

It's About Time: working towards better understandings of unequal temporal resources and the impact of time for students in higher education (0073)

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Abstract

Higher education experiences are increasingly intensified by competing imperatives of study, work, and personal commitments. However, despite significant change, the assumption persists that time is a neutral and linear framework in which all students are equally positioned. This paper will examine how experiences of 'time', as well as dominant discourses about 'time management', significantly impact on the experiences, participation and academic achievement of students in higher education, often exacerbating inequalities. The paper will draw on qualitative data from a comparative research project, including in-depth interviews with and time journals produced by students from undergraduate Nursing, Law and Engineering programs at one Australian and one English regional university. The research reveals how temporalities shape inequalities in higher educational participation, as pedagogical and institutional structures and practices of time are entangled in, and often reinforce, unequal social relations.

Paper

Despite the foundational role of 'time' in organising higher education experiences, it has received little attention in research (Stevenson and Clegg 2012). Yet one of the main reasons students from under-represented backgrounds cite for leaving study is 'lack of time' and 'time pressures' (e.g. Horstmanshof and Zimitat, 2007). This paper will explore perceptions of 'time', 'time pressures' and 'lack of time' and show how such perceptions impact on the educational experiences of students from diverse backgrounds. The paper will provide a platform from which assumptions of 'time' and 'time-management', conventionally considered to be an individual problem—simply the result of an individual's lack of organisation and choices—can be re-configured in more informed, socially aware and responsive ways. The research data uncovers that the way temporal constraints are conventionally understood in pedagogical and institutional contexts tend to exacerbate, rather than ameliorate, inequalities in higher education participation across complex social differences. The paper will explore the key overarching question: How does conventional thinking about time, in terms of educational trajectories and time management, create and reproduce different opportunities and exclusions in higher education?

This paper is based on theorisations of 'time' in scholarly literature from fields of Sociology and Physics. This body of work suggests that the rigid structuring of time reinforces existing power relations and masks the inequalities around how time is perceived and lived (Clegg 2010; Adkins 2009; Barad 2001,

2007). The analysis of qualitative data from the project reveals that there are differential—and distinctly ‘relational’—experiences of time in higher education. The ways time is experienced is deeply interconnected with social, cultural and geographic relations of difference and power. Time commitments may be significantly stretched and constrained according to particularities of geographic distance, SES status, gender, disability, and other such contingencies. However, this is not simply about ‘making time’ to travel to university, complete homework or fit in childcare. Time management is embedded in complex social relations so that unequal access to temporal resources, and the ways that temporal constraints are understood, judged and translated in disciplinary, pedagogical and institutional contexts, contribute to exacerbating inequalities and exclusions in higher education. The research framing the proposed paper aims to provide a deeper and more refined understanding of how time plays out across social differences, how conventional understanding of ‘effective time management’ might be limited in relation to institutional aspirations for equity and inclusion and how policy and practice might be more sensitive to those differences, power relations and complexities.

The paper will present our analysis of how ‘time’ is experienced by undergraduate students across two regional universities: one in Australia and one in England. Drawing on data from research funded by the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE) in Australia, the research reconceptualizes time as ‘relational’ and deeply entangled in social, geographic and cultural inequalities. The research involved the collection of rich and detailed data about student experiences of ‘time’ through in-depth, qualitative interviews conducted with undergraduate students, from regional and remote/rural areas, participating in Law, Nursing and Engineering programmes (one case study HEI in Australia and one in England).

As well as the in-depth interviews, our analysis will also draw on time journals that the students have produced over a two-week period of their studies. The three disciplinary contexts were selected to examine differences between them in how time and ‘time management’ is constructed and structured, how that impacts students’ temporal experiences and how time pressures might vary across programmes of study and in relation to geographic issues. Each of these 3 different disciplinary fields faces the contemporary challenges of meeting the diverse needs of students and the temporal issues this raises. Our analysis of the data identifies contingencies of ‘time’ as lived by students across these different disciplinary contexts, aiming to inform new approaches to higher education policy and practice through which problematic conceptions of time can be reconfigured to better support students, with particular attention to those from regional and remote/rural areas, and to the importance of addressing the temporal ‘rhythms’ that characterize these different programmes of study.

The paper will outline the following key issues emerging from the research in relation to broader pedagogical commitments to supporting students from diverse social backgrounds:

- How ‘time’ frameworks shape and limit participation and retention in

higher education;

- The limitations of 'time management' approaches for addressing the complex temporal experiences, challenges and relationships of students from a range of (often intersecting) equity groups; and
- How to conceptualize new ways to practically implement 'time management' frameworks in higher education that are able to be responsive to the specific needs of students, and especially those students from equity groups whose time commitments are stretched and constrained according to particularities of geographic distance, SES status, gender, disability, and other contingencies.

- **References:**

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