

More work is required to make academic “timescapes” worth inhabiting and to open up space for creative work

[lse blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2017/05/29/more-work-is-required-to-make-academic-timescapes-worth-inhabiting-and-to-open-up-space-for-creative-work/](https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2017/05/29/more-work-is-required-to-make-academic-timescapes-worth-inhabiting-and-to-open-up-space-for-creative-work/)

5/29/2017

*Is the problem with contemporary academia really one of constant acceleration? **Ulrike Felt** argues that focusing too much on acceleration overlooks a more complex phenomenon at work. What is needed is careful investigation of “time generators”, the key sites in academia that create binding temporal requirements and regulations. Many of academia’s recent reforms – to funding structures, assessment exercises, accountability procedures, curricula or career paths – have all involved important temporal reordering work. This work has inevitable effects on core academic work and may have consequences for who remains in academia and who leaves. More attention thus needs to be devoted to the ways different academic times come together to form a “timescape”.*



This is a new post in the [Accelerated Academy](#) series.

Is the problem of contemporary academia really about acceleration – the continuous need to squeeze ever more elements into a finite amount of time? And, if so, would the proposed solution be to simply [slow down](#), as many contemporary writers suggest? [Acceleration](#) and, more generally, a “[culture of speed](#)” have become the defining characteristics of contemporary societies and modern life, a trend echoed by their recent prominence in academic debates. In particular, young scholars account for the feeling of a growing pressure coupled with [a worrisome degree of alienation](#) when facing the discrepancy between how they imagined science to be and how science expects them to perform in order to succeed.

One can certainly find specific elements in the contemporary academic research system to support the drawn conclusion of speed as a major problem. Nonetheless, I would argue that focusing too much on acceleration might cause us to overlook a more complex phenomenon at work. Indeed, the feeling of acceleration might actually be understood as the outcome of a gradual process of reconfiguring the temporal infrastructures of academic work and life on multiple levels. A good example of avoiding such a normative dual view of fast or slow is Filip Vostal’s [Accelerating Academia](#). So, if acceleration is not the core problem then deceleration is certainly not the solution. From where, then, does this strong feeling of time pressure and haste in contemporary academia emerge?



Image credit: [Clock](#) by Hefin Owen. This work is licensed under aCC BY-SA 2.0 license.

How time gets made in academia

In moving away from conceptualising time as a straightforward physical entity, we must shift our attention to the places and moments where time gets made. What is needed is a careful investigation of the key sites in academia that create binding temporal requirements and regulations; thus, imposing specific rhythms, which standardise as well as homogenise academic time. In short, we have to study what [Rinderspacher](#) calls “time generators.” More concretely this means looking into the academic system’s multiple recent reforms – i.e. in funding structures, assessment exercises, accountability procedures, curricula or career paths – as all of these are involved in doing important temporal reordering work. Indeed, I might suggest, [as I have done in a recent book chapter](#), that for any problem academia encounters the appropriate response seems to be the establishment of a new time generator.

The challenge to boost quality in research led to a competitive distribution of funding via the project, subsequently putting time limits on what we can think and research, creating a new iron cage of project bureaucracy. This projectification of academic work has also generated a whole new category of researchers who, as Oili-Helena Ylijoki points out, temporarily join academic institutions as project collaborators and [“sell their labour” through the commodity of “project time”](#).

Concern over quality at individual, collective and institutional levels brought a [flurry of assessment exercises](#). Academic education has become increasingly structured through stressing what should to be taught per time unit and careers have become temporalised according to the paradigm of excellence and selectivity. The counting of publications per time unit, along with the valuing of journals expressed through the tallying of average numbers of citations per time unit (the impact factor) are yet further examples of how time gets interwoven into academic valuing and living practices. We thus encounter a bewildering multiplicity of ever-new time structures permeating academic lives.

Unintended consequences and temporal inconsistencies

These new temporalities do not leave core academic work untouched. We can see shifts in how we attribute value to both the manner in which we work and the outcomes we produce. We observe changes in academic lifestyles — affecting who remains in academia and who leaves. Furthermore, we can trace impacts on researchers’ ability or

willingness to take the time to engage beyond their field, to do support work or to collaborate beyond the pragmatic and formal level. Or we might speculate that an unintended consequence of these temporal reorderings is the so-called [reproducibility crisis](#), the inability of researchers to reproduce others and – even more troubling – their own experimental data.

This bewildering variety of temporalities tacitly governing academia pushes and pulls researchers in many different directions at once. In this context, the key question is how academics manage to create coherence between these different, often competing temporal structures and their values and attending demands. This leads to a deep feeling of asynchronicity. The rhythms of reporting and assessing, of lives and careers in research, and of projects and publications no longer seem to fit together. This creates ruptures and tensions from which arise the constant demand on academics to work on repairing inconsistencies. The feeling of acceleration can then be understood as a failure to synchronise adequately and the lasting feeling of “not being in/on time”. On the one hand the different temporal rhythms and their non-alignment create the feeling of constant demands to meet all kinds of deadlines. On the other hand, it expresses a deep struggle to embrace these new temporal imaginations, performances and demands. The latter becomes palpable through the oscillations between academic nostalgia, expressed in the partly [nostalgic recollections](#) of a better, “slower” past, and the quite radical rejections of the past as inadequate and inefficient.

Time and power

These observations, however, raise our attention to the [deep entwinement of the control of time and the exercise of power](#). Controlling researchers’ temporal resources and being able to regulate their rhythms of work, defining the duration of research activities as well as the length of a researcher’s stay at an institution, and prescribing the speed of production as well as the rhythm of evaluations, are all expressions of power. Therefore, questions of inclusion and exclusion from the academic system (i.e. a factor often underestimated in debates on gender and academia) must be seen through the lens of time and the introduction of ever-new time generators. Being able both to coordinate one’s time within institutional/departmental time structures and to synchronise with other actors vital to one’s work becomes fundamental for access to opportunities and recognition. Consequently, this ability allows for decision-making at appropriate moments and thus, in the end, to successfully survive in academia.

What to conclude?

Contemporary researchers are confronted with many different temporal structures and must develop the capacity to fold them in ways appearing to fit with their expectations of a good academic life. However, this demands substantive work and it is highly questionable if the growing temporalisation of academia will actually produce the desired effects. More attention thus needs to be devoted to the ways different academic times come together to form a “[timescape](#)”, a term coined by Barbara Adam. Let’s make an analogy to landscapes: we appreciate the attention devoted to the spatial arrangement of the different elements in ways found sustainable and attractive for their inhabitants, cherish the know-how of landscape architects and acknowledge the work it involves. Analogously, more care should be paid to how different times come together to form academic timescapes, how they form a scape worth inhabiting and allow for creative work to unfold. This also means to engage in a deeper reflection on the necessity of ever-new time generators — ultimately they may create as many problems as they promise to solve. In short, we face a need to “[retime research and higher education](#)”, as I have recently argued. However, there is also a need to acknowledge the work that needs to be done to make a timescape worth inhabiting and open up space for creative work. Finally, as is done for landscapes, academic institutions would need to take the time to reflect on and thoroughly care for the academic timescapes they create — perhaps a new task for academic leadership.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Impact Blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [comments policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.

About the author

Ulrike Felt is Professor of Science and Technology Studies and currently Dean of the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Vienna. Her research interests span number of themes including issues of science and democracy, questions of responsible research and innovation as well as the analysis of changing cultures of academic knowledge production. Understanding temporal structures in science and society as well as the importance of future making practices is her keen interest across the above-mentioned issues. Her ORCID ID is [0000-0001-7506-4234](https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7506-4234).

- Copyright © The Author (or The Authors) - Unless otherwise stated, this work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution Unported 3.0 License.