

## Slow Strategies for Student (and staff) engagement.

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### Abstract

Universities have sought to engage students through new research-led approaches to teaching. This paper argues that student engagement strategies should include student disengagement and its causes. It draws on the Slow Movement to conceptualise areas where students and staff share anxieties (overwork, finances and careers) that contribute to a sense of isolation. The past two years have seen an explosion of interest in the Slow Movement as a response to stress and overwork in universities. Many staff use the movement to work less, reduce stress and give themselves appropriate breaks from academic life. The theoretical and practical tactics and ideas for slowing down, however, have not been shared with students. Students often feel overworked, particularly if balancing part-time work and employability concerns that can take up as much time as studying. This can cause disengagement with studies. This paper argues that staff should become aware and sensitive of the demands placed on students and their time and offer appropriate strategies to help preserve it. It ends by evaluating one of the authors' recent efforts to foster student and staff engagement through informal writing sessions for both staff and students (termed 'Shut Up and Write') in the Geography Department at UCL.

### Introduction

Slow scholarship has animated and excited academics across the social sciences (Miele and Murdoch 2002) and within geography (Kuus 2015; Mountz et al, 2015). A desire for a thoughtful, reflective and unhurried scholarly career entices faculty from senior professors to early career researchers.

The desire for deceleration is summarised by Mountz et al., who note "increasingly larger class sizes and fewer teaching assistant hours, [create an] incentive to standardize assignments to reduce grading time" (2015, p.1233). Academics are encouraged to make themselves "calculable not memorable" (Ball 2012, p.17) by increasing their publication rate and exam and coursework turnaround. This requires they work faster and engage less with their students and research.

Slow scholarship means sustained, deep and substantive engagements with teaching and research. It recognises that quality scholarship requires time, and lots of it. This is not just time for writing, reading, or the other tasks academics undertake: teaching, marking, pastoral work, publishing and applying for grants; it includes time for thinking and musing, and allowing ideas to germinate. For some, slowing down challenges the mantra of publish or perish: they opt for better quality papers that take longer to write. For others, it can be mundane changes to office life: going for a walk, eating lunch away from their desk and checking in with colleagues. Others also

advocate new ways of measuring the impact of research based on quantitative metrics (Steel et al, 2006). For Mountz et al., the aim of slow scholarship “is to create living and working environments where slow, self-determined work lives become possible for *everyone*” (2016, p. 1249: emphasis added).

Slow scholarship has ambled through the upper echelons of the academy and largely neglected undergraduate and graduate students.<sup>1</sup> Where the movement’s benefits have been discussed for students, they are indirect. In *The Slow Professor*, Berg and Seeber (2016) argue slowing down will help staff improve the quality of their teaching. The consequences of a slower department will trickle down to students. The assumption is that students may not need to slow down.

A cursory glance at campus life reveals the opposite. A staggering 72% of students report they have suffered with some type of mental health difficulties whilst at UK universities (Student Minds 2011). In the US, anxiety is the top concern on campuses, (Reetz, Barr, and Krylowicz 2016). Overwork, a common cause of anxiety, is a problem staff can easily identify with. Too often, students and staff work long hours to prove their worth and guarantee their career and financial security.

The rush of undergraduate life can be as invisible to academics as the rhythms of an academic’s life are to students. As the University and Colleges Union puts it, ‘the conditions teachers work in are the conditions students learn in’ (Hunt, 2016: np). Finding a job, staying financially afloat and being overworked are shared problems. When both groups lack knowledge of the plight of the other, conflict may emerge: time is a resource that each scrabble to preserve. For some students, teaching appears subordinate to staff research interests. For some staff, students appear unengaged with their studies or only interested in the degree as a stepping stone to better things.

In recent years and in response to rising tuition fees and student feedback, universities have tried to engage students through research-led teaching and student partnerships (Healey et al. 2010; Brew 2003). They place research at the forefront of teaching, allowing students to access cutting edge debates and resources, or encourage students to undertake their own research, often publishing or presenting it to the wider world (Thorogood et al, 2018). While these efforts at student engagement are useful they do not tackle the systemic stressors that cause students to become disengaged: overwork, employability and finances. These problems impede student engagement; they force student to spread their time thinly, like butter scraped over too much bread. Slow strategies may allow staff and students to collaboratively find time to make more time for themselves and one another.

This paper developed from conversations at the ‘Making the Slow University Inclusive’ session held at the Royal Geographical Society’s Annual Conference in 2017. Speakers from schools and universities outlined how they adopted the Slow Movement into their research, classrooms and lecture halls. It draws its inspiration from these speakers who apply the Slow Movement in education.

The paper begins by briefly discussing the Slow Movement, its application to finances, overwork and employability in universities and what has been termed ‘hasty scholarship’. It outlines the specific problems that students and staff share, and how the movement can help tackle them. The literature review examines student disengagement and its link to finances, overwork and employability. It concludes by

evaluating a group writing project, run by one of the authors at UCL in the spring of 2017, as a method of slowing down. We draw on our experiences as three British ex-undergraduate students who graduated in 2011, 2013 and 2015. Two are now in full-time employment and one is completing a PhD. We all studied geography at British higher education institutions and have come to the Slow Movement after our degrees, retroactively realising its value.

We do not try to speak for diverse student populations, and instead highlight how university life, the job hunt and equitable employment can be that much harder for women, BAME (black, Asian and minority ethnic) disabled, part-time and LGBTQ students and use secondary data to support this. While this paper is written from a British perspective, we draw on wider, worrying trends in the US and Canada where the Slow Movement has also blossomed.

### **The Slow Movement and Fast Scholarship**

The Slow Movement can be traced back to Rome in the late 1980s (Honoré 2009). In 1986 Italian journalist Carlo Petrini, dismayed by the construction of a McDonalds just outside of Vatican City in Piazza di Spagna, began a movement that resisted the 'fast' in fast food. Fast food robbed the food, chefs and consumers of the time required for cooking, eating, digesting and enjoying food. Petrini disdained with the convenience of fast food and the lifestyles it encouraged: an ability to eat on-the-go (Miele and Murdoch 2002) and hurry back to work. The slow principles were applied to other areas of life: fitness and bodybuilding (Honore, 2004), urban planning (Knox 2005) and travel (Dickinson, Lumsdon, and Robbins 2011). The ethos remains the same; it examines where 'time poverty' exists in our foods, bodies, buildings and relationships with friends and technology. As the Slow Movement grew, it challenged the mantra of ever-increasing productivity: doing more in less time.

Quality and meaning, the Slow Movement suggests, do not arise from the ability to produce or do more things in less time. They come from giving care, attention and adequate, if not plentiful time to a task. This has massive ramifications for office-based workers. A slow solution can be a simple refusal to multi-task (which many psychologists and neuroscientists believe does not exist), hurry or to check the inbox every few minutes. At its simplest, a Slow Strategy increases the time taken to fully focus and complete a single task.

Sometimes, slow strategies are more than antidotes to an overloaded schedule or distracted mind: they diagnose deficiencies in how institutions are run and employees approach their professions. It is this task that Berg and Seeber (2016) sought to undertake in *The Slow Professor*. They outline factors that speed up university life: the quantification of academic activities, burgeoning administrative tasks that take away from more meaningful tasks (Greaber, 2018); a shift in academia as a preparation for job markets rather than the pursuit of knowledge and the blurring of graduate employers and academia (Del Gandio, 2010). In the UK, the running of universities like businesses has found parliamentary support from the Government in the form of the Browne Review (2010). As employees in businesses, academics are subject to performance reviews, the epitome of which was the introduction of the UK Research Excellence Assessment (RAE, now the Research Excellence Framework or REF). This exercise involves submitting a profile of

academic articles to a panel which assesses the 'research profile' of university departments every 6 years, with research being graded on its impact. In research intensive institutions, faculty members can be expected to publish up to three manuscripts a year or attain minimum amounts of grant funding as a condition of continual employment (Chen 2015; Sparkes 2007). Student intakes have generally been rising in the UK and for many staff, particularly sessional and adjunct-teaching staff onerous workloads are poorly remunerated on temporary contracts force academics to take extra part-time work on top of their teaching loads to survive (*The Guardian* 2015; Christensen 2008). For many, slowing down becomes a response to the demands imposed by the neoliberal university.

Yet the same rapid pace of university life effects students. A spate of studies have shown a link between decreased academic performance and mental health (Slavin, Schindler, and Chibnall 2014; Bruffaerts et al. 2018; Leonard, Stiles, and Gudiño 2016). In the next section, we show how mental health and student engagement have become pressing issues on campus, before offering some explanations as to why students feel so rushed.

### *Mental Health*

Today, student mental health is worse than in previous generations. The 2016 UK HEPI showed 21% of students having the lowest levels of anxiety compared to 41% in the general population. A recent UK study from YouGov (2016) found that both 34% of female and 45% of LBGQT students are more likely to report mental health problems than their male counter parts (22%). Students have lower levels of wellbeing than all people aged 20-24, according to a 2018 Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) study.

In the US, a 2014 study from Pennsylvania State University's Centre for Collegiate Mental Health suggested half of students visiting campus list anxiety as a concern, and it is now the leading mental health diagnosis on campus (CCMH, 2014). In Canada, a survey from the Ontario University and College Health Association (OUCHA) suggests that 65% of Ontario students experience overwhelming anxiety. Rates of depression are also increasing and is now the second leading cause of death among young people aged 15-29. This is not a problem confined to undergraduates; with half of all US doctoral students failing to complete, a survey of 27 graduate schools found only 6% of students felt they could turn towards their faculty during stressful times (Barna 2000). It is important to point out the quandary international students face. In 2006, international students occupied 12% of the UK's annual intake. In 2014-2015 that figure rose to 19%. On top of the typical student problems, they face extra challenges due to cultural and language barriers (Andrade 2006). It is vital that international students are considered within the problems and slow solutions that we outline below and will require a range of actors within the university to encourage inter-cultural communication (Leask 2009).

HEPI has recommended that UK universities triple their student welfare funding to cope with increasing demand. For UK undergraduate students, a sharp rise in the use of counselling services is a recent and notable trend (Coughlan, 2015) with mental health services at some institutions seeing increases of use by 50% last year. This might reflect a welcome willingness for students to seek help, but in the US there is on average only 1 counsellor for 3,500 students (Thielking, 2017). Other novel approaches include using a student's smartphone to monitor bodily responses

to educational outcomes in the student body (Wang et al. 2017). Promising research is exploring how mindfulness, cognitive behavioural therapy and relaxation practices may improve student welfare (Lo et al. 2017; Galante et al. 2016; Kuhlmann et al. 2016) and provide students with the tools to control their own mental health.

### *Student Engagement*

Another problem on campus is a student's engagement in their studies. As a concept and issue of concern, student engagement managers, and even departments, are now commonplace across campuses. In response to student complaints about teaching quality, particularly in the UK in the era of increasing tuition fees, efforts to engage students through research-led teaching show a genuine desire to redefine staff and student relationships through research (Brew 2010; Brew and Mantai 2017; Griffiths 2004). Much of research-led teaching is led by staff (Zamorski 2002) where it is done for students or built into the curriculum for them (although see Tong, Standen and Sotiriou, 2018 for examples of students working on research-led teaching in collaboration with staff). Recent innovative approaches involve staff-student partnerships based on, equality, trust and mutual respect can help students engage with their studies (Hardy and Bryson 2016; Marie, Arif, and Joshi 2016).

These strategies for engagement are sincere attempts to redefine the staff-student relationship through research and mutual respect. Student disengagement, however, must also be addressed.. Research shows that when students have a stake or a sense of belonging, this is positively linked to educational attainment. (O'Keeffe 2013; Hardy and Bryson 2016) and many first year students report a lower level of belonging in US campuses (Stebbleton, Soria, and Huesman 2014). The results of the 2017 and 2018 National Student Survey included a section on student voice, and these also indicate that many students feel their feedback is not acted upon.

To help engage students, we suggest an inclusive Slow Movement where students are encouraged to slow down with staff members to increase a sense of belonging. There are mutual problem areas that can be tackled in concert: employability, finances and overwork. Before this can happen, staff must learn how these issues set the student's metronome at its rapid tempo. In the next section, we outline the extent of these issues and how they impact student engagement.

#### **Problem One: Graduate Employability**

A National Union of Students (NUS) survey found that for 20% of UK students, finding a job was a major source of stress. Students are bombarded by careers fairs, employer presentations and companies on campus, imploring them to take the future seriously.

Many first or second year students are understandably reticent to commit to a single career path so soon, and are instead encouraged to develop generic employability skills alongside their studies. These include leadership, teamwork, organisation, presentation skills and increasingly, soft interpersonal skills. There is a voluminous literature on the skills employer's value (Lowden et al. 2011; Bridgstock 2009). This is because employers are demanding more from graduates. Companies in Canada complain that graduates are not equipped with skills for the job market (Rana, 2017). A recent Organisation for Economic Development (OECD, 2018) study noted that a quarter of UK graduates are in positions where a degree is not required. They explain that too many graduates do not have the numerical and written skills

employers required. On top of this, graduates require 'soft skills' such as teamwork, presentation skills and interview techniques. These skills are indirectly obtained from academic learning, but directly from internships, voluntary work, work experience, placements and direct training online, in extra seminars and workshops. Many soft skills are classified as extra-curricular but are tacitly understood to be very much curricular for students seeking graduate employment. They purport to help students to stand out from the crowd, despite increasingly being regarded as a necessity for graduate employment (even as some studies have questioned their value in the labour market, see Wilton 2011). This type of 'CV swelling' is encouraged by career services and some degree programmes, which in previous years were entirely academic, now offer employment modules which feature an internship as part of their final marks.

These strategies no doubt help pave the pathway to graduate employment. There are, however, no reports by universities asking what employability skills students value. Some 'opportunities' offered are patently exploitative, whereby students become unpaid labourers. They enter precarious, expensive and sometimes, humiliating situations to gain skills and work experience. The recent case of David Hyde, an unpaid intern at the United Nations who lived in a tent outside of his workplace in Geneva, is exemplary. The problem of unpaid internships has led the governments of the UK and provincial government of Ottawa to consider legislation to protect students from unfair labour practices (Cowen, 2014).

The pressure to achieve a graduate job may trump the goal of achieving the highest grade possible. For many, universities are a gateway to well-paid employment (Tomlinson 2008). One survey showed 73% of British students go to university to increase their job prospects (Lowden et al. 2011). In a 2014 survey of US students, that figure was 86% (Rampell 2015). It does not follow that a student who wants a graduate job harbours an apathy towards in depth, intensive study; they may be forced to focus less on their studies by necessity. Undergraduate and masters students find that despite a small economic recovery since 2008, the improvement in the job market is geographically uneven and statistically minimal (HESA, 2015). For US doctoral students, a third report finding no permanent employment after graduation, particularly those entering the academic market (NSF, 2016). In the UK in 2016, it was revealed some 50,000 or a quarter of new graduates were working in jobs that did not require an undergraduate qualification (HESA, 2017). For students aiming for high-salary graduate jobs, the need to present a competitive and more-than-qualified professional profile can be extreme (Peake and Mullings 2016).

Applying for jobs places massive demands on a student's time. A single graduate job application can take up to 20 hours to complete.<sup>2</sup> Many students deploy a blunderbuss approach, firing off multiple applications to employers. These employers maybe only slightly aligned with their own career interests, but likely to offer them an interview. If a job application is accepted, large graduate recruiters have structured application processes, often comprised of assessment centres, multiple interviews and rigorous psychometric testing, all of which require preparation alongside studies. With their own mark schemes and formulas for success, the graduate application can be more taxing than a university module; the job offer becomes more precious than a first-class degree mark.

For help with these processes, students may turn to the careers services. A proactive careers service is valuable, particularly for diverse student populations (Morey et al. 2003). One metric of the UK's Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), however, is graduate employment after six months. This metric puts increased importance on quickly gaining a position, while disregarding the time it may take to find meaningful and fulfilling employment post-graduation. Of course, many students cannot afford to be unemployed after university, but there is a concern a student might be pushed towards rapid employment in any career rather than a job that is fulfilling or appropriate for the student in question. The 'top jobs' are found in tomes with titles like the 'Top 100 Employers' and are not representative of the broad scope of graduate employment opportunities graduates might consider. In many universities, multinational firms that look to employ graduates – irrespective of their degrees -- dominate career fairs. From 2015-2016, the top ten employers offered 22,300 jobs across the UK, up 6.6% from the previous year (Ali, 2016a).

A student applying for jobs may find themselves experiencing large amounts of rejection and failure. This can be shocking for those who have, until university, succeeded in previous studies. It is now common for students to experience tens of rejections before being hired. Careers services do not usually offer workshops designed to help students understand rejection. Two exceptions are the universities of Kent and Oxford whose career services offer 'handling rejection' webpages.

The need to secure rapid graduate employment often stems from financial pressures, which we discuss next.

### **Problem Two: Finances**

The second challenge is financial stress stemming from drastic changes in the cost of university. Tuition fees have increased 40% in Canada from 2006-2016 (Statistics Canada, 2016) and public universities in the US are seeing costs rise faster than in private institutions. A student in the USA will pay close to 50% of their tuition fees compared to 34% pre-2008 recession (Young Invisibles, 2016). Predatory lending practices and tuition costs have meant that student loan debt exceeds all other forms of non-household debt. Rising fees are associated with increased anxiety in student bodies, particularly for those who struggle to pay back loans. This financial strain may exacerbate student anxiety, particularly if a student's perception of their own debt is particularly worrying (Ross, Cleland, and Macleod 2006; Cooke et al. 2004). In Canada, earning enough money to pay back student debt was identified as a large factor for stress by the Canadian University Survey Consortium (CUSC, 2015).

Many students undertake part-time work to supplement their finances. Universities have recommended targets for how many hours a student should spend studying. In the UK, these limits range from 12-20 hours per week, but they are often unmonitored. The government sets legal limits for the paid work international students can do, and universities set targets for how much studying should be done. The problem with these legal limits and university targets is that they encourage overwork when combined. The push for recommended study targets grew when drastic inconsistencies in how many hours students worked between disciplines were discovered (Paton, 2009). It is not clear if these aspirational work targets include unpaid but equally important employability work (job interviews, applications, careers sessions and volunteering). If not, and you add these hours to the recommended maximum limits of 20 hours a week paid work and 40 hours a week

study recommended by many universities, then a student could feasibly infer that it is acceptable to study, work part-time and job hunt for more than 60 hours week. This well over the UK legal limit of 40 hours a week for full time salaried staff. Such overwork is dangerous to physical and mental health, it encourages a “work rhythm that is rushed, riddled with anxiety and pressure” (Mountz et al., 2015, p.1244).

The problem is not just limited to undergraduates. The Higher Education Academy’s (HEA) 2016 survey of 72,000 postgraduates revealed 28.8% of students studying for professional qualifications or master’s degrees felt they struggled with their workloads (Havergal, 2016). In the UK 1/3 of staff are on short term contracts and in the US and Canada, sessional instructors and adjunct professors occupy similar roles, with full time adjunct professors and part-time staff making up over half the US and Canadian workforces.<sup>3</sup> Postgraduate teaching assistants (PGTAs) are paid on hourly teaching wages (Fazackerley 2013). A 2012 UK NUS survey found that one in three PGTAs did not receive a contract for teaching and another third earn below the minimum wage when adjusted for inflation. Postgraduates have started campaigns in efforts to ensure they are treated as members of staff whose labour is valued.<sup>4</sup>

Even when a graduate secures a job, the wages may not be in line with living costs, a particular problem for UK black graduates who earn on average 23% less than their white counterparts (TUC, 2016) and black female graduates in the US earn 12.3% less (Wilson and Rodgers 2016). Under-privileged students, BME students, those with disabilities and those with mental health problems are consistently under-represented in graduate careers (Daniels et al. 2011; Gutman and Schoon 2012). Disparities between disability pay rates of employment abound in North American and the United Kingdom (Bruyère et al. 2016; Duvdevany, Or-Chen, and Fine 2016).

### **Student disengagement and possible solutions**

The glossy photos of students lazily reading on grassy knolls in university brochures are misleading. Students have heavy workloads, and many feel overworked. A student who struggles to balance employment and studies may turn to study drugs to help them perform and focus (Ali, 2015; Teter et al. 2006). Modafinil, anti-anxiety medicines such as Xanax, or high strength caffeine beverages assuage the pressing need to concentrate or find time. It is not uncommon for energy drink companies to market heavily to students.

Student engagement is not just a problem of disinterest in studies; nor is it a matter of changing how academics teach. Both play a part, but student disengagement from overwork, perceived or otherwise, must be acknowledged. Being disengaged, or at least selectively engaged, may be the only strategy that helps a student balance their time and succeed. Amid discussions of grade inflation and the declining worth of a university degree, critical thinking and deep engagements with literature are replaced by more pressing concerns: career prospecting, CV building, work experience and unpaid internships. This is a prescient problem for final year undergraduate students who feel the acute pressure of finding employment. With such demands on time, a student may wish to devour their reading lists, but instead decide to learn material selectively, focussing on what will help them perform well in exams and essays. Ironically, this means that they may miss the substantive engagement needed for the highest grades. Staff dread the question ‘will this be on the exam?’, but it is a reasonable response to overwork, especially for students



aiming for nationally recognised metric of academic success (an upper second-class degree, or satisfactory Grade Point Average, see Strasser 2003).

The paper now uses the Slow Movement to think through to the problems of employability and overwork. We conclude with an evaluation of a funded 'Shut up and Write' session that sought to tackle the problem of overwork for both staff and students.

### *Employability*

Some departments now realise employability is not opposed to critical thinking, just as teaching need not be opposed to research. Critical and slow thinking may well help students think more carefully about what employability means to them. However, a careers service that works to a 6 month cut-off deadline will not counsel patience, it will instead try to prepare graduates to become 'job ready' (Moore and Morton 2017). We know much less about what students value when it comes to employability (Tymon 2013). Staff can help students develop critical, self-reflective understandings of employability, using examples from their careers. Furthermore, personal tutors should humanise rejection by reminding students that failure within academia is critical to success. One commendable example of this comes from Johann Haushofer, a Princeton academic who published his CV of failures, noting failed articles and grant proposals, job interviews and denied degree program entry which made international news (The Guardian, 2017). Notwithstanding his job security and tenure, such confessions are welcome relief for students: they humanise failure.

Second, an authoritative figure can help students slow down their employment journey. The outgoing head of the UK Universities and Colleges Administration Services (UCAS) recently stated students should worry less about immediate graduate employment, suggesting there is no shame returning home and spending time considering options thoughtfully (Yorke, 2017). While we recognise this is not financially possible for many students, it can be helpful to remind students that their first job need not be their only job. Many academics take years of work to settle themselves in a secure or tenured position and are opening up to colleagues about emotional impacts of their own job hunts.<sup>5</sup> There is no reason why they could not do the same with students. Staff can help students explore a broader range of options post-university beyond the traditional graduate routes. At Oxford, a session called 'But I Don't Want To Work In The City' is offered by the careers service (Monbiot, 2015). This is emblematic of the Slow Movement: thoughtful consideration of other options students might take.

### *Overwork:*

A student's superficial engagement with their course no doubts frustrates and disappoints teaching faculty. We should remember that students may feel the same about staff's engagement with teaching. Students value staff who are available and accessible (Benton and Cashin 2014). Academic motivation has been linked to a sense of belonging (Stebleton, Soria, and Huesman 2014) and students are appreciative of departments and staff members they believe to be caring and quality teachers. They vote in Teaching Awards (often run by Student Guilds, or bodies that lobby and represent the student interest to the university, not the university itself). Occasionally, students defend staff members who they feel prioritise student

learning, especially if a staff member's job is threatened (Devon Live, 2013). They also turn to online platforms (ratemyprofessor.com) to vent their dissatisfaction with their experiences of staff they perceive to be disengaged, aloof or uninterested in teaching. Notwithstanding the category for 'hotness', research has shown these responses have value for improving teaching (Otto, Sanford and Ross 2008).

Research outputs, arguably the yardstick for academic employability, may appear more important to students than teaching. This is not an unreasonable judgement. A HEA study showed that many students contend with less than ten hours contact time and class sizes of more than fifty (HEPI, 2015). With increasingly short-term contracts becoming the norm for early career researchers, students have less chance to get to know their lecturers, decreasing the sense of belonging they have in a department. In 2013, then UK Universities minister David Willets noted that 55% of an academic's time was dedicated to teaching in 1963. In 2013 it decreased to 43% teaching, compared to 57% research (Walker, 2013). With regimented office hour appointments once or twice a week for student engagement, students feel aggrieved their time is subordinate to other concerns such as research or administrative responsibilities. A study from Healey et al. (2010) suggested students perceived staff research as detrimental to their own learning. Many believe tuition fee rises have not resulted in higher quality of teaching and recent surveys by the UK's Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) have shown that students are demanding more of their universities in terms of contact hours, reductions in time taken to mark coursework (Soilemetzidis et al. 2014; Buckley, Soilemetzidis, and Hillman 2015).

If, as Berg and Seeber (2016, p. 57) suggest, slowing down is about "asserting the importance of contemplation, connectedness, fruition and complexity", then overwork should be recognised as a shared problem. Students and staff both have less time to work on teaching and learning. Academics and students value their time immensely, and work hard to satisfy the many demands a university career or education places upon it. It is not clear that each group values the time of the other. Royal Holloway University of London tell students that core textbooks need not be read from cover-to-cover.<sup>6</sup> Such simple statements are more than good advice for those who are unaware of the different methods of academic reading; they are an understanding that a student's time is also precious.

When staff value a student's time, concerns and career aspirations, students value staff for their kindness, availability and empathy. Furthermore, a sense of belonging, identified in the literature as a factor in student performance, can be encouraged through simple solutions and gestures. We developed a project at UCL geography that allowed students and staff to tackle overwork by reclaiming their time together.

### *Shut up and Write! Making time for writing alone, together*

A shared problem requires a shared solution. If time is a precious commodity for both groups, and a sense of belonging is linked to academic performance, then one solution to overwork is for a department to offer time and a space for student and staff to get to know one another and work on their own projects.

In 2016, with a small grant from the UCL Changemaker's, the Geography department organised the first ever Shut Up and Write! (SUAW) sessions. These sessions began online in the mid-2000s but have become popular in university departments around the country. Participants write silently for 25 minutes, before

taking a 15-minute break to drink eat, drink, stretch their limbs and chat with other participants. The intense, silent writing is then repeated for another 25 minutes with another 15-minute break. This cycle is repeated as many times as desired in a two hour slot. The whole department was invited to engage in group writing. SUAW sessions can be done physically and digitally, ensuring a sense of community for distance learners (O'Dwyer et al. 2016).

The sessions were open to the whole department held in large classroom. Our funding provided refreshments for attendees, who signed up via a Doodle poll. These 3 standalone sessions provided a space for uninterrupted and concentrated writing. SUAW provides uninterrupted time for focussed writing. Group pressure also discourages distraction; nobody wishes to be the only person not tapping away on a keyboard. Apart from creating a comfortable place to work, we were interested as to whether to sessions would encourage a sense of community in the department across years and different subjects.

The three sessions were held in the second term of the 2016-2017 academic year from February to March. We timetabled them fortnightly on Wednesday afternoons to avoid lecture clashes. No register of attendees was taken; we felt this would be counterproductive as the sessions were not meant to feel like formal teaching.

Timetabling informal writing time for staff and students across the years is a slow strategy for tackling overwork. SUAW is a promising way if doing this. Research shows a student who feels they have a stake in their department is more likely to stay in university (O'Keeffe 2013). In the USA, a sense of belonging contributes to higher GPA scores (Layous et al. 2017). Yet belonging requires staff to be available and present. SUAW shows belonging could be developed informally, and is not reliant on formal, face-to-face contact through lectures, offices hours and seminars. SUAW is a simple mechanism that can be repeated by as little as two people, and many have sprung up across UCL and online more widely over the years. We see SUAW as a slow approach to work that is relaxed and can be regularly practiced, rather than a formal writing workshop that is timetabled and registered. As Maskia and Jones suggest in their study of belonging in universities, faculty should 'consider how curricula and teaching might be developed and reorganised to provide for *sustained* engagement between teachers and students (2016, 147: emphasis added).

## Conclusion

*Empty time is not a vacuum to be filled: it is the thing that enables the other things on your mind to be creatively re-arranged, like the empty square in a 4x4 puzzle which makes it possible to move the other 15 pieces around.*

Harry Lewis, Dean of Harvard Undergraduates, 2004

Feeling exhausted, anxious and overworked is a common symptom in today's university. Completing job applications and drafting resumes, filing for bursaries and grant applications, revising manuscripts and essays, reviewing journals articles, peer-marking another student's work, getting rejected from journals and graduate schemes, managing society and grant budgets, filling in progress and administrative reports, fretting over your workload. These are the trappings of student and staff experiences today.

Too often, these issues appear to put staff and students at odds, where the gains of one group appear as costs the other. In recognising the shared problems of overwork, ample opportunities for collaboration, concern and respect arise. The Slow Movement rejects a false dichotomy between the demands and priorities of staff and students. Both can collaboratively ease the current frenetic pace of university life by creating time for one another to tackle disengagement. This paper has suggested group writing, but other slow solutions need not be funded or timetabled. A slow solution can be as simple as changing a coursework deadline, meeting a colleague or students for a catch up over a coffee or reducing the size of a required reading list. These are three changes that show respect for a student's workload.

Students have much to offer, more to gain and the most to lose from the fast pace of university life. If the Slow Movement is as valuable to health and wellbeing as academics have written, then there is no reason why students should not enjoy its benefits. This paper has argued that careers, finance and overwork are three areas where staff and students share anxieties and offered a strategy for easing overwork while increasing a sense of belonging and student engagement in the department.

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<sup>1</sup> There are few examples of academic work, published or otherwise, that deal with students and the slow movement. Some discussion can be found at 'The Slow Academic' Blog post (Why Slow for Organisations) that deals with teaching burnout, but students are once again passive recipients.

<https://theslowacademic.wordpress.com/> accessed 14/04/2017. Other work that is designed for Graduate Students can be found <http://gradlogic.org/slow/> (accessed 29<sup>th</sup> May 2017). at the 'Grad Logic' blog.

<sup>2</sup> The figure of 20 hours comes from a student writing for the blog. See more at <https://careersblog.warwick.ac.uk/2015/11/09/how-much-time-should-you-spend-on-a-job-application/> (accessed 29<sup>th</sup> May 2017).

<sup>3</sup> Ira Basen's documentary 'Class Struggle' outlines the challenges Canadian teachers face. It can be accessed at <http://www.cbc.ca/news/class-struggle-documentary-1.2756899> (accessed 24<sup>th</sup> May 2017).

<sup>4</sup> See the 'Fair Pay for TA's campaign conducted at University College London <http://ucl.ac.uk/fair-play-for-TAs> (accessed 29<sup>th</sup> May 2017).

<sup>5</sup> Examples include the 'tenure she wrote blog' <https://tenureshewrote.wordpress.com/2015/07/09/how-to-fail-better-and-even-succeed-in-the-academic-job-market/> and 'The Professor is in' a career advisor for these hunting for tenure themselves <http://theprofessorisin.com/> (accessed 29<sup>th</sup> May 2017).

<sup>6</sup> Information obtained from the Geography Department at Royal Holloway <https://www.royalholloway.ac.uk/geography/currentstudents/readinglist.aspx> (accessed 29<sup>th</sup> May 2017).