

When and Why Do We Read?

The Time and Value of Reading in the Twenty-
First-Century University: Project Report



*Council for the Defence
of British Universities*

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Introduction:

Building upon previous studies on time-use in the university, this project specifically investigates the interconnected issues of when and why reading happens in the humanities today. While researchers in all disciplines read as part of their profession, it is in subjects such as English, History, Philosophy that it is the absolute key to the successful production and transmission of knowledge. For academics, reading is an essential activity for their research and teaching, and much of the humanities student's time is meant for reading. This study uses a vector of ethnographic comparison established by our previous collaboration, the Lockdown Reading Project, to compare the opportunities for, and value given to, reading at the English and Danish university. Our study has allowed us to gain insight into the value given to reading, its prioritisation and its place on schedules, course plans and summer reading, affect the way humanists in these two settings approach learning and teaching through reading.

Rationale:

As our lockdown project (based on 860 surveys and 70 in-depth interviews) showed, people's reading tended to increase with an increase in leisure time. For many, time gained from the usual commute, led to more reading.¹ For students and academics, though, the pandemic university in both countries was often one of increased workloads and remote learning. Students read in isolation without the community offered by in-person learning, and academics spent considerable time learning new technologies and preparing online materials. The time faculty had for reading was curtailed.

This pandemic picture of overworked academics struggling to find time to read comes against a generalised backdrop of excessive workloads in the English system, often taken up with more teaching and administrative demands. With recent redundancies and department closures in England, especially in the Humanities, this is only set to get worse. In some English universities, we also see that the central activity of reading has been somewhat sidelined. The 1-hour allocation for lecture preparation on certain workload models is not enough time to read a novel or history book, let alone write a lecture on it. 'Reading Weeks' in some universities have been retitled 'Consolidation Weeks' and reading is now often subsumed under 'independent study'. Reading for academics is often an invisible part of the work they are, however, required to undertake; it is often not seen as being productive in itself. As many of our interviewees told us, it is very unlikely that an academic

¹ For a full account of this study, see [Davies, Lupton, and Schmidt, *Reading Novels during the Covid-19 Pandemic* \(Oxford University Press, 2022\)](#).

applying for sabbatical would be successful if they simply listed 'reading' as their focus for a period of leave; reading is not seen as an 'outcome' on its own. Likewise, discussions of HE in terms of 'delivery', 'provision' or something 'captured' online (exacerbated by the pandemic) often fail to register the importance of reading for students, or the time it requires.

The rationale for this study, then, is to see when, how and why academics and students read. When does reading take place? Where does it appear on academics' work schedules and in student handbooks? What value do students give it, especially in an increasingly marketized system as in England focused on graduate employment? Do these changes affect how students prioritise reading? Do they value it in itself, or just as a means-to-an-end? In documenting the realities of reading time and practices in today's university, we will provide specific findings about the current conditions under which students and academics read. Our interviews with faculty and students will provide a snapshot of whether reading is prioritised above other tasks; if students see it as valuable in itself; if it happens on a weekly or daily basis; on the role of summer research reading for faculty; and on the relationship between instrumental reading of emails and research reading.

The rationale for comparing English and Danish cases lies in the fact that while Danish citizens benefit from some of the lowest working hours per week in Europe, British workers consistently clock some of the highest. This extends to the university setting, where Danish students study without fees for 5 years while being paid a basic income. This economic difference within these systems ties into the ways in which reading does – or doesn't – happen for students and faculty in these two systems, and the value given to reading. By focusing our comparative study on a country outside the UK, we will be able to investigate how the highly marketized, instrumental English system and the increasing focus on graduate outcomes may affect the value given to reading, the time dedicated to it and, ultimately, its purpose. In Denmark, the reading landscape is shaped by the way working and holiday hours are tightly calculated, and parental leave and summer fiercely protected – but the outcomes in terms of scholarly reading are often poor. Comparison of these two settings will be vital to the originality of our conclusions.

Methodology:

Between October and December 2022, we interviewed 33 humanists based in British and Danish universities, with the following breakdown: Cambridge (6); Copenhagen (10); Portsmouth (8); SDU (5); 3 Warwick (3); 1 retired UK Professor. Women (16), Men (17). Professors (9); Associate Professors (6); Readers (1); Postdoctoral Lecturer (1); Postdoctoral Researcher (1); Research Assistant (1); Visiting Researcher (1); PhD students (3); PhD graduand (1); Emeritus

Professor (1); MA students (3); BA students (5). Out of those that provided such details, the age range of participants was as follows: 21% = 18-24; 16% = 25-34; 16% = 35-44; 21% = 45-54; 21% = 55-64. 42% had 1 or more children.

Ahead of the interviews, participants were asked to keep a journal of their daily reading habits during a term week, using the Reading Log Template provided (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Reading Log Template

	What (e.g., email, student paper, Facebook; article, book title)?	Format (e.g. phone, tablet, PDF, audiobook?)?	Where (home, office, library, desk, in bed)?	Thoughts/ Reflections
Morning				
Afternoon				
Evening				

At the end of this week, we conducted semi-structured interviews in person, lasting between 45-60mins, what Jennifer Mason terms 'qualitative interviewing'.² These interviews were conducted in-person and in English at the Universities of Cambridge, Sussex, Portsmouth, and Warwick, Copenhagen, and Southern Denmark. We chose these universities because they represent a range of institutions. Cambridge is an 'ancient' Russell Group university, Sussex a 1960s 'plate glass' university, Portsmouth a 'Post-1992' university, and Warwick a 'plate glass' Russell Group university. The University of Copenhagen is a research-intensive institution and the country's oldest university, whereas Southern Denmark is a modern institution that prides itself on its ties to business and industry. This range allowed us to examine how factors such as research income and student demographics might influence the value placed upon, and the time made available for, reading. We were also able to see the variation in office space, ranging from brand new but incredibly small offices at Warwick's Faculty of Arts Building, to the spacious rooms at Newnham College, Cambridge.

² See Jennifer Mason, *Qualitative Researching*, 2nd ed. (London: Sage, 2002), p. 62.

Following the transcription of the interviews and reading journals, we analysed those interviews to gain a sense of the lived realities of reading in these different universities, focusing specifically on when, how, and why reading happens. This involved analysing potential problems affecting reading in current settings, and the possibility of producing recommendations on how better to re-establish and embed the value of reading.

Project Findings:

Our initial findings are published here: Ben Davies, Christina Lupton, 'When Your Job Is to Read After Work.' *Reception: Texts, Readers, Audiences, History* 6 July 2023; 15 51–57. doi: <https://doi.org/10.5325/reception.15.1.0051>

The following summarises what we record in this article as well as our other findings:

- Our research suggests that most of our participants see themselves as not having time to read as closely, deeply, or widely as their work ideally demands – despite the fact that on other counts they are reading all the time. Yet, while most had not read as they wanted, almost everyone had spent many hours skimming texts online, reading the news, re-reading texts for teaching, listening to audiobooks, reading email, and editing students' or colleagues' writing.
- To some extent this reflects a media crisis, with online reading – particularly of email – overwhelming almost all other kind of textual activity. But many scholars also demonstrated creative and successful use of audio reading and online reading formats and platforms in their notetaking and research practices.
- Academics and students all reported that they had less time for open-ended reading because they have to spend time on directed reading and writing that result in 'outputs'. In Denmark especially, several academics felt that their work consisted overwhelmingly of grant management, and they complained on the new emphasis on publication.
- For students themselves, the online reading, scrolling, and skimming described in many recent studies of student reading were present but were also seen as the antithesis of the kinds of study they had come to university hoping to do.³ Certainly, the fantasies still attracting students to the disciplines of literature, history, and philosophy involve the offline immersion in a book.

³ See, for instance, Mary Margaret Kerr and Kristen M. Frese, 'Reading to Learn or Learning to Read? Engaging College Students in Course Readings', *College Teaching* 65, no. 1 (2017): 28–31. <https://doi.org/10.1080/87567555.2016.1222577>. For an example of the shape debates about student reading can take, see Rachel Pells's 'University Students Are Struggling to Read Entire Books', *The Independent*, 15 April 2016. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/education/university-students-are-struggling-to-read-entire-books-a6986361.html>.

- Students and faculty in the humanities all felt that they came closest to reading as they wanted to in summer, or after their work for classes was done. Being away from home, especially in holiday houses or settings, often seemed to provide the ideal time and space to undertake more exploratory reading.
- The fact that the most ideal reading for the humanist scholar happens in time for which they are not paid creates a complex situation in which the professional survival of humanists begins to depend on there being some limits to their paid work.⁴ Of the many layers of attention that 'working' on a text requires of the humanist scholar, that initial one of reading for curiosity or pleasure turns out to be the hardest to make room for as university employees in humanities disciplines become more time-strapped.
- This leads to the complicated conclusion that it is the people who read most who may need their instrumental reading to be limited. Without this balance, between time spent with and away from their email, teaching preparation, grant writing, grading, and assessment of each other's texts, humanists are left to read as everyone does: for work, and without ever ranging freely between texts, or returning repeatedly to the same passage, scene, sentence, or word.
- We saw an unevenness with time for reading across institutions, depending on department sizes, student numbers, funding/resources, administrative needs. There was no easily identifiable pattern here. For instance, well-resourced institutions such as Cambridge can involve lots of college administration for Fellows.
- The value given to reading within Higher Education suffers from a problem of representation and knowledge. Public understanding of the work undertaken in the name of 'reading' is often built upon cultural stereotypes, and can at once seem simplistic and esoteric. As one Associate Professor at Cambridge put it, 'the humanities feels transparent and easy to understand and its complexity would surprise...'. Part of our ongoing project aims to provide a greater account of the processes, practices, and methods of 'reading' as experienced by academics and students alike, as well as the temporal demands it requires.

Project Talks and Presentations to date:

Ben Davies, 'Reading at University', The Functions of Criticism Conference, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, 19-20 May 2023.

⁴ It is worth noting here that a survey report by the University and College Union (UCU) in the UK indicates that on average academics undertake over two extra days of unpaid work per week ('Workload Survey 2021 Data Report' by the University and College Union (UCU) - A Report by University And College Union, June 2022, p. 26. <https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/12905/WorkloadReportJune22/pdf/WorkloadReportJune22.pdf>).

Christina Lupton, 'The Place of Critical Distance', The Functions of Criticism Conference, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, 19-20 May 2023.

Ben Davies, 'Academic Ghost Labour: Reading After Death', Nicholas Royle: A Symposium, University of Sussex, Falmer, 23 June 2023.

Ben Davies, 'Reading as Labour', Narrating Labour: Posture and Positionality Conference, Aix-Marseille Université, Marseille, 28-30 June 2023.

Christina Lupton, 'When Your Job is to Read After Work', Keynote Address, Un/Disciplining Reading Conference, University College Dublin, Dublin, 13-14 September 2023.

Christina Lupton, 'Social Reading and Reading Communities', Keynote Address, German Association for the Study of English (Anglistenverband), Seigen, 25 September 2023.

Christina Lupton, 'Reading Under the Dome of Work', Keynote Address, German Society for English Romanticism, Leipzig University, Leipzig, 5-8 October 2023.

Project Publications to date:

Ben Davies and Christina Lupton (2023); 'When Your Job Is to Read After Work.' Reception: Texts, Readers, Audiences, History 6, 15 51–57. doi: <https://doi.org/10.5325/reception.15.1.0051>

Christina Lupton, "Can Literature Survive an Age of Endless Work?" forthcoming in Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift fuer Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte.

Future Development:

The research funding from CDBU allowed us to undertake interviews at 5 universities in 2 countries. As our summary report shows, this has enabled us to gain greater insight into academic and student ideas about reading, time-use, and perceptions of value. To develop this research further, we plan to submit a large-scale research funding bid that would allow us to investigate these

areas across multiple university faculties, especially in the Sciences. Moreover, we anticipate undertaking a period of embedded research, following a group of academics and students for a semester to observe their reading practices. This would allow us to analyse statements in relation to what we observe and would enable us to use other ethnographic methods in our research. In terms of dissemination, we plan to write a co-authored monograph on this project, in part helping to provide a fine-grained picture of reading within universities today.

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