

CRITICAL REFLECTION

Why Can't You Slow Down? Conceptualizing Compelled Agency in Global Higher Education

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Abstract

This critical reflection addresses the question “why can’t you slow down?” by examining the dominant norm of being rushed, busy, and productive within the context of global higher education. The reflection particularly focuses on female international students, who experience intensified anxiety and fear produced by social and institutional demands. While existing literature provides thorough portraits of the multifaceted challenges faced by female international students (e.g., financial crisis, ageism, and gendered violence), there is a gap in understanding why they value career acceleration and productivity. Drawing on autoethnographic reflection, illustrative extracts from the author’s doctoral research, and scholarship on time in academia, this article addresses this scholarly gap. Specifically, this article reconceptualizes the choice of being busy, not slowing down as a form of compelled agency (viewing acceleration as a survival strategy), and as a gendered survival strategy enacted at the cost of one’s well-being and individual rhythms. This reflection challenges the ideal of slowing down and being self-compassionate as a luxury and privilege, thereby contributing to ongoing discussions about transformative change towards temporal justice in global higher education.

Keywords: Compelled agency; female international students; global higher education; self-compassion; time

Introduction

Reflecting on my educational journey, from passing the Gao Kao examination (China’s national college entrance examination) to travelling to the UK for MA and PhD studies, I realized that I always cherished the feeling of being “on time.” I actively pursued moving to—and starting—the next chapter as expeditiously as I could. I valued spending on the “right” or “useful” things (i.e., studying to pass an exam and obtaining a degree). As an early career researcher, I still subscribe to a speedy and busy work mode. I want to get published quickly and secure a job immediately. Despite often feeling overwhelmed, I embrace multiple tasks.

Otherwise, the anxiety of wasting time and not “keeping up” appears. Often, my senior colleagues don’t understand why I cannot just slow down. As a result, I have noted that there is a disconnect between the compassionate value of slowing down and my own survival intuition. Existing studies advocate compassion for international students while overlooking the notion that acceleration could be a strategic move for students (even though sometimes not freely chosen) (Huang, 2022; Shahjahan et al., 2024). This article reflects on how we might redefine temporal justice by acknowledging the pressures of global higher education and the coping strategies of international students by combining an autoethnographic approach (drawing on my personal experience to interpret the intersections between individual lives and social life) (Adams et al., 2017) with illustrative data from research on female international students.

In this work, I look for the answer to “why can’t you slow down?” My personal reflection also speaks to the scholarship on justice and a compassionate approach in global higher education (GHE). Scholars have recently critiqued current understandings that time is neutral and uniform. For example, Shahjahan et al. (2024) propose that clock time is the “dominant temporalities associated with mechanical / digital clocks and calendars” (p. 3-4) and the standardized and linear conception of time marginalizes non-linear and diverse ways of being and knowledge production (Shahjahan, 2025). Shahjahan and Zembylas (2025) argue that clock time is not homogenous and objective, instead, it produces affective responses (e.g., anxiety, anticipation, etc.) and shapes how people experience productivity and institutional expectations in academia. As a result, Shahjahan (2025) advocates for more dynamic and flexible approaches to our understanding of time to embrace transformation and self-compassion. My urge to be productive and my anxiety about entering the next stage of my academic career represent how I live an internalized clock time which links speed with my goals (e.g., permanent contract in academia). Female international students (FIS) often experience intensified anxiety and view speed as a gendered survival strategy, shaped by intersecting institutional acceleration and patriarchal expectations concerning education, employment, marriage, and age (Nater et al., 2026). Inspired by the call for decolonizing time and looking for alternative affective approaches for temporal possibilities (Shahjahan & Zembylas, 2025), this article specifically focuses on FIS. However, I offer a different perspective from existing studies which highlight the challenges of international students. Specifically, I highlight that such haste is a strategic and agentic move. Below, I first present the phenomenon of global acceleration experiences among FIS. Then, I conceptualize such pursuits as a form of temporal “compelled agency,” in which speed becomes a survival strategy, especially for FIS. Next, I use Shahjahan’s (2025) theories to reflect on historical processes (e.g., colonialism) and institutional pressures which present challenges to the notion of “slowing down” and reward what I refer to as a “global rush” to accomplishments. I end the article with a call for a compassionate temporal approach for justice and transformation in GHE.

Global Rush for Speed

The UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2025) reports that FIS outnumber male students in GHE: approximately 113 women per 100 men in 2023. In the UK higher education sector, there were 8855 (51%) more FIS than male international students (Department for Education, 2025). This article positions international students as knowledge-producing individuals within higher education (Huang, 2022; Huang & Cockayne, 2026; Lomer & Mittelmeier, 2023) and as a heterogeneous group (Mittelmeier et al., 2022).

As Walker (2009) points out, the commodities of time and time acceleration in GHE make students feel as though they are rushed and have little time. Existing research has tended to frame “rush” as a burden imposed on international students. However, these pressures can also be understood as strategic responses to a variety of challenges. Recent studies demonstrate that FIS face particular challenges within accelerated temporality, such as gendered violence, financial precarity, and discrimination based on age. For example, Liang and Ahn (2025) examined the experiences of doctoral FIS in Engineering at a US university and found that students were prone to various forms of discrimination from both their peers and researchers, as well as doubts about their abilities as engineers. Chifamba and Zvobgo’s research (2024) in Zimbabwe found that financial concerns and gender-based violence faced by female university students reflect a common challenge for female students globally: their study time is often preoccupied with anxiety for their own safety and security. Schartner et al. (2024) found that FIS from the Global South attending UK universities all shared concerns about financial constraints and the pursuit of financial independence. Similarly, Moran et al. (2021) demonstrated that doctoral FIS in an Irish university had to overcome financial concerns, in addition to emotional distress.

Ageism also shapes FIS’ experiences. Martin’s (2025) study of women from China attending Australian universities showed that students were occupied with the “curse of 35”: ageism in the workplace against employees over 35 years old. Those students’ desire to become “settled” at a younger age was challenged by labor market uncertainties due to an economic recession (Martin, 2025). Thus, uncertain economic futures caused them to pursue “success” with a constant sense of urgency as a way of navigating compulsory flexibility. As Hong Fincher (2014) writes, women throughout the country are expected to be married and have children by the age of 30, or they are labelled “大龄剩女” (dàlín shèngnǚ, leftover women). Wang and Wang (2024) have exposed the high levels of pressure that scholars in Chinese universities face under the tenure track employment system, also known as the Up or Out (“非升即走” fēi shēng jí zǒu) system which only gives faculty employees a probationary employment contract. Chinese academics experience negative effects caused by the probationary period in terms of their teaching quality (e.g., arranging less time for teaching to write papers), research performance (e.g., prioritizing quantity), and personal lives (e.g., working long hours under high pressure) (Wang & Wang, 2024).

Importantly, literature has demonstrated how gender stereotypes serve as culturally specific expressions of broader gendered structures. Nater et al.’s (2026) research into gender stereotypes based on public opinion polls from 1995 (22 nations with 22,000 respondents) and 2023 (40 nations with 4,800 respondents) reports persistent stereotypes associating men with agency and ambition and women with care and communion. For FIS,

these gendered expectations intersect with academic, migratory, and culturally specific life-course pressures (Patrick et al., 2026).

It is important to acknowledge that time is also culturally plural in ways that go beyond Western clock time. The above examples (the “curse of 35” and the Chinese tenure “Up or Out” system) all reflect culturally specific temporal rhythms and pressures that are not simply imposed by Western colonialism but emerge from within particular cultural logics. For example, a student navigating both Chinese ageist expectations and UK academic timelines is experiencing a collision of multiple cultural temporalities simultaneously. This collision highlights the plurality and complexity of temporal experiences and suggests that the global rush emerges from the interactions of overlapping cultural, institutional, and structural temporalities. Although these examples discuss the challenges faced by certain groups of FIS, there is a theoretical gap in understanding their rush as a strategic move in response to anxiety caused by various challenges. Rather than being experienced solely as burdens, these pressures can also compel strategic actions. Under these conditions, the global rush becomes a necessary response which shapes how individuals organize their time or prioritize productivity. In this sense, the global rush is not simply imposed on students, instead, they actively respond to and engage with overlapping structural pressures. Thus, this article reconceptualizes students’ action of being rushed as a form of compelled agency (i.e., a coping strategy), as exemplified by how FIS actively make use of “acceleration” as a strategic move to fight against multiple pressures and anxiety. Compelled agency is an original conceptual formation developed in this article, in dialogue with existing scholarship on institutional acceleration and gendered temporality.

Being Rushed as a Compelled Strategic and Agentic Move

This article draws on several key concepts from Shahjahan’s work. Building on earlier discussions of clock time, I engage with the notion of the “temporality mirror” through which individuals evaluate themselves in relation to temporal norms, imagined future selves, and the perceived expectations of others (Shahjahan, 2020). Temporality mirrors work both internally as a mode of self-evaluation (e.g., shame) and externally through institutional structures and norms (Shahjahan, 2020). I also employ the concept of “being for others,” which explains how individuals orient themselves towards external expectations and institutional demands (Shahjahan, 2020). In addition to this framework, I use broader feminist and decolonial scholarship that highlights the plurality and situated nature of lived experience, while cautioning against the universalization of temporal norms (Hayes et al., 2021; Hoque, 2024). Feminist work on unpaid labor challenges dominant interpretations of time and labor by emphasizing that experiences often labelled as “burdens” are in fact complex, and both relationally and affectively meaningful (Hoque, 2024). Decolonial scholarship in higher education similarly highlights that temporal orientations are historically, politically, and contextually situated, and that linear understandings of past, present, and future should not be viewed as universal (Hayes et al., 2021).

As a female early-career researcher, my feelings of being rushed and pursuing speed demonstrate how institutional pressures permeate my lived experience. As Hernandez et al. (2025) point out, many academics, particularly early-career researchers, face structural academic precarity and institutional pressures about market-driven metrics and

standardization. They describe this phenomenon as an “era of conformity” which constrains the potential for intellectual diversity in GHE institutions (Hernandez et al., 2025, p. 217). Shahjahan (2025) supports this depiction and mentions that the standardized time dimension is also a key dimension dominating GHE, within which uniformity and control structure bureaucratic and academic systems. For example, in an effort to follow other people’s career trajectories, I wanted to apply for research funding to increase my chance of securing a stable job. However, an instant comment I received when I shared this plan with more established academics was “you will not get it” with the explanation that securing such competitive resources should require years of extensive work. This feedback made me feel that, even after investing four years of time, money, and energy to secure a Ph.D. degree, I was still not competent enough to progress to the next chapter. Such a response viewed my attempt as too rushed, and the suggestion I received was to “slow down.” Through this exchange, I experienced a disconnect between the urgency prevalent in Chinese academia (Wang & Wang, 2024) and the suggested slower pace in the UK. My intent was to be better prepared for uncertainty, such as returning to China to engage in the Up or Out system or finding a job in any UK university amid the current financial crisis. From my perspective, the question was not whether I wanted to be rushed, but why rushing seemed to be the only thing I could do to accumulate sufficient academic capital (e.g., attending conferences and publishing papers). By rushing, I became less anxious and increased my chances of getting an opportunity. Here, I use Shahjahan’s theory (2025) to demonstrate how, firstly, my experience of feeling rushed is a product of the current institutional pressures that govern GHE, and secondly, feeling not good enough compelled me to be rushed as a survival strategy (though not a freely chosen strategy).

The concept of time in academia is shaped not only by individual circumstances but also by broader social and institutional structures—temporal frameworks reflecting deeper historical processes, including colonialism. The role of clock time was especially significant in European medieval universities, where the clock was central to daily life (Shahjahan, 2025). Under colonial and capitalist time systems, speed and productivity represent legitimacy, and “I am busy” is a necessary state, rather than a personal choice. The institutional prioritizations for immediate productivity and efficiency may cause those who act differently to question their worth (Shahjahan, 2020; 2025).

The following extracts, drawing from my doctoral research with female Chinese international students who were earning master’s degrees at a UK university (ethical approval NO. 2011-11149-20508), illustrate how the pressure to remain productive is experienced. (All participants’ names are pseudonyms.) Rui shared that, during her dissertation writing time, “although I have no classes, I am not that free because I need to meet my supervisor. I need to write something in advance... I don’t have much time for myself to relax and travel.” This example shows how being busy is not a freely chosen strategy, nor a personal choice, but instead shaped by institutional clock time. Rui demonstrated an awareness that she had to stay on campus to work on her assignment and sacrifice her own preferences for leisure. Thus, being busy becomes a necessary way of coping, which can also be seen as a form of survival strategy shaped by temporal conditions.

Hu shared that, despite feeling stressed, she avoided taking breaks, as they would be “wasting time.” She mentioned that “sometimes I cannot even write many words, but I knew that I was in a stressful state. I wouldn’t think about wasting a day or take some time to relax.” This “stressful state” created a sense of anxiety, where she felt caught between being

unable to write and being unable to rest. Her feeling of having to be productive, even when feeling exhausted, demonstrates how academic time produces a feeling of compulsion that limits the possibility for rest. Being busy is a common experience for many academics as they constantly live under strict deadlines; minoritized and early career researchers, in particular, often experience shame as they struggle to meet external demands (Shahjahan, 2020, 2025). Shahjahan (2025) emphasizes that such shame or failure is not personal; instead, it is a reflection of institutional and societal pressure that pushes researchers to prioritize productivity rather than self-compassion. Established academics often benefit from academic acceleration as they have more job security, while early-career researchers are forced to view themselves as inadequate, and to participate in acceleration to “earn” their place (Shahjahan et al., 2022; Shahjahan, 2025). My own experience reflects this: the kind suggestion to slow down from an established colleague disconnects with the reality I am living in; the comment adds to my anxiety and feelings of inadequacy and shame.

Feelings of anxiety, shame, and inadequacy produced by the standardized conception of time further turned into a type of exploitation of the body. These moments, along with uncertainty and job precarity, all contributed to my pursuit of acceleration. These feelings were also evident in my doctoral research participants stories: “now I’ve already adapted to staying up late to write my assignments” (Xia); “I stayed up very late to write my assignments: until 2AM every day. I tried my best to plan ahead. I often stayed up late, still there wasn’t enough time” (Hu); and “I haven’t fully enjoyed life here because most of the time, I am in the library. I don’t have much time to see the outside world. Because I need to do something that will be helpful for job hunting in the future” (Rui). Similarly, Hernandez et al. (2025) shared that knowledge production can occur during a walk in the rain to collect medication for treating depression. The current system that prioritizes outputs often ignores such embodied experiences. These stories demonstrate the exploitation of the body to survive intense academic assignments. For some FIS, such shame and anxiety have been further intensified. Viewing these quotes through the conceptual lens of Shahjahan’s (2020) temporality mirror, what I see is a female figure navigating the pressures produced by academic demands and social age, where her existence is measured by speed and productivity.

In the above examples, research participants seemed to be exercising their agency (e.g., engaging in knowledge production late at night). I argue that such agency is deeply compelled. While existing work has conceptualized agency as constrained by structural conditions (e.g., Cassidy & Davidson, 2025), I argue that such constraints do not merely limit actions but actively compel particular forms of strategic engagement. As Shahjahan (2025) describes, individuals are forced to fulfill and meet deadlines to shape their future success, often at the expense of the present. Compelled agency is a strategic move to earn an opportunity. It is a necessary condition so that FIS feel good enough to not only excel but feel relevant. It is for survival. Such compelled agency is “being or existing for others” to meet standard academic demands (Shahjahan, 2020). A conceptualization of being rushed as compelled agency extends beyond constrained agency by emphasizing how individuals are not only shaped by structural conditions, but also pushed into specific temporal strategies to survive. This conceptualization also resonates with broader discussions about agency under conditions where autonomy is limited, yet action remains meaningful (Ota, 2025). Thus, the global rush experienced by some female academics, and many FIS, is a common issue produced by the current standardized conception of time in GHE. It seems like a positive image: everyone is working hard and striving to progress. However, when individuals are

expected to exist “for others” (Shahjahan, 2020), their personal lives and diverse ways of being are often undermined. Being slow or self-compassionate becomes a luxury.

Conclusion

In closing, I want to suggest that Shahjahan’s (2025) invitation for individuals to embrace self-care or self-compassion and look after the needs of their bodies (or, the suggestion I received to “slow down”) is an impossible luxury and privilege, especially for marginalized academics such as the MA students I interviewed for my dissertation. Although pursuing speed or engaging in the global rush results in compelled agency, for some female international students and global scholars, it is also a gendered survival strategy and an agentic move that is deliberately made in exchange for potential “slowing down” in the future.

The data in this article are based on a specific group of participants and my own reflections and are not intended to represent all FIS / scholars. Nevertheless, I would contend that global rush is not solely about individuals’ psychological or social adaptation; it is inevitable in the current GHE landscape. The question thus is not about individuals adopting self-compassion, but about rethinking and developing a higher education environment and system that embraces multiple temporalities and diverse ways of being and knowing. Although we have to be productive, this article calls for temporal justice, a future where FIS can choose to follow their own rhythms without accompanying feelings of shame or anxiety. Rather than encouraging individuals to “slow down,” institutions need to critically reflect on the temporal structures they reproduce, such as rigid timelines and standardized expectations. Temporal justice requires more flexible pathways that recognize diverse life-course and structural constraints. By reconceptualizing experiences of being rushed and busy as forms of compelled agency, this article opens up new possibilities for rethinking justice and transformation.

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Acknowledgements

I am grateful to the friends and colleagues whose informal conversations helped to inspire this article. I also thank the participants in my doctoral research, who generously shared their stories. My sincere thanks go to the two anonymous reviewers for their thoughtful and constructive feedback, which helped improve the overall quality and structure of this article and encouraged a more concise and critical presentation of its ideas. I am also grateful to the editors for their support and assistance throughout the publication process. Any and all mistakes are my own.

AI Statement

This article was not written with the assistance of any Artificial Intelligence (AI) technology, including ChatGPT or other support technologies.

Conflict of Interest

The author has no conflict of interest regarding this publication.

Article History

Submitted: 2 January 2026

Accepted: 1 August 2026

Published: 18 August 2026

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