

Strategies for Applying Business Models to Optimize the Work of Foreign Language Teachers in Higher Education Institutions

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This article explores the application of project management methodologies, successfully used in the business sector, to improve the organization of foreign language teachers' work in higher education institutions. It examines the multifaceted role of the teacher as the manager of various projects, including course development and updates, scientific research, writing publications, administrative duties, and mentoring. The practical implementation of key project management tools in an academic context is analyzed in detail: expanded Kanban board functionality for flexible visualization of multi-stage workflows; the use of Work in Progress (WIP) limits as a strategy to prevent burnout and increase productivity; and the use of Story Points to estimate task complexity for realistic planning of teaching and research workloads. The article proposes a comprehensive system for organizing a teacher's work aimed at improving efficiency, optimizing time and personal resources, and creating conditions for high-quality teaching, academic, and research performance. Special attention is paid to adapting business concepts to the specifics of the academic environment, with concrete examples of their application.

Keywords: project management in academia, teacher time optimization, management of educational activities, Kanban method in education, academic time management, using Trello in education, burnout prevention strategies for teachers, using Story Points for academic load planning, research project management in universities.

Introduction

A modern foreign language teacher at a higher education institution is not merely a specialist in linguistics and teaching methodology. Their work encompasses a wide range of responsibilities that require diverse skills and approaches to organizing the work process. In addition to conducting classes, a teacher develops educational programs and materials, conducts research in their field, authors scientific

publications, supervises students' coursework and theses, participates in various academic and methodological committees, and often performs a significant volume of administrative work.

Simultaneous involvement in numerous diverse tasks—each with its own deadlines, requirements, and complexity—creates a considerable workload for the teacher. The constant need to switch between different types of activities, from preparing lectures to writing academic articles, leads to a fragmented workday, decreased concentration, and ultimately lower overall productivity. Moreover, the absence of a clear system for managing one's own workflow can result in chronic stress, a sense of overload, and professional burnout, all of which negatively affect both the teacher's well-being and the quality of their work and contribution to the educational process.

In the context of increasing demands on the quality of higher education and the need for continuous professional development, there is an urgent need to implement effective work organization methodologies that would allow teachers to approach their numerous responsibilities more systematically and consciously. In this context, the experience of the business sector—where project management is a key competency for achieving strategic goals—can offer a valuable set of tools and approaches adapted to the specific nature of the academic environment.

1. The Multifaceted Work of a Teacher as a Set of Projects and a Value Stream

To effectively apply project management tools, it is necessary to reconceptualize a teacher's daily activities as a collection of interrelated projects, each aimed at creating a specific "value"—whether that be a well-prepared learning material for students, a published scientific article, or a successfully conducted academic-methodological seminar.

Let us take a closer look at the concept of a value stream using several typical tasks performed by a foreign language teacher.

For example, the project: "Development of a new English course for the Computer Engineering program":

- Stage 1: Initiation and planning — identifying student needs, analyzing existing programs, defining course objectives and tasks, drafting a preliminary syllabus and course structure.
- Stage 2: Content and methodology design — selecting and adapting educational materials, developing lectures, practical assignments, interactive exercises, self-study tasks, and evaluation criteria.

- Stage 3: Creation and testing of the first version — writing lecture texts, creating presentations, recording or generating audio and video materials, developing tests and assessments, and piloting course components.
- Stage 4: Approval and validation — discussing and revising the course at the department meeting, submitting it for approval to the faculty's academic-methodological council.
- Stage 5: Implementation and monitoring — uploading course materials to the learning platform, delivering lessons, collecting student feedback, and analyzing learning outcomes.
- Stage 6: Evaluation and updates — assessing the course's effectiveness, identifying strengths and weaknesses, and drafting suggestions for improvements and updates for the next academic year.

The same project-based breakdown can be applied to other types of work, such as writing a research article, organizing a student conference, or supervising a student's research project. A clear understanding of each process's stages allows for more efficient time and resource allocation, identification of responsible individuals (in the case of group work), and effective progress tracking.

2. The Teacher's Kanban Board: Enhanced Visualization for Managing Multitasking

To effectively manage these diverse value streams, a teacher can use a personalized Kanban board. Instead of the standard three columns ("To Do", "In Progress", "Done"), an academic Kanban board can be more detailed and reflect the specifics of different types of activities:

- Backlog of research projects: (e.g., develop a dissertation topic, write a grant proposal, prepare abstracts for a conference in Oxford, translate an article for Scopus);
- Educational and methodological planning (weekly/monthly): (e.g., preparing lectures for first-year students, updating assignments for second-year practicals, developing an online course in Moodle);
- Ongoing grading tasks: (e.g., essays from group A, tests from group B, presentations from group C);
- Administrative and organizational tasks: (e.g., preparing a departmental report, attending a methodological committee meeting, replying to student emails);
- Completed (weekly/monthly): for tracking personal productivity and reviewing completed work.

Each card on the board represents a specific task, including a detailed description, due dates (if applicable), related materials (links, files), and—if part of a group project (e.g., developing a joint teaching manual)—assigned team members. Regular board updates and movement of cards between columns according to their current status provide workflow transparency and help visualize progress.

For more advanced analysis, the teacher can use the extended functionalities of Trello, including:

1. Labels: to categorize tasks by activity type (research, teaching, administration), priority level (high, medium, low), or student group.
2. Checklists: to break down large tasks into smaller subtasks and track their completion.
3. Due Dates: to set timeframes and receive deadline reminders.
4. Comments: to record ideas, feedback, and discussions related to a task.
5. Power-Ups (Integrations): to add extra functionality such as calendars, Gantt charts for visualizing project timelines, or time-tracking tools.

Using a digital Kanban board like Trello enables access to the work environment from any device, which is especially convenient in remote or blended learning settings.

3. Deep Understanding and Application of WIP Limits to Increase Efficiency and Prevent Burnout

The principle of limiting Work in Progress (WIP) is one of the key components of the Kanban method, and it holds particular importance for optimizing a teacher's workflow and preventing professional burnout. Having an unlimited number of tasks in progress simultaneously leads to scattered attention, reduced quality of task execution, and increased stress levels.

Setting WIP limits means consciously restricting the number of tasks allowed in a certain stage of the workflow (i.e., in a particular Kanban board column) at any given time. For a teacher, this might look like:

- "In Progress: Lecture Preparation" — limit of 2. This means the teacher does not begin preparing a third lecture until the previous two are completed.
- "In Progress: Grading" — limit of 10 (depending on the volume of work). The teacher avoids taking on a new batch of assignments until the previous ten are reviewed.
- "In Progress: Article Writing" — limit of 1. Focus is maintained on finishing the current article before starting a new one.

Applying WIP limits offers several key benefits:

1. Improved focus: Limiting the number of active tasks forces concentration on completing them quickly and with quality.
2. Reduced multitasking: Constant switching between tasks is inefficient and exhausting. WIP limits help to minimize this behavior.
3. Identification of bottlenecks: If a specific column is consistently filled to its limit, it may signal a problem in that stage of the workflow (e.g., grading takes too long).
4. Enhanced quality: Focusing on fewer tasks allows for greater attention to each, resulting in better outcomes.

5. Lower stress and burnout prevention: Having control over the workflow and visible progress in completing tasks positively affects the teacher's psychological well-being.

Defining optimal WIP limits is an iterative process and may require experimentation. It is important to consider the teacher's individual working style, the nature of the tasks, and available resources.

4. The “Story Points” Method for Academic Workload

Traditional academic workload planning in terms of hours is often a formality and does not reflect the actual complexity and labor intensity of different types of tasks. The Story Points method, used in Agile development, offers a more flexible and realistic approach to evaluating academic workload by focusing on the relative complexity of tasks.

The process of applying Story Points in an academic context may look as follows:

1. Defining the evaluation scale: A numerical sequence is used to reflect increasing complexity—commonly a modified Fibonacci sequence (1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, 20). Each number represents a relative unit of complexity—a Story Point.
2. Selecting a baseline task: A relatively simple and familiar task is chosen to serve as a reference point for comparison. For example, preparing a standard one-hour academic lecture may be rated as 2 Story Points.
3. Estimating other tasks relative to the baseline: Each planned task is assessed based on its relative complexity, workload, required resources, and level of uncertainty compared to the baseline task.
 - Grading 10 student essays with detailed feedback might be assigned 5 Story Points (more complex than preparing a lecture due to the in-depth analysis required for each submission).
 - Developing a new 50-question modular test, including literature selection and trialing, might be rated at 8 Story Points (significantly more time-consuming and resource-intensive).
 - Writing a 20-page scholarly article for a peer-reviewed journal could be estimated at 13 Story Points (high complexity, substantial research involved, and formatting requirements).
 - Supervising a student's thesis throughout the academic year might be rated at 20 Story Points (a long-term process including consultations, reviewing drafts, and assisting with formatting).
4. Determining “academic velocity”: Over a given period (e.g., a week or a month), the teacher tracks how many Story Points they manage to complete. This figure becomes their “academic velocity.” It may vary depending on workload, task types, and other factors.
5. Planning workload: Knowing the total number of Story Points for all planned tasks in a semester or academic year, and their own academic velocity, the teacher can

more realistically plan their workload, set priorities, and identify potential overloads in advance.

Using Story Points allows a shift from formal hourly accounting to a qualitative assessment of the complexity and intensity of various academic activities. This promotes a more equitable workload distribution, greater awareness of personal productivity, and helps prevent overwork.

Conclusions

The integration of project management principles and tools into the workflow of a foreign language teacher in higher education is not merely a modern trend, but a pressing necessity dictated by the complexity and multifaceted nature of their professional responsibilities. The use of Kanban boards to visualize work processes, the conscious limitation of Work in Progress (WIP) to enhance focus and prevent burnout, and the application of relative estimation methods (Story Points) for realistic workload planning are concrete steps toward building a more efficient, balanced, and productive academic career.

By adapting business approaches to the specifics of the educational environment, teachers can gain valuable tools for optimizing their time, improving the quality of teaching and research, and maintaining their physical and emotional well-being. The implementation of such systemic methods will contribute not only to the personal success of each educator but also to the overall advancement of higher education quality in Ukraine.

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