

## Report of UCUQMU branch workplace inspection (workload) June 2023

In February 2023, UCU workload representatives conducted an inspection of the workplace under Regulation 5 of the Safety Representatives and Safety Committees Regulations 1977. The inspection focused on workload-related stress. This report is an analysis of the findings as a contribution to the 2023 revision of the institutional Stress Risk Assessment.

Excessive workload has been identified as a health and safety concern within QMU and across the HE sector, which has led to the UCU 'it's your time' campaign (<https://www.ucu.org.uk/workloadcampaign>). This campaign involves training specialist health and safety representatives ('workload reps') to conduct workplace inspections focusing particularly on workload-related stress and ill-health. The QMU UCU branch appointed six workload reps in addition to an existing health and safety rep, who underwent specialised training, and conducted the inspection. The reps are grateful to QMU's safety advisor for providing 'arms-length' support for this work.

The inspection took place in February for several reasons:

- Sufficient distance from the QMU institutional stress survey conducted in April 2023 in order not to interfere with its results;
- To feed into the prioritisation of areas for workforce planning;
- To provide input to budget-setting processes where appropriate, for control measures against workload-related stress;
- To provide input to the revision of the institutional stress risk assessment

The inspection was promoted to all staff via Moderator, through the distribution of leaflets and, word-of-mouth. Twenty three confidential interviews were conducted, which constitutes the bulk of the data for this report. In addition, during the inspection, several staff made more informal comments which were recorded. Although the inspection and interviews focused primarily on workload and the HSE management standard '**Demands**', additional questions explored possible areas of concern in the other five management standards e.g. control, managing change etc. The management standard for Demands includes:

- employees indicating that they are able to cope with the demands of their jobs, and;
- systems are in place, locally, to respond to any individual concerns.

The inspection was designed to target areas of concern amongst all staff, not restricted to trade union members or UCU's bargaining group, and indeed participating staff were from a wide range of work-roles. It was not intended to be a representative survey of all staff; all staff who identified concerns relating to their workload and requested an interview were offered an interview, and all, except for one, requests were accommodated within the four-week time period. The interviews were not recorded verbatim, but were conducted by

workload reps in pairs, with one rep responsible for detailed note taking. Quotations, under the themes identified below, are from these notes. Interviews were numbered and anonymised, with the only designation being between academic (A) and professional support (P) roles. The inspection was not academic research, although all workload reps are also experienced researchers which influenced the inspection. A thematic analysis of interview notes (data) was carried out.

One report has already been submitted in an area which required immediate attention, and an interim verbal report has been provided to the stress management working group.

### **Theme 1: Impact on health and well-being**

Interviewees were asked about the impact that their workload was having on them. Although not specifically related to health and wellbeing but raised during the interviews as an open question on “overall impact”, this theme emerged as a distinct one, and is presented first, due to the serious health and safety issues it raises.

Staff reported serious health and wellbeing issues with examples including:

- High stress levels
- Poor mental health and anxiety
- Migraines
- Fatigue; exhaustion; burn outs
- Effect on sleep; sleeplessness
- Changes in mood; feeling demoralised; lack of sense of purpose
- Impact on personal relationships
- No (or a fragile) work-life balance
- Attending work while being unwell
- Working out with work hours; working during the night
- Not tending to needs of family members and dependants
- No breaks
- Undergoing therapy
- Going off sick
- Feeling isolated

Some illustrative quotes

*High stress, lack of sleep, migraines, being really tired, extremely grumpy at home, neglected my partner, by the time I am at home if working overtime it deteriorates...” (I.15/A).*

*I try not to work overtime, but sometimes have to and feel terrible. But even if I don't, I dream of work, think about it constantly, string effect on well-being” (I.5/A)*

*On personal level, work-life balance is an issue. Also, younger colleagues I worry for, they are stressed. They want to progress they feel like they need to take on more. (I.4/A)*

*“You can feel it in the team that everyone was snappy and cranky, after Xmas everyone was ready to quit, even if they don’t want to..going sick to work too. If I stay at home, others will have to or nobody else is there to do it (I.2/A)*

*At night I think of what is to be done, so I get up and do it, so it’s not in my head. It’s very stressful. There’s the attitude that this is part of the job, what you get paid for. I don’t think unhappiness and sleepless nights should be part of role. (I.1/P)*

*Being a single mother I do not have time to work over the work hours. This results in a constant feeling of falling behind and getting stressed about it, without being appreciated.. work is affecting my mental health – feeling pessimistic and like having given in. I am struggling with the feeling of not being able to do my job well which leads to stress and anxiety (I.7/A)*

*Stress! I wake up in the middle of night, I can’t go back to sleep after waking up at night thinking about work..when working from home, don’t take breaks at all and work all the time (I.9/P).*

*In the summer, I was close to burnout. I feel like I am a resilient person who has worked in stressful environments but this constant pressure is leading to a feeling of exhaustion and burnout. The constant pressure is key. No let up. (I.10/A)*

*Close to being hospitalised; people left to their own resources; I have developed high blood pressure, and have family and relationship problems (I.15/A).*

*On sickness absence for two weeks (stress related) – on return no stress risk assessment or phased return. This contravenes Health and Safety regs . ..Instead, manager immediately put more work on me as other colleague was then on sick leave.(I.14/P).*

*I feel so isolated; when I raise concerns I’m afraid it is viewed as “not coping” (I.13/A).*

*GP signed me off.. when off sick, you feel you are failing. (I.12/A).*

## **Theme 2: Staffing levels**

A constant theme throughout the interviews was the inadequate staffing levels. There is a sense that everything is being done on a shoestring, that plates are kept spinning, and that this leads to anxiety, especially in areas where there is a single point of failure (particularly in professional services). Respondents report the lack of capacity for unexpected absence, or resignation, or expansion of roles, or new tasks. Requests to managers to address these concerns lead to unsatisfactory responses such as recruiting VLs or fixed term or fractional appointments – usually shifting the stress (as staff are expected to recruit and or support these staff) as well as creating stress for staff on casual contracts (no hourly paid or fixed term contract staff were interviewed in the workload inspection, and this is potentially an area for follow up). This reflects a reaction at the bottom of the hierarchy of control measures, suggesting that managers, or the institution, are not treating workload-related

stress as a health and safety issue. It also results in increasing casualisation as response to workload.

A few quotations from interview notes illustrate this:

*The bottom line is that we need more staff to complete all the tasks that we have to do. Can't hire more staff to develop more projects. Apply for projects with the staff that they have.. would like to develop further but can't due to staffing issues. (I.10/A)*

*If I go off sick, there is no one to do my job... There is a single point failure, if any of the staff goes off sick there is no one who can cover. There is no sufficient staff resource to allocate work, even when [former colleague] was there it was not enough. I am going on holiday ... and there is no one to cover which means that I will come back to a lot of work. ... There is just not enough staff and resource. (I.9/P)*

*[After raising workload with HoD] they did hire one new person but they are on fixed contract (Short). They suggested that they will try to find money to keep them but no guarantee. We cannot afford to lose the person. New person replaced someone who quit. New staff just started so not sure if it will be enough (I.2/A)*

*Student numbers are big, not enough staff. Things just happen to us and management not interested in being proactive. (I.5/A)*

*(My role) ..is viewed as a 'sticking plaster' instead of addressing the long term future of the project and offering job security (I.14/P)*

*Despite effort to get recruitment process underway so a proper handover can be carried out, my role has not been advertised yet – again, no contingency planning – this is not the way to do business (I.14/P).*

*It went particularly bad when someone retired; at first I was PT, when colleague retired I took on almost all their work, and a lot of other "historic" stuff (I.12/A).*

*The team has made recommendation to increase staffing levels on a very regular basis for a number of years, including providing detailed AWAM data, but this has always been refused (I.22/A)*

*Overwork intersects with casualization, and both are structured by familiar inequalities...there is much more (real, material) pressure to systematically overwork if you're contract is insecure, in pursuit of the dangling carrot that you might one day be rewarded with more secure employment (I.23 (A))*

### **Theme 3: Ways of responding to excessive workload**

Respondents reported a range of ways in which they respond to the excessive workload, depending on work role and personal circumstances, all of which cause stress:

- Working beyond contractual hours
- Not taking annual leave
- Sacrificing quality
- Getting further and further behind
- Worrying about work at home / not sleeping

Respondents on part time hours particularly commented on the expectation to work beyond contractual hours because contractual responsibilities exceed contractual hours.

Additional quotes to those appearing under “impact/theme 1”:

*[There is an] unspoken / implicit expectation that I work beyond PT hours ... certain workstreams would fall over if this additional work didn't take place (I.11/A).*

*Compromised quality.. many applications not properly looked at; no proper admission process; serious systemic issues (I.15/A).*

### **Theme 4: AWAM**

Academic staff referred to AWAM frequently, in particular in its failure to both capture and, subsequently, address excessive workload. For some, this is because AWAM calculations exceed 100% but this is not addressed; for others, AWAM calculates a manageable workload but activities are not captured. In several cases, AWAM was viewed as being misused or appropriated as a workforce planning tool by managers to make a case against providing sufficient staff to deliver the work.

Although overall staff might have teaching within the AWAM, but at certain times of the year the overload can be acute. Respondents thought this isn't sustainable as it creates such stress and anxiety, the time take to recover from this has a big impact on those times when the T & L load is less.

Quotes:

*[I am] PL for two programmes (two iterations), AWAM gives 8 hours a week which is inadequate (I.7/A)*

*We use AWAM back to front – but it doesn't come to too much for everybody in a spreadsheet. [We then have to] try to make tweaks and make sure everything is covered. (I.2/A)*

Everything is AWAM driven now, but there are many things that are intangible, things that take time but are not captured. Some things cannot be measured in AWAM in that way... AWAM not used to see how many people we need, but it is the other way round (I.4/A)

[I was] quite positive about the use of a methodology but [not] the way in which AWAM is used ... Even though the model was agreed it was not what actually happened and at the next AWAM this was taken away. I was asked to produce two AWAM models ... [the line manager] then decided which model they went with (I.18/A)

The entire process of AWAM has been very demotivating and demoralizing. ... Although the current AWAM is not satisfactory, I did not feel inclined to challenge it. The traumatic process that resulted in [an agreed AWAM] was so difficult that I don't want to repeat the conversation (I.18.A)

Time for admissions not calculated, as many other things; interviews not recognised, not dealt with.. AWAM fails to capture so many, time consuming things (I.15/A).  
Not a true reflection of the actual time spend on project work (I.14/P).

Particularities of the programme not taken into account when looking at workload/AWAM. Excessive support for students placement coordination, specific to the pgm, availability of placements, placement search, no supervisors available (I.13/A).

Extra work not accounted for, such reviewing Ethics applications (initial discussion was 50 hs in total for this role but I does 50 hours a month (I.12/A).

### **Theme 5: Raising and responding to concerns**

The management standard for Demands includes the expectation that '*systems are in place locally to respond to any individual concerns*'. A theme in the interviews particularly focused on the attempts by staff to raise concerns, and what the impact of this was. Many staff said that they had raised concerns during PERs or, for academic staff, in other discussions relating to AWAM. A few staff said that they rarely had a PER meeting. Others that they didn't have enough time to complete an AWAM prior to a PER meeting. In several cases, the staff were told to provide more evidence or were provided with more work in order to address the issue. Staff reported that often managers themselves were unable to address concerns raised by staff.

Some relevant quotes:

*I haven't raised it in PER since they are full of objectives that are never fulfilled. There are fast changes to workload. Nothing changes after giving feedback (I.1/P)*

*The only solution offered for workload that can't be achieved is to find VLs. I was called upon to help recruit VLs to cover workload. There is simply not enough hours within contracted hours. I have to find the VL to do the work, recruit them and train them. By the time this is done then I may as well have done the work herself (I.8/A)*

*I avoid asking for support from my line manager because then things that give job satisfaction are taken away, or when I subsequently ask to do something that could enhance my development, barriers are put in the way of doing it because I am already seen to be 'struggling'. So I never report that I am struggling to do all my work (I.16/A)*

*When I raised this with a manager on behalf of the staff I was told that use of the term 'firefighting' was an exaggeration. Lack of forward planning or capacity to respond to a changing situation however makes it feel as though we are always either reacting or recovering (I.16/A)*

*I don't feel that people's workloads are actively managed. I asked for help several times and was told this will be look into but nothing happened. ... I feel like unless I scream nobody cares about it. I raised it and nothing (I.5/A)*

*'Not managing' workload is perceived as personal failure by some in my team (I.14/P).*

*Mngnt do not seem to care about us.. we do not plan; we react.. we have a 3-fold increase in numbers, why do they not commit to resources? (I.15(A)*

*"Sticking plasters" instead of addressing the long term future of the project (I.14/P).*

*Issues were communicated to manager who has, despite his effort, failed to address these (I.21/A).*

## **Theme 6: Role descriptions and development**

Some staff reported lack of clarity around expectations and their role with frequent inequities in the way that work is valued and rewarded. There is often a lack of role description with staff reporting a lack of opportunity for professional development.

*I was essentially appointed to backfill myself... this means that although I was appointed as SL on grade 9, for one day per week I do the same work but as an AL on grade 7 (I.23.A)*

*Not consistently encouraged to develop new skills to undertake new and challenging work; in some ways, under challenged but overwhelmed in terms of constant change and level of demand or pace (I.21/A)*

*Balance between admin, research and T&L changes constantly; no consistency across level of teaching taking into account seniority, experience or significant responsibility for research (I.21/A)*

*I haven't made much significant process on my research work (as someone who is 'REFable' etc. although reject those classifications!) since I joined QMU. (I.23/A)*

## **Theme 7: Other management standards**

Workload reps asked about other management standards. This did raise a few issues, primarily, based on workload.

### **a. Control**

Academic staff have control over the details of their work, but this can be limited by there being inadequate time, especially where managers expect work allocated by managers to take priority over self-directed work. One respondent stated they were told 'If you do this then you can't do other things' (I.9/A). Some staff are reluctant to raise concerns about workload for fear of losing control over valued work. One interviewee, when asked whether they had raised workload with their line manager in PER, stated that in PER they just 'say what my objectives are, so I'm not micromanaged' (I.5/A).

Other quotes included:

*Alerting them (managers) allows me to "let go of issue" but makes me realise my own lack of control over work and processes (I.14/P).*

*No research or scholarship ; running even without research (I.13/A).*

*No control , no research; not time to collaborate with other depts., other Unis, do intnl work (I.12/A)*

*I could identify what things need to go but I limited control (I.12/A).*

### **b. Support**

This sub-theme is closely related to Theme ("Raising and responding to concerns") but is presented here separately as specific mention of "support" (or lack of) from management and/or colleagues was made.

A quotation from I.1(P) reflects a frequently reported concern 'I feel supported personally but not structurally'. This is manifest in various ways, from: feeling support from colleagues and sometimes line managers who have limited control of staffing levels; to: not having time to attend relevant training. Another respondent reflected that when support is sought this is perceived negatively (*I feel isolated ; viewed as "not coping" when issues raised, as not 'managing' workload is perceived as personal failure by some in my team (I.13/P).*

### **c. Relationships**

Some respondents made specific mention of the impact workload and unreasonable demands have on relationships at work.

Quotes:

*'You can feel it in the team that everyone was snappy and cranky [due to overwork]' (I.2/A)*

*Some people do not talk with each other ; difficult to manage situation; left unresolved to fester.. fragile relationships; people, individually, good, teams dysfunctional; colleagues NOT here to provide support (managers should consider that) (I.15/A).*

*Particularly stressful working environment due to team dynamics and openness of certain team members to discuss and address the concern collegially (I.21/A)*

#### **d. Managing change**

This sub-theme, again, links to the impact on staff workload (averse) way of managing change can have.

Relevant quotes:

*Pandemic, incredibly stressful to keep the pgm going, changes not managed well.. I was told to proceed "as normal" although short –staffed (I.13/A).*

*No contingency planning in staffing should colleagues be off (I.14/P).*

*Any change is not managed well.. permanent crisis mode.. no consultation on anything; new roles seem to be only for promotion (I.15/A).*

*It went particularly bad when someone retired; at first she was PT, when colleague retired she took on almost all their work and a lot of other "historic" stuff in addition to what she was doing (I.12/A)*

*Change is not managed well; people stuck with former roles and add ons (I.12/A).*