Flexible and fixed times working in the academy

In the daily practice of the academy, it seems to me one thing is increasingly the terrain of dispute, anxiety and stress. Time. Colleagues want more time to research, do not have enough time to read, are working too much of their time, cannot fit the job into the time available, cannot spend enough time with students who need them, have to spend too much time with students who do not appreciate them, get riled by parents who assume they have long vacation times and so on. The litany is familiar and long. I was prompted to reflect a bit more specifically on what is going here by a couple of events arising from structural developments in the British university system. Firstly as part of 'transparency audits', I had to do my annual time-use survey exercise. This records broad headings of activities so the university can allocate overhead costs on research and teaching. It is a simple post hoc exercise of dubious reliability, but one that tries very hard to talk in proportions of time rather than total amounts. Second then, my university has just managed to implement a national staff regrading structure agreed, after some acrimony, two years ago across all British universities. All jobs were re-evaluated, from porter to professor, measured against a variety of skills and placed on one grand scheme of job categories. This July, one month before the final deadline allowed in the national agreement, my institution managed to send out the notices of our new gradings and related conditions of employment. The portion of the conditions that struck me was the brevity with which it could detail expectations of work for academics. Unlike complex formulae and discussions for hourly paid staff, for academics it mandates:

> 'a nominal working week of 35 hours per week, [where] the hours and days are not strictly defined as it is expected that employees on these grades will manage their own time to ensure that all duties and responsibilities are fully completed, where this involves additional time either at work or away from the workplace no enhanced rates of pay will apply.'

On the face of it, this seems not merely a typical statement of being a salaried employee but the sort of positive flexible arrangement many employees in other sectors would crave. So why then is there

all the angst? Part of the answer is in the combination with the definition of the duties and responsibilities that must be 'fully completed'. So being in an 'old' university, my contract defines as 'such teaching, research and administration as the Vice-Chancellor or Chair of Board of Studies may from time to time specify'. So between these two phrases, we have presented the ambiguity and flexibility of academic time: an open ended set of tasks and an indeterminate time period. I want to use some reflection of the temporalities of academic work to raise issues that perhaps speak to other forms and work and indeed to how we need to think through temporalities.

Time Burdens, Time Measures, Times Tallied up

One clear reason for angst over time is pressure on academics in terms of the overall demands of the job. The last decade or two in British academia have seen a large expansion in student numbers, growing pressure to conduct and publish research alongside new regulatory and administrative regimes designed to render these activities transparent and auditable. The impact of audits is not only in terms of performance anxiety but as a time burden. Taking all these demands together the overall time demands on academics in the UK have been growing. The then Association of University Teachers (2006) used official statistics to suggest that from a base of a 39 hour week, faculty averaged 9 hours a week 'unpaid' overtime – or, putting it another way, were working for free for three months of each year. Add to this the evidence from the union sponsored survey of 2004 on work life balance and stress where 59% of full time employees admitted to working more than 45 hours in a typical week, with 21% typically doing more than 55 hours and only 40% taking all their entitlement to annual leave (Kinman and Jones 2004, pages 1, 4). The resulting quantitative picture attests to large work loads and pressures on work-life balances.

One strategy to attempt to deal with these time pressures is using workload models. So for my department every teaching and administrative activity is given a time allocation. Your duties can

thus be added up to produce an overall commitment, and line managers should thus be able to allocate tasks to enable some approximate parity. In my workplace, the aim is to keep everyone to within 20% variance from the average load (calculated pro rata for fractional staff, sabbaticals and so forth) and to contain total teaching and administration time to allow time for research. In the eight years it has been running, two trends have become evident. First, the credit for work is always contested. How much time does an 'average' postgraduate take to supervise? How long does it take to write a lecture? Statistical norms become normative standards quite quickly. Secondly, more and more has to be included in the model – to get someone to do a job, it has to count. Currently the model stops short of including research – but with new funding rules paying for academic's time inputs to projects, this will surely start to be factored in soon enough.

Such models offer some protection or at least definition of expectations, but inevitably using time as a metric means equating apples and pears. The rewards, both personal and professional, from say supervising a postgraduate cannot be easily equated with an equal time taken teaching however many first year lectures, or organising a seminar programme, for instance. They may all take the same amount of time, but their meaning is very different. So there is an issue to unpack not just how much time, but the value of that time to individuals and institutions? However, I also want to push this a little further to think not only about quantities of time involved but the types of time – the temporalities. I want to suggest that as much stress results from conflicting temporalities as from absolute demands on academic time.

Academic Temporalities

Ylijoki and Mantila (2003) in a study of Finnish academics identified four senses of time - scheduled time, contracted time, timeless time and personal time. Scheduled time referred to the demanded and organised time laid out by institutions – this is where the pace, duration and timing

of an activity is defined by the organisation. Typically academics have watched this increase as universities have become more active in managing their staff and leave less autonomy over activities. Contracted time refers to fixed term projects and fixed term employment – a sense of finitude and a race to accomplish things before the end point. Again the rise of 'flexible' staffing and short term contracts has been marked across higher education. Timeless time is the much sought after sense of being lost in one's work – reading or researching without a definite series of outcomes, but enabling reflection and deeper thought than instrumentally searching for a source to complete a section of a paper, an example for a lecture or some such. Personal time was the perspective reflecting on the overall pattern of their work in terms of a career or work life balances. In Finland too, they found long hours marking sacrifices for career advancement, with 10 or 12 hours days and respondents worrying about 'burning out' (Ylijoki and Mantyla 2003, pages 67-8). My suggestion is that the conflicts between these temporal perspectives have been growing.

Clearly I do not mean to play down the impact of overall hours. It has become a commonplace to ironically note academics working long hours to write papers decrying exploitations through long hours cultures (I think my first encounter with the example was in Massey, Quintas et al. 1992). Indeed personally I am so sad as to be able to talk of writing presentations on the topic of work life balance in the small hours of the morning. And if that is when you are happiest writing in some senses that is part of the flexibility that many others would dearly love to have. But it is not simply a matter of preference. In their study of women in Canadian academia, Acker and Armenti (2004, page 4) sum things up with the poignant informant quote - 'I mean, if I didn't have to sleep it would be fine'. Their work points to the systemic imbalances in demands on people's time. Looking especially at recent mothers they sum up the major coping strategy, and I use that term advisedly, as working harder and sleeping less. Balancing demands to be a carer and have an academic career raises an unequally gendered set of issues. Some of these issues are broad policy issues of childcare provision, parental leave, that vary nationally and are outside academia. Some are compopunded by

specific effects within the academy. So increasing numbers of British academics are turning to fractional contracts to balance the overall demands of work with caring tasks. That is 'tenured' faculty taking fractional pay for doing a fraction of a full workload. This highlights thorny issues for the academy –since it has rarely defined what a full time work load might be, it is very hard for even sympathetic managers to moderate those to fractional contracts (Birnie, Madge et al. 2005).

However, more than just the total amount of work there is the effect of clashing clocks, rhythms and routines. Thus in North America we might see the clashing of the tenure clock with women's desires to have children, resulting families postponed until tenure is secured – and with little maternity pay, the timing of births to coincide with the start of summer vacations (Acker and Armenti 2004, page 11). Indeed the sense of time as accumulation sits uneasily with the imperatives to start afresh and shift focus with shifting jobs, or career breaks or shifts in focus. We might contrast the more general sense of linear temporality many demand or expect from a career and more episodic and cyclical senses of time in academia. Academic resumés are a shrine to the notion of linear development – publication after publication, paper presentation after presentation. That vitae are so obsessed with stressing a linear trajectory may indicate this is *not* the way time in the academy is usually experienced. A case can be made that cyclical time is far more pervasive. In Britain, without tenure track clocks, the system of performance audit currently extends all the way through the career, with work being assessed in Research Assessment Exercise cycles. What you did last time does not matter, the clock is set back to zero and the only question is what have you done in this cycle? Likewise teaching is one of the great cyclical time markers. Each year a new cohort starts, the courses have to be revised, retooled and re-presented. These are familiar patterns at differing temporal scales – on a weekly scale the course ticks along, on an annual one it is marching in place. Against this the sense of a career as some sort of arc, or trajectory of smooth progress seems oddly incongruous. Not only does this smooth progress repress cycles it also downplays the sense of episodic time. It is a retrospective fiction, woven by removing the

contingencies and anxious waiting times. So in 2005 the average success rate for getting an Economic and Social Research Council grant was a little over 20% with a six month decision period - and other funds and other countries have similar rates. So 80% of the time put into the applications is 'wasted' and whole future planned programmes of work never happen. Time spent on these things tends to be edited out of the picture. But these gaps and pauses, the contingency of which of our ideas comes off, either through funding or making it through journal refereeing , the lumpiness of how sometimes things all seem to go well and sometimes nothing seems to work, tend to be suppressed in the 'ideal' trajectory. The episodic nature of trying to accomplish things, some of which come off (at first, second or successive attempts), some of which do not (at first, second or any attempt), all of which operate on different multiple time scales and rhythms seems central to the experience of being an academic.

Fixed or flexible times and places

The very variability and multiplicity of timescales is at the essence of juggling tasks. Grants to referee or proofs that appear without warning and demand (sometimes vainly) dropping everything; university missives demanding information, reports or data similarly appear and usually require urgent attention; these have fixed, sometimes short deadlines. Writing a paper, a book or so forth may be a longer process and may have a less fixed end point. The number of clashes is rendered harder to manage since there are many commitments from different sources – from the employing institution at different levels, from journals, from publishers, from funders, from respondents, from collaborators and so forth. All of whom run to their own timetables. The balance of doing what is important and not just what is urgent is never easy. Academia often functions on the basis of people agreeing to do things far in advance when their diaries look less cluttered and alluring blank spots appear on the pages –only to realise once the time arrives it is now just as massively congested as any other time. Most often this is experienced as fixed commitments, often of our own choosing,

getting in the way of planned and desired work. For many or most academics getting through the fixed commitments gets you to the start of the 'real' work – that which is going to be found more satisfying or intellectually engaging. I do not wish to imply that fixed commitments may not be important, discharged professionally and indeed be engaging and rewarding, yet they are often felt and spoken of as obstacles.

Employers' work life balance policies often offer flexibility as 'the solution'. Academia, of all professions, has massive flexibility. Many use this, by starting early, or working late, or stopping work and restarting tasks at home to juggle the demands upon them. But this very ability is also one of the problems. Since we can reschedule so much, partly since there are so many different things going on, there is the presumption that academic time is almost infinitely malleable. Coupled with this malleability is a sense of the job being almost infinitely extensible – with always another item there on the 'to do' or 'to read' pile. That it is our more flexible more ongoing tasks that tend to be rescheduled out of normal hours seems apparent when 80% of academics work 20% of their time outside normal hours, during which they do half of all personal scholarship (Kinman and Jones 2004, pages 12, 19). Likewise the times to network, to put it instrumentally, or to offer professional courtesy and hospitality, to be more benign, tend to be out of normal hours and clash with demands of being a carer or indeed a partner (Raddon 2002). So one of the defences emerging is reinforcing the 'normal working day' where people, especially on fractional but also full contracts, attempt to restrict work hours as a way of defining the job. If it does not fit then it is asking too much. So may be more staff will see 'working at home' not as the flexible solution to juggling home/work commitments but as a Trojan horse – letting the demands of academia in to private time.

Putting boundaries on work is thus often more than a time strategy – it can be a spatial strategy as well. The ability to work from home has long been a treasured part of academia – reducing the pressures of daily commuting, enabling different domestic arrangements. But some of these spatial

strategies now too seem to be shifting. One reason for working at home, which would be familiar to Virginia Woolf, was peace and room to think. It was not just that our scholarship got done outside office hours – it was done outside the office in an environment more conducive to serious reflection, with fewer disturbances and competing claims for attention. Except access to a personal study space, free from other household members' demands makes assumptions about the overall resources available to afford that room and about power within the household to define such room as a work space. Moreover, the rise of new media and ways of working are changing the 'isolation' of home - as virtual networks and email mean there is less escape from the other demands of work.

The spatial scale of a globalised academia also poses time-space constraints. Traditional academic assumptions of trailing spouses, or relocations for sabbaticals also tend to assume household locational decisions fitting the contours of academia. Dual income households, which are increasingly prevalent, often utilise complex logistical coping strategies that may well mean they are more dependent on locally embedded support networks and relationships, and thus less locationally mobile (Jarvis 1999). An assumption of mobility, especially early in the career, bumps ever more frequently into issues of non-work commitments be they as a carer or to partner's career. Compounding this then is that choices for spatial immobility often entail taking less desirable, possibly rolling short term, contracts or working in institutions less well suited to individuals' needs. Certainly there are strong contrasts with economic sectors that have regional or urban labour markets. Even in a small country like Britain, outside the far south east, the pattern tends to be that academic job moves entail residential moves. The alternative to relocating may be coping strategies that use time flexibility ruthlessly – working extreme hours for half a week, which imposes its own burdens - or employing more remote access for parts of the work period. On a shorter time scale, careers entail not just hours in the office but travel away from home to present, travel to research, and, for geographers, travel to take field classes – all of which have time impacts on spouses and

partners. The fixed times, and places, of childcare, schooling, school terms and the like jar uneasily with demands for mobility and time away from home.

Reflections

Some of these issues may be inflected by national structures – such as audit cultures or maternity rights - but these issues are not unique to British academia. Academics remain extremely well positioned to fashion their own solutions to issues, although it is clear managements are looking all too eagerly at ways of monitoring activities. My suspicion is that if such monitoring develops it may well prove terribly counterproductive for institutional managers. Not only might it flag up the issue of overall work loads but may well force people to realise what proportion of time is spent doing different sorts of tasks. It might show the costs of all those unsuccessful activities – may be even encouraging fewer but better honed pieces of work. If a triage approach ensued it would surely mean further damage to a variety of 'professional service' activities that are collectively vital but individually optional. The hierarchies of fixed versus flexible tasks, urgent versus important would come under intense strain. More seriously it might lead to 'bite size' work – a productivist ethos that seeks an outcome for each action. Now I am not arguing that publicly funded scholars should not be productive, or even efficient, but the worry surely is that to itemise and justify time may lead to a prioritising of more short timescale tasks – that scheduled time will overwrite timeless time to use Ylojki and Mantyla's terms. Doreen Massey's (2002) plea for a sense of time to reflect seems apposite here. Like her, I am not saying that large works somehow require a monastic retreat and solitary introspection. They do indeed comprise much thinking through action and hosts of practices, which could be elaborated, documented and audited. Maybe such an accounting would again reveal the amount of labour that goes into academia. It might also force us into some uncomfortable assessments of which activities consume how much time. That may be beneficial. But I very much doubt that increasingly corporate universities will weigh the benefits and costs in

the same terms. Currently developing a more comprehensive sense of 'scheduled time' may offer us a way of managing and controlling 'personal time', but strategically we need to develop ways of narrating different time-scales, rhythms and temporalities that offer a vocabulary for slowness, for reflection, and for non-linear paths.

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