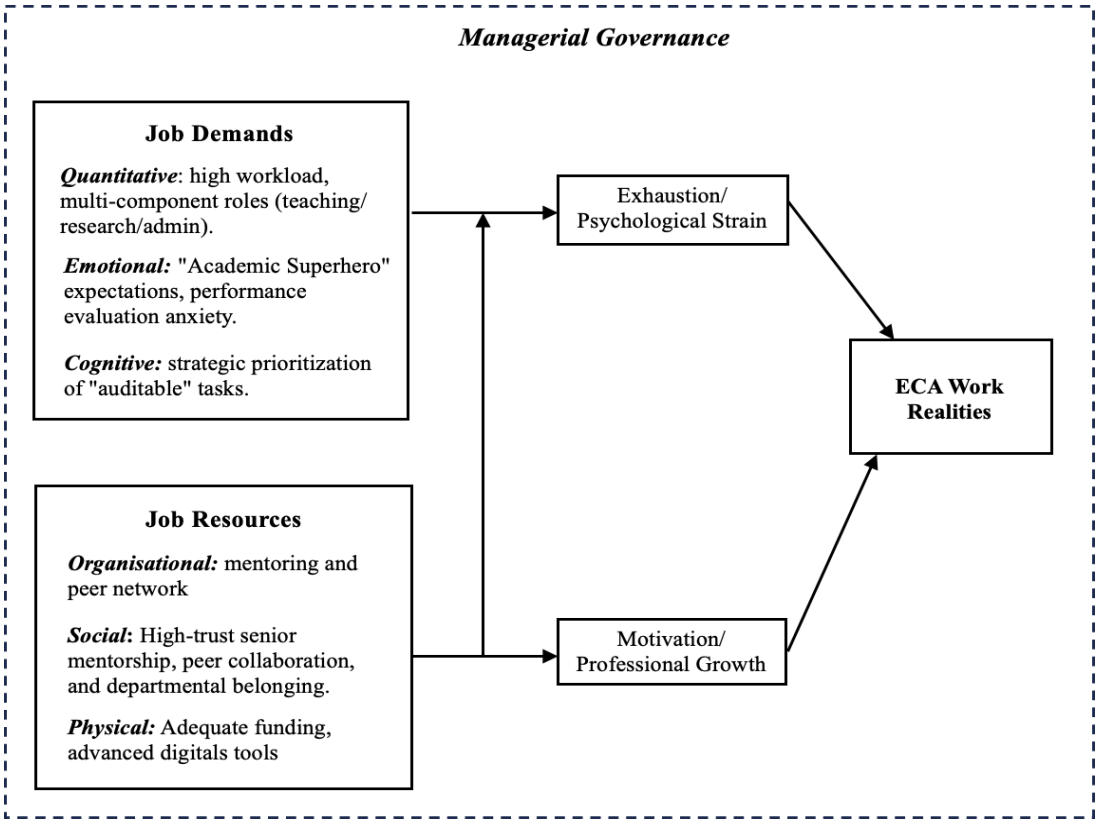

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework Linking Managerial Governance, JD-R and ECAs' Work Experiences

3. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the governance and performance culture experienced by ECAs within a Malaysian research university. The study was conducted at a public, research-intensive university in Malaysia, classified as one of the country's Research Universities (RUs) under the national higher education framework. Established more than five decades ago, the institution is a large, multidisciplinary university with a strong strategic emphasis on research productivity, international publication performance, and performance-based academic evaluation systems. Consistent with qualitative case study methodology, the institution constitutes a bounded case within which ECAs' experiences were examined in relation to governance and KPI practices. These institutional characteristics situate the case within Malaysia's highly competitive research-intensive university sector, where formalised governance and performance management systems strongly shape academic work. To protect institutional anonymity, specific identifying details are withheld. Eligible participants were identified across several faculties based on the study's inclusion criteria (academic staff in either contract or permanent positions with fewer than five years of service). From this pool, twelve early-career academics were contacted through university email directories and invited to participate. Six individuals agreed within the study timeframe, forming the final sample. The participants included both contract-based and permanent academic staff.

This sample size aligns with the exploratory nature of qualitative inquiry, where depth of insight and contextual understanding are prioritised over breadth of representation. In qualitative

interview research, relatively small samples can generate rich analytical insights when participants share comparable professional contexts and experiences. During the coding process, the researchers observed that the core themes relating to workload structuring, KPI pressures, and governance expectations began to recur across interviews, and by the later interviews no substantially new thematic categories were emerging. This approach aligns with qualitative research guidance suggesting that thematic saturation can often be achieved within relatively small samples in focused interview studies (Guest et al., 2006). Evidence of thematic saturation was monitored through iterative code accumulation across interviews, as summarised in Appendix B.

The inclusion of participants with less than five years of experience was justified on the grounds that ECAs are typically in the formative stage of their academic careers, navigating institutional governance structures, adapting to performance expectations, and negotiating career identity within the pressures of managerialism. Including both contract and permanent staff allowed for the comparison of differing employment contexts, offering a more nuanced understanding of how governance and KPI mechanisms influence academic work, professional development, and institutional engagement. Participants were selected based on the following inclusion criteria:

- Individuals currently employed within one Malaysian RU as academic staff.
- Those with less than five years of cumulative academic work experience.
- Academics occupying either contract or permanent positions.
- Willingness to provide informed consent for participation and data use

The primary method of data collection was in-depth, semi-structured interviews ranging from 60 to 90 minutes. The interview recordings were transcribed verbatim and analysed using ATLAS.ti version 23. A reflexive thematic analysis approach was adopted to identify patterns across participants' experiences. The analysis proceeded in several stages. First, transcripts were read repeatedly to familiarise the researchers with the data. Initial open coding was then conducted to identify meaningful segments related to governance perceptions, workload structuring, and KPI expectations. In the second stage, related codes were grouped into broader categories through iterative comparison across transcripts. Finally, these categories were refined into higher-level themes that captured recurring patterns across participants' experiences. To enhance analytical rigour, coding decisions and theme development were reviewed by two researchers through peer checking, and differences in interpretation were discussed until consensus was reached. As a reflexive thematic analysis approach was adopted, inter-coder reliability statistics were not calculated; instead, analytic credibility was supported through iterative discussion, reflexive memoing, and consensus-building among the research team. An excerpt of the coding framework illustrating themes, selected codes and definitions is shown in Table 2.

The interview protocol focused on governance perceptions, the impact of performance metrics on daily academic work, and their emotional and motivational consequences, as outlined in Appendix A. While semi-structured interviews constituted the primary analytic data source, institutional documents (e.g., KPI frameworks, promotion guidelines, and strategic plans), observational notes, and researcher reflective notes were used to support contextual understanding, inform interpretation, and enhance reflexivity, rather than as independent datasets for formal thematic analysis. Accordingly, the findings reported in this paper are

grounded in interview data, with supplementary materials used to enhance analytical sensitivity and credibility.

Next, peer checking was conducted by engaging two researchers to review coding decisions and thematic interpretations, helping to minimize individual bias and improve analytical rigor. These measures supported the credibility, dependability, and confirmability of the study's findings, ensuring that interpretations remained grounded in participants' lived experiences and institutional realities. Throughout the research process, the researchers engaged in reflexive practice to remain aware of how prior familiarity with higher education governance and performance systems could shape interpretation. Reflexive memos were used to bracket assumptions, interrogate moments of analytic resonance, and ensure that themes remained grounded in participants' accounts rather than researcher expectations.

The study was conducted in accordance with the university's internal code of conduct for research involving human participants and internationally recognised ethical principles governing qualitative research, including the principles of respect for persons, beneficence, and justice articulated in the Belmont Report (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979) and the British Educational Research Association Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (British Educational Research Association, 2018). Several safeguards were implemented to protect participants throughout the study. First, all participants received an explanatory statement outlining the purpose of the research, the voluntary nature of their participation, their right to withdraw at any time without penalty, and the intended use of the data. Second, verbal informed consent was obtained prior to the commencement of each recorded interview. Third, pseudonyms (P1–P6) were assigned to all participants, and identifying information such as department names and specific responsibilities was removed from the transcripts to ensure confidentiality. Fourth, interviews were conducted either virtually or in neutral off-campus locations to allow participants to speak freely without concern for institutional oversight. Finally, all interview recordings and transcripts were stored on a restricted cloud drive accessible only to the principal researcher, and anonymised research data will be securely retained for five years in accordance with recognised research data management practices.

4. Findings and Discussion

The study involved six ECAs who were assigned pseudonyms to protect their identities (P1-P6), as shown in Table 1.The sample comprised four female and two male participants, reflecting variation in gender composition. Three participants held permanent academic positions (P1, P2, P3), while the remaining three were employed on contract basis (P4, P5, P6). Their academic working experience ranged from 2 to 3.5 years, consistent with the study's focus on staff with less than five years in academia. This distribution enabled the exploration of how employment status (permanent versus contract) and early career stage intersect with experiences of governance and performance measurement in higher education.

Table 1. Participant Demographic

Participant (Pseudonym)	Gender	Employment Status	Working Experience (years)
P1 (F)	Female	Permanent	3.5
P2 (N)	Female	Permanent	2.5
P3 (Z)	Male	Permanent	3
P4 (S)	Female	Contract	3
P5 (D)	Female	Contract	2
P6 (R)	Male	Contract	4

The findings and discussion are structured around the central research question: *How do governance and KPI systems shape ECAs' daily academic work, workload, and priorities?* Three main themes and eight sub-themes emerged from the analysis and are presented in Table 2, followed by detailed discussion in the sections that follow.

Table 2. Governance and KPI system in shaping ECAs' work

Theme	Sub-theme	Working definition	Exemplar codes
Structuring of daily academic tasks	KPI-driven task prioritisation	Ways in which formal KPIs determine which activities ECAs prioritise or postpone in their daily schedules.	"chasing publications", "grant first, teaching later", "activities generating more income", "deadline-driven tasks"
	Balancing teaching, research, and professional service	How ECAs distribute time and effort across teaching, research, and service in response to institutional performance expectations.	"overloaded hours with the rest of KPI", "night-time research", "take leave to focus on research", "juggling multiple roles", "split focus", "working on weekend"
	Administrative and reporting burden	Extra workload related to documenting, tracking, and reporting KPIs and governance requirements.	"online KPI system data entry", "filling forms", "evidence uploading", "time spent on reports", "paperwork burden", "delaying process", "various system which not merging to one another"

Perceived realism and fairness of expectations	Realistic versus unrealistic KPI targets	ECAs' judgements about whether KPI targets are attainable given their career stage, and resources.	"targets too high", "unrealistic for new lecturer", "benchmarks for senior staff applied to juniors" "insufficient mentoring", "same KPI for all DS13 although different year of service", "no consideration of learning curve"
	Differences by employment status and gender	How employment status shapes exposure to and experience of KPI pressures.	"KPI tied to contract renewal", "job insecurity", "extra pressure on contract staff", "KPI set (in contract) sometimes no aligned in the system", "inequality of risk", "newly working mom received less support"
Governance structures as enablers or constraints	Supportive versus restrictive management practices	Ways in which faculty or university management either facilitates or obstructs ECAs' work under KPI regimes.	"supportive HOD", "rigid rules", "top-down decisions", "flexible workload allocation", "pressure from management", "too much bureaucracy",
	Transparency and communication of expectations	Clarity, visibility, and communication of policies, KPIs, and performance criteria.	"unclear criteria", "late communication", "policy confusion", "orientation/briefing sessions", "learning by trial and error"
	Autonomy in workload negotiation	ECAs' perceived ability to negotiate tasks, redistribute workload, or resist unreasonable demands.	"no say in workload", "negotiating teaching hours", "fully autonomy in class", "pushing back on tasks", "limited voice", "accepting decisions"

Theme 1: Structuring of daily academic tasks

Analysis of the data revealed that the theme structuring of daily academic tasks comprised several interrelated sub-themes, namely: (a) KPI-driven task prioritisation; (b) balancing teaching, research and professional services; and (c) administrative and reporting burden.

a. KPI-driven task prioritisation

Participants consistently described how KPIs shaped the organisation of their daily work, often redirecting their efforts towards activities that were formally measurable and reportable (Javed

& Alenezi, 2023). Work associated with quantifiable outputs particularly publications, grants, and other research-related indicators was routinely prioritised over teaching preparation, student support, and service responsibilities. Several participants explicitly characterised their experiences as "chasing publications" and adopting a "grant first, teaching later" orientation, suggesting that research and income-generating activities, such as organising conferences and seminars, increasingly dominated their academic schedules. As P5 expressed:

"Sometimes I feel like an event organiser more than an academic, so much energy goes into planning, logistics, and reporting for activities that are mainly there to generate income and KPIs." (P5)

This perception was echoed by P2, who described how substantial time and effort were diverted from core academic responsibilities towards revenue-oriented tasks that were viewed as institutionally prioritised, albeit with unclear benefits for staff development:

"The management has a lot on their agenda that we don't fully see or understand in terms of what it brings to ECAs. What I do see is that they focus on generating revenue or income, and we end up organising a lot of conferences to generate revenue, which are not even part of our main KPIs." (P2)

For P6, these conditions resulted in an increasingly instrumental approach to work organisation, described as "working backwards from the KPI list," whereby institutional metrics and appraisal timelines became the primary reference points for planning weekly and semester activities. This produced a predominantly deadline-driven workflow, in which work associated with imminent KPI-related cut-offs took precedence. Consequently, several participants acknowledged engaging in strategic task management by deferring or minimising responsibilities that were less visible within formal performance systems such as mentoring, collegial support, industry attachment and community development in order to preserve time and energy for activities that were institutionally recognised, rewarded and visible to the management. These experiences were broadly consistent with institutional documents that emphasise publication output and performance-based evaluation criteria.

b. Balancing teaching, research, and professional services

Participants described significant challenges in balancing teaching, research, and professional service, including industry attachments and community development, under institutional performance expectations. Many reported that official workloads did not capture the invisible time required to meet KPIs, creating a sense of constant juggling across competing responsibilities. This often meant adopting a "long hours" culture, being available 24/7, working nights, weekends, holidays, or taking leave just to complete research, plan lessons, or manage emails (Bozzon et al., 2017). Several participants described "night-time research" (P3) and "working on weekends" (P4, P6) as a common strategy, while others had to "take leave to focus on research" (P1, P2, P4) because regular working hours were consumed by teaching, meetings, and service tasks. As Bozzon et al. (2017) note, "the boundaries between work and other life spheres seem to be weak, in an ambiguous exchange between work vocation and

precariousness," reflecting participants' experiences of work encroaching of personal time and space. P2 emphasized:

"I work extra hours, and ironically, to protect 'my KPI', work-life balance never exists in my dictionary as academia" (P2).

P1, a permanent ECA, added that to avoid being labelled as "not committed" by colleagues, she preferred to use her annual leave to focus on research and publications. She explained:

"My timetable is so packed with classes and meetings that the only way to make progress on research is to take leave. During normal days, I try to keep up with other assigned work and make sure I'm not seen as not committed… I literally apply for leave just to sit down and write or analyse data. This doesn't happen to me alone; my circle of friends do similar things." (P1)

Others echoed these sentiments, explaining that raising concerns about workload might result in being assigned even more tasks or being perceived as less dedicated than their peers. Consequently, several ECAs described normalising practices such as staying late, working from home after hours, and sacrificing rest days in order to manage teaching, research, and service simultaneously while avoiding negative judgements about their commitment.

c. Administrative and reporting burden

Participants identified administrative and reporting demands as a major source of strain in their daily work. A substantial amount of time was spent on entering data into online KPI systems, completing forms, uploading evidence, and preparing multiple reports, often across different platforms that were "not merged with one another," resulting in duplication and delays. The involvement of multiple parties, including department heads and administrative staff, further complicated these processes and increased the time required to complete administrative tasks. Consistent with these experiences, Basheyeva (2025) noted that many educational institutions continue to rely on manual data management systems, which heightens the risk of errors and delays in reporting. Together, these conditions contributed to the perception that administrative duties had become a significant component of workload, frequently at the expense of time for teaching and research. Participants viewed this paperwork burden as an added layer of work tied closely to governance and performance monitoring, yet offering little direct value to teaching quality or research development. P2 echoed:

"Honestly, teaching should play the biggest role in our work. But administrative work is the most tiring and takes up most of my time. My role requires a lot of communication with students and alumni, so it really eats into my time." (P2)

Similarly, P6 a contract lecturer whom excel in the publications emphasised the administrative load embedded within revenue-focused activities:

"There are so many revenue-focused projects that we get 'volunteered' for, and most of them come with heavy administrative work that doesn't really count towards our own academic development." (P6)

Together, these accounts illustrate how governance and KPI systems generate significant administrative and reporting requirements that extend beyond routine academic duties, contributing to feelings of overload and limiting the time available for substantive teaching and research work. Interpreted through the JD–R framework, these experiences reflect the growing dominance of job demands within the academic work environment. The accumulation of reporting tasks, publication expectations, and administrative responsibilities created competing pressures on limited time resources, while participants reported relatively few institutional supports to offset these demands. As a result, ECAs experienced an imbalance between increasing performance demands and the resources available to manage them.

Theme 2: Perceived realism and fairness of expectations

Participants frequently questioned the realism and fairness of KPI expectations, particularly in relation to their career stage and available resources. Two sub-themes were identified; (a) realistic versus unrealistic KPI targets; and (b) differences by employment status and gender

a. Realistic versus unrealistic KPI targets

The corporatisation and marketisation of higher education have reshaped academic work, particularly for those in precarious employment, through increased workload, mobility demands, and work–life strain (Izharuddin, 2018). This has made KPIs increasingly unrealistic and challenging to meet. Participants frequently questioned whether KPI targets were appropriate given their experience and the support available. P1, P2, and P6 described the expectations as "targets too high" and "unrealistic for new lecturers," noting that benchmarks designed for senior lecturers were often applied to junior staff without adjustment. This created a sense that the system did not adequately recognise the developmental needs and constraints of ECAs, reinforcing perceptions of structural unfairness. P2's experience with her head of department illustrates this tension:

"My KJ (head of department) is a very 'by the book' person. She sometimes lacks the human aspect; her only question is, 'So haven't you published enough?' But she doesn't really help me in any way. It's demotivating, but it also forces me to be independent." (P2)

P5, a contract ECA with a professional background in industry who currently holds multiple responsibilities as a programme coordinator and is involved in programme development, emphasised that despite her prior experience, the academic environment remained new and challenging. She argued that institutional expectations did not adequately account for the distinct transition from industry into academia, particularly during the early career stage. Reflecting on the misalignment between performance expectations and lived experience, she stated:

"When I look at the KPI sheet, I honestly wonder who it was designed for, because it doesn't reflect the reality of being a new lecturer with a full teaching load and limited research funding. On top of that, just so many other uncertain tasks…" (P5)

Similarly, P4 expressed comparable concerns but framed them as an ongoing professional challenge within the academic field. She highlighted the demoralising effect of being assessed against the same performance indicators as senior colleagues who possessed significantly greater research capital and support:

It's demoralising when you're compared directly with senior staff who already have established projects and teams. The KPI numbers might be the same, but the starting point is completely different."(P4)

Overall, this demonstrate that KPI targets were perceived as insufficiently grounded in the realities of academic work.The failure to align expectations with workload conditions and resource constraints reinforced participants' perceptions of unfairness and neglect, particularly when performance measures were implemented without meaningful guidance or developmental input. Rather than serving as motivating benchmarks, KPIs were widely experienced as sources of pressure and emotional strain, shaping a work environment characterised by heightened stress and diminished morale.

b. Differences by employment status and gender

Employment status and gender shaped how KPI pressures were experienced, often creating unequal exposure to risk and support. Contract staff, in particular, perceived a direct link between "KPI tied to contract renewal," which intensified feelings of job insecurity and extra pressure on contract staff. They described situations where KPI sets written into their contracts were "not aligned in the system," creating confusion and a sense of "inequality of risk" compared to permanent colleagues who faced less immediate consequences if targets were not met. Newly working mothers also reported "receiving less support," noting that caregiving responsibilities were rarely considered when workloads and expectations were set, further compounding gendered pressures in meeting performance demands. By contrast, some permanent staff reported greater access to induction and mentoring structures that helped them navigate governance and KPI frameworks. P2, for example, recounted:

"I learnt from PTM. It's an induction course for new lecturer's permanent position. We were introduced with numbers of policies, systems. The course was quite short and not familiar (with the system) because I hadn't experienced it quite yet during that time…but it still helpful." (P2)

P6, who had renewed his contract for a second term, explained how employment status shaped access to support and information:

"Permanent staff get sent to more courses and are more involved in meetings where systems are explained. As contract staff, we are still expected to meet the same KPI or maybe more, but we don't always get the same briefing or mentoring." (P6).

Similarly, P4 observed that permanent staff were afforded greater tolerance for underperformance, whereas contract early career academics faced more severe consequences for unmet KPIs. She described this as an unequal distribution of risk, where a single weak

performance cycle could jeopardise contract renewal. In contrast, P1, a permanent ECA who had recently returned from maternity leave, drew attention to gendered pressures associated with KPI expectations. Despite major changes in her time and energy, performance requirements remained unchanged:

"After coming back from maternity leave, the KPI didn't change at all. The expectations were exactly the same, but my time and energy were completely different. I don't see much understanding or adjustment for new mothers."

Interpreted through the JD–R framework, these accounts suggest that KPI expectations function as intensified job demands that disproportionately affect individuals with fewer institutional resources. Participants highlighted how contract status and caregiving responsibilities limited their capacity to meet publication and performance expectations, thereby increasing feelings of strain and perceived unfairness. These accounts also suggest that gendered caregiving responsibilities may shape how ECAs experience KPI expectations, particularly when institutional performance frameworks do not accommodate periods such as maternity leave or other caregiving responsibilities. Universities may take steps to address these inequalities by offering targeted funding and development opportunities for minority and marginalized groups, including temporary and contract staff. Promotion criteria could also be reassessed to ensure that women and caregivers are not unfairly disadvantaged due to constraints on advancing their publication records or qualifications because of household and family responsibilities (Solomon & Du Plessis, 2023; Mason et al., 2013). Such measures would help mitigate the unequal exposure to risk and support created by current KPI frameworks, where contract staff experience heightened job insecurity and newly working mothers face additional gendered pressures.

Theme 3: Governance structure as enablers or constraints

Analysis of the data revealed three sub-themes, namely: (a) supportive versus restrictive management policies; (b) transparency and communication of expectations; and (c) autonomy in workload negotiation.

a. Supportive versus restrictive management policies

Participants' accounts highlighted how governance structures, enacted through management practices, could either support or constrain their work under KPI regimes. Many described experiencing predominantly restrictive practices including rigid rules, top-down decisions, and too much bureaucracy that left them feeling disempowered and reluctant to voice concerns. P1 explained:

"It's better to just keep quiet and not act like you're an expert… staying silent so you didn't get much work because there's no team to rely on and your superior doesn't really help when issues arise. Some superiors do want to help, many don't but it really depends." (P1)

Such reflections suggest that the lack of responsive support and shared decision-making reinforced a culture where ECAs felt they had little influence over how KPIs and workloads were managed, and where raising issues risked further pressure rather than relief.

In contrast, others emphasised the enabling potential of more supportive management, especially where leadership provided concrete assistance rather than merely setting targets. P3, for instance, stressed the importance of broader forms of support:

"I also think it should come in form of resources, assistances not just money and material, but also guidance." (P3)

Similarly, P5 observed that administrative demands in academia, especially for ECAs, were often excessive. At one end, ECAs encountered bureaucratic and output-driven practices that increased pressure and limited opportunities to voice concerns; at the other, they described the need for approachable leadership, clear guidance, and practical support to help them meet KPI expectations without undermining wellbeing or academic quality.

b. Transparency and communication of expectations

Participants consistently raised concerns about the transparency and communication of performance expectations, particularly around more complex indicators such as KIPs. While they felt that the components for research and teaching were very straightforward, they described KIPs as difficult to understand and not communicated clearly, noting that what counted often "depends on what the superior wants." P1 explained:

"We have the usual KPIs, and the components for research and teaching are very straightforward. But the KIP is very difficult to understand and often not communicated clearly, because it depends on what the superior wants. That process is not transparent, poorly communicated, and lacks clear planning in terms of how this year's discussions will inform next year's KIP. It's the one that ends up dragging down the other KPIs." (P1)

Open and transparent decision-making helps lecturers feel informed, valued, and more willing to engage in academic work collaboratively, which ultimately contributes to better educational practice (Ibnu et al., 2024). However, participants' experiences suggested that such transparency was often lacking. They spoke of unclear performance criteria and the absence of consistent briefings that could have helped ECAs plan their work more effectively and understand institutional expectations. Beyond the technical aspects of KPIs, participants also pointed to broader communication gaps in how important decisions were made and communicated within their institutions. P2, for example, described an incident related to confirmation and promotion:

"There is lack of transparency. Multiple incidents… for example, recently check about confirmation and promotion. In the management meeting, all the candidates should come to the meeting to be interviewed. But it was never widely informed. It should be clear. It should be explained why this situation happened. It should be a normal process to everyone, not just selected one." (P2)

Experiences like this reinforced perceptions of learning by trial and error, where ECAs discovered critical procedures informally rather than through clear, proactive orientation or briefing sessions. Together, these narratives suggest that limited clarity and inconsistent communication around systems and performance criteria not only hinder effective planning but also contribute to uncertainty and mistrust in governance processes.

c. Autonomy in workload negotiation

Autonomy in workload negotiation emerged as a constrained and uneven aspect of participants' experiences. This pattern echoes existing research, which has established that insecurity is closely linked to uncertain work continuity and limited control over work tasks and responsibilities (Solomon & Du Plessis, 2023). In this study, ECAs generally felt they had limited voice in decisions concerning the distribution of teaching, administrative duties, and additional responsibilities, describing a pattern of routinely "accepting decisions" made at higher levels rather than being actively involved in shaping them. While some participants reported occasional opportunities to "negotiate teaching hours" or request minor adjustments, such instances were described as exceptions rather than standard practice and were often dependent on the goodwill of head of department or dean rather than supported by formal procedures. Many participants distinguished between autonomy within the classroom and autonomy over their broader workload. As P1 explained, decision-making authority was largely confined to teaching practice:

"…50–50 autonomy in handling class, but nothing else. The rest just follow what has been told." (P1)

This illustrates a situation in which ECAs could exercise some professional judgement over how they taught but had little influence over how many classes they were assigned, what additional tasks they were expected to take on, or how their time was allocated across teaching, research, and service responsibilities. Attempts to "push back on tasks" or question these allocations were widely perceived as risky, particularly for those in more vulnerable positions, reinforcing a culture in which compliance with workload decisions was the norm and meaningful negotiation remained limited. P4 further captured this sense of token consultation:

"We are told that workload is 'discussed,' but often it feels more like being informed rather than actually being consulted" (P4)

For contract staff, this lack of bargaining power was experienced even more acutely. P5 noted that although staff were formally told they had the right to refuse tasks, in practice such refusals carried perceived risks, particularly in relation to contract renewal:

"I can suggest small changes like swapping a class time, but when it comes to the overall number of courses or committees, it's already decided. We just follow. They told that we have the rights to refuse. But, what do you think for contract like us? It's going to give bad impact when renewing the contract." (P5)

Taken together, these accounts illustrate how governance structures can operate either as enabling resources or as additional constraints within the academic work environment. While some participants acknowledged the potential value of supportive leadership, clear communication, and practical guidance, many described governance practices that limited their voice in decision-making and constrained their ability to negotiate workloads. Interpreted through the JD–R framework, such governance arrangements may function either as organisational resources that support ECAs in navigating institutional expectations or as additional job demands when policies are experienced as rigid, opaque, or excessively bureaucratic. When supportive leadership and transparent communication were absent, participants reported greater uncertainty and reduced autonomy, reinforcing the imbalance between institutional performance demands and the resources available to manage them.

5. Conclusion, Implication and Recommendation

Framing the findings through JD-R theory clarifies why governance and KPI systems were experienced by ECAs as both overwhelming and, in some cases, potentially enabling. JD–R theory explains work experiences as shaped by the balance between job demands such as sustained effort and emotional strain and job resources, which support goal attainment and development (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). In this study, KPI-driven task prioritisation, extended working hours, heavy administrative and reporting requirements, unclear performance expectations, and non-negotiable workloads functioned as major job demands, particularly when targets were perceived as unrealistic or when employment status and gender increased the risks associated with underperformance. At the same time, job resources were unevenly distributed: supportive leadership, clear communication, induction programmes, mentoring, and flexible workload arrangements helped some ECAs manage these pressures more effectively, while contract staff and newly working mothers often reported limited access to such support. In particular, the experiences of newly returned mothers highlighted in this study suggest that gendered caregiving responsibilities constitute an important but underexplored dimension of KPI-driven academic performance cultures, meriting focused, gender-sensitive research designs in future studies. From a JD–R perspective, caregiving responsibilities may further reduce the resources available to ECAs for meeting institutional performance demands, thereby intensifying the imbalance between job demands and available resources. Consistent with JD–R theory, this imbalance between high demands and insufficient resources contributed to stress, work–life conflict, and disengagement; however, the findings also suggest that strengthening institutional resources could shift KPI governance from being primarily draining to more developmental in nature.

Based on these findings, several implications and recommendations arise. Institutions should review KPI frameworks for career stage sensitivity, ensuring differentiated expectations, scaffolded targets, and explicit recognition of transition periods, caregiving, and disciplinary variation. Governance processes need greater transparency through systematic, accessible briefings on policies, promotion, and appraisal, reducing reliance on informal “trial and error” learning. Workload models should incorporate mechanisms for genuine negotiation, especially for ECAs and contract staff, and reduce redundant administrative reporting by streamlining systems. Finally, leadership development and mentoring programmes should emphasise

supportive, dialogic management that combines accountability with resources, guidance, and advocacy, so that KPIs become tools for capacity building rather than drivers of chronic strain.

Future research should deepen and extend these insights in several ways. Comparative studies across different institutional types, disciplines, and national systems could clarify how specific governance configurations and funding regimes shape the demand–resource balance for ECAs, including cross-country analyses informed by JD-R theory. Longitudinal qualitative or mixed-methods designs could track how ECAs' experiences of governance, KPIs, and wellbeing evolve over time, particularly across key transition points such as confirmation, promotion, or shifts from contract to permanent roles. Further work is also needed on intersectional experiences examining how gender, caregiving status, contract type, ethnicity, and field of study interact to produce distinct configurations of risk and resilience in performance cultures. In particular, the experiences of newly returned mothers highlighted in this study suggest that gendered caregiving responsibilities may represent an important but underexplored dimension of academic performance cultures. Finally, intervention-focused research that pilots and evaluates concrete changes (e.g., revised KPI frameworks, mentoring schemes, workload negotiation mechanisms) would offer much-needed evidence on what kinds of institutional reforms most effectively support sustainable and equitable ECAs' trajectories.

AI Declarations

AI-assisted tools (ChatGPT, Gemini, and Quillbot) were used during manuscript preparation for language editing and grammar checking. These tools were not used for data analysis, interpretation of findings, or generation of research conclusions. All analytical decisions and interpretations were conducted by the authors.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

Context	Sample of the Interview Questions
Opening (Informed consent and participation)	Thank you for taking the time to participate in this interview. Before we begin, I would like to briefly explain the purpose of this session and your rights as a participant. This interview is part of a research project that aims to understand how governance systems and KPI expectations shape ECA's daily academic work, workload, and priorities. • Everything you share today will be treated with strict privacy and confidentiality. Your name and any identifying information will not appear in any reports, publications, or presentations. All data will be anonymised, and only the researcher will have access to the raw interview files. • Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You have the right to skip, pause the interview, or withdraw from the study at any time. If you choose to withdraw, your data will not be used. • With your permission, I would like to audio-record this interview. The recording will help ensure accuracy during transcription and analysis. The audio files will be securely stored and will not be shared with anyone outside the research team. Before we proceed, may I confirm the following: 1. Do you understand the purpose of this study? 2. Do you agree to participate voluntarily? 3. Do you consent to the audio recording of this interview? If you agree, we can begin the recording and start the interview.
Background and context	1. Could you briefly describe your current role and responsibilities? 2. How would you describe a typical workday or workweek?
Perception of governance	1. How do you understand the governance structure in your institution or faculty? 2. How would you describe your experience interacting with institutional policies, rules, or decision-making processes? 3. In your opinion, how does governance affect your work as an ECA? o Can you elaborate further?

Influence of KPIs and metrics	1. What KPIs or performance metrics are you expected to meet? o Can you give any example? 2. How do these metrics shape your daily tasks or decisions? 3. How realistic or achievable do you find these KPIs?
Emotional & motivational experiences	1. How you balance teaching, research, and administrative work? 2. Do you feel supported by your institution when working to meet these expectations?
Closing questions	1. Is there anything else you would like to add that we haven't discussed?

Appendix B: Emergence of New Codes and Thematic Saturation by Interview

Interview	New Codes Identified	Cumulative Codes
P1	18	18
P2	12	30
P3	8	38
P4	5	43
P5	3	46
P6	0	46