

With the rise of neo-liberal ideology and knowledge intensive economy, universities are primarily regarded as a node in the national innovation system, required to speed up innovation flows from academia to society in order to increase the competitiveness of nations, regions and individual firms in the global markets. Faced with these external pressures, universities have become increasingly entrepreneurial and engaged with “academic capitalism” (Slaughter & Leslie 1997). Accompanying this, the project format has been a common response to the rapidly changing and increasingly turbulent environment in all organizations (Grabher 2004), including academia.

The project format is evident especially in the research function of university. The image of a lonely scholar dedicated to his or her research interests for a lifetime belongs to nostalgia rather than the present reality (see Fanghanel 2012; Henkel 2012). Instead, university research is increasingly conducted in large, tightly organized and managed projects on external, competitive funding from various national and international sources. Gibbons et al. (1994) refer to this change by arguing that traditional, disciplinary-based and curiosity-driven basic research (Mode 1) has transformed into transdisciplinary, problem-oriented and externally funded applied research carried out in temporary expert teams (Mode 2). In this way, the project format has become a standard way to organize research activities in academia.

In this paper, I will discuss more in detail the “projectification” of university research, focusing particularly on the temporal conflicts of project rationality. The paper explores how the project format shapes and shakes the temporal orders of research practices and work experiences of academics.

The paper is based on a larger research project entitled “Timesapes of knowledge production – A temporal approach to academic cultures and identities”, funded by the Academy of Finland (2010-15). The data gathered in this project comprise in-depth interviews with senior academics in Finland, Sweden and the UK (45 interviews) and focus group discussions with Finnish junior academics (3 groups). All academics participating in the study were social scientists working in the fields of sociology, social policy and social work. In this presentation I will concentrate on the Finnish data. The in-depth interviews included 15 professors or other established academics at three Finnish research-intensive universities in which social sciences have a strong standing. Focus group sessions involved 12 early career academics, working in two research-intensive universities in Finland. All focus group participants had recently received doctorates in social sciences and were working on temporary contracts, varying from a couple of months to four years. All interviewees worked fulltime. The interviews were tape recorded and transcribed.

Based on close reading of the interview material from a temporal perspective, the paper focuses on the temporal dilemmas and conflicts created by the project format in research work (Ylijoki 2014a, forthcoming 2014b). The starting point is that the project format is rooted in linear, standardized, abstract and homogeneous clock time (see Adam 2004) which is called project time. It tends to become in conflict with other temporalities involved in knowledge production. Project time entails a clearly defined timeframe with a certain beginning and end, which is unconnected to internal, contextual, nonlinear process time involving periods of standstill, deceleration and acceleration. Furthermore, project time includes 1) commodification of time by translating research time into money, 2) control of time by dividing time into beforehand determined phases in which accountability of the use of time is required, 3) compression of time by fostering speeding up of

productivity, and 4) colonization of time by subordinating other temporalities into the project-based clock time regime. As a consequence, the project format contributes to the redefinition of academic values and ideals, glorifying such virtues as economic rationality, instrumental orientation, efficiency, accountability, short-terminism and speed.

The paper argues that the dominance of the project format promotes a sort of binary organizational structure and culture within academia, which operates on external funding and is only loosely connected with daily teaching and administrative functions of the university institution. In addition, it further promotes stratification of academia into “have and have-nots” groups (Slaughter and Leslie 1997) so that the experiences of professors and flexible project workers become increasingly distinct both across and within projects (see also Ylijoki and Ursin 2013). Likewise, junior academics, all working on short-term contracts, use different strategies to gain continuity and security in their career paths. Yet, the empirical data also indicates that although academics need to adapt to the temporal order of the project format, to some extent they are able to reshape project time for their own purposes and create some spaces for alternative timeframes, temporalities, timings, and tempos in their work practices.

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