

# Neo-Liberalism's Shadows: Modern slavery in South African Higher Education

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**Dates:**

Received: 30 Apr. 2024

Accepted: 09 July 2024

Published: 17 Sept. 2024

**How to cite this article:**

Steynberg, L., Grundling, J.P. & Venter, M., 2024, 'Neo-Liberalism's Shadows: Modern slavery in South African Higher Education', *Transformation in Higher Education* 9(0), a405. <https://doi.org/10.4102/the.v9i0.405>

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Neoliberal ideology globally prioritises competition and productivity over staff well-being in higher education, leading to exploitative practices and heightened stress among academic faculty, culminating in what can be termed modern academic slavery. This study investigates the contemporary impact of neoliberalism on South African universities, focussing on governance, funding and academic freedom, and how these factors contribute to deteriorating conditions for academic staff and toxic work environments. This research examines academic experiences in a South African urban higher education institution (HEI) utilizing a single-case study approach. It examines their context within institutional and societal trends. Using a single-case ideographic approach in a South African HEI, the study utilises detailed documentation, incident analysis and literature review to understand academic enslavement within the chosen HEI, contextualising the academic's experiences within these broader institutional and societal trends. The findings reveal four key themes: moral disengagement, corporate malfeasance, exploitative labour practices, and labour coercion, illustrating the widespread exploitation of academic staff. The study advocates for urgent interventions to ensure respectful treatment, foster ethical work environments, and address disparities between administrators and faculty. It calls for autonomy, ethical leadership and a culture of inquiry in HEIs to combat modern academic slavery while acknowledging the need for further action and exploration.

**Contribution:** This study underscores the current impact of neoliberalism on higher education in South Africa, exposing challenges for academic staff and advocating systemic reforms. It emphasises the necessity for future investigations into institutional accountability and strategies to enhance staff well-being in HEIs.

**Keywords:** neoliberalism; enslavement; higher education; toxic working environment; ideographic research; workload; exploitation; ethical leadership.

## Introduction

### Background

Harvey (2005) and Saad-Filho (2020) argue that neoliberal globalisation prioritises market deregulation, privatisation and reduced government interference to connect economies and societies globally. In the late 20th century, free-market capitalism became the dominant global economic model, advocating free-market capitalism as the principal method of promoting economic growth and advancement.

In the context of higher education, neoliberal globalisation has fundamentally reshaped higher education institutions (HEIs) by emphasising market-driven concepts that prioritise economic goals over societal welfare (Denzin & Lincoln 2018; Giroux 2015; López-López et al. 2021; Lynch & Ivancheva 2015; MacLaren 2024; Pan 2021; Zawadzki & Jensen 2020). This shift has led HEIs to adopt 'user-pay' and excellence models, raising moral concerns (Caulfield, Lee & Baird 2023). The market-driven transformation of HEIs has resulted in academic conditions resembling modern slavery, characterised by dehumanising behaviours and a lack of concern for the well-being of academic faculty and staff (MacLaren 2024; Macfarlane, Bolden & Watermeyer 2024).

Understanding the complexities of these issues is essential, as this complexity is compounded by statistical challenges and its multidimensional nature (Such et al. 2020), which includes the mistreatment of faculty and staff because of understaffing and heavy workloads

**Note:** Special Collection: Neoliberal Turn in Higher Education.

(Noakes & Noakes 2021). The reluctance of faculty and staff to address potential enslaving practices in higher education underscores the significance of this research (Mazzone et al. 2023), aiming to enhance understanding of emerging enslavement practices and their impact on higher education in South Africa. Potential enslavement practices include excessive workloads, coercive employment terms, lack of autonomy, toxic leadership and inadequate support structures. Examining how modern slavery impacts higher education in South Africa could help address global issues such as poor governance, exploitative workloads, toxic leadership and performance challenges. These findings highlight the need for institutional and legislative reforms to uphold social justice, human dignity and human rights in higher education while protecting the integrity and reputation of HEIs.

Exploring modern slavery within HEIs has far-reaching implications for academia, policy and law. Modern slavery, as defined by Landman (2018), includes severe forms of exploitation where individuals are coerced into work and unable to leave because of threats, violence, deception or abuse of power. This encompasses forced labour, human trafficking and practices akin to slavery, where autonomy and freedom are severely restricted.

Recent studies highlight challenges in defining forced labour and distinguishing it from highly exploitative yet seemingly 'voluntary' work (Amir 2016; Landman 2018). Such et al. (2020) suggest that a criminal justice-focussed approach may impede prevention efforts and support for victims within HEIs. Modern slavery is often linked to concepts such as 'wage slavery' and poor working conditions, particularly in developing nations such as South Africa. Wage slavery refers to a situation where workers have little choice but to accept substandard working conditions and low wages because of economic pressures and a lack of alternatives, creating conditions that can resemble coercion and exploitation (Phung & Crane 2018). Therefore, HEIs need to establish standards, reduce risks and implement ethical care programmes for employees to combat modern slavery (Dodd & Dumay 2023; López-López et al. 2021).

Legal requirements such as reporting and addressing modern slavery are crucial, and institutional frameworks that promote and defend human rights are vital (Caruana et al. 2020; Landman 2020). Treating modern slavery solely as a reputational risk is cautioned against; proactive prevention is key (Caruana et al. 2020). Despite the illegality of slavery, 47% of institutions have not criminalised slavery (Landman 2020). Therefore, this study aims to raise awareness among higher education professionals about modern slavery and contribute to the development of effective prevention and mitigation strategies.

This research takes an ideographic approach by focussing on individual case studies to understand modern slavery in a South African HEI shaped by neoliberal globalisation. It aims to aid social scientists in developing structural taxonomies and deepening understanding (Syed 2024). The study investigates modern enslavement in a South African HEI shaped by neoliberal ideology, distinguishing it from objectionable labour practices and exploring contributing factors. Its objectives include identifying mitigation actions within the neoliberal globalisation context, informing preventive measures and offering insights for interventions addressing challenges faced by academics in higher education.

By examining modern slavery within HEIs under the influence of neoliberal globalisation, this study delves into restrictive employment conditions that extend beyond the workplace, curtailing individual freedoms. The literature review scrutinises modern slavery's conceptualisation and determinants. The methodology is outlined, leading to findings across four themes: moral disengagement among line managers, corporate malfeasance, exploitative labour practices and coercion within labour relations. Actionable recommendations for addressing modern slavery in HEIs are discussed, alongside acknowledgement of research limitations and suggestions for future investigations.

## Conceptualisation of modern slavery

Modern slavery in higher education involves the exploitation of marginalised faculty and staff for financial gain. This issue intersects with human rights theories, demonstrating how exploitative tactics and human rights abuses converge within HEIs (Alzoubi, Locatelli & Sainati 2023; Kara 2017; Nazir 2021; Phung & Crane 2018). Modern slavery in HEIs is defined as the exploitation of faculty and staff for financial gain, production or service delivery, as prohibited by the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights (1966) (Dodd & Dumay 2023; Landman 2020).

Toxic leadership in HEIs mirrors modern slavery by fostering divisions and causing emotional exhaustion among faculty and staff. This environment traps individuals in coercive situations, making it difficult to refuse or leave (Caruana et al. 2020; ILO 2017; Macfarlane et al. 2024; Nkwor 2023; Phung & Crane 2018; Ramaditya, Effendi & Syahrani 2023). Such conditions are exacerbated by power dynamics and cultural factors, leading to marginalisation, dependency and disempowerment (Nazir 2021; Pettinato 2022; Sarfaty 2020; Solomon & Du Plessis 2023).

In HEIs, dissenting scholars often face suppression within HEIs, further highlighting the marginalisation of vulnerable groups (Noakes & Noakes 2021). This suppression underscores the socially constructed nature of modern slavery, which requires a thorough ethical examination (Gutierrez-Huerter, Gold & Trautrim 2023).

Broader conceptualisations connect modern slavery to extreme employee exploitation resembling severe management practices, where employees are denied agency and unable to escape (Gutierrez-Huerter et al. 2023; Phung & Crane 2018; Landman 2018). Landman (2018) emphasises critical aspects such as the denial of agency and the inability to escape enslavement conditions, deepening our understanding of modern slavery determinants in HEIs. Exploitative tactics such as threats, violence, coercion and abuse of power contribute to a culture of academic exploitation and staff vulnerability (Alzoubi et al. 2023; Carrington, Chatzidakis & Shaw 2020; Washburn et al. 2022).

Employment terms in HEIs that restrict freedom beyond the workplace serve as proxy determinants of modern slavery. These terms often involve coercion and abuse of authority, mirroring conditions of forced labour and restricted autonomy (Amir 2016; Phung & Crane 2018). Examination of academic employment terms restricting freedom outside the workplace (Amir 2016; Washburn et al. 2022) underscores the need to address exploitative practices compromising basic human rights and freedoms in HEIs.

To enhance this conceptualisation, the researchers propose operationalising 'modern slavery' in higher education under neoliberal globalisation as the excessive exploitation of employees by institutional authorities, involving coercion, deception or force to compel labour against faculty and staff's will, depriving them of freedom and basic human rights. This operational definition underscores the urgency of combating and preventing exploitation in HEIs.

### Proxy determinants of modern slavery in higher education

Proxy determinants of modern slavery in higher education encompass various exploitative tactics such as threats, aggression, coercion, deception and abuse of authority (Alzoubi et al. 2023; Carrington et al. 2020; Washburn et al. 2022). These actions, including 'position bullying' and 'mobbing', transcend social barriers and undermine victims' worth and potential (Mazzone et al. 2023; Noakes & Noakes 2021; Win et al. 2024; Zawadzki & Jensen 2020). Understanding these factors is essential for identifying and addressing exploitative practices in HEIs, ultimately safeguarding faculty and staff's well-being and dignity.

To delve deeper into the underlying factors contributing to modern slavery within HEIs, specific proxy determinants are discussed.

#### Institutional detachment

Institutional detachment, highlighted by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and researchers such as Phung and Crane (2018), heightens vulnerability among potential victims. Mazzone et al. (2023) and Zawadzki and Jensen (2020) notice instances where employees adopt a bystander approach, choosing silence and inaction when confronted with malpractice. This passivity inadvertently perpetuates

enslavement practices such as bullying and mobbing. Limited awareness among faculty and staff fosters an environment where exploitation can flourish unchecked. Thus, there's a pressing need for heightened education and proactive measures to combat modern slavery in HEIs.

#### Persistent socio-economic inequalities

Persistent socio-economic inequalities within HEIs, shaped by neoliberal ideologies, prioritise organisational status over individual contributions, fostering job instability and limited opportunities (Lynch & Ivancheva 2015; Win et al. 2024). This economic framework increases vulnerability to exploitative practices such as bullying and mobbing, perpetuating a culture prioritising profitability over employee welfare and fostering perceptions of modern slavery within academia (Mazzone et al. 2023; Washburn et al. 2022; Zawadzki & Jensen 2020).

Higher education institutions, seen increasingly as investments, emphasise productivity and financial gains at the expense of the public good and intellectual contributions (Caulfield et al. 2023; Giroux 2015; Hall 2018; Smith, 2023). Cost-cutting measures such as workload re-engineering and reliance on part-time faculty intensify workloads resembling modern slavery because of extreme labour intensity (Anderson, Lindebaum & Pérezts 2019; Bolaji 2014; Solomon & Du Plessis 2023). Nigerian lecturers, for instance, manage workloads equivalent to multiple full-time positions, leading to exhaustion and well-being concerns (Bolaji 2014; Portnoi 2015). These persistent socio-economic disparities highlight the urgent need for HEIs to address exploitative practices and prioritise faculty and staff well-being to prevent conditions resembling modern slavery.

#### Academic dignity erosion

Academic dignity erosion, highlighted by MacLaren (2024), occurs when academic ethics emphasising personhood, civility, respect and autonomy are compromised. In contexts resembling slavery, dignity can be reduced to mere 'property' (Landman 2018; Kara 2017), leading to powerlessness, servitude and exclusion from societal opportunities (Gully 2009; Landman 2018). Heavy workloads and administrative dysfunction exacerbate this, hindering scholarly pursuits (Portnoi 2015). Neglecting dignity mirrors forms of slavery that deny social and political agency (Amir 2016; Landman 2018). Higher education institutions often prioritise faculty and staff expectations over the agency, critical for safeguarding institutional reputation (Zhuang & Liu 2020), evident when dissenting views are silenced (Noakes & Noakes 2021).

Toxic leadership in HEIs limits faculty and staff participation in decision-making, impacting morale and health (Mahlangu 2020; Ramaditya et al. 2023; Smith 2023). Disempowerment results from alienation, information withholding or occupying less powerful positions (Amir 2016; Hall 2018; Landman 2018). This diminishes legal and social standing, increasing dependency on employers ('masters') (Hall 2018).

Strict adherence to ethical principles can lead to ethical blindness, alienating workers if labour fails to fulfil intrinsic needs (Gutierrez-Huerter et al. 2023).

### **Terms of conditions of employment restricting freedom outside the employment relationship**

Employment terms in HEIs that restrict freedom beyond the workplace serve as proxy determinants of modern slavery, marked by coercion and abuse of authority (Alzoubi et al. 2023; Carrington et al. 2020; Washburn et al. 2022). These practices, including misrepresented contract terms and degrading work conditions, resemble modern slavery traits such as forced labour and restricted autonomy (Amir 2016; Phung & Crane 2018). These employment terms perpetuate modern slavery-like conditions within academic settings, undermining individual freedom and dignity while fostering a culture of exploitation and systemic failures in HEIs. Addressing these terms is crucial for safeguarding human rights and freedoms, and mitigating the risks associated with modern slavery in higher education.

### **Workplace exploitation continuum**

Workplace exploitation in HEIs spans a continuum from voluntary to coerced, often with subtle nuances (Caruana et al. 2021). Factors such as silent compulsion blur this distinction, reflecting underlying capitalist dynamics (Anderson et al. 2019). Faculty and staff, enduring workweeks exceeding 60 h, may develop workaholic tendencies resembling modern slavery (Solomon & Du Plessis 2023; Win et al. 2024). Part-time faculty members, in particular, face significant burdens, impacting their well-being (Bolaji 2024). Inadequate management support contributes to burnout and decreased work engagement (Smith, Johnson & Brown 2016). In this context, the ethnographer's Labour-factor of 1.52 underscores the severity of exploitation. Addressing these challenges necessitates a holistic assessment of labour conditions to foster healthier work environments and enhance education and research quality.

### **Coercive employment practices**

Coercive employment practices, such as misrepresentative contract terms and degrading work practices, indicate forced labour, a facet of modern slavery (Amir 2016; Giannakakis 2020; Phung & Crane 2018; Sarfaty 2020), often associated with toxic leadership characterised by workplace incivility (Macfarlane et al. 2024; Ramaditya et al. 2023). Toxic leadership, marked by anger, abuse and bullying, poses a significant challenge in organisations because of its subtle and deceptive nature (Green 2014). These behaviours erode organisational culture and effectiveness, often unnoticed until significant harm occurs. Early intervention to address toxic leadership is crucial for preventing modern slavery-like conditions and promoting a culture of respect and inclusivity.

### **Institutionalised disempowerment**

Toxic leadership practices in HEIs marginalise critical engagement, eroding autonomy and perpetuating exploitation

(Green 2014; Mahlangu 2020). Academic freedom suffers, constraining contributions to discourse and innovation. Toxic leadership undermines academic freedom and autonomy, leading to repercussions for dissenting voices such as exclusion from decision-making processes, denial of resources or opportunities, and even retaliation (Mahlangu 2020). This diminishes agency, hindering meaningful contributions to academic discourse. Promoting transparent, accountable and inclusive leadership is vital to combat institutionalised disempowerment and encourage challenging norms without fear of retaliation.

### **Redefinition of academic labour**

The redefinition of academic labour reflects concerns about neoliberalism's impact on higher education (Macfarlane et al. 2024). Neoliberal ideology views academics primarily as technical experts, penalising those who challenge injustices within the system. This shift prioritises workforce training over critical thinking, restricting academic freedoms and devaluing intellectual pursuits (Giannakakis 2020; Giroux 2015). Academics face pressure to prioritise economic contributions, risking the erosion of HEIs' role as bastions of knowledge. To preserve higher education's mission, it is crucial to resist neoliberal pressures and reaffirm academic freedom and intellectual exploration.

### **Institutionalised negligence of staff well-being**

Health and safety concerns among academic staff in HEIs can signal modern slavery (Bolaji 2014; Sarfaty 2020). These concerns include psychological and physical strain because of excessive workloads, unreasonable performance expectations and a lack of management support. Physical strain may arise from prolonged working hours without breaks or unsafe conditions. When these issues are ignored, academic staff may experience heightened stress, anxiety and burnout. This reflects an institutional emphasis on productivity over staff well-being, fostering feelings of undervaluation, exploitation and disconnection from the institution's commitment to their welfare.

In conclusion, power dynamics, exploitation and sociocultural factors shape modern slavery in higher education. This informs the examination of modern slavery within a specific South African HEI. The research methodology that follows uses an ideographic, event-based approach that is based on auto-ethnographic techniques to understand how faculty and staff experience modern slavery. This methodological alignment enhances understanding of contemporary exploitation in the targeted HEI. The study upholds ethical norms, ensures participant anonymity and addresses the practical effects of modern slavery.

## **Research methods and design**

The study investigates the dynamics of modern slavery within a specific urban HEI in South Africa, acknowledging the pervasive influence of neoliberal ideology (Taylerson 2020). By emphasising the importance of context-specific

interpretations, this strategic approach aims to enrich the global understanding of modern slavery in higher education settings, recognising the diverse nature of social issues and underscoring the significance of interpreting them within their specific contexts.

To refine concepts and address gaps in modern slavery research, a comprehensive literature review was conducted. The review integrated theoretical developments and insights from scholars such as Flick (2018) and Lynch and Ivancheva (2015), aiming to uncover new interpretations and pathways for understanding modern slavery. The study specifically investigates modern slavery dynamics within a selected South African HEI, focussing on factors such as labour exploitation, worker rights and institutional operations using event-based data.

The study concentrated on a selected South African HEI, recognising the possibility of localised modern slavery dynamics within specific areas of the institution. Data collection aimed at incidents related to modern slavery determinants identified in the literature, focussing on the period from 2022 to 2024 to accommodate the clandestine and illegal nature of modern slavery (Anderson et al. 2019; Sarfaty 2020).

The researchers adopted an ideographic data collection procedure to understand modern slavery through the lived experiences of an individual (ethnographer), identified as Participant 1 (P1), a 52-year-old female academic staff member (Syed 2024; Wagner, Kawulich & Garner 2012). This approach focussed on the experiences of affected academic staff because of stakeholder enslavement conduct within the specific HEI. The findings are case-specific, representing a 2-year time series of events to observe changes in how modern slavery affected the ethnographer.

Several methodological strategies were used to ensure the reliability and validity of the research findings. Member checking was conducted, in which the participant was invited to review the study's findings to ensure the accuracy and authenticity of interpretations based on their experiences at the HEI under study. This strategy improved the credibility of interpretations while accurately representing the participant's voices and perspectives. In addition, peer debriefing sessions were held, allowing the participant to discuss the findings and interpretations with colleagues and field experts. The researchers undertook this to corroborate their interpretations, reduce bias and include additional perspectives in the analysis. The research followed a rigorous audit trail, documenting field notes, coding decisions and methodological observations. This documentation increased transparency and audibility, allowing future researchers to follow the analytical process and validate the study's findings. Finally, the validity of interpretations was determined by the considerable data collected using ethnographic methodologies, such as auto-ethnographic narratives. The study's themes and conclusions were based on the participant's lived experiences and narratives,

accurately capturing the complex dynamics of modern slavery in a South African HEI.

Informed consent was implicitly acknowledged and documented, as one of the researchers served as both participant and researcher. The two additional researchers were crucial in monitoring the primary researcher's self-awareness and adherence to the study's aims and methodology through regular meetings and discussions.

The approach used in this study was self-reflective and iterative, as the participant and researcher were the same individual. The two other researchers provided valuable feedback during discussions with the principal researcher, assuring ethical and efficient management of the researcher's dual position. This collaboration facilitated clear roles and ensured adherence to ethical standards.

Using an in-depth ideographic approach, the researchers aimed to capture personal experiences, reflections, and living realities within the social and cultural context of South African higher education through auto-ethnographic accounts presented by the ethnographer in written documentation and a detailed logbook (Wagner et al. 2012). This aligns with Flick's (2018) view that auto-ethnography focusses on the ethnographer's own experiences of modern slavery. Interpretations were based on locally constructed meanings, reflecting the diverse nature of social life (Denzin & Lincoln 2018).

During the exploratory data collection phase, information was deeply embedded within the ethnographer's interpreted experiences and socio-cultural context, acknowledging the role of personal, moral and political values in the discovery phase (eds. Denzin & Lincoln 2011). The findings were analysed objectively using interpretative theme and content analysis, including emotional categorisation, to identify patterns and meaningful content from the data, aiming to capture the ethnographer's viewpoints (Wagner et al. 2012).

Despite the study's unique nature, strict data storage and protection measures were followed. The two additional researchers helped to establish and supervise these methods. They ensured that all acquired data, including personal reflections, field notes and other documentation, was securely stored and only available to the research team. To guarantee confidentiality, the two additional researchers used secure, encrypted digital storage systems and reviewed security measures regularly.

The study also complied with the Declaration of Helsinki and the Singapore Statement on Research Integrity (Viljoen & Cilliers 2019). By closely adhering to the highest ethical standards, the research was conducted with the knowledge that all ethical considerations, such as informed consent, participant confidentiality and data security, would be strictly upheld. Recognising the study's privacy-sensitive context, the researchers anonymised any identifiable

information to protect privacy and prevent any harm. Participation was entirely voluntary, with the option to withdraw at any time without consequence. Debriefing meetings were held to ensure that the participant fully understood their role and the study's findings.

Given the delicate nature of the research, the researchers assessed and mitigated any potential emotional or psychological effects on the participant. Efforts were made to ensure cultural sensitivity and respect for the participant's background and context. The study maintained transparency by continuously disclosing clear information about its objectives, methods and possible outcomes. Continuous monitoring and ethical oversight were implemented to address any ethical concerns. In addition, a feedback mechanism was implemented to allow the participant to provide input on their experience, ensuring their opinions were acknowledged and valued.

The researchers, all South African natives with over 80 years of cumulative experience in higher education, provided valuable insights grounded in locally constructed meanings, reflecting the diverse nature of social life (Denzin & Lincoln 2018). To ensure participant safety and confidentiality, all identifiable information was removed from the study, mitigating potential repercussions for those involved.

The ethnographer's narrative was analysed using a conceptual mapping process that employed interpretative social reality analysis, integrating note-keeping, reflections, reported emotional experiences and a clinical psychologist's psychological report to provide meaning to incidents and processes within the targeted higher education environment. Overall, this methodology contributes to understanding the fundamental operations of modern slavery within a HEI.

## Findings and discussion

The primary objectives of this study were to examine the dynamics of modern slavery in a specific South African HEI, understand how neoliberal ideology impacts labour exploitation and worker rights, and identify institutional practices that contribute to modern slavery. The findings support the researchers' nominal definition of 'modern slavery' in higher education as excessive staff exploitation by institutional authorities through coercion, deception or force, resulting in labour performed against their will and deprivation of freedom and fundamental human rights. The findings are classified and discussed based on the following themes, which each meet distinct study objectives.

By describing the unique dynamics of modern slavery within the organisation, the phenomenon of moral disengagement among line managers causes ethical morasses, which in turn create a toxic work environment typified by unethical leadership and its detrimental effects on staff exploitation. This directly addresses Objective 1. Corporate malfeasance and treason assess how certain institutional operations contribute to perpetuating modern slavery practices, in line

with Objective 3, by concentrating on institutional misconduct and negligence. By highlighting the broader consequences of neoliberal ideology on the exploitation of employment and workers' rights, the exploitative labour practices contributes to Objective 2 by examining the interrelated variables of workplace adversity, educational instability and surveillance. Lastly, labour coercion addresses Objective 1 by concentrating on the pervasive application of coercive practices within the institution and explaining how institutional structures result in staff exploitation.

### Theme 1: Moral disengagement

This theme addresses Objective 1 by revealing a toxic work environment shaped by unethical leadership, resulting in employee exploitation, biopsychosocial harm, systemic ethical breaches, emotional abuse, mental distress and institutional neglect without accountability.

The ethnographer's journey unveils a landscape rife with moral disengagement among line managers, resulting in profound biopsychosocial suffering and the exploitation of faculty and staff. Instances of victimisation, mobbing, toxic feedback loops and humiliating behaviours, such as *the fraudulent manipulation of student marks by senior academic team members*, (P1) exemplify this moral disengagement and the absence of accountability. These actions perpetuate dysfunction within the institution, turning it into a battleground plagued by 'enemies within the walls' (*hostes intra moenia*) where toxic leaders thrive amid discontent and ethical ambiguity.

The ethnographer's narrative illustrates the severe impact of workplace bullying, mobbing, humiliation, victimisation and systemic corruption on mental health (Macleod et al. 2024). *Symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), including intense emotional experiences such as anger, fear, distress and feelings of betrayal towards the institution and its managers*, (P1) underscores the human cost of toxic leadership. *The degradation of the ethnographer's academic reputation* (P1) endured emotional abuse and orchestrated systemic infractions further underscore the detrimental effects of moral disengagement, enabling unethical practices to maintain power and evade accountability.

Systematic inefficiencies and organisational negligence, exemplified by *mishandling of the ethnographer's employment contracts by the Human Resource Department, resulting in the loss of critical records after 22 years of service* (P1), heighten the ethnographer's distress and emphasise the necessity for accountability and ethical leadership to prevent further psychosocial harm.

Exploitation heightens emotional exhaustion and psychological distress among faculty and staff, fuelling systemic transgressions within the HEI. Over time, *the ethnographer's emotional state evolved from initial annoyance, concern and embarrassment to more serious negative emotions such as fury, panic, overwhelming distress*, (P1) *depression and developed hatred for the organisation*. These reactions highlight

the profound impact of unjust accusations, mistreatment and emotional abuse by morally disengaged line managers.

The ethnographer voiced frustration with workload estimations, stating:

'Although I have gratitude for the efforts made to document my work, my workload template is a grossly underestimate of the amount of time required to complete numerous, and often concurrent, tasks.' (P1)

This reflects broader concerns about inadequate workload models in academia, often leading to unrealistic demands and insufficient resources. The ethnographer further states:

'Faculty leadership and my line manager do not understand the complexity of my work and had unrealistic expectations, especially when it came to research.' (P1)

This underscores how unrealistic without adequate support contributes to biopsychosocial harm among faculty and staff, emphasising the need for informed, supportive and adaptable management practices within HEIs.

The ethnographer's emotional distress is worsened by workload models that do not accurately represent academic demands, fostering feelings of betrayal and exploitation. This highlights the urgent need for ethical leadership and accountability within the HEI to address injustices and prevent further harm to faculty and staff.

The ethnographer shares:

'I found myself working seven days a week, starting at 7:00 in the morning and often working until 10 to 12 at night. This schedule was pushing me toward burnout, leaving me with no time to spend with my family.' (P1)

This description highlights the extreme lengths to which academic staff are pushed because of unrealistic workload expectations, underscoring the toll it takes on personal health and family time and highlighting the dedication of faculty and staff who navigate difficult circumstances to uphold their professional responsibilities despite personal sacrifices.

## Theme 2: Corporate malfeasance

This theme addresses Objective 3 by identifying several sub-themes related to corporate misconduct and treason within the HEI. Corporate misconduct and treason are exemplified by toxic communication practices, negligent assessment practices, neutralisation, stigmatisation and falsifications by line managers. These actions have a detrimental effect on the ethnographer's professional and academic reputation, heighten distress and frustration, and underscore the adverse impact of institutional oppression.

The study identified several sub-themes concerning corporate malfeasance and treason within the HEI. Firstly, toxic communication practices in the academic department foster

mistrust and hostility through defamatory remarks and digital pillorying, damaging the ethnographer's reputation and causing emotional distress, reflecting the destructive organisational culture.

Secondly, negligent assessment practices reflect institutional oppression and corporate malfeasance. This includes fraudulent assessments, inadequate security measures and a lack of fact-checking by line managers, compromising academic integrity and heightening distress and frustration.

Thirdly, neutralisation, stigmatisation and falsifications by line managers isolated the ethnographer within the academic department, excluding them from discussions, withholding crucial information and disregarding their value-added role. These actions damaged the ethnographer's professional and academic reputation, intensifying distress and frustration, and highlighting the adverse impact of institutional oppression.

Fourthly, legal and regulatory violations by line managers, such as failure to provide service level agreements and procedural obstructions in addressing grievances, indicative of toxic leadership characterised by dictatorial styles, bullying and scapegoating when wrongdoings were exposed. These behaviours compound the ethnographer's distress and underscore the negative impact of toxic leadership.

The findings revealed line managers' disregard for Senate regulations on moderator appointments and investigation of concerns, reflecting negligence and impunity that intensified the ethnographer's sense of injustice and frustration. Additionally, the line manager's written affirmation labelling the ethnographer as a *frustration* (P1) and denying future service subject presentations undermined the ethnographer's professional standing, contributing to feelings of isolation and marginalisation. This behaviour exemplifies toxic leadership within the HEI, perpetuating a culture of disrespect and disregard for individual contributions and well-being.

The ethnographer's experiences highlight challenges with workload management and its impact on academic well-being within the HEI. Specifically, concerns were raised about the inflexible nature of the workload model, which fails to adapt to individual situations or disciplinary distinctions:

'The workload model I received lacks the flexibility to adapt individual situations or disciplinary distinctions. A one-size-fits-all strategy is intrinsically flawed because it will always benefit some disciplines while disadvantage others.' (P1)

This highlights the gap between workload assessment and actual academic responsibilities, leading to frustration and inadequacy. Faculty and staff must have a greater role in workload design and implementation to accurately capture the complexities of academic work and promote fairness within the HEI.

The ethnographer stressed the importance of consulting academic staff in workload determination, by stating:

‘Getting more academic staff involved in creating and using the workload model would help ensure it properly shows how complicated academic work is. There needs to be more consultation with staff who do the work to get a more accurate picture of how long certain activities take.’ (P1)

This highlights the need for inclusivity and transparency in workload management to ensure fairness and understanding among staff. Including all aspects of academic contributions in the workload model is crucial for an accurate assessment and a healthier academic environment in the HEI.

The ethnographer’s experiences underscore widespread corporate malfeasance within the HEI, including toxic communication, negligence in assessment practices and toxic leadership. These systemic issues undermine academic well-being and highlight the urgent need for organisational reform and accountability to address modern slavery and institutional oppression. Without such reforms, employees face limited options: conform to toxic norms, confront suspicious dynamics or leave the institution.

### Theme 3: Exploitive labour practices

This theme examines how the neoliberal ideology impacts labour exploitation and worker rights in HEIs, addressing Objective 2. The researchers identified a third theme termed ‘Exploitive Labour Practices’, comprising three interconnected aspects: workplace adversity, pedagogical turbulence and surveillance.

The ethnographer’s experiences of workplace adversity convey inadequate workload management and unrealistic expectations. As highlighted by the ethnographer:

‘The number of classes I teach has increased significantly, yet my workload remains unchanged. However, the workload does change due to the increased number of students. As an example, the number of students in my classes has increased from 98 to 189 to 356. This means that as the number of students increases, so do the marking, consultations, emails, assessments, meetings, and other responsibilities that go along with it.’ (P1)

This quotation underscores a systematic oversight of important academic duties beyond teaching, revealing an organisational culture that prioritises certain aspects of work over others and ignorance of increasingly concurrent work activities, leading to excessive pressure on academic staff.

Furthermore, the ethnographer’s critique aligns with the theme’s emphasis on unrealistic workload expectations:

‘The duties associated with teaching are sufficiently attended to, but research time is not nearly enough ...’ (P1)

and it further indicates that the current workloads or workload allocation models are:

‘Unrealistic, unfair, unsustainable, and/or ridiculous.’ (P1)

This sentiment reflects the normalisation of exploitive labour practices within HEIs.

The constant changes in subjects and reliance on part-time lecturers mirror the ethnographer’s experience of educational flux and instability:

‘Diminish subject consistency and erode autonomy over subject content, positioning academic staff as inferior in knowledge.’ (P1)

These changes diminish subject consistency and erode autonomy over subject content, creating challenges for academic staff and impacting their autonomy.

The excessive monitoring of teaching platforms mirrors a larger critique of a hostile organisational culture in higher education. The ethnographer’s plea for more staff involvement in workload design underscores the importance of challenging hierarchical practices that overlook frontline perspectives.

Supported by scholarly critiques from Gill and Donaghue (2016) and Burton and Bowman (2022), these findings highlight systemic challenges in HEIs. Gill and Donaghue (2016) criticise the individualistic approach to analysing academic labour in neoliberal contexts, noticing increased surveillance and exploitation of part-time staff. Burton and Bowman (2022) stress the normalisation of precarity in higher education under neoliberal ideals, leading to unstable labour arrangements and the erosion of academic staff rights and identity.

The Exploitive Labour Practices portrays HEIs as ‘care-less’ organisations that normalise the marginalisation of faculty and staff, blaming them for questioning leadership and organisational practices. This hostile culture, marked by constant surveillance and unrealistic workloads, has supplanted academic kindness in institutions. The findings, along with scholarly critiques, highlight systemic challenges requiring urgent reforms to address precarity, promote equitable labour practices and empower academic staff in shaping institutional policies.

Consequently, the ethnographer and some academic staff may feel unwelcome, out of place and alienated from the institution. The ethnographer embodies a ‘Misfit Maven’ – knowledgeable but different from others. In this exploitive labour practices, survival favours the compliant, non-critical and those less likely to challenge the status quo.

### Theme 4: Labour coercion

This theme focusses on Objective 1 and highlights the prevalence of labour coercion inside institutional structures. The ethnographer’s experiences highlight the challenges of balancing professional and personal responsibilities because of coercive labour practices.

Endless demands for urgent information, frequent disruptions from meetings and relentless pressure to complete tasks regardless of academic commitments illustrate the struggle against coercive labour practices. These bureaucratic obstacles extend beyond mere administrative inconveniences, infiltrating personal time and disrupting the delicate equilibrium between professional responsibilities and family life. The ethnographer's sentiment that:

'Achieving a balance between work and home responsibilities feels unattainable,' (P1)

underscores the profound impact of labour coercion on personal well-being.

Moreover, the ethnographer's observations uncover challenges in managing *super-size* classes of *student (356): lecturer (1) ratios* and navigating hierarchical staff structures, where genuine emotional support from line managers is lacking, intensifying feelings of isolation among faculty and staff. Furthermore, fairness and recognition issues, such as perceived workload disparities among colleagues and undervaluation of certain academic work, contribute to broader discontent. As expressed by the ethnographer:

'I frequently work long hours because I am passionate about my work ... but that dedication should not be exploited.' (P1)

This statement highlights the failure of higher-ups to appreciate the time and effort required for academic tasks, leading to overloading and stress.

The narrative exposes a stark disparity between assigned workloads and actual work hours, revealing systemic challenges in accurately quantifying academic tasks and allocating workload resources effectively. As expressed by the ethnographer:

'The workload assigned to me does not correspond to the actual hours I work. Consequently, we all face equal and excessive pressure.' (P1)

Attempts to address workload inaccuracies, especially in teaching, coordination, mentoring and student support, were frustrating. The ethnographer lamented:

'I pointed out that my workload failed to accurately represent my responsibilities ...' (P1)

citing underestimations and omissions in workload assessments. These issues align with Papadopoulos (2017), who emphasises that having a workload model alone does not ensure fairness; the design and implementation are crucial.

The lack of transparency in workload determination processes exacerbates labour coercion within the institution. The ethnographer reflects on this, stating that:

'During the workload determination process, there was a notable lack of transparency, and I question the discretion granted to line managers when interpreting the model. The workload model

itself is not accessible to staff; instead, I receive a spreadsheet with fabricated numbers to achieve 15 teaching hours per week, which may look satisfactory on paper but fails to accurately reflect the actual work demands.' (P1)

This opacity undermines staff confidence and contributes to a sense of exploitation and distrust.

The financial pressures faced by faculty leadership, driven by senior management directives, exacerbate the lack of transparency in workload management, with unrealistic workload expectations tailored to budget constraints, coupled with a top-down management style that disregards staff input. This erosion of professionalism jeopardises the institution's academic reputation. Moreover, the ethnographer highlights the impact of workload quantification on research efforts, advocating for a comprehensive approach to workload estimation and performance assessment:

'Research efforts should be quantified in hours, not solely by outputs or outcomes achieved,' (P1)

the ethnographer argues, emphasising the importance of accurately reflecting academic responsibilities to support staff well-being and fulfilment.

The ethnographer's narrative underscores the urgent need for systemic reforms prioritising fairness, transparency and staff consultation in workload management to create a healthier academic environment conducive to professional growth and academic excellence.

## Recommendations

The recommendations provided herein establish a strategic framework for HEIs to effectively combat modern slavery, address workplace challenges and promote ethical leadership. These recommendations are based on a thorough understanding of the interconnected issues affecting faculty and staff, aiming to foster a healthier academic community while ensuring institutional integrity and respecting the rights of faculty and staff.

Firstly, HEIs should adopt a complex system-thinking approach to combat modern slavery in education. This involves analysing various factors such as faculty exploitation, under-utilisation and profit-labour considerations to ensure compliance with human rights and labour laws. Scholarly advice underscores the significance of fair employment contracts and ethical communication within university statutes (Antczak, Nowakowska-Grunt & Ci der-Jackowiak 2023; Dodd & Dumay 2023; Nkwor 2023; Win et al. 2024; Zhuang & Liu 2020). Additionally, HEIs should develop accountability metrics to foster a fair and ethical work environment for faculty and staff.

Secondly, HEIs must liberate academic staff from oppressive domination and control (Mohjer & Yazdani 2020). Emancipation involves granting freedom to faculty and staff, humanising economic processes and prioritising human

experiences amid productivity pressures (Antczak et al. 2023; Hall 2018). Policies focussed on humane standards and denouncing workplace cruelty are essential (Caulfield et al. 2023). Faculty and staff empowerment, including autonomy over their work and the protection of academic independence and freedom, is crucial to combat oppressive work conditions (Lynch & Ivancheva 2015). Prioritising scientific and ethical leadership and engaging faculty and staff in preventing modern slavery practices are imperative. Utilising technology for modernisation and developing metrics for institutional justice and fairness are integral parts of this approach.

Furthermore, social mobilisation through digital platforms can combat corrupt and exploitative practices within HEIs, promoting accountability and transparency (Nkwor 2023). Encouraging social mobilisation and promoting scientific and ethical leadership are proactive steps to address modern slavery and corruption, enhancing institutional integrity, and safeguarding the well-being and rights of faculty and staff. Higher education institutions should prioritise informed decision-making beyond policies, fostering continuous reflection to promote accountability, transparency and institutional sustainability. Addressing toxic leadership is crucial for enhancing corporate governance and HEI health. Implementing proactive measures to identify and mitigate toxic behaviour is essential for creating healthier institutions (Green 2014; Mahlangu 2020).

Finally, empowering individuals facing workplace challenges such as bullying and victimisation is paramount. Establishing a safe environment for reporting unethical conduct and providing support strategies can prevent feelings of helplessness and foster a healthier workplace. Encouraging faculty and staff to share their experiences contributes to a positive work environment and enhances the institution's reputation.

### Limitations of the research

The research offers valuable insights into modern slavery in HEIs, but it has limitations. It relies on data from a single case or department, limiting generalisability. However, this focussed approach proved instrumental in compiling a comprehensive compendium of typical violations and enabling a deeper analysis of modern slavery in higher education. Despite its limited generalisability, the research provides valuable insights into modern slavery, laying a foundation for broader explorations and potential solutions. Although the research's scope is confined to a specific case or department, it significantly advances our understanding of modern slavery in HEIs. It serves as a crucial stepping stone for further investigations and actions to combat modern slavery, underscoring the importance of continued research and intervention in this critical area.

### Directions for future research

Future research on modern slavery in HEIs should explore institutional accountability to determine the extent to which specific sections or components are implicated in modern

slavery practices. This inquiry will clarify whether responsibility for addressing such practices is institution-wide or localised within certain areas. Additionally, given the lack of a universally accepted definition of modern slavery, future studies could develop an intensity-based model categorising varying degrees of modern slavery, ranging from subtle forms to severe human rights violations. By doing so, researchers can gain a more comprehensive understanding of the prevalence and severity of modern slavery in HEIs, thereby informing targeted interventions and policies to combat it effectively.

## Conclusion

This study reveals the pervasive issue of modern academic slavery in a South African HEI through four key themes: moral disengagement, corporate malfeasance, exploitative labour practices and labour coercion. These themes reveal a distressing environment of fear and mistrust among faculty and staff resulting from systemic exploitation and management misconduct.

The findings highlight the critical importance of addressing ethical violations and leadership shortcomings that contribute to academic staff exploitation. The study emphasises the disconnect between the current state of higher education and the ideal values it should exemplify, such as respect, trust, academic freedom and good governance. According to Mahlangu (2020:118), everyone has the right to be proud of and enjoy their work. However, this study exposes a different and opposing reality. Despite the pessimistic tone of our findings, which suggests that 'the worst is yet to come', they serve as a reminder of the gradual erosion of today's HEIs, emphasising the need for shared narratives to sustain hope.

Higher education institutions, once known for fostering autonomy, job satisfaction and vocational zeal, are now witnessing a departure from these ideals. The evidence suggests a progressive erosion of core ideals, emphasising the need for substantial and structural transformation. Urgent action is needed to address the root causes of this decline and restore ethical leadership in higher education. This will help reclaim academia's soul and reaffirm its mission as a beacon of intellectual pursuit and societal advancement.

The ethnographer's narrative portrays the challenges faced by faculty and staff, urging stakeholders to act. Confronting these challenges is essential to uphold the core principles of higher education and ensure its continued relevance and impact on shaping a better future.

This study aims to raise awareness of these difficulties and encourage dialogue and action to reform HEIs. The ultimate goal is to ensure these institutions uphold their core values and contribute positively to society.

## Acknowledgements

### Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

### Authors' contributions

L.S., J.P.G., and M.V., all contributed equally to the conception and design of the study, data collection and analysis, interpretation of the results, drafting and revising of the manuscript, and final approval of the version to be published.

### Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

### Funding information

The research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

### Data availability

The corresponding author, L.S., retains the dataset and can be contacted for any queries regarding the data presented in this article, ensuring its availability upon request.

### Disclaimer

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