

What do academics do all the time?

Oh my dear, what do academics *do* all the time? For students I know it is confusing: primarily because it is so unlike school. It can seem upsetting that the academics do not spend all their time in class with you. Well, being an academic is a full time job, and only a part of that job is about teaching undergraduates. Let me explain.

What academics do and don't do

Academics do not spend their time lying on Caribbean beaches eating peeled grapes from the hands of Hollywood movie stars. Nor do they spend their time swilling Pinot Grigio in louche wine bars between tutorials. It is a common mistake for students to assume that academics only exist in the rooms in which tutorials take place: it always surprises me how often my students pass me in the street and completely fail to recognise me because I am not in the place where they usually see me; if I stop them and say "hello" they usually jump as though I had risen magically out of the pavement.

You would be amazed at the things academics do. They teach postgraduate students as well as undergraduate students: so there is an entirely different timetable for that. They supervise research students. They serve on committees in law schools and at the college level (average meeting time 1.5 hours) in the following areas: staff meetings, teaching and learning policy, research policy, postgraduate teaching, undergraduate teaching, examinations, widening participation, staff-student liaison (undergraduate and postgraduate), admissions committees, teaching strategy, room refurbishment, review of other teachers' teaching, appraisal assessment, the contents of the library, budget and finance, IT, WebCT and service provision, administering the provision of course documentation, ; and applying for research funding, delivering papers at academic seminars, writing papers for academic seminars, serving on the editorial boards of journals, serving on governments and similar bodies, responding to consultation papers. And that's not taking into account marking essays, office hours, preparing for lectures and seminars, preparing for meetings, writing references, talking at open days, reading UCAS forms, marking examinations, and so on. There are others, but I cannot call them to mind right now. Just preparing for teaching takes hours and hours. Planning the materials and putting them together takes ages.

With the research assessment exercise (RAE) most academics are required to publish research which is reviewed formally by government-appointment committees every five or six years. If you think about writing a textbook, for example, of 1,000 pages: that is about 500,000 words. Just to type out 500,000 words at a typing speed of 30 words per minute would take 277 hours. If each working day is 7 hours long with two hours of teaching a day deducted, that would take 55 working days just to type out those words. That is eleven weeks just on the typing. The table of cases in each law textbook will have on average 30 pages of cases, with 40 cases on each page: that is 1,200 cases, each of which the author has read, at (say) an hour each: that is, 1,200 hours, or 48 working

weeks (effectively one year, taking into account holidays) just on reading the cases. You will notice that none of this even takes into account thinking about those cases, nor reading any journal literatures or other books, nor thinking about what should be typed out, nor re-drafting the thing that is typed: all of this obviously takes months and months and months. Of course, books do not get written that quickly because there is all that committee and teaching work getting in the way. The same is true of monographs and journal articles and conference papers. It is even harder if you are a younger lecturer writing your first or one of your first pieces of research.

Oddly, your learning experience would be much improved if you took a little time in seminars to ask your seminar leader what they find interesting about the subject you are studying: what they thought when writing about, what the challenges were, where the fun is for them, how they got lured into the subject, what first captured their interest ... You may find an entirely different person in there.

Office hours

There is often confusion about office hours: that is, the hours in which students are available to see their students. Given the amount of other stuff that academics are required to do, as we have already considered, it is not true that they have nothing to do when they are not actually teaching. So, the risk is that academics might otherwise always be too busy to talk their students, or that it might only be possible to see them if you were lucky enough to find them in their office.

So, instead, what office hours do is to make a promise that the academic will be in her office at the advertised times. Office hours are a positive promise to the student that the academic will be there to talk to you at the advertised time. The onus is on you to go and talk to her. Most law schools will have a policy as to the number of hours that academics make available, over how many days they must be spread, and so on.