

Variables That Are Challenging To Quantify In Academic Workload Allocation: Time Tricksters

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ABSTRACT

Workload allocation models are increasingly used in higher education settings but their implementation presents a number of challenges. The challenges are all the more acute if they remain under the radar of discussion and analysis. The purpose of this article is to expose and interrogate one such challenge, to which we refer as “time tricksters”. Time tricksters are mandatory activities that take up significant amounts of academics’ time but that add no or little value to the academic project. The article is a conceptual paper that reviews existing literature on academic temporalities and academic affective regimes to explore how these dynamics shape the ways in which time tricksters complicate the implementation of workload allocation models in higher education settings. The article finds that uncounted, unverifiable, unproductive, wasted time has profound effects on a range of institutional operations at universities, ranging from resource allocation, management and time auditing to how academics rate their wellbeing and job satisfaction. We demonstrate that time tricksters pose profound challenges to the implementation of academic workload allocation models and we present a compelling case for bringing the reality of time tricksters into the frame of workload allocation discussions between line managers and academics. The dynamics that shape the temporal aspects of time tricksters are so elusive, that they have not been conceptualized in the literature. It also means that the creation of a conceptual framework with which we can grapple with these temporal realities constitutes a valuable intervention in the relevant bodies of scholarship. Our development and exploration of the concept “time tricksters” in this article is an important contribution to filling this urgent and necessary scholarly gap. Given the extent of the impact of time tricksters on academic operations, it is very problematic that no scholarly concept exists to denote the activities that whittle away academics’ time, add no value to any part of the academic project, and leave academics feeling disempowered and frustrated. This article thus has the potential to have significant impact on a range of academic management and policy decisions, as well as on the implementation of workload allocation models at universities.

Keywords: time tricksters; academic workload allocation; waste; resource management; academic temporalities; academic affective regimes

Introduction

Have you ever attended a meeting that could have been an email? Have you spent hours in a committee meeting where the substantive agenda could have been meaningfully dealt with in 30 minutes? Have you found yourself engaged in the work of a support department that is unrelated to your scholarly training or expertise? Have you needed to divert your attention from your core responsibilities to respond to an email where it was clear that the sender simply did not consult the necessary, and readily available, policy document? Have you closed your laptop at the end of a busy day feeling that you have not accomplished anything academically productive? If you answered any of these questions in the affirmative, you likely have first-hand experience with time tricksters. Universities across the globe have increasingly been turning to workload allocation models (WAMs)

to manage the exponentially rising demands on academics' time. The uptake of WAMs in the higher education ecosystem has been so vigorous, that a significant body of scholarship about academic WAMs has emerged (see, for instance, O'Meara et al., 2019; Boncori et al., 2020; Fumasoli and Marini, 2022). This article will not revisit the general scholarship on academic workload allocation models. Rather, it will home in on one particular factor that has tended to elude scrutiny, namely time expenditure that refuses easy quantification. The article starts from the recognition that at least some of academics' time will be spent on mandatory activities that add no or little value to the academic project and that we will refer to as "time tricksters". The scenarios signalled in the questions at the start of the introduction are familiar to any academic working in a contemporary university setting. Yet the dynamics that shape the temporal aspects of these scenarios are so elusive, that they have not been conceptualized in the literature. As the rest of the article will demonstrate, uncounted, unverifiable, unproductive, wasted time has profound effects on a range of institutional operations at universities, ranging from resource allocation, management and time auditing to how academics rate their wellbeing and job satisfaction. This makes it all the more problematic that no scholarly concept exists to denote the activities that whittle away academics' time, add no value to any part of the academic project, and leave academics feeling disempowered and frustrated. It also means that the creation of a conceptual framework with which we can grapple with these temporal realities constitutes a valuable intervention in the relevant bodies of scholarship. Our development and exploration of the concept "time tricksters" in this article is an important contribution to filling this urgent and necessary scholarly gap.

Time tricksters pose a challenge to workload allocation models since they are difficult to quantify with any degree of accuracy, but they have a very real impact on the available time and energy of academics. McCarthy et al (2017: 1018) explain that, in WAMs, "all activities are measured and verified in terms of exchange value". The problem with time tricksters is that they are not aligned to anything of real exchange value, and they thus remain both unquantifiable and unverifiable. Unproductive, overly long meetings and related administrative tasks are common examples of activities that can be regarded as time tricksters. Time tricksters erode time and morale and, while line managers will not be able to identify and quantify them all, they do need to be recognized in workload allocation discussions. By creating space for academics to articulate the time tricksters in their workloads, line managers will also have a useful diagnostic tool that can serve them as they work towards eliminating poor utilization of resources. While it is not realistic to commit to cancelling every unproductive meeting, the fact that this expenditure of time is recognized and explicitly brought into the frame of workload discussion will be a significant move towards a more accurate understanding of the time any given academic will have available to be allocated to tasks. The article concludes with concrete suggestions for how line managers can attempt to control for time tricksters by integrating them into productive key performance areas¹.

Academic Temporalities: A Review of Selected Literature

Given the increased sense of urgency around how academics' time can be utilized and managed more effectively, scholars have been exploring academic temporalities. The stakes are particularly high when it comes to time in university settings, and Simon Smith (2015: 150) explains the relevant dynamics as follows:

In a profession like academia, where a strong ethos of intellectual autonomy underpins the self-esteem of individuals, the ability to dispose of one's own time in the manner one chooses is one of the key stakes in struggles for position. Time is a source of both economic and symbolic capital for academic knowledge producers because protecting time for key activities – notably research – is essential to the production of 'goods' that are redeemable in the specific 'economy' of cultural production that science constitutes...

The ability to feel empowered enough to exert some control over one's own time thus does identity work, as well as economic, social and cultural work in university settings. When an academic loses a grip on how her or his time is spent, the effects can thus be far reaching. Smith (2015: 152) identifies three distinct temporalities that academics negotiate in their working lives, namely disciplinary time, career time, and project time. While Smith offers useful insight into the layered complexities of academic temporalities, his analysis does not speak directly to time tricksters. Academics may well be dissatisfied with how time is allocated to disciplines, careers and projects, but these are all significant constituent parts of an academic's world. Time spent on a discipline, career or project can be measured against quantifiable outcomes, and it is not the same as wasted time.

In their research on academic temporalities, Susanne Gannon and Carol Taylor (2021: 1162) identify a starting point in academic workload considerations that signals how time tricksters tend to remain under the radar:

¹We recognize that academic departments are also populated by staff members who are not academics. These staff members fulfil various administrative and support functions, and their performance are, in many cases, also managed by academic managers such as department chairs. Although many of the same dynamics will complicate the implementation of WAMs in non-academic staff members' work allocation, this article specifically focuses on how time tricksters complicate the utilization of WAMs for academics.

“The underpinning assumptions – that time is quantifiable, standardised and linear – imply that measuring time is not only possible and desirable, but is an essential part of what makes the neoliberal university ‘tick’”. Even in the case of time spent on tasks that are part of an academic’s key performance areas, measurement and quantification are tricky. Gannon and Taylor (2021: 1162) refer to “the fictions of quantification” which “are sustained through practices of temporal regulation”. They point to informal discussions and networking with colleagues and students as examples of time spent on activities that do not neatly fit into a specific work category. While such tasks do indeed complicate academic temporalities, they are also quite distinct from time tricksters as they do not constitute wasted time. They may be more challenging to categorise, but they nevertheless add tangible value to core academic activities. Networking can be regarded as a form of academic citizenship and it can provide a range of scholarly benefits, such as research collaboration and mentoring opportunities. Discussions with students are modes of student support that can be accommodated within a teaching and learning key performance area. Significantly, these are also activities that meaningfully draw on the key skillsets of academics, and they would not usually leave someone with the distinct sense of waste, frustration and futility that typically accompany time tricksters. On the contrary, discussions with colleagues and students can serve to invigorate, inspire and challenge an academic.

In considerations of academic temporalities, time spent on administrative tasks and reporting has also been highlighted by researchers who try to account for academics’ sense of general time poverty and dissatisfaction. Nick Osbaldiston, Fabian Cannizo and Christian Mauri (2019: 747) remind us that “[a]cademic temporalities do not exist in a vacuum but are constructs of both the individual’s goals and ambitions, and the structures that oversee the governance of temporalities”. This reminder contains two points that are important for the purposes of this article. First, the reference to the individual’s personal career trajectory signals that one needs to disaggregate this discussion according to post level. An emerging scholar will have less power to minimize time tricksters while also being less able to afford them than a senior, established academic. The dynamics and effects of time tricksters emerge differently for academics at different stages of their careers. Second, a workload allocation model can be regarded as one of the structures that “oversee the governance of temporalities”. This is thus a useful tool via which to tackle complications to academic temporalities, such as time tricksters.

For Libor Benda (2021), the implications of academic temporalities extend beyond WAM, staff morale and academic career progression considerations. Benda engages with academic temporalities to develop an argument that draws direct linkages between time and epistemic outcomes in scientific communities. The argument is articulated as follows: “...the temporal structure of academic work should not be seen merely as affecting—whether negatively or positively—the *speed* of scientific development but rather its *direction*” [italics in original] (Benda, 2021: 32). Benda draws on the work of Oili-Helena Ylijoki (2015), who distinguishes between “process time” and “project time”, where the former refers to “the temporality embedded in the internal logic of research activity” and the latter is “the scheduled time of a research project as it is ‘on paper’” (Benda, 2021: 35). These two types of temporalities “are in mutual conflict, as process time is slow, emergent, temporally blurred, multidirectional, and context-dependent, whereas project time is by contrast fast, highly scheduled, predictable, linear, and decontextualized” (Benda, 2021: 35). In discussions of WAMs, project time is prioritized because it is obviously more amenable to quantification and management, but process time is crucial for the quality of knowledge production. Scholars consistently express frustration about the erosion of time for research, or process time, as they are increasingly pushed into devoting significant chunks of their working days to project time. This instrumentalization of time, and its impact on scholarship, is very much linked to the rise of managerialism in higher education. WAMs tend to be regarded as an instrument of managerialism, which represents a threat to academics’ ability to spend their time as they wish in general, and on research in particular. We are raising these aspects of academic temporalities here to emphasize the fact that WAMs in academia are already viewed with some suspicion about whether they can meaningfully engage with the scholarly temporalities of academics. When a line manager uses a WAM in a workload discussion with an academic and the discussion ignores the reality of yet another threat to the time academics have available for their core activities, the potential for successfully utilizing such a WAM is compromised from the start. By recognizing the reality of time tricksters and engaging openly with them, line managers can facilitate greater buy-in from the academics whose workloads need to be accommodated in a WAM.

When we understand that the success or failure of WAMs as managerial tools in academic settings will be dependent on the level of buy-in from the people whose time they are meant to manage, it becomes all the more important to identify and expose temporal dynamics that erode confidence. According to Houston, Meyer and Paewai (2007: 26) academics’ confidence that a WAM accurately reflects the “tasks undertaken and the time required to complete those tasks” should be regarded as a key element that determines the effectiveness of a WAM. In some of the most authoritative research on academic WAMs, John Kenny and Andrew Fluck (2014: 595) note that the WAMs which were most positively received by academics tended to be “the models that were quantifiable, seen as a fair attempt to capture their work and that provided an opportunity for collegial discussion to resolve workload matters”. Crucially, “[s]taff did not seem to worry if the model was not perfect, as long as it was credible and could form the basis of a conversation” (Kenny and Fluck, 2014: 595). This finding

signals that time tricksters in and of themselves will not necessarily make WAMs unviable in academic settings. Rather, it is the attempt to elide them and pretend that they do not exist that will turn them into the real threat. In this sense, time tricksters are similar to other elements of academic temporalities, and they need to be engaged with on their own terms rather than by enforcing ill-fitting categorizations onto them. Again, it is useful to return to Gannon and Taylor's (2021: 1162) conceptualization of "academic temporalities as emergent, temporary assemblages of academic work comprising events, relations, doings, objects, affects, and spaces of all kinds". While this fluid, flexible and open-ended understanding of academic temporalities may appear to be fundamentally at odds with the very idea of a WAM with its connotations of managerialism and quantification, we suggest that academics and their time are attuned enough to nuanced complexity to work productively with WAMs if they have confidence in the process of implementation.

Peter Fleming and Bill Harley (2023: 1) focus on collegiality as a part of academic workload that is vulnerable to constituting "uncounted work". They tease out the different factors involved in peer reviewing articles for academic journals to expose the challenges this routine academic activity presents to fair, easy quantification in a WAM. Significant for the purpose of this article, they do not suggest that peer reviewing as a form of collegiality should not be part of academics' work. They do offer the following critique of the larger ecosystem within which peer reviewing is embedded: "Just as the academic publishing industry profits from substantial amounts of 'free labor' ..., so too does the university benefit from uncounted work. Put differently, an element of managerial exploitation is evident". They argue that academic collegiality is a performance area that accommodates "much *necessary* yet *uncounted* institutional work", and they tackle the challenge this represents by working towards a "deeper understanding of what academic collegiality means" (Fleming and Harley, 2023: 4) [italics in original]. Time tricksters are, of course, distinct from these types of collegial activities in the sense that they are both unnecessary and uncounted. We include Fleming and Harley's work here to advance our central argument in two main ways. First, perfection is not a precondition for academic WAMs to work but they cannot be regarded as an instrument through which academics' time is cynically misrecognized for exploitative purposes. Second, academic temporalities and the constituent parts of academic WAMs are amenable to conceptual changes and complexities, temporal ambiguities and imperfections. The caveat is that academics need to feel consulted, heard and seen in conversations about how WAMs capture and reflect how their time is spent.

Affective Considerations in WAMs: Time Tricksters and Frustration

As the preceding discussion demonstrates, feelings such as trust, being seen and heard, and feeling empowered, are crucial for the effective implementation of WAMs in universities. Feelings also feature prominently in our conceptualization of time tricksters. Time tricksters make academics feel frustrated, disempowered, unproductive and disillusioned, amongst others. Given the prominence of feelings in how these dynamics shape academics' workload experiences, it is worth unpacking the affective regimes that operate in contemporary higher education settings. Scholarly explorations of affect in academia are not new, but explicit linkages between affect, time tricksters and WAMs remain under-researched, and this is an area that has not been theorized. The points of alignment between feelings and WAMs tend to be limited to passing references to positive or negative affective engagements with WAMs. Sustained, critical engagements with affect and WAMs constitute a gap in the relevant bodies of scholarship.

Herta Nöbauer (2012: 133) offers an overview of the rapid and wide-ranging changes that have been characterizing higher education, with a specific emphasis on the increasing instrumentalization of scholarly work in the "global knowledge economy". In the light of these changes, Nöbauer (2012: 133) finds it "astonishing" that "academics along with their bodily and affective strategies of coping with the modifications of academic labour have hitherto drawn remarkably little attention among researchers". Nöbauer's work is also useful for the terminological rigour with which she distinguishes between the concepts of feelings, emotions and affect. Her conceptualizations draw on the work of Eric Shouse (2005: 1) who reminds us that, "[a]lthough feeling and affect are routinely used interchangeably, it is important not to confuse affect with feelings and emotions". According to Shouse (2005:1), a "feeling is a sensation that has been checked against previous experiences and labelled. It is personal and biographical because every person has a distinct set of previous sensations from which to draw when interpreting and labelling their feelings". An emotion is defined as the "projection/display of a feeling" (Shouse, 2005:1). Affect, which is the most important concept for the purposes of this analysis, is "a non-conscious experience of intensity; it is a moment of unformed and unstructured potential" (Shouse, 2005:1). Of the three concepts, affect is the most abstract, but also the one with the most powerful impact on how we experience stressors in our working worlds. This additional explanation from Shouse (2005:1) offers greater insight into why this is such a crucial concept for understanding how a factor like a time waster shapes the way an academic will experience a WAM: "affect plays an important role in determining the relationship between our bodies, our environment, and others, and the subjective experience that we feel/think as affect dissolves into experience" (Shouse, 2005:1). Affect is the more expansive concept as, according to Karen Niven (2013:49), "[a]ffect is the superordinate category; emotions and moods are states belonging to this category". Rebecca Nedostup (2009: 228) refers to scholarship that uses "affective regimes" as a "term to indicate a system of cues, symbols, or behaviors that influence human decisions, rest on emotional

associations, and are usefully distinguished from the strictly political or economic". Nedostup (2009: 228) builds on this existing work but also places significant emphasis on the political, cultural, and economic conditions that influences the outlook and beliefs of a people—which in turn have political, economic, and cultural consequence". The larger ecosystem within which WAMs and academic temporalities operate is one that has fundamentally been shaped by neoliberalism with its political, economic and cultural connotations and Nedostup's broader conceptualization of affective regimes speaks most robustly to how they operate in the higher education landscape. If we recall Smith's (2015) explanation of how an academic's sense of self is intertwined with economic and social capital within cultures of scientific knowledge production systems, academic affective regimes do align better with an expansive understanding of the term.

Two of the most prevalent changes in contemporary university labour systems of practice are the increasing integration of technology in all aspects of academics' work, and structural changes that have made more academics part-time and/ or temporary employees. These changes have profound implications for academic temporalities, academic affective regimes, and the spaces where they intersect. As the rest of this section will unpack, time tricksters insidiously operate to heighten already fraught feelings around time in ways that fundamentally threaten the viability of academic WAMs. Thomas Hülsmann, Elena Barberà and Jennifer Roberts (2015: 156) refer to the "casualization of labour" and ever-increasing workloads as important factors contributing to a scenario where "what academics are doing is changing, that they are increasingly stressed and that technology, far from freeing time, increases the density of the working day". Temporary employment, by its very nature, introduces vulnerability and feelings of powerlessness into the affective regime of an academic who is employed on a temporary basis. Nöbauer (2012:) mobilizes the telling moniker of "academic precariat" to refer to academics who belong to the "broad and increasing spectrum of people who have little or no job security and few employment rights". While we will not engage with the debates around the employment rights of temporary academics, the precarity that is centered in this description usefully signals the uncertainty and insecurity that pervade contemporary higher education institutions. When an academic who is already feeling insecure and uncertain needs to advocate for her or his time in a workload allocation discussion, the parties enter into the conversation from a profoundly unequal playing field. Now consider how this scenario is further complicated by pedagogical technological advancements. Eileen Kennedy et al. (2015) note that time is deployed differently in online teaching and learning environments and, while this in itself is not negative, the uncertainty that surrounds these temporal landscapes needs to be managed very carefully. They argue that an "adequate response to the challenges faced by changes to time and workload as we move teaching online will shed light on the murky world of costing within the university sector and beyond" (Kennedy et al., 2015: 194). The murkiness of this new world exacerbates uncertainty and increases the risk that an academic, especially one who is on a temporary contract, may leave a workload allocation discussion feeling disempowered, frustrated, and even exploited. Time tricksters threaten to complicate this already loaded and tricky terrain even further. If we recall that time tricksters lead to feelings of frustration and an inability to exercise meaningful control over how an academic spends her or his time, it should be clear that line managers cannot afford to ignore these dynamics in workload allocation discussions that are already complicated and rendered fraught by a general sense of precarity and murkiness. As the preceding discussion has demonstrated, the salience and specificities of both academic temporalities and academic affective regimes in today's university settings demand careful maneuvering from line managers who hope to utilize academic workload allocation models effectively. The way in which time tricksters are handled can have a significant impact on these processes.

Reframing Time Tricksters: The Way Forward

The next section will offer suggestions for constructively incorporating time tricksters into workload allocation discussions. Given the stakes that are involved in the sound management of academics' time, workload allocation discussions that continue to ignore the realities of time tricksters do not constitute a viable way forward. Such a willful elision of a core threat to academics' time and affective wellbeing in the workplace can be regarded as a cynical attempt to displace managerial responsibilities to academics. Academic managers find themselves at the forefront of leading the complex processes through which academic workload allocation models are utilized in university settings. While there are different levels of institutional management within higher education settings, department chairs or heads tend to bear the brunt of the responsibility for managing the workload allocation of the academics who are located in their departments. These same department heads manage the performance of their academics and they tend to have the most direct knowledge of the academic temporalities and affective regimes operating within their spaces. These realities all signal that department chairs are ideally placed to engage with WAMs in productive ways that speak to the salient nature of academic labour. In his analysis of the part academic managers play in university workload allocation and performance management, Andrew Graham (2015) recognizes the challenges and competing demands that this task places on managers. Universities use WAMs to manage resources and these processes thus have significant financial and auditing implications. Along with these fiduciary aspects, WAMs structure how an academic spends her or his time and, as the preceding discussion has demonstrated, academic temporalities and academic affective regimes are intricately entangled. In other words, WAMs shape how an academic experiences her or his job. This means that WAMs are directly related to employee satisfaction and this is another matter that the manager

needs to manage. It is never simply a matter of applying a one-size-fits-all model to the academics whose workload a department head manages. In Graham's (2015: 12) findings, participants "recognize the problems of quantifying the workload that isn't directly teaching", and the challenge this presents to WAMs. In contemporary academic workload and performance management, universities have become much more adept at quantifying key performance areas other than teaching. For instance, research can be quantified with output and citation numbers as well as impact factors and grant funding amounts. Academic citizenship can be quantified with committee membership, meeting attendance registers, peer review reports and mentorship success rates. These are just some examples to support the argument that the quantification of the activities that make up an academic's working day has evolved to accommodate much more than teaching tasks. Much of the progress towards more accurate measuring of research and academic citizenship has come about because academic managers understand that quantification is necessary to facilitate the successful application of WAMs in university settings.

Despite the progress with academic activity quantification, this remains a fairly fraught work in progress and we need to pay closer scholarly attention to the academic time that seeps through the gaps in institutional management structures, tools and efforts. This article has argued that time tricksters constitute a particularly insidious quantification dilemma in academic WAMs. However, this is not an insurmountable challenge that necessarily renders academic WAMs unviable. As noted earlier, perfection is not a prerequisite for academics when it comes to a willingness to engage with WAMs. Feelings of trust, collegial conversations about workload, transparency, empowerment and collaboratively engaging with workload decisions are what ultimately determine whether academics buy into WAMs or not. These are the very dynamics that are most directly undermined by time tricksters, which tend to leave academics feeling disempowered, frustrated, misunderstood and misrecognized.

Academic managers thus need to navigate a loaded and tricky terrain when they use WAMs in workload discussions with academics. A manager enters such conversations with a complex system of power relations at play. Simply put, the manager has less power than the institutional structures that mandate the implementation of the WAM, but she or he has, at least in some ways, more power than the academic whose workload allocation must be determined and then managed. The process becomes even more complicated when we factor in the general sense of disempowerment felt by academics in contemporary university settings. John Kenny (2018: 377-8) notes that

neo-liberal economic policies in higher education have resulted in the deterioration of working conditions and a loss of power by academic staff, manifested as managerialism, reduced funding, massification, external accountability, performativity, growing job insecurity, increased class sizes and growing accountability requirements, resulting in increased stress and work overload. The evident loss of power of academics has led to a deterioration in their working conditions which may reduce their productivity if not addressed.

According to Kenny's research, WAMs can play a significant role in addressing these challenges. A close reading of Kenny's findings signals how these processes play out in the spaces where academic temporalities and academic affective regimes intersect:

A transparent and credible workload allocation process, developed in consultation with the academics, was shown to empower individuals to negotiate reasonable workload outcomes and ensure adequate time is allocated to undertake research. It enabled them to regain some control over their work and manage the demands on their time (Kenny, 2018: 378).

Conclusion and Recommendations

The preceding discussion demonstrates both that managers need to tread carefully in their utilization of WAMs, and that there is a great deal to be gained from getting this right. To assist managers with meaningfully and transparently engaging with time tricksters in their workload allocation discussions with academics, we suggest the following guidelines:

- When line managers utilize WAMs, the workload allocation discussions with academics must explicitly recognize the reality of time tricksters in the working days of academics. Line managers can bring time tricksters into the discussion by asking questions such as: Do you spend any of your working time on activities that you struggle to fit into any of your KPAs? Do you find that this time leaves you with a sense of waste and frustration? Can you provide some examples of activities that do not align to any KPAs but that you cannot avoid doing? This last question presents an opportunity for the line manager to guide the academic in cases where activities are simply miscategorized or misunderstood. In such cases, activities can be reconceptualized and moved from being time tricksters to being part of one or more KPA. This is a useful formative discussion

to have since it can facilitate a more meaningful understanding of how an academic's time is spent and, by moving activities into KPAs, feelings of waste and frustration should be lessened.

- Line managers can attempt to control for time tricksters by integrating them into productive KPAs. This is a slightly different exercise from the one listed under the previous bullet as it deals with changing the activity rather than changing how the activity is understood. Here a line manager needs to tread carefully to avoid artificially categorizing a time trickster into a productive activity. This recommendation can only have value if the actual activity can be refined in such a way that it adds some productive value to a KPA. Many of the activities that can be classified as time tricksters could most logically be accommodated by the academic citizenship and academic leadership KPAs. In the workload allocation discussion, line managers can ask academics (1) whether any of the unproductive activities they are expected to perform can be refined and integrated into value adding KPAs and (2) if they can, whether any changes in the way these activities are performed can change them from being time tricksters to being meaningful activities that contribute to a KPA that serves the academic project.
- More senior academics are typically expected to allocate a heavier weighting to academic citizenship and academic leadership KPAs. In terms of protecting the career trajectories and developmental opportunities of emerging scholars, line managers should be vigilant about minimizing time tricksters in the typical working week of more junior academics. Minimizing time tricksters should, of course, be a managerial priority in the workload allocation discussions of all academics, but more senior academics are typically more confident about advocating for the safeguarding of their productive time.
- Time tricksters should be capped at a certain number of hours per academic per year. The caps should be determined according to departmental operational needs, but they do need to be disaggregated according to post levels to account for the above bullet point. So, for instance, a department might decide that the time waster cap for a full professor is 20 hours per year, for an associate professor it is 18 a year, for a senior lecturer 16 a year, for a lecturer 14 a year and for a junior lecturer 12 a year. Ideally, the number of hours any given academic will need to allocate to time tricksters should decrease at each new annual workload allocation discussion.
- The time of more senior academics is more expensive than the time of less senior academics. The disaggregation of time tricksters according to post level will thus have the additional benefit of clearly exposing how much the wasted time costs an institution. This should add to the institutional urgency to address time tricksters effectively.
- Regardless of how well the recommendations listed here work, the line manager should, at the very least, acknowledge the reality of time tricksters and take managerial responsibility for them. Time tricksters are, at their core, symptomatic of some type of failure of management. Pretending that they do not exist places the burden of this failure on academics who can do nothing about them. This, in turn, exacerbates the sense of academic disempowerment, disillusion and cynicism about the feasibility of academic WAMs.

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