

The pace of academic life is not the problem—the lack of autonomy is

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To many disgruntled with the quantification of scholarship, its impossible demands and meaningless metrics, it is the heightened pace of academic life that is the problem. For **Alison Edwards**, the crux of the problem is actually a lack of autonomy. Is it time for academics to take back control? This post is inspired in part by the Impact Blog's [Accelerated Academy](#) series.



If you work as an academic, chances are you were the smart kid in school. You always liked learning. It's like being a fish in water, being an overachiever. You get off on performing. I hear you; I get it. Because me too.

But like many, I'm disturbed by the developments in the academy today. The quantification of scholarship, with its impossible demands and meaningless metrics, is creating perverse incentives and a toxic atmosphere. The situation has been aptly described as "[heating up the floor to see who can keep hopping the longest](#)".

Slow Academia has been proposed as a solution. But as a response to [Neoliberal U](#), it is not yet fully thought out. It's not clear that the *pace* of academic life is the issue here. More likely, the crux of the problem is a lack of autonomy—in which case a more felicitous call to action would be not necessarily to slow down, but (to reclaim the catchphrase of the Brexiteers) to take back control.

Slow Academia

It's hard to argue with the ideas behind Slow Academia, as expressed in manifestos and movements like [Slow Scholarship](#), [Slow Science](#) and the [Slow University](#). To put the brakes on now and then. To let ideas brew. To "focus upon a more reflective way of being, doing and living connected to addressing ... issues of well-being, the common good, connection and community", as [Maggie O'Neill](#) puts it. Who could dispute the appeal? But Slow Academia has its critics too. In particular, it seems to have a troubled relationship with time.

Pace is not the problem

The focus on *slow* suggests the issue is specifically the frantic speed of developments in academia. But that's not the whole story. Here's the [Slow Science Manifesto](#):

"Don't get us wrong — we do say yes to the accelerated science of the early 21st century. We say yes to the constant flow of peer-review journal publications and their impact; we say yes to science blogs and media and PR necessities...However, we maintain that this cannot be all. Science needs time to think."

It's not about doing everything more slowly, then, but about having the space to focus on what's important. Like thinking, rather than being slaves to the metrics machine or tethered to our email accounts. ("I'm a professor of philosophy, not a cardiac surgeon", writes Brian Treanor in the [Slow University Manifesto](#). "How urgent can it be?")

Filip Vostal advocates "[unhasty](#)" rather than slow scholarship, and points out that speed is not all bad. Rather, modernity has always been characterised by an inherent "will to accelerate":

“Speed has often been chosen, desired, appreciated — either as an instrument or as a goal in its own right...[T]he commitment to speed...remains a powerful motivational force even today; a force profoundly entrenched in the modern individual’s calculating and strategising mindset.”

It’s not about being “sluggish turtles”, he continues. What academics want is “something akin to **scholarly time autonomy**, enabling them to determine how temporal resources should be used”.

Autonomous academia

So *control* is the crux of the matter, and it’s here that the politics of slow have been accused of being not radical enough. Rather than challenging the very nature of capitalist knowledge production and consumption, Slow Academia just asks for [more time to deal with it](#). Or as [Heather Mendick](#) puts it:

“Slowing down is mainly a way to be a more efficient and effective scholar, with slow scholarship directed towards the same aims as fast scholarship but offering a better way of getting there. But... shouldn’t we be seeking to challenge the goals as well as the means of academic life? And more broadly shouldn’t slow disrupt rather than reproduce the dominant definition of progress?”

Yet for better or worse, it is *productivity* as defined by the establishment that drives many scholars. We might object to the rules, but can’t help playing the game anyway. We are hypocrites, achievement fiends, “[addicted to the brand](#)” of big-name journals.

The point is about choice. In asking “is slow what the Slow University’s about?” Luke Martell [says](#): “the issue isn’t balance, but control over the balance. Lots of things grouped under slow are about quality of life...But the key is autonomy and the ability to reclaim our lives for ourselves.”

Taking back control

Martell goes on to propose some solutions: “one is individual withdrawal from paid employment, going part-time, self-employed or freelance. Some who do this still have lots of work and a life of speed. But because they’re freer from institutional employment they feel liberated.”

This is the route I’ve taken. I did my PhD at Cambridge, where my thesis was accepted with the rare result of no corrections. I like to think I’m not lacking in the ability and ambition departments. But the establishment route, I began to notice, didn’t sit well with me. I spent large chunks of time writing applications for grants I had next to no chance of getting, a futile process made worse by how dodgy it felt. Where is the sense in using an ultimately taxpayer-funded position to write proposals in the hopes of landing yet more taxpayer money? (See [Jan Blommaert](#) for [more](#) on this.)

On graduating, I was strongly encouraged to apply for a post in Germany just as I was preparing to move to the Netherlands with my new husband, who had landed a postdoc there. “If you caught the overnight train from Amsterdam every Sunday”, he said brightly, “you’d be right on time to teach at 9am Mondays”.

The prospect didn’t sound appealing. So I bit the bullet and went out on my own as a part-time, independent scholar, funding my research through freelance editing and translation. In a broad sense, I embrace the ethics of slow. Free of the tyranny of the tenure track, I have the luxury of investing in new knowledge. I’ll take a sidestep into an adjacent field rather than salami slicing yet another paper out of work I’ve already done to death. I’ll attend a conference I’m intrigued by even if I’m not presenting at it.

But that’s not to say I work *slow*. I don’t want to work fewer hours or be less productive. I see myself in [Mark](#)

[Carrigan](#)'s admission: "I'm aware that I like speed...Time-pressure can be a symbol of status and flaunting it can represent one of the few socially acceptable forms of conspicuous self-aggrandisement available." I may not have external targets, but I can't get enough of imposing them on myself. There are papers in the pipeline, collaborative projects, a second book in progress, a blog and a small business. Oh, and I'm about to have a child.

Removing myself from the establishment route doesn't diminish that drive. I expect the personal compulsion to do more, to achieve more, to *produce* more will always be there. It runs deep.

But it's on my own terms.

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About the author

Alison Edwards (PhD Cantab) is based in Amsterdam, where she works as a writer, translator, editor and independent scholar. Her latest research focuses on English in continental Europe and its role in local identity construction. She is the author of *English in the Netherlands: Functions, Forms and Attitudes* (John Benjamins 2016). She also blogs at www.theroguelinguist.com/blog. Follow her on [Facebook](#) or [Twitter](#).

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