

CREATIVITY AND DEVIANCE IN THE UNIVERSITY ENVIRONMENT: THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL CRITERIA FOR DISTINCTION

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Summary

The article proposes a theoretically grounded approach that treats creativity and deviation from norms not as identical phenomena but as different trajectories of exploratory activity. A system of criteria for assessing creative and deviant behaviour in the academic setting is substantiated. On this basis, a model is developed that combines the level of creativity and the level of constructive normativity, making it possible to distinguish productive and destructive forms of non-standard behaviour as well as borderline, risk-laden zones where they intersect. The proposed framework allows researchers and practitioners to evaluate not only the external “unconventionality” of behaviour, but above all its value orientation, motivational basis and impact on other participants in the educational process. The findings are used to formulate recommendations for university policy aimed at supporting the professional creativity of academic staff and students while minimising the risk of pathologising creativity under conditions of increasingly normative and audit-driven higher education.

Key words: professional creativity, deviant behaviour, university environment, norm and normativity, motivation, innovation in higher education.

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1. Introduction

The transformation of higher education under conditions of structural instability, digitalisation and global competition for resources and attention intensifies the demand for creative academics and students who are able to initiate and sustain innovative change. At the same time, the regime of normative regulation of academic activity is becoming more stringent: programmes are unified and standardised; formal requirements for documented academic integrity are growing; systems of external quality assurance are being expanded; rigid regulations for assessment, reporting and management by indicators are introduced. In this configuration of audit culture, non-standard behaviour of a lecturer or student acquires an ambivalent status. The same practices can be interpreted either as desirable creativity, consistent with the logic of innovative development, or as undesirable deviance that threatens institutional stability and violates established normative expectations.

Most educational practices lack clear criteria for distinguishing creative from deviant behaviour. Institutional norms tend to respond to any deviation as a threat to order, whereas innovative development requires a reflective questioning and partial violation of established patterns. This creates a risk of pathologising creativity and of labelling creative lecturers and students as “problematic”, “inconvenient” or “conflict-prone”. Such dynamics block the realisation of the institution’s innovation potential, contribute to professional burnout and foster conformist strategies among students. Hence the need for a theoretical and methodological

distinction between creativity and deviance in the university environment. The aim is not to legitimise any “unconventional” actions, but to develop criteria that make it possible to differentiate constructive creativity from destructive deviance and to describe intermediate, risk-prone zones where these phenomena intersect.

The aim of this article is to substantiate the differences between creative and deviant behaviour of participants in the educational process in the university environment, to develop criteria and a conceptual matrix for distinguishing them, and to outline the risks of pathologising creativity in normatively oriented higher education.

To achieve this aim, the following research tasks are set: to analyse the main theoretical and methodological approaches to understanding creativity and deviance; to describe behavioural manifestations of teachers’ professional creativity and student creativity in learning; to develop criteria for distinguishing creative and deviant behaviour, presented in the form of a generalised table; to propose a conceptual matrix of the relationship between creativity and normativity as a tool for analysing behaviour of participants in the educational process; to identify potential risks of pathologising creativity and to outline guidelines for university educational policy.

Theoretical and methodological framework. Methodologically, the article builds on the author’s previous empirical studies in the field of teachers’ professional creativity and the motivational modes of participants in the educational process (Illiakhova, 2024). Conceptually, the research draws on the componential theory of creativity (Amabile, 2012), which understands creativity as the result of interaction between domain-relevant expertise, creative thinking and intrinsic motivation. This approach is particularly relevant for analysing the professional activity of university teachers, where subject expertise and the motivational-value sphere determine the potential for creatively renewing educational practices.

In this context, creativity acquires a clearly professional dimension. Teachers’ professional creativity can be defined as an integral quality that ensures their capacity to design and implement innovative forms of teaching, create developmental situations for students, and reflexively reinterpret their own practice. It includes cognitive (originality, flexibility, divergent thinking), motivational (intrinsic motivation, meaningful engagement), emotional-volitional (tolerance for uncertainty, ability to cope with risk) and communicative components.

The study also draws on self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2023), which posits a continuum from external to internal motivation and introduces the concept of flow as an optimal state of creative engagement in professional activity. In examining the motivational structure of participants in the educational process, the author introduced a model of motivational modes “have to – must – will – can – want” as different modes of professional and learning activity. This made it possible to trace the link between dominant modes and a tendency toward either creative or conformist behavioural strategies (Illiakhova, 2023). Thus, creativity in the university environment is considered not only as a personality trait, but as a dynamic process of interaction between the individual characteristics of teachers and students, institutional requirements and the broader cultural-historical context.

The methodological approach combines normative-value analysis, psychological-pedagogical interpretation of the motivational sphere and conceptual modelling, which together enable creativity and deviance to be considered as interrelated but not identical phenomena of academic life. In particular, the following methods are used: conceptual reconstruction – reinterpretation of the author’s previous findings on teachers’ professional creativity, motivational modes and the cluster structure of creativity in order to apply them to behavioural manifestations in the academic setting. Critical analysis of norms – identification not only of explicit but also of

informal normative expectations within the university that influence the interpretation of creative behaviour as “problematic” or “deviant”. Conceptual typologisation – development of a system of criteria for distinguishing creative and deviant behaviour and subsequent structuring of the “creativity–normativity” matrix, which makes it possible to single out four types of behaviour (constructive creativity, conformist routinisation, risky deviance, destructive deviance).

2. The Relationship between “Norm”, “Creativity” and “Deviance” in the Educational Process

A key question in researching creativity in education concerns the relationship between norm and creativity, and the nature of their correlation. It is precisely at the boundary between the “normal” and the “deviant” that the phenomenon of creativity emerges: on the one hand, creativity inevitably transcends what is established; on the other, it should not be conflated with destructive deviance. Contemporary overviews of deviance emphasise this tension, describing deviance not as a “pure breach” but as a complex zone of interaction between norm, innovation and protest (Goode, 2015).

The concept of norm (from Latin *norma* – measure, rule, law, pattern) is polysemous and cannot be reduced to its etymology. In everyday, psychological, philosophical, natural-scientific, socio-cultural, economic and legal contexts it acquires different connotations. In common usage “norm” refers, first, to an “established measure, quantity” or “average value” (Illiakhova, 2023); second, to “custom, established order”; and third, to “a generally recognised rule of behaviour in a given social milieu”, “binding order or arrangement”. The accent on stability here is twofold: a norm may emerge gradually and spontaneously as a “habitual state of affairs”, or be explicitly instituted as a mandatory rule. Because of this, the second and third meanings of “norm” tend to merge in everyday language, and norm itself is often perceived as self-evident, as something that “needs no explanation”.

In scholarly analysis it is useful to distinguish at least two basic dimensions of norm. The first – substantive (descriptive) – relates to the specification of what is considered the normal state of an object, that is, typical characteristics whose manifestation is perceived as regular and stable. Deviation from these characteristics is treated as an exception, an anomalous state that should be “brought back to normal”. This leads to the classical dichotomy “norm – anomaly” or “norm – pathology”. In psychology, for example, a person whose behaviour runs counter to the values, habits or attitudes of the majority is often considered “abnormal”, and the rarer a particular deviation, the more likely it is to be perceived as anomalous. A similar logic is evident in contemporary accounts of deviant behaviour, where “normality” is linked to statistical frequency and social acceptability, whereas deviance is associated with marginal, rare and socially unacceptable actions (Goode, 2015).

The second dimension – prescriptive (deontic) – concerns norm as an ethical or legal rule. In this sense norm appears as “a standard of conduct, a custom repeatedly reproduced in similar actions of many people as a moral law binding on each individual”, i.e. as part of moral consciousness. Here we are dealing with social norms as provisions that regulate relations between individuals and society and set patterns of action through which ordered and regular social interaction is maintained. Norm in this context is less a description of “what is” than a form of obligation, an idea of “what ought to be”. Contemporary research in the field of legal consciousness shows that the level of internalisation of such norms and the degree of trust in institutions significantly influence a person’s readiness either to comply with or to violate established rules (Pevko, 2024).

Thus, in the first case norm fixes what is typical and established (the substantive dimension), while in the second it denotes what is expected and obligatory (the deontic dimension). In higher education these two types of norms intersect: stereotypes of practice (“this is how things are done here”) gradually acquire the status of moral and professional imperatives (“this is how it should be”). Conversely, formally proclaimed ethical norms may fail to take root as actual behavioural patterns. This discrepancy between declared and actual norms becomes fertile ground both for deviance and for creative re-thinking of norms.

The paradox of creativity lies in the fact that both deviant and “normal” behaviour may exhibit similar outward features. Many individuals with deviant behaviour are also highly creative. Behaviour that diverges from familiar patterns is often driven by an active exploratory impulse, yet it can be maladaptive and destructive in its orientation. The crucial difference lies in the value vector and motivational basis. In creative activity, the process of exploration itself is a source of satisfaction; even negative results are interpreted as additional knowledge about the object and a stimulus to redirect the search. In contrast, in deviant exploratory activity the primary motive is often pleasure as such, the pursuit of excitement, power or dominance regardless of the consequences for others. Empirical studies of young people in the post-COVID period, for example, show that a combination of high sensation seeking with low empathy significantly increases the risk of deviant behaviour, whereas empathy has a clear protective effect (*Floridi et al., 2025*).

Researchers have long noted the presence of shared characteristics among creative and deviant individuals. Barron and Harrington point to independence of judgement, the ability to find challenge attractive, aesthetic sensitivity and willingness to take risks (*Barron, Harrington 1981*). Farley identifies a specific personality type – the “T-personality”, oriented toward excitement seeking. People of this type may attain high levels of creativity or display destructive, including criminal, behaviour (*Farley, 1986*). The results of a series of empirical studies confirm this thesis, demonstrating that the same “search energy” can unfold either into constructive innovative activity or into destructive forms of deviance, depending on the configuration of motivational and value-affective factors (*Floridi et al., 2025*). A high level of exploratory and risk-taking activity is therefore neither a guarantee of creativity nor a marker of deviance; what is decisive is value orientation, attitude toward norms and consequences for others.

In everyday discourse this often results in a misleading opposition between “deep creativity” and superficial “creative display”, where the former is associated with substantive exploratory activity and the latter with demonstrativeness, imitation or self-presentation. Methodologically, however, creative work and creative behaviour belong to the same order of concepts and, in the motivational sphere, should be opposed not to each other but to deviant, addictive forms of behaviour in which the search for novelty is reduced to the pursuit of excitement, evasion of responsibility or sheer destruction. In this sense it is essential to distinguish innovative, socially beneficial non-standardness from destructive deviations (*Goode, 2015*).

3. Criteria for Distinguishing Creative and Deviant Behaviour

Taking into account the above analysis of creativity and deviance in higher education, the article proposes a system of criteria summarised in *Table 1*. These criteria enable an assessment not only of the external “non-standardness” of behaviour but, more importantly, of its value orientation, impact on others and educational outcomes.

In creative individuals, independence of judgement and non-conformism are grounded in inner values and reflection, whereas in deviant individuals they often arise from a hidden sense of inferiority and maladjustment. A creative professional's desire to go beyond the template is linked to the search for constructive solutions; in a deviant actor it is associated with the pursuit of thrills, shock value and risk for its own sake. Openness to the new in the first case is driven by cognitive interest; in the second, by the quest for extreme experiences and uncommon ways of satisfying personal impulses. In general, creative activity tends to be constructive and oriented toward substantive and professional domains, while deviant activity is concentrated in spheres related to norm violation and addictions.

Table 1

Criteria for distinguishing creative and deviant behaviour in the university environment

Criterion	Creative behaviour	Deviant behaviour
Value orientation	Focus on development, educational quality and expansion of opportunities for participants in the process.	Focus on satisfying personal impulses, power or protest without regard for consequences for others.
Attitude to norms	Critical, reflective stance; readiness to question and, where necessary, transparently renegotiate or challenge norms in order to improve practice while preserving fundamental rights and safety.	Systematic ignoring or deliberate violation of basic ethical, legal and academic norms, without assuming responsibility and without concern for the protection of others.
Motivation	Striving to move beyond routine patterns; originality and non-standard approaches; openness to the new and unfamiliar.	Sensation seeking, pursuit of extreme experiences and unconventional ways of achieving gratification; risk-seeking and shock-oriented behaviour.
Activity profile	Constructive activity in substantive and professional domains. Strong sense of agency linked to autonomy and resilience to social pressure.	High exploratory activity focused on deviant interests. Independence in non-deviant domains combined with a tendency to blame others and dependency in addictive spheres.
Attitude to others	Respect for the dignity of students and colleagues; willingness to engage in dialogue; sensitivity to others' boundaries and needs.	Humiliation, manipulation, instrumental use of others; tolerance for violent or degrading practices.
Level of responsibility	Constructive engagement in teamwork. High personal and professional responsibility for outcomes and impact on others.	Avoidance of responsibility, shifting blame, denial of personal involvement in problematic situations.
Reflexivity	Awareness of motives and goals; readiness to reconsider one's approaches and learn from experience.	Low reflexivity, rigidity; predominance of self-justification over analysis of one's own behaviour.
Attitude to mistakes and risk	Mistakes are treated as a learning resource; controlled risk is accepted in the name of innovation.	Risks are ignored; irresponsible experimentation or destructive behaviour "for the sake of protest".

Continuation of table 1

Impact on the educational process	Enhancement of learning quality, engagement and motivation; emergence of new practices.	Destabilisation of the process; decline in trust and motivation; deterioration of the psychological climate.
Emotional tone and communication	Emotional engagement without violence; humour without humiliation; constructive handling of conflict.	Aggression, sarcasm, ridicule; passive or active aggression; systematic devaluation of others.
Motivational mode	Dominance of “can” and “want” modes (self-determination, intrinsic motivation, meaningful engagement).	Dominance of deformed modes “must”, “don’t want”, “I don’t care”; protest without a constructive vision.

These criteria demonstrate that creativity and deviance are not synonyms for non-standardness. Creative behaviour may transcend established forms yet preserves the value core of education, respect for the dignity of others and an orientation toward development. Deviant behaviour, by contrast, undermines this core, even when it outwardly appeals to creativity or freedom.

If norm is understood in its substantive sense as any unit of social experience accumulated and transmitted through tradition – that is, as typical features of a class of phenomena, processes and practices – it fixes a pattern of activity that ensures broad acceptance and stable repetition. In this context behavioural stereotype and norm largely coincide, both denoting stabilised, established ways of acting. Accordingly, creativity as active exploratory activity driven by intrinsic motivation and oriented toward self-determination must, in principle, move beyond the limits of the “substantive norm” and stereotypical practice. Mere deviation from familiar content or form is not yet deviance; on the contrary, without such deviation professional creativity of a teacher is impossible.

However, if we proceed from the second, deontic meaning of norm as an ethical and legal rule that expresses what is expected and sets the boundaries of acceptable behaviour, the picture changes. Here deviation from normative behaviour – that is, from rules that protect dignity, safety and rights of others and ensure ordered interaction – appears as social deviance rather than creative activity. Creativity may and should challenge content-related, methodological and organisational stereotypes, but it must not destroy fundamental ethical, legal and academic norms.

4. The “Creativity–Normativity” Matrix as a Conceptual Model

To further differentiate behavioural strategies of participants in the educational process, a conceptual matrix of the relationship between creativity and normativity is proposed (*Figure 1*). It is based on two axes: the level of creativity (low – high) and the level of constructive normativity (low – high), the latter reflecting the degree to which basic ethical, legal and academic norms are observed.

The intersection of these axes yields four quadrants:

1. *High creativity + high normativity (constructive creativity / innovative leadership).*

This quadrant includes lecturers and students who generate and implement new ideas while preserving respect for norms of safety, dignity and academic integrity. Their practices contribute to institutional development, improve learning quality and foster engagement. This group forms the core of the institution’s innovative potential.

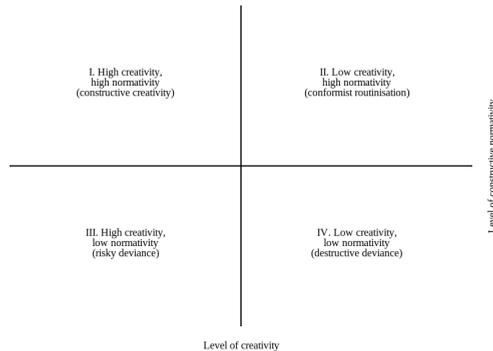


Fig. 1. Matrix of the relationship between creativity and normativity – schematic description

2. *Low creativity + high normativity (conformist routinisation)*. Here we find participants who carefully follow rules but do not initiate change and avoid responsibility for innovation. They provide system stability, but when this type of behaviour dominates, the institution risks sliding into mere reproduction of the status quo.

3. *High creativity + low normativity (risky deviance)*. This quadrant describes “spectacular” creativity without ethical constraints. Its representatives are capable of original ideas but may violate others’ rights and neglect integrity and safety. If the university uncritically romanticises this type of behaviour, creativity becomes associated with impunity and toxicity.

4. *Low creativity + low normativity (destructive deviance)*. In this quadrant neither creative orientation nor respect for norms is present. Behaviour is openly destructive: aggression, sabotage, devaluation of learning. It calls not for innovative, but for disciplinary and psychological-pedagogical responses.

The matrix shows that creativity in itself does not guarantee constructiveness, and normativity is not necessarily synonymous with “rightness” in the long term. An innovative academic institution must consciously support the first quadrant, while creating conditions for participants to move from conformist routinisation and risky deviance toward constructive creativity.

5. Conclusions

The academic setting simultaneously requires creativity and seeks to preserve normative stability, creating tension between innovative and conformist tendencies. Within this tension, non-standard behaviour may be interpreted either as desirable creativity or as undesirable deviance. In the educational context, creativity is an integral characteristic of teachers’ professional activity and students’ learning engagement, connected with intrinsic motivation, states of flow, the capacity to re-think norms and to create new practices. Deviant behaviour in the university, by contrast, involves violations of ethical, legal and academic norms that harm other participants or undermine the basic values of education. Some behavioural manifestations may have a mixed character, when protest against unjust norms takes both creative and destructive forms.

The proposed criteria for distinguishing creative and deviant behaviour indicate that the key parameters are value orientation, attitudes toward norms and other people, level of responsibility, reflexivity and impact on the educational process. Non-standardness as

such cannot serve as sufficient basis for classifying behaviour as deviant. The conceptual “creativity–normativity” matrix makes it possible to identify four types of behaviour – from constructive creativity to destructive deviance – and to delineate risk zones where creative potential can slide into deviant practices or, conversely, be blocked by excessive normativity.

In the absence of clear criteria for distinguishing creativity and deviance, university administrations and academic communities may: label creative lecturers and students as “problematic” when their practices go beyond habitual routines; suppress innovative initiatives under the pretext of “violating traditions”, “overly risky experiments” or “non-format” behaviour; reproduce a culture of fear of error in which impeccable compliance with instructions becomes the main value rather than development.

The consequences include reduced motivation and resilience among academics, outflow of the most creative professionals from the academic system, and the formation among students of a strategy of “doing the minimum to pass” rather than genuine learning.

To avoid pathologising creativity, university policy should:

1. *Clearly separate creativity and deviance at the normative level.* Adopt internal regulations that explicitly distinguish between support for innovative teaching and research practices, on the one hand, and procedures for responding to ethical, legal and disciplinary violations, on the other.

2. *Introduce structured spaces for experimentation.* Establish semester-based teaching innovation grants and “protected pilot status” for experimental courses, where lecturers can test new formats of content delivery and assessment under peer review and with clearly defined conditions of responsibility.

3. *Develop a culture of reflection and dialogue.* Institutionalise regular pedagogical colloquia, communities of practice and mandatory ethics workshops that explicitly differentiate legitimate critique of norms from harmful norm-breaking. This reduces interpretive conflicts and the arbitrary stigmatisation of creative behaviour.

4. *Strengthen student self-governance and partnership formats.* Involve students in joint design of curricula, assessment criteria and codes of academic conduct through mixed committees and participatory formats. This channels potentially deviant energy into constructive participation and shared responsibility.

5. *Work systematically with the motivational sphere of academics.* Support autonomy, recognise achievements, and provide opportunities for professional development and research projects. Such measures contribute to a shift from “have to / must” motivational modes toward “can / want”, which form the psychological basis of creativity.

Future research should focus on empirical testing of the proposed matrix with samples of teachers and students, the development of diagnostic tools for assessing motivational profiles and behavioural strategies, and the analysis of links between types of creativity/deviance and the innovative potential of academic communities.

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