

# **The 34<sup>th</sup> International Labour Process Conference 2017**

## **'Re-Connecting Work and Political Economy'**

### **Abstract submission:**

### **Time, place, space and the academic labour process**

Amanda Lee and MariaLaura DiDomenico, University of Surrey

Mark N.K. Saunders, University of Birmingham

Drawing on empirical findings from a longitudinal ethnographic study of a post 1992 UK university business school, we argue that structural and organisational changes taking place in the working environment have implications for the way in which time, place and space are experienced, articulated and conceptualised by academics and the organisation. Our research examined the impact of formalised location independent working (LIW) practices on the lives, relationships and identities of academics in the case study institution.

In order to frame the institutional and social context of our research, labour process theory (LPT) was utilised as the underpinning theoretical ideology to examine the impact of managerialism in higher education and consider its wider implications for the working lives of academics. We chose to take an interpretivist, social constructionist reading of LPT, following in the tradition of writers such as Knights and Willmott (1990; 2007) and O'Doherty and Willmott (2009). These writers stress the importance of considering the multi-faceted nature of work, relationships and workplaces in the context of a labour process. In this way interpretations went beyond the simple binary of micro and macro levels of analyses and built upon Giddens (1984) notion that human agency and social structure are inextricably linked. Multiple qualitative methods were adopted which encompassed: the first author's own reflective research journal; twenty-six in-depth loosely structured interviews and seventeen participant day-in-the-life diaries. The participant sample included both LIW and office-based academics, senior management, trades union and human resource management representatives.

Findings reveal an entrenched managerialist culture driven by private sector business models. Evening and weekend working are accepted as normal practice and work intensification and long-working hours are common. This is exacerbated by a perceived need for constant connectivity via mobile digital devices. There is evidence of spatial, physical and temporal blurring of the boundaries between work and home, although at a personal level, attempts are made to segregate these domains. However, those employed on LIW contracts feel they have greater levels of temporal and spatial flexibility than their work based colleagues. Opting for an LIW arrangement is felt by individuals to legitimise their right to work flexibly, so even though managers are often prescriptive about where and when they work, this is not easily enforced. In contrast, office-based academics feel the ability to work flexibly is not dependent upon an LIW arrangement and is part of the nature of academic work.

A specific development in the case study university was the move to open-plan working, introduced in order to save space and costs, as well as to encourage a more collegiate working environment. Nevertheless, academics report difficulty carrying out work requiring concentration, such as reading, reviewing, writing and marking. Consequently, for much of the time, the space is under utilised. Several participants described the working environment as a call centre and one participant made a direct comparison with a distribution warehouse. This suggests staff and students appear to be seen as a commodity to be exploited in order to ensure efficient use and distribution of labour where and when required by the organisation.

### **References:**

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