Assignment 2 Cover Sheet

Developing and Enhancing Your Professional Practice
Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education (PGCHE)

Participant Name	**Todd Waugh Ambridge**
Word Count *Excluding evidence and reference list*	**3365**

I wish for my assignment to be considered for inclusion as an exemplar in the PGCHE Bank of Assessed Work (please tick)	**YES**	**X**
	NO	
I have taken on board any formative feedback given to me by my tutors and/or peers for patches and other work (as applicable)	**YES**	**X**
	No	

I would like the following aspects of my work to receive focused feedback:

In submitting this assignment, I confirm

- that it is my own work (or work derived from my group, if applicable)
- that I have removed any information identifying individuals other than my own to maintain confidentiality
- that I have chosen themes that enable me to provide both depth and breadth of evidence of successful engagement with Descriptor 2 of the PSF across all the assessments.

Participant PSF Mapping

The following PSF 2011 dimensions and elements of Descriptor 2 should be evidenced and referenced within the assignment narrative (including ones you identify and select).

Core assignment PSF elements that must appear in this assignment: A5 K1 K6 V3 V4

Please map these and all other elements that you have included:

	Areas of Activity *Successful engagement with:*	**Core Knowledge** *Appropriate knowledge and understanding of:*	**Professional Values** *A commitment to:*	**Descriptor 2** **iv** (optional) **v** (core) **vi** (core)
Assignment 2	A1, A4, A5	K2, K3, K5, K6	V1, V2, V3, V4	D2v, D2vi

Introduction & Context

Every field of work is unique – with its own concerns and challenges – but academia seems concerned with introspection more than most. Academics have long reflected on how their identity *as* an academic is defined by a multitude of constituent parts (Drennan et al., 2020). This definition is not fixed once it has been found: it is fluid, continually reshaped by one's development *as* an academic and the overall context of Higher Education (Marques et al., 2024) [V4]. To make things more difficult, the definition of 'academic identity' is itself difficult to pin down, with notions of what it *means* to be an academic changing across different space-times (Archer L., 2008; Henkel, 2005). According to Clegg (2008), the so-called 'Golden Age' perspective of academia as an institution that primarily identifies with collegiality and academic freedom has in recent years been replaced with a post-structuralist diversity of identities largely constructed from views of the self and what Margaret Archer (2000) calls 'the inner conversation' (cited in Clegg, 2008). Archer's inner conversation – an internal dialogue concerning "our physical well-being", "our performative competence" and "our self worth" – is both our "window to the world" and, more fundamentally, the determiner of "our being in the world" (Archer M., 2000, p. 318) [D2v]. It is this conversation with oneself about one's position in the world which Clegg (2008) recognises as the modern compass for one's academic identity.

While the 'Golden Age' perspective (if it existed, see Burgess, 2007 and Tight, 2000) produced identities which were "stable" and "legitimising" (Henkel, 2005, p. 155; Castells, 1997), identities formed from the inner conversation may be more individual and fractious – not least due to the "pernicious reach of neoliberalism" (Archer L., 2008, p. 281). The view that 'the neoliberal university' and the marketisation of higher education in the UK (as well as internationally) has contributed to the fracturing of academic identities is not novel – indeed, the literature seems obsessed with this perspective (Archer L., 2008; Locke, 2014; Skea, 2021). The ways in which universities have changed since the 1970s, and especially after the introduction of tuition fees in 1998 in response to the Dearing Report, has undoubtably had a long-lasting and overwhelmingly negative effect on academics' identities [V4]. The guiding principles of collegiality and academic freedom having been supposedly overtaken by the requirement to adhere to performance metrics to ensure one's role is sufficiently contributing to the creation of capital (Skea, 2021). Regulation imposed on academics by neoliberal institutions has been argued by Harris to be a lens through which "professional and institutional 'output' becomes more important than beliefs or values underpinning professional work" (Harris, 2005, p. 425; Ball, 2003). However, Harris further argues that it is "important … not to focus on the disempowering elements of neoliberal modes of governance", but also to optimistically and creatively carve out spaces for academic agency in the modern university (Harris, 2005, p. 428).

Through this assignment, I am being challenged to lay bare my own inner conversation: to reflect upon my identity as an academic and how it has been informed by my own values, beliefs and practice. In the previous assignment, I outlined the four core values that constitute my teaching philosophy: ***empathy***, ***community***, ***quality*** and ***inclusivity*** (Waugh Ambridge, 2024). It is these same values – along with a fifth, ***freedom*** – that

inform my overall academic sense of self, in ways which I will explore in this assignment. Alongside these values, my identity has also been shaped by internal and external contexts. In order to critically reflect how I have developed as a Higher Education professional, I first have to look back at how my background laid the foundations of my academic identity, and at how my first ten years at the University of Birmingham has formed it. Following this, I will discuss how my identity has been especially shaped as a full-time educator and researcher in the School of Computer Science, including by appraising the impact of Continuing Professional Development (CPD) activities on my practice [A5; D2vi]. Throughout, I will incorporate advanced scholarship relating to the identity of Higher Education professionals [D2v]; in particular, I will aim not to revisit the well-trodden ground of pessimism relating to 'the neoliberal university', but instead – and by way of conclusion – to look positively to the future about how I can achieve academic agency in the complex environment of the modern university.

Inclusivity & Empathy: Reflecting on my background

The modern perspective of academic identity says that there is a strong relationship between one's identity as an academic and more fundamental parts of one's identity, such as family, gender and class (Clegg, 2008). While recognising the privileges of my cis male gender identity, being the first in my working-class family to go to university is certainly something that has formed an integral core of my academic identity [V4]. A positive of the modern university is that it is more accessible to students from lower income backgrounds than in the past; with 29% of secondary school pupils on free-school meals (FSMs) progressing to higher education in 2021/22 compared to just 14% in 2005/06 (UK Government, 2023) [V4]. As a beneficiary of this, I see furthering this as an important part of my academic identity – and there is, of course, a lot more work to do (Macdonald & Stratta, 2001). While access has indeed increased for students from lower income backgrounds – as well as other backgrounds, especially those lying at the intersection of race and gender (see Kim, 2011) – the focus is now on genuinely widening participation and promoting ***inclusivity*** [V2; V4]. As one of my key values, I have found myself gravitating towards roles that allow me to take a lead on my department's approach to inclusivity, for example the establishment of a departmental inclusivity charter and – more recently – outreach programmes for local A-level pupils [V1; V4].

I have just begun to get involved in outreach activities, having only taught two two-hour courses on 'Narrative Programming' to prospective STEM-subject A-level pupils. Despite the recency of this, I feel teaching these courses was an important instance of CPD for my teaching practice [A5; D2vi]. Firstly, the positive response pupils had to learning about this hands-on, creative aspect of programming has taught me to inject more creativity into my curriculum – for example, now that I am leading the heavily theoretical Computer Systems module, I aim to involve more practical formative coursework to allow students to construct knowledge creatively themselves, rather than just being 'lectured to' [V3; K1]. And secondly, I found that teaching a younger cohort helped me to focus on my communication and my ability to include all students in the classroom conversation; something that I hope to bring to my lectures and tutorials, and hone further by investing more of my time in outreach [V3].

The other foundational tenet of my identity is that of ***empathy***, which also formed from my background. During sixth form, my identity as a computer scientist burgeoned during my lessons with Mr. Mills, my Computing teacher. His empathetic approach to teaching, as well as that of my English Literature teacher Ms. Lewis, unquestionably shaped my view of how educators should be [A4]. I believe, as they did, that every student has potential and something to contribute, and deserves the nurturing and support needed to achieve that. Indeed, as I outlined in my first assignment, "I feel it is important for students' success to have empathy both for their individual learning [preferences] and for their broader emotions and wellbeing" (Waugh Ambridge, 2024, p. 2) [A4; K3]. The impact of this part of my identity on my practice is felt both in my teaching/supporting learning and my leadership roles. I have noticed students recognise me as an *academic who cares*, and as such am often fielded questions about students' progression, or requests to meet to discuss circumstances. Recently, a student requested me as a project supervisor – in a topic that is not my specialty – explicitly because they wanted someone more empathetic and able to provide pastoral support [V1]. This is something I am deeply proud of and has led to me shifting towards academic roles that are student-facing, such as those that co-ordinate with student groups/societies and, more recently, the role of senior tutor. I feel I am well placed in these roles, as someone who understands the student experience (as explored in the next section) and someone who holds empathy at the heart of their academic identity.

Community: Reflecting on my foundational years at Birmingham

Clark (1983) identifies two communities as key for the formation of one's academic identity: firstly, the community of their own discipline (in my case, theoretical Computer Science), and secondly their higher education institution (the University of Birmingham). I will explore the latter in this section, and build upon this with the former in the next.

I am in a rare position as a lecturer at the University of Birmingham: I studied both my undergraduate degree and my Ph.D. here. Having been in the same position as my students gives me a unique insight into their experiences here. Furthermore, many of the lecturers that taught me I am now working with; indeed, I share a module with one of my Ph.D. supervisors. As I look back at my first ten years at Birmingham, I feel these years as a student have formed me into an academic with a strong feeling of ***community*** [V1]. When I first arrived at Birmingham in 2014, the fact that we were asked to call lecturers by their first names – and to see them as colleagues rather than just teachers – left a lasting impression on me. And since becoming a Teaching Associate in 2018, I sought to bring this sense of community into my teaching by, for example, designing assessments – and later, modules – that allow students to collaboratively construct knowledge (Waugh Ambridge, 2024) [A1; K2]. Now, as a permanent and full-time member of staff, I not only think about the community we have *between* staff and students, but also the one that we have *among* staff themselves. Although this somewhat contradicts my earlier perspective of a horizontal community, my identity as a collegiate academic *does* now include the fact that this is my job – that I am 'here to stay' – and therefore that I want to have strong communal ties to my fellow permanent staff members.

As a worker at a modern university, the building of collegiate academic communities among fellow staff members is, I feel, incredibly important. As universities have become

more ‘dynamic’ and ‘flexible’, individual academics are under a growing variety of pressures in terms of teaching, research and administration (Locke, 2014) [V4]. For example, my own University’s Academic Development Programme (ADP) requires me to work diligently across six areas – Education, Research, Citizenship, Leadership & Management, Outreach and EDI – creating often unrelenting work requirements as I am pressured to get promoted within five years or be effectively fired. The existence of a supportive and collegiate community helps one to navigate these pressures, something the ADP itself recognises through its creation of a Peer Support Group for each academic. I have helped to develop my School’s staff member community by (for example) collaborating with other colleagues on research and teaching, organising academic and social events, and (as discussed previously) expanding the department’s commitment to inclusivity to ensure maximum participation within this community.

The January 2024 Computer Science Education Away Day, held only two months after I started as an Assistant Professor, reaffirmed my identity as an educator committed to building a strong departmental community. On that day, I engaged in CPD by collaborating with various members of staff in the department on discussions and tasks concerning how to better our teaching practices [A5; K5; K6; V3; D2vi]. I came away from it with a profound sense of being in the right place: ultimately, I want to give back to the University – the community – that has given so much to me. After having studied and worked here for so long, it goes without saying that a core facet of my identity is being an academic here *at* Birmingham. While staying in one place is generally difficult for academic (see Markey, 2020), I am immensely happy to be able to continue to build and be part of this community.

Quality: Reflecting on my roles as a researcher and an educator

My inner conversation is closing in on the present day: at this point, I am a full-time educator at my alma mater whose core values are empathy, inclusivity and community. But I am not just an educator: despite having a teaching-focused contract, I am also a researcher in theoretical Computer Science. The Theory group at Birmingham is perhaps my closest community, and is regarded as an internationally leading light in theoretical CS [K1]. As part of my inner conversation, by reflecting on which one belief above all others being a member of this group has instilled in me, I arrive at my fourth key value: ***quality***.

Every six months during my Ph.D., I had to present my work to two other members of my research group. Each time, it was a rewarding and formative experience wherein I gained a huge amount of insight into how to improve my work. Further, during my internship at the global computing company Huawei, I learned what quality means from the perspective of not just theoretical CS, but practical, industry-standard CS. This focus on producing high-quality work was often challenging and sometimes stressful; indeed, as the many conflicting demands of the modern higher education sector often are. But because of these challenges, I have become an academic capable of producing (at least one example of) high quality research (Ghica and Waugh Ambridge, 2021, published in the internationally leading conference for theoretical CS, LICS) [K1; D2v]. Now, in my education-focused role, I strive to give the highest quality teaching, lecturing, tutoring

and supervising that I possibly can. The ways in which I achieve this are by providing research-intensive teaching and by being a reflective academic.

I embed my research into my teaching wherever I can, which is sometimes easy but often not. As I am teaching-focused, I am on three module teams, but only one of those directly relates to my area of research. Within this module, *Advanced Functional Programming*, it is straightforward for me to apply my research into computational proofs, because the module itself teaches students the foundations of these skills [K1; D2v]. However, with more introductory modules – such as *Computer Systems*, a conversion MSc module I will lead in the coming academic year – the job is harder. However, it is important for an academic at a research-intensive University to find space for this where I can, as one of the University's core offers to our students is the ability to learn as part of an "intellectually stretching, research-rich … learning community" (Armour et al., 2017). I have therefore added a small, but important, research-intensive offering to the 'Number Representation' section of *Computer Systems*, which applies my research into methods for *exactly* representing real numbers computationally to the introductory topic of inexact floating-point arithmetic [K1; A1; D2v]. This is a way of teaching this topic I have not seen before, and so I hope my students can appreciate this unique perspective that they would potentially only have at Birmingham [K2].

As a reflective educator, I not only evaluate my own teaching, but support others' pedagogical development by evaluating theirs and sharing best practice within the department [A5; K5; K6 D2vi]. However, as a young academic I am still most reflective when it comes to my own teaching practice. To that end, I would like to highlight the Anupam Das' lecture observation of me as probably the single most useful CPD activity of the past two years [A5; K6; D2vi]. His caring attitude and attention to detail not only boosted my confidence, but gave me expert advice that has helped me to improve the quality of my lectures for the coming year [V3]. In return, I was able to observe his lecture and I hope he too appreciated the feedback I gave him in aid of his own high-quality teaching [K6].

It is worth noting that quality can be a double-edged value to have in the neoliberal university. Davies and Petersen (2005) write that the neoliberal system produces "competitive [academics] who strive to produce the products desired by government and who are at risk of losing the capacity to fulfil (or even to feel) the desire to carry out significant creative or critical intellectual work". It is therefore incumbent on me that in my pursuit of delivering quality research-intensive teaching, that I *actually* spare time to *do* that research; and that in my reflections I reflect upon my ability to be creative and not overly constrained by the demands of management – an ideal that leads nicely into the concluding section.

Freedom: Finding my academic identity

Archer's inner conversation concerns one's "physical well-being", "performative competence" and "self worth". In exploring my values of inclusivity and community, I have conversed with myself about my well-being and my ability to build a positive space for myself as an academic at Birmingham. By considering my commitment to empathy and quality, I have discussed my performative competence – my ability to communicate

what I want to as an educator. I now bring the conversation to a close by thinking about how my academic identity supports my sense of self-worth.

My knee-jerk feeling is that I derive a great amount of self-worth from succeeding at a Russell Group institution but being from a working-class background, and by having achieved a permanent position at my alma mater by age 27. Though, at times, doubt sets in and I wonder if perhaps this is not self-worth but *pride* formed from success as determined by neoliberal objective-setting. I do not wish for my identity to be plagued by the forces of market and capital – but in some ways this is unavoidable. If I am to get a promotion, it will be not only through making my students happy, but by earning points within a rigorous, quantified framework that attempts to determine my success as compared to my colleagues. Ultimately, it may be that I cannot avoid being a "neoliberal subject" (Archer L., 2008) [V4].

However, I *can* avoid the doubt associated with this realisation. I fully agree with Skea's (2021) assessment that we must reframe academic identities in the current context by committing to collegiality and challenging discourses of productivity. However, I do not agree with her claim that viewing academia as a *job* rather than as a *"vocation"* – or "spiritual calling", as it is "generally considered" (Skea, 2021, p.406) – encourages academics to "produce as much as [they] can, as quickly as [they can]" (ibid.). In fact, I would argue exactly the opposite: putting academia on a pedestal as a 'calling' and then despairing when getting promoted requires some hard work we do not feel 'called' to do is not in my view a productive way forward. In order to carve out spaces for academic autonomy, I actually argue that we *should* see our jobs as just that.

At times, our jobs will adapt to societal and market conditions such as higher education funding; they may get tougher, and we may end up with less time to do the parts of the job we love. But, as Skea says, by working within that system we must strive to find time to attend to the "quieter intellectual virtues of the profession" (ibid, p. 407). It is this strive that epitomises academia to me: this quest for ***freedom***; one of the 'Golden Age' values that I feel is still so important today. After two years working in academia, I see that freedom is now hugely important to me: the freedom to work *when* I want to, to teach *how* I want to and to choose *what* I wish to focus my research on. It is true that that freedom may not be as freely available as it was in the past (Davies and Petersen, 2005), but it is still at the heart of the profession and – now – at the heart of my academic identity.

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