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<https://doi.org/10.1080/21568235.2021.1930566>

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# 'When the hurley-burley's done, When the battle's lost and won'<sup>1</sup>: exploring the value and appropriation of silence and quietude in academia

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The intensification of the working life of academics in the corporate world of higher education shaped by new public management, is the backdrop for an exploration of the appropriation of opportunities for silence and quietude through the operation of internalised disciplines of self-imposed control. The paper includes a review of selected literature on the effects of neoliberal education policy reform on the working lives of academics in higher education. Specifically it considers the intensity and pressures and the possibilities for academics to find silence, quietude and respite from the 'hurley-burley', allowing them to 'stand back' from this for a time. The influence of dominant market rationalities in higher education on academic working life is explored, with a particular focus on three national contexts - England, Sweden and Italy. Two vignettes illustrate some of the possibilities and limitations of silence and quietude in academic working life. In the paper, the authors have also examined how the value of such opportunities can be eroded when subjugated for the purposes of the neoliberal academy and the drive for efficiency and performativity.

Keywords: silence, quietude, higher education, performativity, academics

## Introduction

Time and space for stillness and reflective quietude in academic life may be assumed to be a *sine qua non* of the hectic and pressured world of academia today. Pressure to demonstrate 'productivity' and measurable outcomes is inherent in the competitive marketised environment of

higher education. Writing retreats and quiet physical spaces on campus represent opportunities for peaceful reflection away from the ‘noisiness’ and the ‘hurley-burley’ of university academic working life. In this paper we examine the importance of such opportunities for silence and quietude in academia. The ‘battle’ referred to in the title is intended to evoke the idea of resistance to the appropriation of such spaces for the purposes of the corporate world of the neoliberal academy and the drive for productivity and efficiency. For example, Vostal argues that:

Academics today face a burgeoning list of charges: they must cultivate a metric mindset, adopt performance and productivity discipline, publish in the right journals with the right publishers, get cited and learn to exist and thrive in regimes of audit, surveillance, ‘excellence’, ‘accountability’ and business-driven administration structures, often justified by neoliberal assumptions. (2016, ix)

The culture of the ‘neoliberal academy’, governed by market rationalities, is one where ‘individualism, competition, mobility and quantifiable metrics of performance are expected and required for academic success’ (Webster and Boyd, 2019, 44). Neoliberalism has impacted on the working culture of academia and the demands on academics, for example through new public management: ‘Through material manifestations of the neoliberal project, such as new managerialism or new public management, this has resulted in an academic working culture in which academics find themselves in a constant state of self-monitoring in an effort to live up to demands set through performance management strategies’ (Deem and Brehony, 2007 cited in Brorsen Smidt et al., 2020, 115). Instrumentalist values of self-interested individualism are imported into education as part of the rationale of neoliberalism (Olssen et al, 2004). Efficiency, effectiveness and control are valued and neoliberalism exacerbates the erosion of trust (Codd 1999, in Olssen et al. 2004, 194). Carvalho and Diogo (2021,138) point to a general consensus that factors such as the use of new technologies and the imposition of managerialism and accountability regimes have seen academic work becoming more intensified.

Furthermore, as Collini (2012, 115) noted, academics in higher education are ‘busier than ever simply carrying the burdens of increased teaching loads, unstoppably multiplying

administrative procedures, and the assessment-driven obligation to yet more publication'. It is hard to capture the complexities of the work of academics in higher education in ways that do this full justice but the key aspects of teaching, administration and research, referred to here by Collini have been impacted by the intensification of academic work. The effects of neoliberal policy reforms in higher education have been felt in managerialist practices from the corporate world and the pursuit of efficiency and productivity in teaching and research (Kenny 2017, 897). Neoliberal market ideologies have characterised the thrust of higher education reform in recent years and continue to influence how universities are managed, and working lives in the sector are dominated by 'the endless palaver of performativity - target setting, league tables, inspection regimes' (Nixon 2008, 21). The effects of intensification of academic work have been felt, manifest in 'increased stress for academics and an emphasis on accountability and performativity in universities' (Kenny 2017, 897). The effects are felt internationally, as for example illustrated by Carvalho and Diogo (2021,150) who, from research in the context of Portuguese academia, suggest:

Academics make strong efforts to maximise the levels of productivity, working harder and longer in a (new) work environment based on auditing and monitoring, which became increasingly more incorporated and internalised by academics who become more demanding and rigorous with themselves. Academics' self-discipline results from the interiorisation of the dominant performativity culture, leading academics to work harder and to define strategies to conciliate teaching and research activities.

Drawing on insights from the work of Lefbvre ([1974] 1991), we suggest that academic life has been appropriated by linear rhythms as a neoliberal discourse holds sway. Whilst spaces for silence and quietude may be welcomed by academics for their apparent restorative and healthful

capacities, the authors argue that it is the demands of intensification of work that have not only created the need for such spaces but also shape how they are used. In relation to teachers' work, intensification was understood by Hargreaves as the 'bureaucratically driven escalation of pressures, expectations and controls concerning what teachers do and how much they should do within the teaching day' (Hargreaves 1994, 108 cited in Easthope and Easthope 2000, 44).

Theorization in this paper is also drawn from Foucault's work and the operation of power relations and how power is enacted. His concern with disciplinary regimes is apposite to the idea of subjugation. We argue that by providing quiet spaces, opportunities for retreats, peaceful gardens and so on, the perceived benefits for individuals may be considered to ameliorate what we term the 'noise pollution', a term we use to invoke the idea of the demands and fast pace of academic life, yet paradoxically, at the same time subjugating individuals to the enactment of a neoliberal project and thus imposing an internal discipline. From a Foucauldian perspective 'discipline consists of a concern with control which is internalised by each individual' (Mills 2003, 43). Individuals may elect to use these opportunities and spaces for silence and quietude to impose disciplinary regimes on themselves by setting themselves targets for outcomes to be achieved such as administrative work to catch up on or research outputs to write to boost publication outputs. Thus, in electing to increase their own productivity and efficiency in this way, internalised control contributes to the institution achieving its aims, without the use of force, coercion or hierarchical discipline, thus maintaining the construct of collegiality and collaborative working. The apparent paradox being that such subjugation to neoliberalist ways of working is enacted even in the quietude of spaces for 'slowing down' and rebalancing the demands and pressures of the everyday.

Located in three European national contexts, the authors share similar concerns about the detrimental consequences of a dominant measurement culture and the influence of the drive for

efficiency and neoliberalist ways of working on academic life and academics' wellbeing. This paper is our joint effort to explore and make sense of what we have conceptualised as a strategy of governmentality, invoking the work of Foucault, and arguably this works to harness the professional ethics and personal responsibility of staff. One of the authors' shared aims in writing this paper is to inform thinking about ways in which improvements to the working environment may be enacted, an aim which is shared across each of our different international contexts.

Another rationale for the comparison of three national contexts is the similar trends experienced by English, Swedish and Italian higher education settings. These trends include massification and marketisation of higher education along with the diminishing academic freedom and worsening working conditions. In particular, the rapid expansion of higher education in recent years is experienced by all of these three European countries. For example, overall participation in higher education in the UK increased from 3.4% in 1950, to 8.4% in 1970, 19.3% in 1990 and 33% in 2000 (Bolton, 2012). Figures from the Department for Education (2019), for 2017-18, show 50.2% of people going into higher education. Another trend is the marketisation of higher education. The market approach in higher education has increased the competition for students and for research funds among universities rather than encouraging them to collaborate. Williams (1992) suggests that the case for market approaches to higher education funding is based on three main propositions. One is the belief that the private sector can relieve the government of some of the cost burden. The second is that many of the benefits of higher education accrue to private individuals and they should be prepared to pay for them. The third premise is that competition in the market improves efficiency and quality of the higher education provision as demanded by students as consumers. Following this market logic, students start to pay for their university degree to varying extents. In England, home students currently pay £9,250 per year for their undergraduate

degrees. In Italy, student tuition fees are the second most important source of funding after the Fund for Structural Resources to State Universities (FFO) provided by the central government. The amount of tuition fees depends on several factors such as the type of universities (public universities vs. private universities), and students' socio-economic background. OECD/EU (2019) reported that in the last ten years university tuition fees in Italy have increased by 60%. It places the country's higher education in third place in the ranking of the most expensive in Europe, after the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. In comparison, higher education in Sweden is largely funded by the state. The majority of the universities and university colleges in Sweden are public institutions. A minority of universities and university colleges are independent institutions that are run by foundations or associations. Most of the independent higher education providers only offer courses in a limited number of subject areas. Higher education in Sweden is grant-aided and free of charge. This means that all Swedish students and students from the European Union (EU) and European Economic Area (EEA) countries do not pay tuition fees. International students from a country outside of the EU and EEA have to pay tuition fees. All accredited higher education institutions in Sweden are state-funded whether they are public or independent. Although higher education is free of charge the students are, to some extent, viewed as customers. As a result, there is an increasing competition for students among higher education providers in Sweden.

A marketisation ideology has also been linked to reforms of the funding apparatus as part of a policy environment designed to engender competition. Growing constraints on public funding and a prevailing marketisation ideology were the backdrop for policies aimed at greater accountability and selectivity. The Research Excellence Framework (REF) in the UK is a good example of such policies to assess higher education institutions' research capacity and to determine allocations of research funding. Similar performance-based research measuring and funding

systems are adopted by many European countries including Sweden and Italy, ranging from Peer Review-Based Research Assessment (PRBRA) to metrics-based assessment, or some combination of the two (Geuna and Piolatto 2016). These trends have affected how universities operate and govern, with staff and students conceptualised respectively as product providers and consumers. Universities are under pressure to measure students' general transferable skills through assessments but also to enhance their core competencies and dispositions such as knowledge, attitudes, and readiness for entry into the global knowledge-based economy. In addition to worsening working conditions, response to economic and social demands has also threatened academic freedom and autonomy.

### **Silence, quietude and rhythms in academic life**

Etymologically the word silence comes from the Latin verb *silēre* = to be silent, not to make noise, hence the noun *silentium* means the absence of noises or sounds. Silence helps to think, to concentrate, to find oneself and to listen to oneself. Silence is conceptualised by Picard (1948) as an autonomous phenomenon. Picard suggests that 'silence is not simply what happens when we stop talking' (15) and rather than thinking of silence as 'the mere absence of speech', he sees it as 'a positive, a complete world in itself' (17). There are different experiences and uses of silence. Cooper (2012) suggests that silence is: 'the absence, not of sound per se, but of noise which is obtrusive or salient' (55). Experiences of silence are varied, for it 'touches us in many different ways' (Lane 2006, 11). Some silences may be enforced, others chosen. Silences can be thought of as 'wholesome' in the sense of being enriching, fulfilling and replenishing. In modern society, low volume levels – peace and quiet – are often in short supply. It is (nearly) never still and soundless – quiet – in today's society, nor in today's universities. People are (almost) always overwhelmed by the 'cacophony of urban life' as Mendes-Flohr expresses it (2012, 12). In the academic life of

universities today, one of the results of the fast pace, the demands of performativity, the relentless drive for ‘excellence’ and high rankings is captured in the idea of ‘noise pollution’ referred to previously and by which we denote the cacophony of competing demands and a sense of the speeding up of time.

In a neoliberal higher education context, silence also needs to be recognised and studied as an oppressive practice of control. Silence or silencing is a threat to academic freedom and intellectual autonomy. When silence is used as a notion of control, writing about his experiences of surviving the holocaust and correspondence with Germans during the post-war period, Primo Levi reminds us that the consequences of remaining silent and suppressing curiosity can be internalised self-control: ‘at the time, among the German silent majority, the common technique was to try to know as little as possible, and therefore not to ask questions’ (Levi 1990, 221). Academics should be able to speak out critically on issues relevant to their areas of expertise without fear of retribution. When silence is used as a control in the higher education context, academic voices are monitored or censored and as a result, academics' contribution to wider society weakened.

Quietude is another concept invoked in this work and arguably, spaces for quietude and silence in academic life have been appropriated by the rhythms of the linear, ‘depicted only as monotonous, tiring and even intolerable’ (Lefebvre and Régulier [1985] 2004, 76).

Quietude and silence could be seen as one of the characteristics of the ‘slowness’, contrasting to the prevailing speed culture. Parkins and Craig (2006, ix) conceptualise slow living in terms of a way of approaching everyday life with care and attention. They suggest that:

As speed is seemingly equated with efficiency and professionalism, however, slowness can become a way of signalling an alternative set of values or a refusal to privilege the workplace over other domains of life. To declare the value of slowness in our work, in our personal life, in public life, is to promote a position counter to the dominant value-system of 'the times'. (Parkins and Craig 2006, 1).

For Lane (2006,115), silence, solitude and slowness are linked and 'are needed because they give order and harmony to the apparent confusion of the contingent world'. Our argument is for the ability of individuals to determine for themselves how they choose to use opportunities for silence and slowness without the invasion of demands for productivity and efficiency and thus imposing an internal discipline as argued earlier. The politics of 'slow' have importance because, with the dominance of managerialism and the commercialisation and commodification of higher education (see Nixon 2012) paradoxically 'fast' invades the 'slow' spaces, as we examine in this paper. Berg and Seeber (2016, 17) point out that 'Academic work is by its nature never done; while flexibility of hours is one of the privileges of our work, it can easily translate into working all the time or feeling one should'. Intensification of academic life is experienced in many countries, for example the workload of Swedish university academics has increased in recent years and working conditions have changed considerably. Distance work and web-based education have become more common and are now a natural part of higher education and work-related stress has increased (Söderlund 2017). The moves to more online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic have required staff to respond speedily and adapt to new ways of working as teaching and learning have moved much more to the virtual environment. 'Zoom fatigue' is a recently coined expression to convey the exhaustion that hours of online teaching and supervision can produce and all this whilst performativity demands and outcome measures remain. Appleby and Pilkington (2014, 56) note that 'within many educational institutions, working practices that encourage learning and the

existence of physical, organisational learning spaces have been or are being eroded. Lecturers and tutors are increasingly isolated by time and market requirements, in what Ball (2003) describes as the ‘terrors of performativity’. They discuss the pressures of the working environment in higher and further education which is dominated by ‘repetitive and bureaucratic tasks, time-poor and often managerialist’ and the demands on ways to prioritise time and workload (57). Parkins and Craig (2006, 68) considered the manifestation of the stresses of fast living, including increased demands on workers, through longer hours, the drive for ever-increasing productivity levels and less job security. World-wide, ‘neoliberal imperatives have led to the marketisation of higher education across the globe’ (Gourlay and Stevenson 2017, 391). This has been linked to reforms of the funding apparatus as part of a policy environment designed to engender competition. In the UK for example, sector-wide competition has led to institutional stratification, with higher education institutions ranked according to a range of measures (Nixon 2012, 12). In education in Italy and Sweden, market forces and competition have played out in similar ways. For instance, quality measurements at Swedish universities have increased considerably, as a result of which different universities have adopted a range of internal indicators as a measure of success. Common measures of scientific success are, for example, bibliometric dimensions or the proportion of external research funding. In Italy, there are ranking logics connected to academic merits which sees university professors confronted with numerous indicators designed to measure the scientific impact of their work.

Berg and Seeber (2016, xviii) note how ‘corporatization has compromised academic life and sped up the clock. The administrative university is concerned above all with efficiency’ and the result is a ‘time-crunch’ and a sense of ‘powerlessness’ for those subjected to it (Berg and Seeber 2016). These concerns of the ‘administrative university’ can be linked to corporatization,

for ‘the real time issues are the increasing workloads, the sped-up pace, and the instrumentalism that pervades the corporate university’ (Berg and Seeber, 2016, 25). Everyday life is measured quantitatively, the ‘time of everydayness’ is the time of watches and clocks (Lefebvre and Régulier [1985] 2004, 73). Lefebvre differentiated cyclical and linear rhythms and he referred to ‘the perceived-conceived-lived triad (in spatial terms: spatial practice, representations of space, representational spaces)’ (Lefebvre [1974] 1991, 40). Middleton (2014, 13) explains that for Lefebvre: ‘Rhythms associated with the conceived (industry, bureaucracy) are linear - regular, measurable and relentless’ and that ‘Rhythms of the conceived infuse education’s regulatory bureaucracies: clock time, the school day, the academic year, the packaging of time and knowledge’. ‘Dressage’ refers to drills, repetitions, it ‘puts into place an automatism of repetitions’ (Lefebvre [1992] 2004, 40). Education, learning and dressage or training can and must be differentiated (Lefebvre [1992] 2004, 39) and as Middleton (2014, 179) explains: ‘Learning is a *mediation* between dressage and education. Education is an opening out towards the possible. Dressage involves drills, repetitions. The pedagogies of bureaucracy impose dressage’. Within the idea of rhythm, Lefebvre identified the three ‘implied but different notions of polyrhythmia, eurhythmia and arrhythmia’ (Lefebvre, [1992] 2004, 16). Polyrhythmia is made up of diverse rhythms (Lefebvre, [1992] 2004, 67) When ‘rhythms unite with one another in the state of health, in normal [...] everydayness’ (Lefebvre, [1992] 2004, 16) this is eurhythmia, ‘Eurhythmia (that of a living body, normal and *healthy*) presupposes the association of different rhythms (67), whereas ‘The discordance of rhythms brings previously eurhythmic organisations towards fatal disorder’ (16). Arrhythmia is when ‘rhythms break apart, alter and bypass *synchronisation*’ (67). These concepts are applied to our examination of the discourse of ‘speed’ and ‘slowness’ of academic life. Arguably, spaces for quietude and silence in academic life have been appropriated by the

rhythms of the linear, ‘depicted only as monotonous, tiring and even intolerable’ (Lefebvre & Régulier, [1985] 2004, 76) and the first vignette is an example of how this appropriation has taken hold. Here we witness ‘self-overseeing’ through a self-imposed regime dominated by concerns for productivity, efficiency and outcomes.

Whilst ‘calls for the ‘blanket’ slowing down of academia and the need to establish an ‘ethic of slowness’ might seem somewhat attractive and even desirable - especially if they are associated with the critique of neoliberal assumptions that fuel the speeding-up and dynamization of academia’, the conclusion Vostal (2016, 196) reaches is that ‘calls for *general* slowness are problematic’. Vostal (2016) discusses ‘explicitly *discretionary*’, ‘temporal self-determination of academic actors and the *possibility* to operate dynamically/fast and leisurely/slow when one needs and desires; to have the individual and institutional right to pursue activities in one’s own frame of temporal reference’ and what this might mean (198). The temporal autonomy envisaged would be ‘inclusive of a pace that institutions and their attendant actors would themselves determine: slow when needed and fast when convenient’ (Vostal 2016, 198). Vostal (2021, 5) further suggests that:

Pursuing slow might be interpreted as [a] petrifying process of gendered academic hierarchies and inequalities. At the same time, and this is probably the most important line of critique of slowness, the slow initiatives tend to reinforce the well-established way of thinking about and analytically framing academia – they *purify* and isolate academia as a social arena detached, disconnected, “unplugged,” from wider socio-economic, technological forces and ideological and political pressures of the day.

Vostal’s above critique of slow movement has highlighted the complexity of academic times in various contexts and circumstances. Time could be used as an instrument of control in the

workplace. Carvalho and Diogo (2021) note how '(clock) time has always been used as an instrument of (social) control' (137) and 'what seems astonishing in our days is the way the use of time is assumed as a management tool to rule not only workers' professional time but also their personal lives through time schedules and an efficient use of time' (138). In our exploration of the value of silence and quietude, we need to be mindful of the operation of power relations and how power is enacted in academia.

### **The illustrations of the value of spaces and places for silence and quietude in academia**

Two vignettes are used here as examples to illustrate the value of spaces and places for silence, quietude and 'slowness' in academia. They are drawn from the literature and the authors' own experiences and reflections in academia in the national settings of the UK, Sweden and Italy. Their purposes are to illustrate how silence, quietude and 'slowness' are realised in specific contexts. The illustrations serve to provide familiar examples which whilst easy to relate to, in the context of the line of argument pursued, may be worthy of some re-examination. Skilling and Stylianides (2019, 1) note that vignettes are 'primarily associated with the idea of descriptive episodes simulating real events that are presented either in a written or visual form' and that sometimes the term 'vignette' is used interchangeably with terms such as scenarios, stories, or case studies. In this paper, the two vignettes are embedded as practical illustrations of our argument.

#### **Vignette 1: Silent space for writing retreat**

A key task for academics is to disseminate their research and thinking through writing and publications. Finding time and space for this writing can be challenging for many colleagues due to the hectic nature of daily academic work and therefore very often writing takes place in an academic's own time and in isolation.

Writing may be a solitary activity and it can also be undertaken collaboratively with others. Murray (2015) develops a social writing framework to capture the complexity of the writing process and argues for the importance of writing retreats. A writing retreat event could be between one hour and one week depending on the individual's needs. The core principles of a writing retreat are that there is a dedicated writing time, without interruptions and that writing takes place in a shared silent space. Before the writing activity starts, there might be discussion of an individual's writing project and goals with other colleagues in the group and agreement on the structure of the event. Very often there is a facilitator who will ensure everyone adheres to the agreed structure and protocols, and that a focus is kept on the writing activities.

The main activities at a writing retreat are the writing itself in a silent space. The silent space is utilised for collective concentration on writing tasks in a social setting. One academic reflected on the experience of writing in silence:

Silence falls. We start writing. Everyone's looking at their screen. With a glance at a list, article or book, we carry on typing. For ninety minutes the only sound is clicking keys, the odd cough or noises outside – a dog barks, a bus moves off, a door closes. We don't notice. Aware only of the screen, our thoughts, our writing and each other. We are focused on our writing. This is all we have to do – there is no other task. No internet. No interruptions. We are all in the same boat. Writing together. In silence. Everyone's writing (Murray 2015, 131).

Writing retreats are a way to address the challenge of making time and space for writing in academic life and arguably it is silence in a social space that is a key element of the writing retreat.

As argued previously, the writing retreat may be perceived as an opportunity for intellectual replenishment, for mature thought to develop through reading and exchanging ideas

with peers and for new ideas to be incubated. The reality as experienced by one of the authors in their reflections on the experience of participating in a writing retreat, appears somewhat different. A timetable is set, goals to be achieved are identified and shared with others and in this account of their experience, the ‘rhythms of the conceived’ may be seen to prevail.

The silent space for the writing retreat could also serve to promote the efficiency of the neoliberal university. Through the rigid self-imposed framework, the identifiable outcomes to be achieved and the accountability to others at the retreat for adherence to this self-regulatory regime, the space arguably becomes co-opted for the purposes of the neoliberal academy. The writing retreat can be where, for example a research paper gets written and in academia ‘building a publication profile is pivotal to developing and increasing an academic’s competitiveness to win grants and achieve tenure’, as Kornhaber et. al (2016, 1210) have noted. Evidence from their study (Kornhaber et. al 2016) suggested that ‘writing retreats facilitate measurable increases in publication outputs including grant applications, theses and book chapters and number of peer-reviewed articles submitted and accepted’ (1213). In the same study, Konrnhaber et. al report the interrelated features of writing retreats associated with forming a ‘community of practice’ including shared vision, collegial support, mentorship and social interaction. In this way, silent spaces for writing retreats could be interpreted as ‘sites of resistance, inclusivity, self-care and the care of others’ (Rowell 2019).

### ***Vignette 2: Silent spaces and places for general well-being of academics and students***

In Berg and Seeber’s (2016) discussion of some of the top self-reported stressors among academics in the North American context, they included having excessively high self-expectations; securing external research funding; meeting research targets such as publications; balancing professional

and family life; and coping with the heavy workload. More recently, in English higher education Morrish's report (2019) showed similar aspects of work-related stress. For example, there is an increasing number of staff being referred to counselling and occupational health services, and the report noted that higher education has been characterised as an 'anxiety machine'. The report also highlighted some key causes of poor mental health among academics, for example, escalating and excessive workload; the imposition of metric surveillance at both institutional and national levels; increasing precarity and insecure job contracts; and often unattainable outcomes-based performance management (13). Morrish concluded that universities need to become healthier environments for academics to perform their duties and thrive. The report recommendations include more realistic workload allocations; a more responsible use of metrics; and better performance management. To address the issues highlighted by the report requires some structural changes in higher education policies and practice at national and sector levels. Meanwhile, at the institutional level, one of the ways in which we might alleviate the work-related stress is to provide academics with physical places on campus to slow down or stop and relax. Silent places and spaces could potentially be used to promote mental health and wellbeing.

There are silent places available on university campuses designed to help academics and students to slow down and promote their wellbeing. Some of them are indoors and others are outdoors. Due to their Christian foundation, many English universities have a church or chapel on the campus. A chapel on the campus is often an architectural acknowledgement of their faith-foundation. In its original purpose, it was designed to set aside a sanctuary space and time for stillness, prayer and contemplation for use by the faithful in solitude and with others. Today many academics and students use the chapel, church or a multi-faith prayer room on campus as an indoor silent space for reflection and contemplation regardless of their religious beliefs.

At English universities examples of gardens whose purposes appear to focus on contemplation might include the garden at the Whitworth, the University of Manchester and the University of East Anglia. In the official opening of the latter's Earlham Hall Silent Space, the university (2019) explained that:

Silent Space is a project that encourages gardens already open to the public to reserve areas for silent visiting, so that visitors can enjoy the restorative benefits of peacefulness in nature. Inside these spaces, visitors are asked to switch off from technology, social media, cameras and talking, enabling them to enjoy and contemplate the gardens with only the sounds of nature in the background.

Silent spaces on university campuses are equally central to students' wellbeing. The pace of student life can be intense, loud and stressful for students, with the demands of study. These demands may typically include participation in lectures, examinations and other forms of assessment, students' own independent study, balancing study with other commitments and responsibilities, navigating interpersonal relations and social interactions with peers and staff, and the demands of timetables requiring movement between different lecture halls and buildings. A study by the Public Health Agency of Sweden (2018) indicated that a high proportion of university students in Sweden experience stress, have symptoms of fatigue, anxiety and depression and feel anxious about not being able to complete their studies. In the same study, it was emphasized that universities can promote student mental health and prevent mental ill health by creating and evaluating supportive physical, social and academic environments. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, the burden of stress appears to have grown for many students.

Such supportive environments are important to enable students to find alternatives to this otherwise sometimes intense, loud and stressful existence where they might sit by themselves in a

quiet and calm place without having to leave the university building or campus. There are some examples of places for students to contemplate, reflect and study in peaceful quiet or silence on university campuses. At the University of Padova in Italy, the Botanical Garden is a location where quiet time can be enjoyed in natural surroundings amidst the sounds of wildlife. Immersion in this space can be facilitated through participation in one of the Silent Plays sometimes performed there whereby with the aid of a wireless radio guide, participants can become immersed in a story enacted through movement and interactions with others and the surroundings.

In a research study at a Swedish university, focusing on physical, social and academic environments in the form of significant places and spaces for learning, students expressed their need and longing to have an opportunity to experience quiet and tranquil places on campus (Alerby and Bergmark 2016). They valued and described, among other things, places and spaces that evoke feelings of calm and stillness – places they appreciated and wanted to inhabit. The students emphasised, for example, the importance of having places and spaces for reflection and contemplation and that such places should be quiet, tranquil and still, relaxing and harmonious. Here they may sit in solitude with an opportunity to reflect for example on a previous lecture or assignment. One student expressed this need as follows (Alerby and Bergmark 2016, 13).

Here you can relax and let your thoughts ‘fly freely’, you can let go of the stress and not have to worry, think of things other than study work. Just sit back and let the soul free for a while, let the soul “heal” for example, after an exam period.

The student in the above quote stresses the need for peace, stillness and quietness within the walls of the University – places and spaces for reflection and contemplation. It is therefore worth considering the extent to which quiet places and spaces exist in contemporary universities and whether there is scope to include these in the design of the campus.

## **Possibilities and limitations of silence and quietude in academic working life**

In the pursuit of 'excellence' in teaching and research, academics tend to overwork and tolerate the culture of speed in work. This is likely to have detrimental consequences (Su and Wood 2012; Wood and Su 2017). The dominance of the 'administrative university' and emphasis on everyday time measured quantitatively, arguably sustains the rhythms of the conceived. In the current higher education policy environment, academic life is rhythmized by the linear rhythms of the conceived. Although writing many years ago, Picard was prescient in his analysis of useful and uselessness, productive and unproductive, which arguably dominate in market-led thinking in universities today. The quantifiable has importance over the qualitative and Lefebvre's concept of rhythm may offer the possibility of bridging this division, for '**Rhythm** reunites **quantitative** aspects and elements, which mark time and distinguish moments in it - and **qualitative** aspects and elements, which link them together, found the unities and result from them' (Lefebvre [1992] 2004, 8-9). Picard's (1948, 18-19) words resonate with this discord and disunity between what is and is not valued:

Silence is the only phenomenon today that is "useless". It does not fit into the world of profit and utility; it simply *is*. It seems to have no other purpose; it cannot be exploited.

[...] Silence, however, stands outside the world of profit and utility; it cannot be exploited for profit; you cannot get anything out of it. It is "unproductive". Therefore it is regarded as valueless.

Yet there is more help and healing in silence than in all the "useful things".

Time and space for silence and quietude suggests a rupturing of ‘the conceived’, the linear, as explored through the work of Lefebvre, and an opportunity for intellectual replenishment, for regaining perspective and for respite from imposed ‘dressage’.

Yet the issues are deeper than simply creating pleasant spaces and places for intermittent experiences of quietude. There is a need to rebalance the demands of the market-led, corporatised environment of higher education to enable academics to reclaim some control to use time and spaces for quietude and silence without incursion or imposition. Universities may benefit from being rhythmmed more synchronistically, allowing the pace of life to accommodate the cyclical rhythms of the perceived: “The rhythms of perceived spaces include those of the body and of nature” (Middleton 2014, 12). The dominance of the ‘administrative university’ discussed earlier, and an emphasis on everyday time measured quantitatively, arguably sustains the rhythms of the conceived. The idea of the production of the individual as ‘subjected to a set of procedures which come from outside of themselves but whose aim is the disciplining of the self by the self’ (Mills 2003, 43) evokes the notion of the subjugated self and the appropriation of space and time by and for self-imposed disciplinary regimes. For Foucault, the operation of power is not one-way, from powerful oppressor to constrain the powerless, but is rather more complex, a ‘diverse, ambivalent web of relations, rather than a unidirectional force of domination’ (Gallagher 2008, 144). For Foucault (2020, 345) ‘power relations are rooted in the whole network of the social’. His concern for how power plays out in everyday relations between people and institutions (Mills 2003, 33) and the idea that people become their own ‘overseers’ is resonant.

There are often designated locations on campus, both inside and outside in natural surroundings, where people may spend time in quietude. Immersive quiet silent spaces which take different forms, for example peace gardens, writing retreats, contemplation rooms, arguably can

also function indirectly as sites of ‘willing compliance’. We argue that in these spaces, this self-overseeing operates and yet the perception may be of these spaces as restorative and as providing a respite from the intensity and relentlessness of the linear rhythmic patterns, examined previously in discussion of Lefebvre. This ‘overseeing’ of the self may operate whilst also ‘believing themselves, sometimes falsely, to be free of power, making their own choices, pursuing their own interests...’ (Lukes 2005, 106). The idea from Foucault of architectural arrangements and configurations of power relations (Mills 2003, 47) has a connection to the notion of academics becoming their own overseers. In these spaces ‘the external power may throw off its physical weight; it tends to the non-corporal; and, the more it approaches this limit, the more constant, profound and permanent are the effects: it is a perpetual victory that avoids any physical confrontation and which is always decided in advance’ (Foucault 1997, 203). The value of silent spaces for example as respite from linearity and clock time, is eroded paradoxically when through the ‘overseeing’ self they are appropriated in the service of the neoliberal academy. The argument examined earlier for the concept of explicitly *discretionary* temporal autonomy with reference to Vostal (2016), offers insights and appears to transcend binaries of fast and slow. Pace would be determined ‘by institutions and their attendant actors’ and at the same time ‘institutional temporal autonomy needs to declaratively be set against the instrumentalism of the business mindset and enterprise ideology that transmits corporate interests, ad hockey and short-termism into the tasks of academia’ (Vostal 2016, 198).

## **Conclusion**

The intensification of academic work and a sector-wide drive for performativity and efficiency may propel a need for restorative space in academic working life. Yet under pressure from a myriad of demands and expectations, spaces for peace, silence and quietude can be invaded by the

acoustics of the neoliberal academy enacted through the operation of the ‘overseeing self’. Metaphorically, this acoustic can be ‘loud’, and invasive. We have argued that opportunities to ‘step aside’ from the unrelenting linear ‘rhythms of the conceived’ are diminished through this incursion. External power and control operate less perceptively through the ‘overseeing’ self. The authors have explored the operation of the principle of academics as their own overseers and the appropriation of quietude and silent reflective time to serve the purposes and mission of the neoliberal academy, for example meeting publication output targets or other productivity measures. Paradoxically under such performativity pressures, felt across a market-led higher education sector, spaces to ‘step aside’, detach and gain perspective become subjugated to an agenda imposed by strategies of neoliberal working life in higher education.

Note:

<sup>1</sup> Title taken from William Shakespeare’s play ‘Macbeth’, Act 1, Scene 1.

### **Acknowledgements**

The authors would like to thank Professor Jon Nixon and Professor Julian Stern for their valuable comments and suggestions on an earlier draft of the paper. We would also like to thank the three anonymous reviewers who reviewed the original submission of the paper for their constructive feedback and comments. The ethical approval for this study was given by the lead author’s institution.

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