



Embodied Academic Identities in the Hybrid University: A Global Socio-spatial Justice Framework for an Inclusive Higher Education

Nomanesi Madikizela-Madiya & John Kibwage Nyangaresi
University of South Africa

Article History

Received: 2026-01-19

Revised: 2026-08-04

Accepted: 2026-08-09

Published: 2026-10-24

Keywords

Academic identity

Algorithmic governance

Disability

Embodiment

How to cite:

Madikizela-Madiya, N., & Nyangaresi, J. K. (2026). Embodied Academic Identities in the Hybrid University: A Global Socio-spatial Justice Framework for an Inclusive Higher Education. *Research Journal of Education, Teaching and Curriculum Studies*, 4(2), 111-124.

Abstract

Digital and neoliberal developments have remodelled higher education into a hybrid socio-technical environment in which physical campuses, accelerated schedules, digital platforms, and data-driven governance jointly organise academic work. The central problem is not inaccessible campus design or algorithmic control in isolation, but their institutional entanglement: digital metrics and platform rules increasingly shape where, when, and how academic bodies must be present, visible, responsive, and productive. These arrangements disproportionately burden disabled, racialised, gendered, classed, precariously employed, and caregiving academics. Although academic identity scholarship has examined discourse, cognition, professional socialisation, and cultural mobility, its physical, temporal, embodied, and algorithmic dimensions remain insufficiently integrated. This conceptual article uses a critical integrative review and iterative thematic synthesis of 24 purposively selected sources published between 1991 and 2024. The analysis is global in conceptual scope, with particular relevance to resource-constrained and Global South higher education systems. It integrates socio-spatial justice and Lefebvre's production of space triad with relational disability theory and critical scholarship on datafication, learning analytics, platformisation, and algorithmic performance management. The resulting framework conceptualises academic identity as an embodied socio-spatial achievement formed through interactions among conceived space (policies, metrics, platform governance, and AI rules), perceived space (campus design, timetables, interfaces, and everyday practices), and lived space (belonging, vulnerability, fatigue, recognition, and agency). It shows how apparently neutral norms of speed, omnipresence, and frictionless mobility reproduce unequal recognition and participation across campus and platform contexts. The article concludes that accessibility, temporal equity, digital rights, and embodied wellbeing should be

Copyright © 2026





treated as constitutive of academic identity, participation, and educational quality.

Introduction

This conceptual paper contributes to the literature on academic identity in higher education by examining the link between embodiment and socio-spatial justice, a relationship that remains insufficiently integrated. Existing scholarship identifies disciplinary socialisation, academic output, and participation in collegial life as important to academic identity development (Komljenovic, 2022). It also examines cultural hybridity arising from cross-system academic mobility, globalisation, and internationalisation (Dai & Hardy, 2021, 2024; Greek & Jonsmoen, 2021; Shen et al., 2022). This work explains how academics renegotiate identity across institutional and national cultures. However, cultural hybridity is distinct from the hybrid university examined here, which refers to the socio-technical interweaving of physical campuses, remote work, digital platforms, data infrastructures, and algorithmic governance. A mobility-centred account alone cannot explain how marginalised or disabled academics encounter accelerated schedules, inaccessible campus arrangements, platform requirements, and data-intensive performance regimes within a single institutional environment.

Embodiment and space are increasingly difficult to neglect for two reasons (Hegna & Ørbæk, 2024; Troiani & Dutson, 2021). First, universities do not organise academic work solely through cognitive or discursive norms. They structure work through buildings, corridors, offices, classrooms, schedules, platforms, dashboards, communication processes, and performance regulations (Troiani & Dutson, 2021). Second, bodies experience these architectural, social, temporal, and technological arrangements in different ways as they move, care, disclose, conceal, attend, speak, see, hear, tyre, and recover. These conditions enable the presence and participation of some bodies while constraining others. Academic identity in the contemporary university is therefore better understood as a socio-spatial achievement. Becoming recognised as an academic cannot be just about the production of knowledge or the learning of professional norms (Levitt et al., 2024; Merchant et al., 2020). It also calls for filling institutional space in ways that are accessible to others: attending meetings, answering emails and messages, showing up in classrooms and conference spaces, complying with the institution's rhythm, and operating in a manner that emphasises professionalism, productivity, and collegiality. However, they are not all easily attainable. These impacts work through disability, health status, gender, race, class, care roles, digital literacy and precarity. The spatial-temporal-technological organisation of everyday work thus affords universities unequal opportunities for academic recognition.

This argument is based on a social scholarship of space, which critiques the notion of space as an empty container (Lefebvre, 1991; Massey, 2005; Soja, 2010). Space is a social product with political implications; it regulates bodies' abilities, their presence in space, and who belongs (Komljenovic, 2022; Soja, 2010; Williamson et al., 2020). At the university level, this includes the traditional campus, the growing digital world of teaching and administration, and collegial communication among faculty and students. The emergence of the platform university intensifies these dynamics. Beyond extending academic activity into hybrid spaces, analytics dashboards, AI-based supervision, learning management systems, and video-conferencing tools also foster standardisation, monitoring, and data extraction (Komljenovic, 2022; Williamson et al., 2020). Digitalisation is portrayed as flexible and neutral, but can also increase



inequality by favouring continuous presence, speedy reaction and work that leaves a digital imprint that can easily be measured.

Disability studies are particularly important to this analysis. A relational perspective shows that disadvantage is not drawn directly from physical failure but is produced by body–environment, body–norm–body, and body–body–system relations that fail to consider difference (Merchant et al., 2020; Shakespeare, 2006; Titchkosky, 2011). These systems include inaccessible buildings, fixed schedules, fixed meeting cultures, travel expectations, and platform designs and rating criteria built around the premise of continuous productivity. Access is therefore not only a technical matter of ramps or captions. It is a social and institutional issue that depends on people responding to be present, the type of participation, and the type of labour regarded as legitimate (Titchkosky, 2011).

The article builds a socio-spatial justice perspective on the hybrid university as grounded in Lefebvre's three spatial dimensions—embodied academic identity as space conceived, space perceived, and space lived. Conceived space comprises policies, measures, platform governance, and AI rules. Perceived space encompasses campus design, digital page interface, timetable, and daily habits. Lived space concerns felt and relationally experienced belonging, fatigue, surveillance, dignity, and agency. These dimensions interact to create academic identities—not solely from capacity. Embodied difference is either accommodated within the institutional production of space and becomes a basis for recognition, participation, wellbeing, or progress or is de-institutionalised and exists on the margins.

The analysis is not exclusive to any country but is conceived in a broader, global sense, although its implications are particularly relevant to resource-constrained higher education systems in the Global South. It is organised around two questions:

- (1) How do neoliberal spatial and temporal regimes shape embodied academic identities, especially for marginalised and disabled academics;
- (2) How do datafication, platformisation, and AI-enabled performance management reconfigure the higher education space, and what does a socio-spatial justice response require for teaching, curriculum, and professional life?

The article makes significant contributions to education, teaching, and curriculum research in several ways: it situates education within the context of socio-spatial justice in relation to hybrid higher education; it expands the concept of academic identity beyond discourse; and it provides a framework for inclusive institutional redesign.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

This section outlines the theoretical and conceptual foundations that guide the article. It brings together socio-spatial justice and Lefebvre's production of space, relational disability and embodiment, and critical perspectives on datafication, platformisation, and algorithmic governance as complementary lenses for analysing embodied academic identity in the hybrid university.

Socio-spatial justice and the production of space

The article's main normative and analytical perspective is socio-spatial justice. It considers justice and injustice as spatially produced, not just located in space (Przybylinski, 2023; Soja,



2010). Lefebvre (1991) described institutions as a means of establishing social order through contact with conceived, perceived, and lived space. Conceived space is policy, classification, measurement, and management representation; lived space is the bodily experience of belonging, exclusion, dignity, exhaustion, and agency; perceived space is the material, routine, and drawing routines. Massey (2005) also pointed out that space is socially formed and subject to challenge.

Socio-spatial justice is not used here as a general metaphor for justice. It focuses attention on universities' access, visibility, recognizability, and mobility, which are created through buildings, timetables, digital interfaces, platform rules, and evaluative systems. The spatial triad provides categories for analysing academic identity, and socio-spatial justice offers the evaluative question of whether these arrangements allow different academics to participate, be recognised, sustain their wellbeing, and progress on equitable terms.

Relational disability, embodiment and academic identity

Relational disability theory and scholarship on embodiment explain how the same arrangements do not affect all academics equally. Relational approaches do not define disability as simply being the impairment, but as the way the body interacts with the environment in which it lives (Shakespeare, 2006; Thomas, 2004). Titchkosky (2011) further developed this idea by showing that access is not just about whether technical accommodations are available, but about the institutional meaning of who is supposed to be included. Similar arguments appear in purely phenomenological and embodied perspectives, which highlight how academic work is realised in different kinds of bodies with different capacities, rhythms, vulnerabilities, and caring responsibilities (Hegna & Ørbæk, 2024; Wehrle, 2020). These perspectives link spatiality with academic lived experiences.

Datafication, platformisation and algorithmic governance

Critical discussions on datafication, platformisation, learning analytics, and algorithmic performance management address why digital systems must be considered part of the university's spatial order. Platforms not only make it easier for institutions to observe, classify, and reward these activities, but they also help to create what is observed, classified, and rewarded (Komljenovic, 2022; Perrotta & Williamson, 2018; Williamson et al., 2020). The broad categories of availability, response speed, and traceable activity can serve as proxies for productivity, commitment, and algorithmic performance systems (Heemsbergen et al., 2024). These digital processes, like physical architecture and temporal organisation, regulate academic presence and performance and are analysed in conjunction with one another.

The perspectives are therefore regarded as complementary rather than as parallel theories. Socio-spatial justice offers the normative perspective; Lefebvre's "triad" provides the spatial categories; relational disability theory accounts for the disabling effects of seemingly neutral arrangements; and critical data studies unravel the exclusion, visibility, and surveillance produced by platforms and algorithms. Their integration contributes to the article's framework to analyse embodied academic identity in the hybrid university.

Materials and Methods

This article is a conceptual analysis informed by a critical integrative review of multidisciplinary literature. An integrative approach was appropriate because the aim was to synthesise



theoretical and empirical work across several fields rather than aggregate findings from a single research tradition. The review had a global conceptual scope and was organised around the article's two guiding questions.

The final analytic corpus comprised 24 sources published between 1991 and 2024: 17 peer-reviewed journal articles, five scholarly books, one book chapter, and one institutional article. The sources covered eight thematic clusters: socio-spatial justice and the production of space; embodiment and phenomenology; relational disability and access; academic identity and cultural mobility; the neoliberal university; learning analytics and datafication; platformisation and algorithmic performance management; and AI governance. Foundational texts were retained where they established the conceptual vocabulary, while recent sources were prioritised where they addressed contemporary hybrid and data-intensive higher education. Sources were included when they directly illuminated how participation, recognition, exclusion, or academic identity is organised across physical, temporal, and digital environments.

The literature was selected purposively rather than exhaustively. Because the study was designed as a conceptually driven integrative review rather than a systematic review, an exhaustive initial database yield and PRISMA-style screening count were not generated. The reported corpus, therefore, represents the sources that entered the final conceptual synthesis, not a claim to comprehensive coverage.

Analysis proceeded through iterative thematic synthesis. In the first step, key concepts and theoretical vocabulary were clarified. Second, the literature was compared deductively based on the categories conceived, perceived, and lived space, and inductively, based on recurrent patterns in accessibility, temporal discipline, visibility, surveillance, fatigue, recognition, and agency. Third, these patterns were embedded in an analysis that related spatial conditions to academic identity outcomes and implications for teaching, the curriculum, staff development, and institutional governance. This process documents the conceptual steps in an auditable way while maintaining interpretation throughout the review.

Thematic Analysis and Conceptual Synthesis

This section presents five interrelated themes organised around the article's two guiding questions. The first question is answered through the first four themes, which address how neoliberal spatial and temporal regimes influence embodied academic identities—particularly those of marginalised and disabled academics. The second question is addressed through the theme on datafication, platformisation and AI-enabled performance management and its reconfiguration of higher education space. A socio-spatial justice framework is then discussed, followed by implications for education, teaching, curriculum, and professional life.

Socio-spatial organisation of academic identity

The first theme evaluates how the article's structures can be extended to understanding the development of embodied academic identities. In higher education, advantages and disadvantages of various sorts are enacted and circulated not only through abstract principles, but through buildings, infrastructures, pathways, routines, schedules, and institutional geographies (Lefebvre, 1991; Massey, 2005; Soja, 2010). Academic identity is not formed outside these settings or constructs; it is formed through the physical, temporal and digital



environments that organise, recognise, and value academic work. Thus, injustice is not only located on campus or on a platform but is also produced through these locations.

Academic identity scholarship tends to foreground discursive, or professional processes: socialisation to the field, writing oneself into a field, or learning to enact professional positions (Dai & Hardy, 2021, 2024; Greek & Jonsmoen, 2021). While important, these processes are insufficient to explain academics' recognisability in the institutional space. In the university context, visibility and legitimacy are organised through informal encounters in corridors, access to decision-making meetings and mentors, mobility within the university, migration patterns, and trust in electronic systems. Access to these areas at low cognitive, financial, bodily energy, and/or time cost is unequally distributed (Levitt et al., 2024; Titchkosky, 2011).

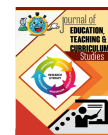
Lefebvre's triad helps to reconcile formal policy, everyday spaces, and lived experience. Conceived space refers to the institutional policies, metrics, categories, and representations that constitute the university's managerial identity and the identity of good academic work. Perceived space is defined as offices, classrooms, platforms, practices, programmes and work processes. Lived space is defined by the subjective sense of belonging / misbelonging, visibility/invisibility, and care/surveillance of these arrangements. In conceptual space, a university can have inclusive policies; but in actual place, it has inaccessible buildings and/or normatively exclusionary platform behaviours, creating alienation in lived place (Lefebvre, 1991; Titchkosky, 2011). However, meeting adaptations or changes in workloads or digital procurement can reduce the effort required to sign up as present.

Socio-spatial inequality cannot be reduced to a single dimension (Massey, 2005; Soja, 2010). Academics are placed differently in academic institutions based on disability, based on race, based on gender, based on class, based on age, based on language, and based on employment. These embodied differences and social positions shape experiences of space and whether institutional concerns feel familiar, fatiguing, or out of reach (Merchant et al., 2020; Thomas, 2004). Thus, a seemingly neutral attitude of professionalism can reflect a limited set of moving, responding, travelling, and performing legitimacy in certain circumstances.

Embodiment and the making of academic selves

Embodiment plays a crucial role in academic identity, as institutional demands materialise through bodies (Hegna & Ørbæk, 2024; Wehrle, 2020). Phenomenological scholarship highlights that humans do not only have bodies; rather, they are embodied: they possess capacities, orientations, and vulnerabilities that colonise aspects of the world through lived experience (Troiani & Dutson, 2021; Wehrle, 2020). Pressures of acceleration, competitiveness and visibility are thus not only organisational conditions in universities. They operate as bodily regimes.

The increased number of meetings, the expectation of travel, longer screen time, tight deadlines, and the expectation of constant communication characterise modern academic life (Hegna & Ørbæk, 2024; Wehrle, 2020). Troiani and Dutson (2021) defined the neoliberal university as a disciplinary space where academic learning, thought, and work are disciplined. These effects manifest as fatigue, anxiety, somatic strain, or a lack of time to think. It is not so much about how much you have to do; it is about how being continuously responsive, digitally enabling, mobile, productive, and resilient are now the norm in academic work.



These standards contribute towards the creation of identity, working as unspoken indicators of scholarly worth (Madikizela-Madiya, 2023; Troiani & Dutson, 2021). The ideal academic is seen as able to manoeuvre smoothly between campuses and conference circuits, quickly turn an idea into a project, be visible within institutions, and maintain a high level of productivity over a long period of time (Levitt et al., 2024; Merchant et al., 2020). This figure is only seemingly meritocratic because it assumes bodily capability, reliable technology, mobility, and the absence of significant caregiving duties. Thus, an academic who needs recovery time, flexible participation, or a less strident scholarly pace may be evaluated using a standard that does not apply to him.

Embodiment is also relational (Hegna & Ørbæk, 2024). Belonging is negotiated through assessment and evaluation of such things as looking confident in meetings, looking like you are not trying hard enough because you are not talking, requesting flexibility as valid, or your body being deemed to draw too much attention as disruptive to the institutional rhythm (Merchant et al., 2020; Titchkosky, 2011). Hegna and Ørbæk (2024) stated that research in higher education has often focused on the cognitive and discursive rather than the sensory and intersubjective aspects. However, exclusion can be felt in being unable to sit in certain areas, in lighting that is too bright, in meetings dominated by English and fast-talking, or in the stigmatisation of tiredness. Such conditions can erode perceived academic legitimacy even when exclusion is not explicitly articulated.

Embodied labour and hidden institutional work

Another lesson from paying attention to embodiment is that much academic work is not physically recognised or institutionally sanctioned (Hegna & Ørbæk, 2024; Troiani & Dutson, 2021). Teaching involves orchestrating voice, movement, emotional self-regulation, and sustained attention (Levitt et al., 2024; Merchant et al., 2020). Supervision and mentoring involve relationship, caring, and listening. Accessibility work often calls for extra planning and adjustment of content, communication with students and negotiation with systems. These activities use time and energy, which are not always recorded in performance data. Embodied and relational work, then, can be indispensable to the institution and largely unexplored where universities incentivise primarily quantifiable outputs.

Marginalised academics disproportionately engage in these hidden forms of labour, making them particularly significant for these individuals (Levitt et al., 2024; Merchant et al., 2020). Disabled academics, women academics, racialised scholars, and junior staff may be given an unequal share of pastoral/representational or diversity roles because they are seen as more available or more likely to do organisational caring (Barnes et al., 2021; Madikizela-Madiya, 2023). Those expectations can increase workloads and reduce the scholarship an institution can see in the product.

Disability, access and the politics of presence

Disability scholarship calls into question the institutional conversations that individualise difficulties (Shakespeare, 2006; Thomas, 2004). Relational perspectives recognise that disability is created when bodies and environments interact and difference is not accommodated (Merchant et al., 2020; Shakespeare, 2006; Thomas, 2004). Walking surfaces and arrangements can thus become disabling because of architecture, procedural design, time expectations, and the organisational culture in question. Levitt et al. (2024) reported barriers to employment,



participation, and career development, and Merchant et al. (2020) identified practices that disabled persons encounter that are disabling.

This has significant implications for access (Titchkosky, 2011). Access is sometimes thought of as a narrow focus in which an accommodation must be created after a barrier occurs (Merchant et al., 2020). Titchkosky (2011), however, considered access as a question of meaning, belonging – who has access, under what circumstances, at what cost. Presence in higher education is often mistakenly interpreted as face-to-face, on-the-spot, travelling, quick response, and constant availability (Levitt et al., 2024). Even where formal policies allow disabled academics access, these expectations can disempower them. They may also disadvantage academics who suffer from long-term illness, mental wellbeing problems, or significant caring responsibilities or other life factors that do not fit neatly into the world of the institution.

Temporal design is one of the least recognised dimensions of access (Thomas, 2004; Titchkosky, 2011). Levitt et al. (2024) and Merchant et al. (2020) argue that uninterrupted capacity is valued on multiple levels, such as deadlines, evening meetings, turnaround, and simultaneous digital demand. The socio-spatial justice perspective is about access to time, not just a neutral resource. Norms that accommodate variation in capacity, flexible time, variable pathways to participation, and manageable workloads must be viewed less as individual accommodations and more as a package of ways to ensure participation in a respectful and equitable manner.

In contrast, this reframing focuses on making academic norms more accessible to disabled students, rather than treating disabled students as a problem to be accommodated (Shakespeare, 2006; Titchkosky, 2011). Normalising multiple work rhythms, flexible attendance and participation, and welcoming digital spaces can help extend participation among the academic workforce (Merchant et al., 2020; Thomas, 2004). Disability-inclusive design exposes the assumed "normal" academic body and demonstrates that standard arrangements are often highly selective.

Belonging, disclosure and institutional risk

Social fit or collegial climate is often referred to as belonging in the context of higher education, but it is also spatial (Barnes et al., 2021; Titchkosky, 2011). Belonging means having the freedom to access and utilise institutional spaces without constantly needing to explain why one should be there or what one needs (Levitt et al., 2024; Merchant et al., 2020). Disabled academics sometimes find belonging to be problematic; rooms may be inaccessible, accommodations may be uncertain, and there may be repeated decisions to be made about sharing information about disability: is it met with support, suspicion, or stigma?

A socio-spatial justice perspective can explain the rational nature of withholding disclosure, given institutional circumstances (Thomas, 2004; Titchkosky, 2011). However, when support is not readily available or is inconsistent or when flexibility is seen as a special privilege, disclosure carries a higher risk than supportive (Levitt et al., 2024; Merchant et al., 2020). This creates a paradox: the institution proclaims inclusion while setting up barriers to naming needs.

Neoliberal governance, temporal discipline and academic legitimacy

Higher education management has been characterised by increased audit cultures, competition, metrics, and marketplace logics as a result of neoliberal restructuring (Madikizela-Madiya, 2023; Troiani & Dutson, 2021). These are not only cadastral operations. They reconceptualise



academic subjectivity, assign meaning to forms of labour, and deny others, while also insisting on the kind of evidence required to substantiate this value (Madikizela-Madiya, 2023). As Madikizela-Madiya (2023) states, the 'publish or perish' culture materialises and ethicises academic space as perishable while simultaneously intensifying researcher output, placing enormous pressure on these outsiders.

Socio-spatially, neoliberal governance delegitimises legitimacy through a system of time and visibility (Madikizela-Madiya, 2023; Thomas, 2004). Documentation, deliverables, and attendance via traceable activity (Merchant et al., 2020; Thomas, 2004; Troiani & Dutson, 2021). Performance improves accordingly – collegiality equals availability, commitment equals responsiveness, and excellence equals speed. These norms are often implicit, embedded in promotion criteria, workload expectations, quality assurance practices, and the normal language of management.

The central problem is not merely that these systems are demanding. They are based on an ideal worker who can work at an accelerated pace and work at the same level of performance (Levitt et al., 2024; Merchant et al., 2020). Academics who need relief, beds, slow scholarship, or protected boundaries are judged by what seems like a universal standard that disqualifies them through exclusion (Merchant et al., 2020; Soja, 2010; Titchkosky, 2011). The result is a socio-spatial justice perspective that reveals not only the qualities of individual responses to pressure, but also the institutional positioning of some academics who are less capable or less committed.

Datafication, platformisation and AI-enabled performance management

Digital transformation has also transformed and expanded the nature of academic space, beyond the university to platform ecologies that mediate teaching, administration, and collegial interaction (Komljenovic, 2022; Williamson et al., 2020). The use of learning management systems, video-conferencing, cloud productivity tools, and analytics dashboards in higher education work is growing steadily (Perrotta & Williamson, 2018; Williamson et al., 2020). Williamson et al. (2020) termed this process the datafication of teaching, and it entails converting practice into data that can be tracked, analysed, and intervened upon. Such systems not only record practice but also structure it; that is, they articulate what constitutes engagement or performance (Perrotta and Williamson, 2018).

Platformisation is relevant to academic identity, as digital traces are increasingly becoming a proxy for professional presence (Perrotta & Williamson, 2018; Williamson et al., 2020). An educator can be evaluated based on logins, response time, published materials, or captured interactions (Komljenovic, 2022). However, much valuable academic work takes place that does not lend itself to easy metrics, such as mentoring, pastoral care, accessibility work, slow curriculum design, or community building. The risk is therefore not only surveillance but reduction: platforms make some labour highly visible while rendering other labour less legible.

Komljenovic (2022) connected digitalised higher education with new methods of value extraction and new ways of market making. Platforms cannot be considered neutral service tools because they influence how institutions see, buy, and reward (Williamson et al., 2020; Wise et al., 2024). This trend is further propelled by AI's capabilities, including chatbots, predictive analytics, writing assistance, automated marking assistance, and productivity tools. The question of efficiency versus academic integrity is often debated, but a justice approach would



examine who is doing more, who is doing worse, or who is doing what without being treated as different.

A specific concern is in managing user experiences based on algorithms. Heemsbergen et al. (2024) demonstrated how dashboards and behaviour analytics can normalise workplace surveillance in ways that seem 'routine' or 'benign'. At school, they can enable constant online presence, quick and frequent communication, and the turn-in of assignments, while marginalising slower and less visible types of scholarship. Eurofound (2024) pointed out that while daily digital micromanagement can be cyberbullying, it also diminishes autonomy and wellbeing.

These burdens are not evenly distributed. Digital systems assume certain conditions, such as consistent bandwidth, suitable devices, private space, acceptance of maintaining a screen for an extended period, and constant connectivity (Levitt et al., 2024; Merchant et al., 2020). As a result, they can exacerbate inequalities faced by disabled academics, carers, precariously employed staff, and researchers in low-resource environments. Being more connected does not automatically make the hybrid university more inclusive. The key question is whether its digital infrastructures distribute agency, visibility, and burden equitably.

Platform metrics and the redefinition of pedagogic value

The platform university also shifts the uses of teaching (Perrotta & Williamson, 2018; Williamson et al., 2020). In practice, while the practice might be translated into dashboards and timers and teachers' engagement can be reported, teachers might feel pressured to fit their practice within what the system can identify (Komljenovic, 2022; Wise et al., 2024). Rapid replies, constant notifications, frequent updates, and continuous online activity can become proxies for good teaching rather than reflecting depth of care, pedagogical judgement, or inclusive design.

Metric-friendly teaching is not necessarily high-quality or inclusive teaching (Perrotta & Williamson, 2018; Williamson et al., 2020). An educator can be informatively and energetically engaged with the platform, while students may experience the course subject as mechanical or burdensome (Hegna & Ørbæk, 2024; Titchkosky, 2011). On the other hand, a reflective educator who prioritises accessibility, community-based learning, or slower feedback practices might create less conventional data traces, but with greater educational value.

AI, authorship and the uneven distribution of risk

Generative AI introduces another dimension of asymmetry in academic identity (Komljenovic, 2022; Wise et al., 2024). Some academics may use AI to help them write, translate, brainstorm, or improve accessibility. Additionally, for some, AI introduces new compliance requirements, limits on appropriate use, or concerns about automated evaluations of writing authenticity and competence (Williamson et al., 2020; Wise et al., 2024).

AI governance can also reinforce existing institutional inequalities (Komljenovic, 2022; Wise et al., 2024). However, more senior workers with greater disciplinary influence may be better able to experiment, while precariously employed or marginalised academics may feel compelled to reject useful tools and/or hide the fact that they have access to them (Levitt et al., 2024; Merchant et al., 2020). Therefore, equity in governance entails clear guidelines, easy access to services, opportunities for input, and protection from biased assessment or automatic judgements.



Discussion: A socio-spatial justice framework for embodied academic identity

The thematic synthesis results in a framework of intersections between embodied difference, space, and academic identity outcomes. The framework consists of three interrelated dimensions: conceived space, perceived space, and lived space.

At the conceived space level, the framework considers relevant policies, metrics, and governance practices such as promotion rules, workload models, access policies, procurement standards, AI-use rules, and analytics policies (Heemsbergen et al., 2024; Levitt et al., 2024; Titchkosky, 2011; Williamson et al., 2020). The problems of justice risk involve assumptions about systems that may assume continual availability, uninterrupted productivity, faster response times, and greater mobility. Inclusive design involves co-design with marginalised staff, equity impact assessment of AI, metrics, and explicit consideration of accessibility, care, and hidden labour.

On the perceived space level, the focus is on the built and digital environments and routines associated with them. Control items, such as timetables, authentication systems, meeting formats, dashboard interfaces, hybrid learning systems, office allocation and campus routes, are examples of relevant arrangements (Komljenovic, 2022; Merchant et al., 2020; Titchkosky, 2011; Williamson et al., 2020). Justice obstacles involve difficult architecture, platform friction, camera-on norms, bandwidth dependency, and split schedules. Inclusive action includes universal design for teaching and work, captioned and hybrid participation, and flexible temporal design.

On the lived space side, the framework examines both embodied experiences of belonging and confidence and the risks of disclosure, fatigue, trust, surveillance, and agency (Eurofound, 2024; Merchant et al., 2020). Consequences of injustice include burnout, self-censorship, not disclosing, loss of confidence, and withdrawal from collegial life. Inclusive action involves people in 'cultures of care and trust', confidential support lines, mentoring relationships, peer communities and institutions that recognise diverse rhythms of work.

These dimensions produce four main outcomes: recognition, participation, wellbeing, and progression. Recognition is related to the status of the individual as a real scholar. Participation is related to formal and informal institutional arenas. Wellbeing relates to the sustainability of work/rest. Progress focuses on the ability to stay and grow within the academy. Spatial inequality can jeopardise all four outcomes (Soja, 2010; Titchkosky, 2011).

The framework also recognises contestation. Academic researchers will not bend to institutional expectations and arrangements but fight, improvise, and try to rethink space (Komljenovic, 2022; Titchkosky, 2011). Reliance on individual ability, however, is not a foundation for justice. Accessibility, temporal equity, and digital rights should be seen as collective design tasks and not individual coping strategies in universities.

Operationalising the framework institutionally

The framework becomes practical for institutions in terms of design questions (Soja, 2010; Titchkosky, 2011). Promotion and workload models may indicate an image of what a university professor should be like at the conceived space level. Do AI and platform policies expect a continuity of connectivity, speed, and self-disclosure? What types of unpaid (or underpaid) work do systems of assessment value?



Operationalising justice also requires governance changes (Komljenovic, 2022; Titchkosky, 2011). Accessibility and meaningful digital rights are not aspects of the student support office or specialist units (Levitt et al., 2024; Soja, 2010). They should be put into action when obtaining supplies, ensuring they are of good quality, in human resource management, in curriculum management, and in decisions made by senior leaders. Without this integration, inclusion becomes rhetoric, and exclusion remains routine institutional practice.

Implications for education, teaching and curriculum studies

The framework also has implications for education, pedagogy, and curriculum studies. Inclusive pedagogy is built on inclusive working conditions. Humane, responsive teaching is hard to maintain when educators are over-surveilled, overworked, and outsiders in unsystematic areas. Teaching quality, therefore, includes staff wellbeing and institutional justice.

Curriculum is also mediated physically and digitally. Platform design and features such as analytics, attendance systems, proctoring, AI, and other components affect the types of participation and learning that are possible (Komljenovic, 2022; Wise et al., 2024). Teachers must be literate in these areas and be able to think critically about what is measured, who the default body is, and how technology-driven decisions can be more inclusive.

Embodiment should also be included in staff development. Professional learning is not just about learning new thinking skills; it is also about learning how to be in institutional spaces, understanding their limits, and learning how best to work in them (Merchant et al., 2020; Troiani & Dutson, 2021). Mentorship should validate hybrid participation, slow scholarship, and valorise different academic contributions, but not be an institution of prestige cultures based on overtime working.

Governance, procurement, and institutionalisation of AI should be addressed as matters of justice (Heemsbergen et al., 2024; Wise et al., 2024). Labour intensification, privacy, bias, and access, along with transparency and consultation, should be taken into account in policies related to AI-assisted writing, automated assessments, and digital monitoring (Eurofound, 2024; Komljenovic, 2022). Without these, AI is likely to reinforce marginalisation while "innovating".

The framework also establishes a research agenda (Hegna & Ørbæk, 2024; Levitt et al., 2024). Ethnographic research/observations may focus on academics' embodied positioning in hybrid spaces and how they engage with them during a typical work week (Titchkosky, 2011; Williamson et al., 2020). Participatory research could involve disabled staff and other marginalised groups auditing campus/ platform environments. Comparative studies may examine how policy, infrastructure, and labour regimes shape academic identity across different higher education systems.

Relevance for hybrid and resource-constrained systems

These are particularly significant when the digital transformation phase is faster than the infrastructure phase (Komljenovic, 2022; Williamson et al., 2020). Hybrids may expand access for some scholars, but also create new barriers for scholars who lack reliable internet connections and inclusive technologies, dedicated working areas and time, or other kinds of flexibility that can accommodate hybrid arrangements (Levitt et al., 2024; Merchant et al., 2020).



In many Global South settings, higher education institutions operate in a field characterised by funding disparities, colonial frameworks for knowledge, infrastructural strains, and rapid transnational matching of policy frameworks (Komljenovic, 2022; Soja, 2010), making this issue especially topical. A socio-spatial justice lens challenges the uncritical adoption of the digital-excellence models and questions what inclusion means locally (Madikizela-Madiya, 2023; Titchkosky, 2011).

Conclusions

In today's modern-day university, academic identity is created by bodies, spaces, time and digital systems. Academic work is not carried out in a neutral space; it is structured by imagined and experienced spaces that allocate recognition, participation, and opportunity unevenly. Discussions of physical facilities and digital governance fail to understand how they relate in the hybrid university.

Disability is central to understanding this interaction because it reveals how institutional norms define normal participation. The regimes of speed, continuous availability, frictionless mobility, and traceable digital activity benefit a kind of academic whose body, resources and responsibilities conform to this expectation. Others may be less visible, less credible, or less able to participate on an equal basis, even if inclusion policies are in place.

The proposed socio-spatial justice framework provides a lexicon and guide for thinking about and redesigning higher education to make accessibility, temporal flexibility, digital rights, and embodied wellbeing integral components of the definition of academic excellence. As a conceptual framework, it needs to be tested across institutions, fields, national contexts, and resource settings.

Inclusion is thus more than leaving institutional responses as they are and making only minor adjustments for individual students. The spatial, temporal, and digital conditions shaping academic life and their assessment need to be reconsidered. Good quality education requires institutional designs that acknowledge embodied difference, value visible and hidden labour, and rule over platforms and AI in transparent and equitable ways.

References

- Barnes, R., Kelly, A. F., & Mulrooney, H. M. (2021). Student belonging: The impact of disability status within and between academic institutions. *New Directions in the Teaching of Physical Sciences*, 16(1), 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.29311/ndtps.v0i16.3607>
- Dai, K., & Hardy, I. (2021). The micro-politics of cultural change: A Chinese doctoral student's learning journey in Australia. *Oxford Review of Education*, 47(2), 243–259. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03054985.2020.1825369>
- Dai, K., & Hardy, I. (2024). Contextualising and hybridising academic identity formation: An analysis of international returnees and locally trained scholars in China. *Higher Education*, 88(1), 101–118. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-023-01108-7>
- Eurofound. (2024, November 5). *Micromanagement in the digital age: A form of (cyber)bullying?* <https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/en/publications/all/micromanagement-digital-age-form-cyberbullying>
- Greek, M., & Jonsmoen, K. M. (2021). Transnational academic mobility in universities: The impact on a departmental and an interpersonal level. *Higher Education*, 81(3), 591–606.



- <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-020-00558-7>
- Heemsbergen, L. J., Krebs, S., Gorur, R., & Maddox, A. (2024). Algorithmic performance management in higher education: Viva! 365 ways of surveillance. *Surveillance & Society*, 22(2), 73–87. <https://doi.org/10.24908/ss.v22i2.15776>
- Hegna, H. M., & Ørbæk, T. (2024). Traces of embodied teaching and learning: A review of empirical studies in higher education. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 29(2), 420–441. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2021.1989582>
- Komljenovic, J. (2022). The future of value in digitalised higher education: Why data privacy should not be our biggest concern. *Higher Education*, 83, 119–135.
- Lefebvre, H. (1991). *The production of space* (D. Nicholson-Smith, Trans.). Blackwell. (Original work published 1974)
- Levitt, J. M., Thelwall, M., & Moreira, F. (2024). Identifying disability-related barriers to academic employment. *Studies in Higher Education*, 49(11), 2104–2115.
- Madikizela-Madiya, N. (2023). Transforming higher education spaces through ethical research publication: A critique of the “publish or perish” aphorism. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 42(1), 186–199. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2022.2048634>
- Massey, D. (2005). *For space*. Sage.
- Merchant, W., Read, S., D'Evelyn, S., Miles, C., & Williams, V. (2020). The insider view: Tackling disabling practices in higher education institutions. *Higher Education*, 80(2), 273–287. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-019-00479-0>
- Perrotta, C., & Williamson, B. (2018). The social life of learning analytics: Cluster analysis and the “performance” of algorithmic education. *Learning, Media and Technology*, 43(1), 3–16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17439884.2016.1182927>
- Przybylinski, S. (2023). Spatial justice. In J. Ohlsson & S. Przybylinski (Eds.), *Theorising justice: A primer for social scientists* (pp. 191–204). Policy Press.
- Shakespeare, T. (2006). *Disability rights and wrongs*. Routledge.
- Shen, W., Xu, X., & Wang, X. (2022). Reconceptualising international academic mobility in the global knowledge system: Towards a new research agenda. *Higher Education*, 84(6), 1317–1342. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-022-00931-8>
- Soja, E. W. (2010). *Seeking spatial justice*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Thomas, C. (2004). Rescuing a social relational understanding of disability. *Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research*, 6(1), 22–36. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15017410409512637>
- Titchkosky, T. (2011). *The question of access: Disability, space, meaning*. University of Toronto Press. <https://doi.org/10.3138/9781442610002>
- Troiani, I., & Dutson, K. (2021). The neoliberal university as a space to learn, think, work. *Architecture and Culture*, 9(1), 5–23. <https://doi.org/10.1080/20507828.2021.1898836>
- Wehrle, M. (2020). Being a body and having a body: The twofold temporality of embodied intentionality. *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*, 19(3), 499–521.
- Williamson, B., Bayne, S., & Shay, S. (2020). The datafication of teaching in higher education: Critical issues and perspectives. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 25(4), 351–365. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2020.1748811>
- Wise, B., Emerson, L., van Luyn, A., Dyson, B., Bjork, C., & Thomas, S. E. (2024). A scholarly dialogue: Writing scholarship, authorship, academic integrity and the challenges of AI. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 43(3), 578–590.