

Slack Resources as a Lever for Excellence: A Case Study of Higher Education Management

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Abstract

Managing higher education institutions involves a constant struggle between safeguarding the agency and autonomy of the staff and the stewardship of financial resources for stability, regulatory compliance and job security. Previous research has identified the increased reliance on managerialist academic work allocation models, while also acknowledging the innate de-professionalization these models may infer. We report a longitudinal case study of the implementation of a new approach to academic work allocation in higher education in a Swedish university. This new approach utilized slack resources to enhance the autonomy and performance of the staff in a strive for excellence. We show how the approach resulted in a substantial increase in both the quality of operations as well as working environment, while simultaneously introducing new challenges to management. Based on our findings, we offer recommendations to managers that strive to build and maintain higher education excellence and call for new research.

Keywords: academic work allocation models; higher education; management; slack resources

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Introduction

Managers in higher education are tackling substantial challenges (Belhiah, 2025). They are in most cases promoted to management from positions as staff members, i.e., they are not professional managers but are members of the collegium (Ross & Scanes, 2025; Yelder & Codling, 2004). At the same time, they are struggling with dwindling revenues and increased bureaucratization (Kohtamäki, 2019), as well as political winds bearing threats to academic freedom (Nature, 2025).

In response to these challenges, there has been a growing momentum for calculative regimes designed to assure resource control (Argento et al., 2020). With

the main resource being available time of staff, these practices have homed in on assuring resource efficiency and control through enhanced routines for academic work allocation. As noted by Robertson and Germov (2015), previous approaches suffer from rigidity and repetitiveness, counteracting more agile approaches to allocation of resources that may be better suited for the dynamics of academic work. Or as expressed more succinctly by Coates and Goedegebuure (2012, p. 887) ‘the academic career structure no longer meets the operational demands of the current environment and create many barriers to success’.

As noted by Roberts and Donahue (2000), this increased levels of bureaucratic control in relation to the planning of work is described as a deprofessionalization of the staff and academic profession (Leihy, 2011; Roberts & Donahue, 2000). Long gone are the days where staff members were autonomous in terms of how they spend their time, and instead we see a mirroring of the consulting practice of “billable hours” and micro-management. From a situation with substantial unassigned resources, affording higher levels of flexibility, adaptability and agility for both research and teaching, we have entered an age of managerialism with efficiency and plannability as its main virtues (Kolsaker, 2008).

Previous research highlights the necessity of unassigned resources, i.e., slack resources as a means of fostering capabilities to meet external change and internal pressure (Cyert & March, 1963). While there has been substantial research on the merits (and drawbacks) of the utilization of slack strategies in organizations (Daniel et al., 2004; George, 2005; Greenley & Oktemgil, 1998; Lee & Wu, 2016; Vanacker et al., 2017), there is still a dearth of research on the application of slack strategies in higher education (Spithoven & Phalet, 2024). To address this research gap, we pose and answer the following research question: *How can slack resources be utilized to enhance excellence in higher education?*

We report from a longitudinal case study where we engaged in various management roles in the design and implementation of a new approach to work allocation. Through designing and implementing an explicit slack strategy in 2017, we describe the process, trace the effects and identify key learnings. We contribute to research through offering an empirical illustration of the benefits and drawbacks of the utilization of a slack strategy in the management of higher education, and hope that our study will inspire concrete adoption of slack strategies in other academic settings as well as additional research.

The remainder of the paper is organized accordingly: First, we present a review of previous research in academic work allocation models, managerialism and deprofessionalization, along with an overview of the research on slack resources. This is followed by a short description of the method of the study, highlighting the use of confessional accounts as empirical material. After this, we

present the results in the form of a longitudinal case study written through three individual accounts of the involved managers. Finally, we discuss our findings and present the implications of our findings and avenues for future research.

Previous research

Academic work allocation models, managerialism and deprofessionalization

In recent years, academic work allocation models have become central for managing staff responsibilities within higher education, often promoted as mechanisms for transparency, equity, and workload balance (Crisp, 2022). These models, ranging from time-based and points-based systems to hybrid approaches, aim to formalize the distribution of teaching, research, and service tasks. However, while allocation models may bring a veneer of fairness, they have also been critiqued for oversimplifying the complex and unpredictable nature of academic work (Kenny & Fluck, 2022; Robertson & Germov, 2015; Vardi, 2009). Their implementation is frequently tied to broader institutional objectives around efficiency and accountability, reflecting the influence of managerialism in higher education (Kolsaker, 2008). This managerial turn often sees academic work quantified through standardized metrics, with workload dashboards and planning software used to optimize resource allocation, frequently at the expense of professional discretion.

The increasing reliance on allocation models intersects with growing tendencies toward micro-management and centralized resource planning in universities. The adoption of digital tools for tracking academic activities, combined with performance measurement regimes, enables fine-grained control over how staff members spend their time (Archer, 2008). While such tools can improve administrative oversight, they often introduce tensions between institutional control and academic autonomy, contributing to what has been described as the deprofessionalization of academic labour (Blackmore, 2002). Deprofessionalization in this context refers to the erosion of the authority, autonomy, and judgment traditionally associated with the academic role, manifest in growing standardization, intensification of teaching loads, and the routinization of research expectations (Ylijoki & Mäntylä, 2003). As academics are increasingly managed as units of productivity rather than trusted professionals, studies report rising dissatisfaction, identity conflicts, and burnout across the sector (Castelló & Sala-Bubaré, 2025; Knights & Clarke, 2014; Skinner et al., 2021). We have also seen reports on how the allocation models counteract technology-induced change

in pedagogical approaches (Gregory & Lodge, 2015) as well as how they may conserve gendered workload (Steinþórsdóttir et al., 2021).

The utility of slack resources

The concept of slack resources has a long-standing tradition in organizational theory, where it has been used to describe the pool of actual or potential resources which allow an organization to adapt to internal pressures and external demands (Cyert & March, 1963). Early work by Bourgeois (1981) categorized slack resources into three forms: available, recoverable, and potential, highlighting how these buffers may influence organizational behavior, innovation, and adaptability. Slack has often been seen as a source of strategic flexibility (Tan & Peng, 2003), enabling organizations to experiment with new initiatives or to respond effectively to crises. At the same time, slack has also been criticized as a source of inefficiency or even organizational complacency (Jensen, 1999; Mount et al., 2024; Nohria & Gulati, 1997), suggesting a dual role that continues to provoke debate both in theory and practice.

In the context of higher education, slack resources have been explored less systematically, yet their role is arguably even more critical given the dual demands of academic autonomy and accountability (Spithoven & Phalet, 2024). Studies have identified how financial, human, and time-related slack can support research excellence, interdisciplinary collaboration, and pedagogical innovation (Geiger, 2004; Marginson, 2011). At the same time, increasing managerialism and performance measurement in universities have led to tensions around how slack is perceived and managed (Deem et al., 2007). As higher education institutions navigate complex pressures, from funding volatility and digital transformation to global competition, the strategic deployment of slack resources emerges as a vital, yet under-researched, component of institutional resilience and transformation.

Method

We use collaborative autoethnography (May & Pattillo-McCoy, 2000) to retrospectively explore the experiences associated with the implementation of, at the time, a new financial model aimed at resource allocation within higher education, specifically at the Information Systems division at the department of Applied IT at University of Gothenburg between the years 2017 and 2025. Autoethnography is particularly appropriate since it allows for reflective exploration of managerial experiences and decisions that are seldom openly

discussed in the academic "frontstage" but often reside in the hidden, "backstage" realms of university administration (Belhiah, 2025; Goffman, 2002).

The study is conducted by the three authors who have each occupied different managerial roles at different points in time: the first head of division (2017–2021), the head of department (2018–2021), and the second head of division (2021–2025). The choice to include these three roles is deliberate, allowing the study to capture multiple, layered and overlapping perspectives (May & Pattillo-McCoy, 2000) on the development and impact of the financial and management model.

Empirical material has been collected through confessional accounts, a narrative technique inspired by Schultze (2000), which encourages deep reflexivity and openness regarding personal managerial experiences, challenges, and insights. Confessional accounts are particularly appropriate as they reveal implicit knowledge, assumptions, and values underlying managerial decisions. They also acknowledge both success and failure, enabling rich descriptions (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019) and a nuanced understanding of management challenges in higher education contexts.

The unit of analysis is the managerial practice related to the financial allocation of staff resources, specifically focusing on the explicit introduction and use of slack resources as strategic resources. Each author's confessional account covers their specific managerial period, providing a longitudinal perspective that highlights the development of the model, the interplay between managerial actions and organizational consequences, and the persistent tensions between administrative control, staff autonomy, and organizational performance.

The Swedish higher education context provides a unique institutional backdrop for the analysis. The regulatory environment, funding structures, and traditions of academic autonomy shape managerial possibilities and constraints, and thus critically inform the experiences and outcomes detailed in the confessional narratives. The contextual specificity further enhances the transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) of the insights gained, particularly to similar institutional settings in other national contexts.

Through systematic reflection on these narratives, the study identifies critical turning points, challenges, and enabling factors associated with the introduction and maintenance of slack resources. This reflective practice allows for the extraction of broader theoretical and practical implications, contributing to existing discussion on managerialism, academic autonomy, and resource allocation models in higher education.

Writing an autoethnography consisting of confessional accounts that in many cases only are discussed in backstage-settings are never risk free. We believe

however, that the narratives presented could be made visible after the consultation with the recommendations by Sparkes (2024) to shape narratives that are unharmed, acceptable for the community, and do not willingly misrepresent any underprivileged group or individuals.

Results: Using slack as a lever for excellence

We describe the alternative approach adopted at the Division for Information Systems, Department of Applied IT at the University of Gothenburg through three confessional accounts. Each account is retrospective and delimited to a specific period.

The first head of division (2017-2021)

I joined the division of Information Systems in the fall of 2015. Coming from a business school, I was struck with the almost ceremonial character of the time management utilized for staff planning. With the number of staff being small yet tasked with a substantial workload in terms of teaching, I observed how each teacher would constantly decrease the number of hours their involvement of courses would require. They were in essence negotiating with themselves to make sure that the teaching could be delivered by the staff, resulting in over-burdening themselves with teaching throughout the academic year. From my vantage point, I saw a significant level of under-staffing, i.e., the number of teachers was not aligned with the course load that the division delivered. The consequence of this was high levels of sick-leave and the deprioritization of research. After taking on the role as head of the division in 2017, I started to investigate the financial prerequisites more intently.

I was not surprised to see that the department that housed the division was carrying a significant financial surplus. In other words, the under-staffing I had identified was a systemic error that needed to be amended. While each division was tasked with handling staff planning, they had neither insight into the financials of the department nor the division per se. To alleviate this, I started to inquire about the revenues and costs of the division. My plan was to create the basis for increased agency through getting a sound overview of the financials, moving toward a target costing approach for assuring plannability.

My requests were met with strong resistance from the head of administration. They saw no need for my requests for additional financial information, since there was no problem in terms of risks of running a deficit for the department. My arguments concerning the working environment in the divisions

and the low levels of research being conducted (and hence the low levels of research funding acquired) were not heard. In dialogue with the chair of the department, I continued to push on until I got access to what the head of administration referred to as ‘mere conjecture, but the closest thing we can get’ in terms of educational revenues. Using these revenues as a base, I started to calculate the appropriate target cost that would result in a break-even financial result.

In these calculations, two things became clear. First, the number of staff was as I had expected severely under-dimensioned for the workload. With 15 staff members, I saw the need for (and subsequent rationality of) increasing the staff size to 30. Second, the heavy reliance on adjunct teaching staff (i.e., not qualified nor active researchers) was severely restricting the number of staff that we could support financially. With each researcher having the potential for attracting external funding, the adjunct staff needed to be solely supported through educational funds. In other words, having adjunct staff severely hampered our ability of expanding research at the division and each adjunct staff member in essence consumed double the internal financial resources than the other staff members.

I initiated two parallel strategies. The first was intended to expand the number of staff, and the second to decrease our reliance on adjunct staff. The first strategy involved showcasing the severe under-staffing situation for the division to the top management team, pushing for swift recruitment. I pushed for recruiting junior staff members rather than senior, since I saw the need for getting people on site that would be prone to, in essence, create a new division. Through the support of the department chair, we were able to (over the following years) recruit 100 per cent of the identified shortage of staff, doubling the initial size of our staff.

As for the second strategy, i.e., shifting away from a dependency on adjunct staff, I started talking candidly about the existence of an A- and B team with the A-team being the active researchers. Through utilizing the decreased individual teaching load coming from new staff members joining, I offered the adjunct staff the possibility of becoming enrolled as part-time PhD students. I made it clear that given that they were working at a university, not engaging in research was not an option if they wished to continue working with teaching. This was met with significant push-back from the staff accusing me of sowing discontent, and a situation where all but one of the adjunct staff (who was enrolled as a PhD student) gave their leave of absence.

According to the target cost calculations, the division could support 30 staff members given the revenues that we currently had. With a staff of 30 and given the current workload, each teacher would have to be deliver one 15ECTS course per year and supervise three bachelor- or master theses. This was significantly different from the level of teaching involvement that we had seen in the past, where most

staff members were constantly involved in teaching, integrated into several courses in teacher teams. I started talking about the new deal as “The Model”, where we would trust that each staff member took responsibility for delivering stellar teaching in one course, freeing up the rest of the year for research.

This meant that the previous practices of having teacher groups that jointly delivered courses would be dismantled. The argument behind this was that we needed to delimit the time for course involvement as much as possible. With each 15ECTS course being delivered in 10 weeks, this meant that a teacher would have 42 weeks of non-teaching. I started to refer to this as “slack” and spoke about the necessity for self-management to assure that the slack was utilized responsibly. We agreed on not continuing with the previous practice of planning the number of hours of course involvement, and instead to simply use the model as a basis for sign-off between the manager and the employee. One course, three theses and then research, per year.

The effect of the implementation was immediate. We directly saw a substantial decrease in the amount of sick-leave, and we saw an increase with 500 per cent in the number of applications for external research funding in the first year alone. We also saw an increase in the quality of education, since the teachers could now focus intently on the course they were responsible for. With the courses being well-aligned with the teacher’s research, this assured the continued development of the courses and their quality over time. In addition to this, we saw a substantial increase in the amount and quality of applicants for our new positions. With the model actively promoted externally as a unique feature of our research environment, the interest from stellar researchers that wanted to have the possibility of conducting research spiked. Because of this, we started to see an increase in the quality and impact of the research that we conducted at the division, resulting in a growing sense of pride among the staff members for being part of the division.

The head of department (2018-2021)

When I assumed the position as head of the department of Applied IT, I had the expectation that there would be systematic models in place for budgeting and calculating the time and costs associated with the researchers and teaching staff. During my previous work as division manager, we had simple excel-documents to control time and resources. On that level, it was quite simple to get an overview of the financial situation and to communicate with the staff of what was needed in terms of cost management.

As a new head of department, I quickly found that necessary models were non-existent. Instead, there was a short-term perspective in place where funding was distributed reactively to cover immediate capability gaps. This led to an

unfortunate situation where those who lacked external funding received a larger share of the available internal funds. On the other hand, successful researchers who brought in external funding received little or no additional resources. This approach ultimately promoted an irresponsible way of managing finances, undermining the long-term sustainability of the department.

On the department level, that approach of aggregating the local excel-sheets did not scale very well, since our different divisions had very diverging ways of organizing its teaching and how work in securing external funding was conducted. This resulted in a lack of overview and an inability to compare across divisions. One of the more difficult aspects of my role was addressing the allocation of teaching time for staff. I found it challenging to communicate the importance of having dedicated blocks of teaching time and blocks of time away from teaching. Staff who continued to teach in small increments, scattered over the entire year, struggled to find any time to focus on research. They were caught in a cycle of feeling that they did not have enough time to devote to research. They felt that they were understaffed and had no resources for research.

At the division for Information Systems, they had over time formed an approach that encouraged staff to schedule larger, more concentrated blocks of teaching to free up substantial chunks of time for the rest of the year to focus on research. The new division manager soon transformed this approach into an explicit model and was targeted by heavy critique for being instrumental and potentially detrimental to the quality of teaching. The introduction of what they referred to as “the Model” was associated with significant debate and conflict, since it challenged the authority of the department administrative manager. For the division that introduced the model, the results were surprisingly positive. Teaching became more focused, and staff were able to allocate time to research, leading to increased productivity in both areas.

Despite the model’s success, it faced criticism from other divisions, who claimed that the largest division was overstaffed, which allowed them to implement such a model. However, what many did not acknowledge was that this model required the staff to bring in substantial external funding to make it work. The division did so at a significantly higher volume than the other divisions, ensuring that we had the financial stability necessary to implement the model.

Looking back, the key takeaway from my time as head of department is that financial management and resource allocation should be more strategically planned, with a focus on long-term goals. Sadly, the university did not provide a model nor process for this, risking short term, sudden and non-informed decision making. A long-term perspective also requires a different management style at the division level—managers who are willing to confront colleagues who prioritize their own

interests over the success of the division. Since we recruit division managers among our colleagues, one can imagine that many division managers are ill-prepared for this role.

The second head of division (2021-2025)

During my time as head of division, the uniqueness of our model has frequently led to friction in interactions with other organizational units within the university. Within our department, distinct traditions and logics of teaching exist. Other divisions typically distribute teaching responsibilities differently, with multiple teachers involved in each course, each contributing their specialized expertise. While this approach offers a different kind of security, it also generates substantial coordination cost. Our division's approach, by contrast, places complete course responsibility on a single teacher, minimizing coordination cost and granting each staff member substantial autonomy and control.

These diverging approaches often lead to what I interpret as translation issues. Problems arise, for instance, when staff from our division are asked to teach smaller elements in courses from other divisions, leading to ongoing discussions around fairness and workload equity. Such situations tend to escalate into disputes about fairness, especially if certain staff members consistently shoulder these additional tasks. With the model not fully implemented in the other divisions of the department, the feeling tends to be that our division is endowed with fundamentally different operational prerequisites. This is in parts true yet looking into the financials we can see that staff members of our division are funded to a lesser extent through department funds (educational funds, internal funds). In other words, the difference between the division is less of a matter of financial resources and more related to a different approach to management.

These tensions become particularly pronounced in leadership meetings, especially in times of financial constraints. I have seen a significant temptation to revert to traditional hour-based accounting to optimize resource utilization as a response to decreased available funding. However, breaking the model into hourly increments quickly shifts the staff's mindset from pedagogical quality to workload negotiations. This transition risks deteriorating both workplace climate and overall teaching excellence and is hence something that I have invested heavily in counteracting.

During my first three years as division head, we initially focused on recruiting new staff, significantly enhancing our expertise by bringing in recent PhD graduates who had demonstrated success through publications in high-impact journals. Concurrently, we began to realize the positive effects of the model: publication output increased, sick leave dropped to zero, and we observed a notable

increase in innovative educational approaches. We also initiated a self-funded doctoral school involving 15 executive doctoral students, enabling staff members to achieve higher academic qualifications through access to new data and acting as supervisors. By the academic year 2025-26, at least two-thirds of these students are expected to successfully defend their dissertations, many of which have been published in prestigious journals. During this period, our division established itself as the leading Information Systems division nationally and ranked fifth in Europe, receiving two distinguished publication awards, achievements we directly attribute to the agency afforded by our model.

However, the post-pandemic academic landscape has brought significant economic challenges due to inflation and other factors, intensifying competition for external funding. Fortunately, our model has provided staff with opportunities to explore alternative funding avenues, such as commissioned courses and research contracts, creating a stable financial foundation aligned with the core principles of our approach. This strategic self-sufficiency ensures our division maintains its autonomy and reduces dependency on volatile external funding sources.

Yet, paradoxically, this very success has led to a certain complacency among staff members. As economic pressures temporarily eased, thanks to commissioned projects covering budgetary gaps, staff increasingly focused on publications rather than securing external research funding. Consequently, income from external sources declined during 2023-2024, partly due to fewer funding applications and intensified competition.

To sustain the model effectively, we need to continuously emphasize the division's financial realities, guiding staff in balancing service (e.g., reviewing and editorial responsibilities) and publications against the vital necessity of securing external funding. While publications primarily benefit individual researchers and their immediate groups, external funding provides essential resources for the entire division, enhancing collective financial stability. Ultimately, the model requires a proactive, transparent, and strategically mindful leadership approach.

Discussion and conclusion

The results presented in this paper suggest that the deliberate use of slack resources can function as a powerful lever for counteracting managerialism and the deprofessionalization of academics. While managerial reforms have sought to increase efficiency and accountability through tighter control and standardization (Kolsaker, 2008), these efforts have often undermined academic autonomy, degraded working conditions, and diminished the capacity for meaningful research

(Yielder & Codling, 2004). The model introduced at the Division for Information Systems at the University of Gothenburg illustrates an alternative path - one that privileges trust, transparency, and professional agency over micro-management and managerialism.

Rather than interpreting slack resources as waste or inefficiency, as is common in managerial logic, this case reframes slack as a strategic asset. By deliberately creating unallocated time in staff schedules, the division was able to reduce sick leave, increase research productivity, and improve teaching quality. This challenges the dominant narrative that academic efficiency must come from maximum workload extraction and instead positions slack as a buffer that allows for both pedagogical depth and research innovation (Crisp, 2022; Kohtamäki, 2019). The concept aligns with the original perception of Cyert and March (1963) where slack resources are perceived as a necessary buffer enabling organizations to adapt and innovate. In the presented case, slack was not incidental but intentional, a planned space in the staff work calendar that encouraged autonomy and responsibility. Staff were entrusted with the responsibility of managing their own time for research and service, signalling a departure from traditional forms of top-down accountability.

The introduction of "The Model" represented a clear shift from managerial oversight toward professional autonomy. Instead of allocating teaching by hours and tracking micro-level engagement, the model emphasized outcomes and trust (Lumineau et al., 2023; Whitchurch, 2019). Staff members were responsible for delivering one course and supervising a set number of theses per year, freeing them to self-direct their research efforts. This model counteracts the deprofessionalization often seen in universities where academics are reduced to labour units in an accounting system. By contrast, the division's approach reinforced academic identity, encouraged scholarly ambition, and created conditions conducive to long-term research investments. It also re-professionalized teaching by assigning full responsibility for a course to a single individual, deepening their ownership and pedagogical engagement.

A key enabler of this transformation was financial transparency. Gaining insight into the actual revenues and costs associated with teaching allowed the division to challenge the assumption of scarcity that often justifies understaffing and overwork. This transparency allowed for strategic hiring, the phasing out of adjunct roles, and a clearer understanding of the financial implications of different staffing strategies. However, this approach ran counter to established administrative logics. Efforts to gain financial data were met with resistance, illustrating how administrative systems can act as gatekeepers to change. The model thus

underscores the importance of data access and transparency in empowering academic leadership to make strategic decisions (Schade, 2023).

While the model proved effective within the division, it generated significant friction at both the departmental and university levels. Differences in teaching allocation philosophies and staffing models led to translation problems and perceived inequities. In other words, institutional change (such as described in the case) does not occur in isolation. Diverging models of work organization across divisions can lead to conflict, particularly in shared governance settings where resource allocation is contested (Kenny & Fluck, 2023). The case reveals that innovative models must navigate not only structural but also cultural barriers. The division's model was sometimes misinterpreted as elitist or over-resourced, despite financial data showing otherwise. This reflects a broader issue in academia: resistance to differentiation and innovation, even in the face of demonstrated success (Ma & Lee, 2019).

One identified paradox of success lies in the risk of complacency. As the division stabilized financially and gained national and international recognition, some staff began to deprioritize grant applications in favour of publishing. While this enhanced individual scholarly profiles, it threatened the collective financial foundation of the model. Slack, once protected and productive, risked being misused or taken for granted. This underlines the fragility of such models (Lee & Wu, 2016), and supports previous notions of optima in levels of slack (Nohria & Gulati, 1997). Slack must be continually justified and renegotiated, and as noted by Rahrovani et al (2018), it is contingent on not only organizational context but also the personal characteristics of the individual. It also requires a leadership style that is transparent, communicative, and willing to remind staff of the shared responsibility for maintaining the model. In this way, slack is not only a structural feature but also a cultural and relational one.

This study has one main contribution to research. Through identifying the applicability and merits of slack strategies into the higher education context, we add to the plethora of case studies of slack strategies in an empirical setting previously under-researched. While we do not make any explicit theoretical contributions nor any claims of generalizability, we hope that this study may inspire further research on slack strategies in higher education management.

This study has two main contributions to practice. First, we find that the implementation of slack strategy requires a sound understanding of the financial situation of the organizational unit, as well as the application of target costing as a calculative regime. Here, we urge managers in higher education to aspire for cost transparency and to apply target costing as a means for establishing the potential parameters of slack in their organizations. Second, we find that the main challenge

with utilizing slack strategies in an organizational unit will uncover over time, through potential complacency among staff and espoused inequity in the perception from other organizational units. This requires careful and active leadership.

We identify two potential future avenues for research stemming from our study. First, using inspiration from Rahrovani et al (2018) in combination with self-determination theory (Ross & Scanes, 2025) we propose a micro-level study of the perceptions and individual performance of staff members that work in environments where slack resources are used as a lever for management. We believe that this will add additional nuance to individual-level configuration of slack levels as well as offer insights into the avoidance of complacency. Second, we propose comparative studies where similar organizational units are compared based on either if or not they employ slack strategies or, perhaps more interestingly, different configurations of slack strategies. Here, we suggest leaning on a configurational approach (Snow et al., 2005), including a set of predefined control variables related to the institutional environments. We believe that this will add further nuance to the operationalization of slack strategies in higher education settings.

Conclusion and limitations

This study contributes to ongoing debate about the future of academic work. It suggests that rather than succumbing to the logics of managerialism, universities can reclaim professionalism through thoughtful design of work allocation models. Slack resources, when deliberately created and coupled with accountability, can produce better outcomes across teaching, research, and staff wellbeing. Yet this approach demands courage, sustained leadership, and a willingness to challenge entrenched norms. In an era marked by funding volatility and organizational anxiety, the strategic use of slack resources can be an effective tool for reimagining academic life.

This study has three main limitations. First, the choice of utilizing self-reflective, auto-ethnographical, confessional account data comes with certain limitations and caveats. While it affords the first-hand insight and lived experience, it simultaneously offers but one account of many, i.e., suffers from risks associated with biases (Walford, 2021). We have tried to handle this limitation through upfront transparency. Second, with this being a case of a public university, i.e., a highly regulated environment, we acknowledge clear limitations in transferability of our findings (Bannister, 2007). We have tried to handle this limitation through focusing on aspects related to leadership and management, two areas we believe offer greater opportunities of transferability of findings. Third, the study focuses on a single organizational unit within one university, where the authors were deeply

involved in the management and implementation of the model. While this insider perspective provides valuable depth and access, it also introduces the risk of overlooking informal resistance, latent tensions, or alternative interpretations of the model's effects from other staff or administrative perspectives.

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