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Time after time? Balancing asynchronous temporalities in higher education



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The problem of synchronising temporalities in and between organisations



- ‚(Time has) a different rhythm in any different place and passes here differently from there` (Rovelli 2019: 16f)
- Time as a constitutive contextual dimension for how actors (including organisations) orient themselves and provide orientation for others, yet at different overlapping time scales (c.f. Adams 2008, 2004, 2003; Compton-Lilly 2016, Lemke 2000)

Context: Time and temporalities as an emerging research lens



- Overall, time as a research lens in management and organisation studies is quickly gaining more prominence (cf. Blagoev 2023, Granquist & Gustafson 2016,)
- Academic time or the temporal patterns of and in higher education still as a rather new research area (cf. Vettori 2023, Guzman-Valencuela 2015)
- So far, strong focus on actors and actor groups in higher education, predominantly examining how temporal regimes affect motivation, prospects, activities, processes and structures (cf. Rodgers et al 2022, Kaltenbrunner et al 2021, Lumino & Landri 2020).

The problem of synchronising temporalities in and between organisations



Linear concept of time

- As found in action plans, project plans and strategies
 - Oriented at milestones
 - Very often infused with the logic of trajectorial thinking
- Quality development as a continuous progress

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Cyclical concept of time

- As found in review cycles, contractual or management period, student life cycle...
 - Oriented at principles of regularity and repeatedness
 - Very often oriented at the logic of management cycles
- Quality development as a string of recurring phases



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Blurred concept of time

- A specific type of chronostrategy employed by HEIs (cf. Vettori & Warm 2024)
 - Timeless initiatives and ongoing processes
 - Oriented at the principle of atemporality: omitting timestamps and signaling continuity
- Quality development as a matter of observation (who, how and when)

The phenomenon of parallel and asynchronous timelines and temporalities

- Fiscal years versus academic years
- Management cycles versus strategy cycles
- Project time versus institutional time
- Time within the organization and time in its environment
- Time for discovery versus time of delivery
- Difference between “clock time” and “lived time” (following the discussions of Einstein and Bergson)



How well adjusted are our QA approaches to this clash of temporalities?



Can we even account for this clash of temporalities?

- Aligning IQA and EQA cycles
- Reconsidering our understanding of longitudinal analyses
- Acknowledging different temporal perspectives in our systems (e.g. students)
- Negotiating time coordinates across logics (e.g. project versus institution)
- Rethinking our notions of quality improvement and enhancement

