REPORT

University and College Union

Workload Survey 2021/22
Higher Education

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Contents

Foreword

This report provides an in-depth look into workload conditions and concerns experienced by staff across the higher education sector, illustrating the increasingly unmanageable workloads faced by significant numbers of staff. It explores how these concerns intersect with casualisation and equalities issues, and how worsening student-staff ratios, increased administrative demands, reduced staffing levels and ever-increasing expectations continue to result in persistently high workloads.

Increasing precarity, increased workloads, inequalities across the HE sector, and worsening pay after year-on-year real-terms pay cuts have unfortunately become widespread as higher education has become increasingly marketized across the UK. The significant mobilisation by UCU members and other HE unions over the past several years in order to address these structural issues facing the sector are testament to the strength of feeling across staff groups and the understanding that this cannot go on.

Staff across the HE sector went over and above to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic and mitigate disruption for students and institutions as much as possible, yet for too many there has become an expectation that this emergency response has become the new normal. The impact of worsening workloads on mental health and wellbeing are well-known, and this report further evidences how current working conditions are unsustainable.

UCU and the other HE unions will continue to negotiate and campaign at both the national and local level for meaningful agreements to reduce workloads and address the underlying issues as part of our Four Fights. This report and its recommendations come at a crucial time for the sector and will provide an invaluable contribution to UCU's work. We would also hope that it will contribute to the understanding of university employers that the status quo cannot continue.

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Head of Higher Education

Background

This report draws on the findings of a larger survey of members conducted by the UCU in 2021/2022 to investigate issues surrounding workloads in further education, higher education, prison education and adult and community education. Overall, there were more than 13,000 respondents to the survey, but this report provides an overview of data provided by the more than 9,000 respondents who work in higher education.

The report focuses on the following questions:

➡ How have the size or intensity of workloads and working hours changed over the previous three years?

➡ How manageable are workloads?

➡ What are the main factors contributing to any changes in workloads and their intensity over the previous three years?

➡ What changes are likely to help reduce workloads?

The report initially provides descriptive statistics for the three questions that used a rating scale: a) manageability of workload; b) pace and intensity of work; c) working hours) and subsequently presents themes derived from analysis of the open-ended questions included in the survey: the reasons for any increase or decrease in workload and suggestions for reducing workloads. Representative quotes from respondents are included to illustrate key points.

Profile of sample

➡ 56% of respondents who answered this question identified as women, 42% as men, 1% as non-binary and 1% as other.

➡ 51% of respondents who provided their age range were at least 45 years old, 37% were 51 or over and 8% 61 or over.

➡ More than nine respondents out of ten (91%) who disclosed their ethnicity identified as White, 3% as Asian, 1% as Black, 3% as Mixed and 2% as 'Other'.

➡ 14% of those who answered this question identified themselves as disabled.

➡ Respondents could select multiple contract types. 85% of respondents who provided information on their contract type were employed on a permanent basis, with 4% on an open-ended contract and 9% on a fixed term contract. Two percent were employed on a zero hours basis.

➡ In terms of job role, 54% of respondents were involved in teaching and research, 7% research only and 26% teaching only. Eleven percent were employed in academic-related roles and 2% in faculty management.

Perceptions of workload, working pace and working hours

MANAGEABILITY OF WORKLOAD

Few respondents (3%) reported finding their workload manageable all of the time, whereas 23% found it so most of the time and 35% about half of the time. Almost three respondents out of ten, however, (29%), perceived that their workload was unmanageable most of the time, with 10% finding it entirely unmanageable.

How manageable is your workload?
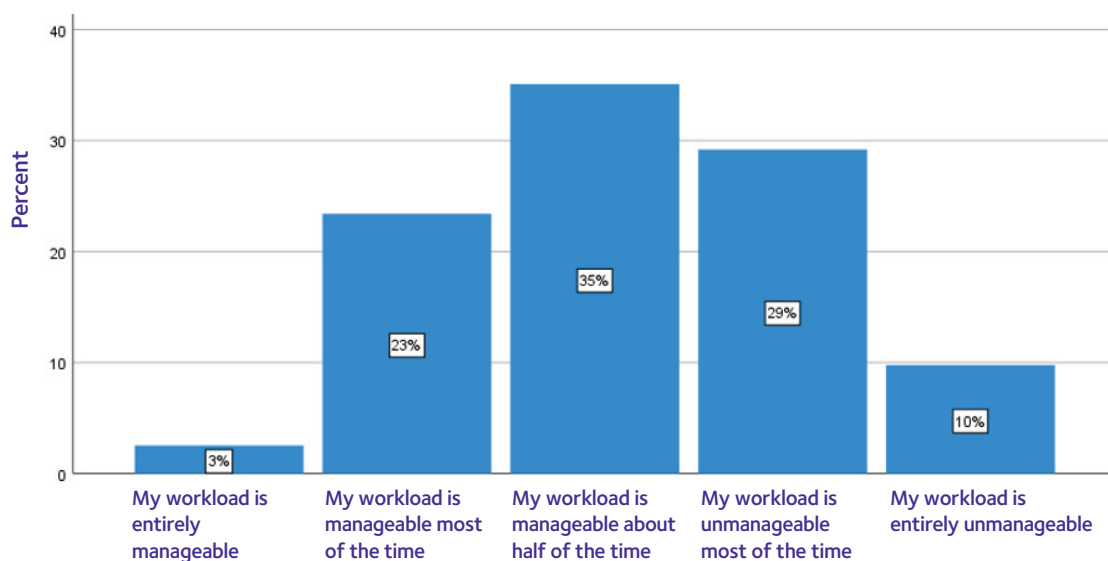
PACE AND INTENSITY OF WORK

Almost seven respondents out of ten (68%) from higher education indicated that the pace and intensity of their work had increased significantly over the previous three years, with 19% perceiving a slight increase. For 10% of the sample, their working pace had remained stable during this time, whereas for 2% it had decreased slightly and for 1% significantly.

Thinking about the pace or intensity you currently work at, do you think this has changed over the last three years?
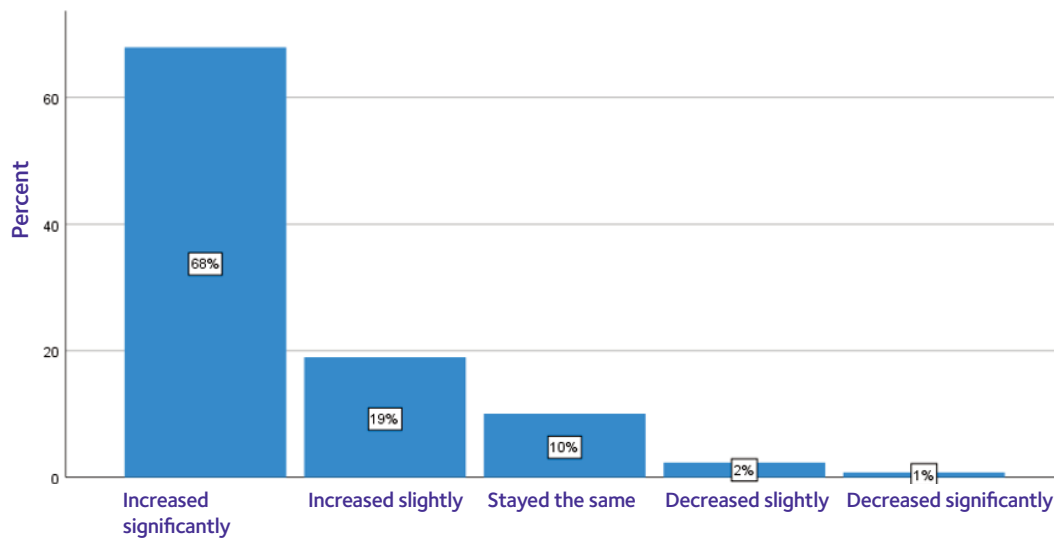
WORKING HOURS

Half of the sample from higher education reported that the number of hours they worked had increased significantly over the previous three years, with a further 30% perceiving a slight increase. Fifteen percent of respondents from this sector indicated that their working hours had remained the same, whereas 3% reported a slight decrease and 1% a significant increase. Some responses to the open-ended questions indicated that some respondents found it difficult to estimate changes to their 'average' working hours, as they fluctuated considerably from week to week.

Overall, over the last three years, how have your working hours changed?
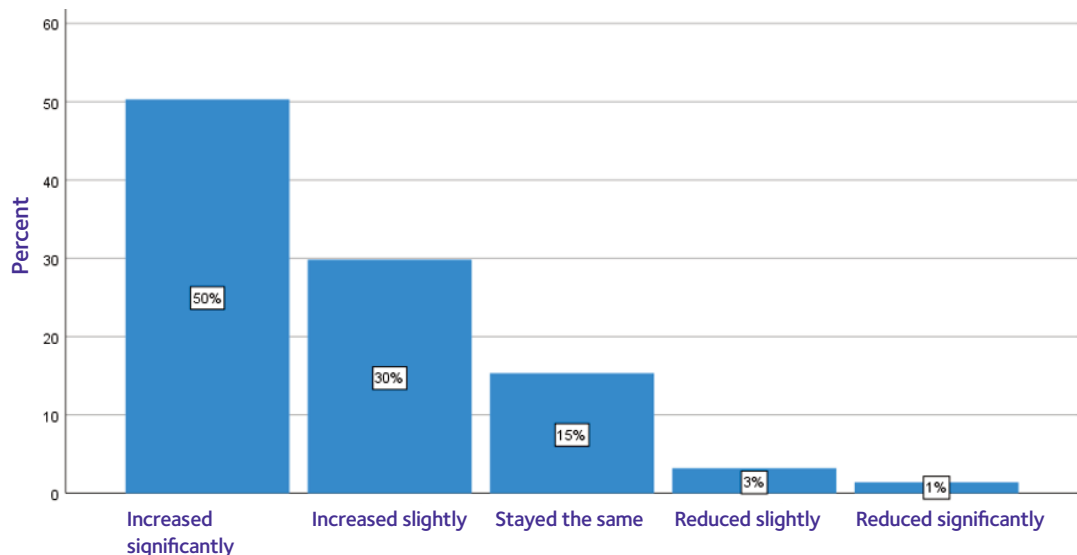
Note

Some comments from respondents working in higher education reflected the findings outlined above, where no notable increase in workload, the intensity or pace of work, or working hours had been experienced. Some indicated that their workload was not excessive, for example, "My workload has been and continues to be manageable" and "Most days my workload is fine and the pressure is not acutely painful." Others reported rarely working

beyond their contracted hours, "I work my hours. When I occasionally work weekends I get paid for it, but 99% of the time I finish when I am supposed to." Although they found their own workload manageable, however, some respondents observed that some of their colleagues were struggling. As one lecturer commented, "I can manage my own workload, but I see my academic colleagues working long hours and missing time with family and friends." Also acknowledged was the role of external forces in contributing to increased workloads in higher education rather than institutional pressures, "I think my institution cares, is facilitative and supportive. Any pressures I experience tend to be externally generated."

DEMOGRAPHIC AND JOB-RELATED DIFFERENCES

Women working in higher education settings tended to report working longer hours over the previous three years than men and perceive that their work had become more intense (p<.001). On average, however, men were more likely to report that their workload had become less manageable (p<.001). Respondents who identified as disabled typically indicated that their workload had become more intense over the previous three-year period (p<.001). Those employed on a permanent contract were more likely to report an increase in overall workload and longer working hours than those in temporary contracts (p<.001). No consistent patterns related to age or ethnicity were found in perceptions of increased workload, pace and manageability. It should be noted, however, that a considerable majority of the sample was White.

Why has workload changed?

Thematic analyses were conducted on the responses to the open-ended question that asked about reasons for any changes in the amount and intensity of workload (either increasing or decreasing). The themes identified are outlined below with representative quotes provided where relevant.

INCREASED WORKLOAD

The COVID pandemic

By far the most common reason provided by respondents from higher education for any increased workload and work intensification experienced in the previous three years related to the pandemic. It was a time of profound stress for many, with wide-ranging effects on people's personal and professional lives. At the start of the pandemic, teaching, support and communication functions were rapidly moved online with little time for planning, while the return to face-to-face teaching and the need to develop hybrid or blended forms of delivery was also challenging.

Striving to maintain 'business as usual' during lockdown was clearly time-consuming and stressful for many higher education staff, requiring a considerable degree of commitment and flexibility and the rapid acquisition of skills. As one lecturer commented, *"Workloads skyrocketed due to urgent and unplanned changes to the way we work."* Coping with an entirely different mode of delivery and the associated changes in processes during this time posed many challenges for staff, such as the need to familiarise themselves with new e-learning and

communication technologies and practices, convert teaching and assessment materials to an online format, support distressed students, adapt promptly to new procedures and respond to unforeseen crises. Some respondents wrote about the need to provide cover for colleagues who were ill or who had caring responsibilities that further increased their workload.

One lecturer's comment illustrated the rapid pace at which many people were working during this time, *"After COVID hit, we moved all programmes fully online within two weeks."* Many highlighted the time commitment required to respond so rapidly to changing circumstances, with one lecturer reporting *"It took me all day to prepare a one-hour lecture."* The increased administration requirements associated with the new procedures introduced during COVID also contributed to an increase in workload. Respondents also frequently commented on the increased number of meetings with managers, colleagues and students which extended their working hours considerably with little opportunity for breaks, for example, *"The relentless scheduling of online meetings back-to-back with no 'in-between' or 'downtime' is exhausting."* The meetings were generally considered time-consuming and not always necessary, with one lecturer commenting, *"Since COVID there has been an uncontrolled growth in online meetings, most of the time unnecessary in my view."* Another described the proliferation of meetings as *"pointless, with no clear outcomes – often meetings about meetings about meetings."*

Some respondents from higher education described how the support they had received from their employers during the pandemic had helped them cope with the additional pressure, for example, *"My school was good at giving us extra time to prepare online lectures, but everything just took so much longer."* Nonetheless, others reported that they were expected to *"get on with it themselves"* with little guidance. As one lecturer commented, *"There was an expectation that we could adapt all our teaching to online, interactive formats and blended face-to-face formats with very little training or support."* Respondents working in support functions, particularly IT, also described how the demands for their services had increased during this time and how this had increased their workload, for example, *"The COVID pandemic and the pivot to online teaching generated a lot of urgent support requests from academic colleagues."*

Respondents from higher education who were working in disciplines with an empirical or practical component highlighted the particular challenges they experienced when trying to adapt teaching and learning processes, both during lockdown and when face-to-face teaching resumed. As one lecturer commented, "*COVID, and the changes needed to research projects to make them COVID safe, had a profound effect on my workload"*, and another, *"It has been a lot of work to teach marine conservation over Zoom. Once lockdown was lifted for education, we ended up having to deliver practical work and field courses on weekends and over the Easter break to ensure students were able to get the experience."*

Managers reflected on the *"challenges and complications"* involved in leading a team through the pandemic. One commented, *"A lot of my work is managing the department and people. More admin was needed to support the new processes and protocols."* Other managers commented on the additional input that was required of them during this time not only to organise employees' work tasks but also to support their wellbeing. One newly appointed manager wrote, *"I became Head of Department just before COVID hit, so having to manage the department and help navigate staff and students through the lockdowns, moving delivery online and manage/hold the emotional impacts for colleagues was a lot to deal with."*

The time gained through not commuting and the flexibility of homeworking was often thought to help respondents from higher education meet the increased workload demands.

Others, however, described how working remotely had extended their working day and eroded the boundaries between their work and their personal life. As one lecturer wrote, *"It sometimes feels like I am living at work rather than working from home."* Some respondents also wrote about the difficulties they experienced trying to *"switch off"* from work at a time where *"email traffic had increased considerably"* and a rapid response was often the norm, for example, *"I could not really cut myself off from the job, even during weekends and holidays, due to the increased volume of emails I had to deal with where people wanted answers immediately."* The implications of the increasing number of meetings for workload were highlighted above, but comments were also made about how meetings extended their working day as they were *"much easier to schedule online"* and "*There is an expectation that when working at home one is available at a moment's notice for meetings."*

The additional time required to *"keep students occupied"* during the pandemic and ensure that their satisfaction was maintained was also highlighted as a major source of pressure. In general, however, respondents expressed great sympathy with their students' situation and many had clearly invested considerable time and energy in supporting them during this challenging time. As one lecturer wrote, *"Students were understandably more isolated and needy under COVID; their education had been disrupted and they quite reasonably had a lot of questions about how to do their work."* Another commented, *"Some students had experienced major traumas and needed a lot of help, others just needed some social contact."* Some respondents, however, described the difficulties they had experienced in supporting and reassuring distressed and sometimes angry students who believed they were not getting the university experience they had **"signed up"** for or receiving *"value for money"*. As one lecturer remarked, *"It really upsets me that some bodies are talking about money back for a reduction of 'in person' teaching. I have never worked so hard and been so stressed in my life."*

Respondents also wrote about the challenges they experienced after lock-down restrictions were lifted and teaching had resumed face-to-face, or via a hybrid/blended delivery. As one lecturer commented, *"Now we are back to some semblance of 'normality', the workload doesn't seem to have changed."* And another, *"The work became much more intense when we returned to campus and tried to rebuild or create new networks and non-hybrid events."* Some described how the steps required to comply with COVID safety guidelines impacted on their workload, with one lecturer estimating that complying with the COVID rules relating to their teaching had increased their workload by at least 50%. Others wrote about being required to *"run multiple tutorials or lab sessions"* and the additional time demands of hybrid delivery, where they might be *"delivering the teaching twice, in two different formats and providing support in two different ways."*

Reduced staffing

Many reasons provided by respondents working in higher education for increased workload related to reduced staffing levels. In the words of one lecturer, *"There is more stuff to do and fewer people to do it."* Another commented, *"People have left to take early retirement, voluntary and compulsory redundancy and some short-term contracts weren't renewed."* Some respondents also observed that colleagues had also left due to chronic work-related stress and related health problems. The need to cover for staff who had not been replaced was a major source of stress for many. As one lecturer commented, *"Fewer staff in roles means more pressure on the rest of the team."* Others commented on the impact of a combination of reduced staffing levels and increasing numbers of students on workloads, for example, *"Increased student numbers requiring more support are not matched by staff recruitment, making the student – staff ratio much worse."*

Respondents frequently wrote about the impact of recruitment freezes, for example, **"As staff have left, frequently their posts are not advertised and filled – there is an expectation from management that the current team will just cover their workload."** Another commented, *"My institution won't invest money to replace staff that leave. So, we who are left have more on our workload with the promise of recruitment which never actually happens."* A lecturer described the situation in their department that had little capacity to take on additional work from people who had left, *"We are now very stretched indeed. Retirements and redundancies without new hirings mean that the extra work has been shared out among an already depleted workforce."*

Many comments from academics related to expectations that they would take on the responsibilities of administrative and support staff who had left (the next section provides a more in-depth discussion of this issue). A librarian also highlighted the implications of reduced staffing levels for their workload, *"This year we are seeing the knock-on effects of redundancies elsewhere in the university - fewer IT staff means more people directing their IT enquiries at us in the library; fewer timetabling staff means we don't get told when our teaching sessions will be scheduled until the very last minute, so can't plan in advance."*

The implications of losing experienced colleagues for workloads were recognised, for example, *"People leaving has caused a loss of institutional knowledge, where so many tasks that were previously routine absorb more time and energy or are allowed to become emergencies."* Also highlighted was a lack of contingency planning for covering the workload of staff that have left, or been moved to other functions, for example, *"Additional work keeps getting parachuted onto us at the last minute when managers realise that somebody has left, giving us no time to prepare."*

It was acknowledged that temporary employees can help "*fill the gaps"* caused by permanent staff leaving, but some concerns were expressed about how an over reliance on hourly paid staff can increase rather than reduce workload. Some may lack experience or have insufficient hours allocated to perform the tasks required and their goodwill could often be abused. As one manager commented, *"We only have a budget for hourly paid lecturers to teach, not cover admin or even marking, so they either do it unpaid or the work is shifted to permanent staff."* Another wrote, *"Reliance on hourly paid lecturers means that we don't have consistency in teaching and are constantly bringing new staff up to speed. It is also becoming more difficult to recruit them due to the poor pay and conditions and excessively high expectations."* Others reported that teaching support from hourly paid and guest lecturers for their courses was no longer permitted due to a "*reduced budget"*.

Where replacement staff were to be recruited, respondents often described *"lengthy and more complex recruitment processes"* involving *"excessive bureaucracy"* that can take several months. One manager wrote, "I*t is getting harder to get permission for recruitment for vacant posts. We have to jump through very many hoops, which increases everybody's workload."* Some respondents commented on the difficulty in recruiting suitable replacements in *"shortage occupations"* when the pay and working conditions offered were not attractive. As one IT specialist commented, *"Uncompetitive salaries in IT, where experienced staff are leaving in droves for better pay and conditions and happier work environments."*

Increased roles and responsibilities
Some respondents from higher education who had been promoted had taken on more responsibility and duties, which they had anticipated in their new role. Nonetheless, many

indicated that their roles and responsibilities had increased and diversified, requiring the investment of considerable time and effort. One respondent commented on their situation, *"An endless stream of tasks and initiatives somehow ends up in my inbox."* Academic roles, in particular, were now thought to encompass a range of duties outside the *"core"* tasks of teaching, research and pastoral care. Concerns were raised that little, if any, time was left to meet performance expectations for writing grant proposals, publishing scientific papers and engaging in external income generation, as well as maintaining student satisfaction.

The need to provide cover for staffing shortages discussed in the previous section extended the roles and responsibilities of many respondents. As one lecturer commented, *"I find myself covering many tasks that are not part of my role because there is nobody else to do them."* Also as previously discussed, the systems introduced during the pandemic typically involved additional administration requirements, particularly in relation to online teaching, assessment and support systems. Comments were made that *"non-transparent"* work allocation models could give the impression that workload was manageable, but many duties were not included. As one respondent remarked, *"The workload we are asked to take on is officially within reason but the unofficial add-ons mean becomes unreasonable and stressful very quickly."* Others wrote that the time previously allocated to tasks on workload planning had been reduced, i.e. *"decreased hourly tariffs for each duty"*, or had disappeared entirely. The requirement to plan teaching and other activities for the next academic year was also thought to add to the workload burden, *"We have to do today's work whilst planning and preparing for the following year, so it's double jobs on a lot of things too."*

Respondents from higher education frequently wrote about the need to provide increasingly detailed information associated with different aspects of their role, often *"with extremely short turnaround times."* As one academic commented, *"More form-filling, more administrative hurdles associated with every task... demonstrating compliance with strategy and goals of the institution is time consuming."* Those working across different departments also reported having to comply with an often overwhelming administrative burden, for example, *"I have contracts with three different departments in three different faculties: this results in a lot more bureaucracy and admin requirements such as completing mandatory training which are similar yet specific to each faculty, attending departmental meetings, exam boards etc."*

Many comments related to the increased administration requirements taking time away from 'core' tasks, seemingly without *"adding value"*. As one lecturer wrote, *"The administrative burden seems to have increased dramatically such that a vast amount of time is spent collating ever increasing sets of data."* Another commented, **"Admin associated with teaching has been increasing steadily over the last few years since services were centralised - this now takes up at least 50% of the time I used to devote to teaching."** Not all of the information requested was thought to be necessary, with some being considered *"pointless tick-box bureaucracy."* One respondent described how frequent and, in their opinion unnecessary, systems changes had increased their workload, *"Endless IT 'improvements' mean countless hours are wasted every year learning new methods of doing what we were already doing competently, but now must relearn to do, that are usually worse than we had before. The sheer numbers of hours every year spent wrestling with new and often flawed software, simply to record data or student meetings, is scandalous."*

Some respondents from higher education expressed the belief that the *"the key driving factor of increased workloads"* was the need to enhance student satisfaction. One lecturer

remarked, *"We used to have 20 working days to mark assessments but this has gradually winnowed down because it makes the students unhappy and they might give us a bad NSS."* Another commented, *"The workload has crept up and up, I find myself working into the small hours every night during marking periods. We can't not do the work – essays have to be marked, reports have to be written - but the expectations for these activities have risen steeply and unreasonably."*

Opportunities for respite in the academic year were generally believed to have diminished, meaning that many higher education staff were less able to *"gain a breathing space"* and recover from the pressures of work. As one respondent commented, *"There are no longer peaks and troughs to the year to help you catch up and take a break - everything is at the peak all the time."* Others described the difficulties they experienced trying to take their annual leave in an *"ever-dwindling window of opportunity"*, for example, *"Many weeks throughout the year have been removed as holiday options. The summer which historically was an opportunity to recover, write and take annual leave, has increasingly been taken up with bureaucracy."* Another wrote, *"The holiday periods, especially in the summer, have shrunk as management (albeit subtly) still expect you to answer emails or provide cover if they require you to suddenly work."*

The increased expectations placed on higher education staff and assumptions of their availability can be particularly problematic for staff on fractional contracts, or those that are hourly paid. One part-time lecturer commented, *"I am overloaded, but feel this is partly due to my line manager expecting too much and perhaps forgetting that I am not employed full time."* Hourly paid staff frequently reported being expected to comply with the increasing requirements for administration and student support without additional pay. As one respondent commented, *"The size of my modules has increased but my hourly rate remains the same – this not only accounts for teaching team but also marking and supporting students."*

Student demands

Comments made by respondents from higher education demonstrate a considerable degree of dedication and commitment to teaching and supporting students to the best of their ability and their willingness to invest a great deal of time and energy into this role. Nonetheless, many comments related to how a *"dramatic"* rise in student numbers had increased their workload. Clearly, this will require more time for preparation, marking and supervision and larger classes often involve repeat lectures and tutorials. Comments were frequently made about the growing number of personal tutees respondents were expected to support, for example, *"I used to have a few personal tutees, this year I have 45, but the allocated hours have stayed exactly the same."* Another lecturer reported having *"just under 100 tutees"* at the time the survey was conducted, with this role being *"non-stop"*. As well as a larger number of students to support, respondents often reported that their institution had increased the number of one-to-one meetings and *"drop in"* sessions with project students and tutees and the associated reporting requirements.

As discussed above, many respondents found supporting students during the pandemic to be challenging and time-consuming. As one lecturer noted, *"A huge increase in pastoral support was required as students were understandably upset and confused and needed reassurance, often on a one-to-one basis."* Another commented on how providing additional, often individualised, support to students during the pandemic had increased workloads in their department, *"Students had more issues and difficulties, so exceptional cases of extra work*

often had to be put in to support them, on a case-by-case basis." The need to provide additional support seemed to be ongoing for many, for example, *"I spend a huge amount of extra time prepping individual students and supporting them - this involves a lot of email time. An awful lot of email time."*

Observations were very frequently made regarding the increased number of students who needed ongoing additional support, requiring a greater investment of time and energy. Many comments related to the academic and pastoral support needs of those who were experiencing stress and more serious mental health issues since the pandemic. One respondent estimated that around 35% of their tutees seemed to have **"fairly significant mental health issues."** A student support worker wrote, *"Over the last few years, mental health problems and learning problems have certainly increased among students. This means we need to provide much more support, with many more meetings."*

Respondents often expressed concern that they were not qualified to monitor and manage *"the increasingly fragile mental state of students caused by the pandemic"* but professional support was limited in their institution. Another wrote, *"There seems a lot more risk to handle than ever before, with increased reports of suicidal ideation, suicide attempts and self-harm injuries."* Commented on the increase in the number of disabled students and the lack of professional support, one respondent wrote, *"There has been a huge increase in the number of disabled students accessing HE (a good thing) without a subsequent increase in resources (a bad thing). Students now have far more complex disability profiles, or much greater support needs, particularly for mental health and neurodivergence. The sector benchmark for the ratio of disabled students to disability advisors is 200:1, whereas at my university it is 2500:1. How is that manageable or sustainable?"*

Respondents working across academic and support functions often reported being unable to meet students' expectations of the support they felt they were entitled to, with multiple requests for one-to-one support being impossible to meet. As one lecturer wrote, *"Students' expectations of staff availability simply don't marry up with staff workload, so this conflict is quite harmful to the staff / student relationship."* The implications for student satisfaction in the NSS of failing to meet their expectations were however acknowledged. Many comments were made about the time and effort needed to *"steer through"* the growing number of students who were *"under-prepared for a university education."* One respondent remarked, *"Teaching and supporting large numbers of needy students who don't have the skills to tackle an undergraduate degree can be very time-consuming."* Support staff also commented on the increasing number of requests they received *"by overworked lecturers who pass students who lack study skills, literacy or digital skills, on to us for help."*

Also identified were expectations that students who needed to develop core academic skills in independent study would engage in independent study, with additional tutorials, assessment support, feedback sessions and skill sessions in small groups often required. One respondent also commented, *"New initiatives within the department to better support students with access needs have resulted in an increased focus on academic skills in every taught session, which can be time consuming and reduce the formal content of lectures."* Another remarked on the need to support the development of students who *"have come with fewer social skills from being in lockdown."* As well as needing to help students develop the skills required to cope at university, concerns were also expressed about supporting those who lacked the motivation to continue. One respondent felt obliged to put a lot of time and energy into *"chasing students so they don't lose momentum, interest, and waste their money (it is expensive!!!)"*

Note

It should be noted that each of the challenges discussed above do not typically occur in isolation but interact to heighten the workload pressures experienced by people working in higher education. For example, reduced staffing levels, increased administrative demands and the rapid introduction of online teaching and associated reporting systems, along with larger groups of students with additional support needs will inevitably increase workloads, intensify the pace of work and extend working hours. As well as expressing concerns about their workload and the pressure they experience from various aspects of their role, it is evident that many respondents gain considerable satisfaction from their work. Nonetheless, current working conditions in higher education do not seem sustainable and have serious implications for the health and wellbeing of employees as well as their professional effectiveness.

DECREASED WORKLOAD

Increased support

Some respondents from higher education indicated that their workload had reduced due to additional support from their organisations. The benefits of improved staffing levels for the workload and wellbeing of employees were widely recognised, for example, *"For the first time in years, my department is fully staffed"* and *"I have only recently had a full team that I can delegate work to. I was previously working 70 to 80 hours and week and close to burnout. My workload is only just becoming manageable after 6 years."*

Also considered helpful by many was the implementation of "*more realistic"* workload models in their institution, for example, *"The new workload model that is being used in appraisals has led to a better recognition of the impact of course leadership and research, meaning that less teaching is expected of me."* Others described how a change in management style had resulted in a reduction in their own workload and that of their colleagues, as one lecturer commented, *"I have a new HOD who does not only pay lip service to reducing overload"*, and another, *"Our new line manager has made a huge difference - tasks have been streamlined, unreasonable deadlines challenged and unnecessary or duplicated tasks refused"*. Also recognised, was the importance of supportive line managers in helping employees manage heavy workloads more efficiently, for example, *"I have worked with my line manager to carve out more time in bulk sessions, rather than have a spare hour here or there."*

Some respondents, particularly those with caring responsibilities, wrote about the support they had received from their institution during COVID. For many in this situation, working hours and deadlines became more flexible, workloads were reduced and tasks were reallocated. One lecturer wrote that the challenges of the pandemic had reduced expectations for performance in their institution, "*Although undoubtedly challenging, I feel COVID has paradoxically relieved some of the institutional pressures on staff to perform. Individual staff circumstances are recognised more, and some deadlines extended."* As highlighted above, however, many respondents reported working longer hours during this time to prepare online materials and support students.

Improved efficiency and experience

Respondents from higher education frequently described how increased efficiency (both on the part of the organisation and the individual) and more *"on-the-job"* experience had reduced workloads. Linked to the previous theme of enhanced support, some lecturers commented on actions taken by their institution to reduce teaching hours, with reductions in

repeat teaching believed to be particularly effective, for example, *"Larger teaching spaces have resulted in fewer repetitions of the same class."* For some, improvements in technology, or its more efficient use, had helped reduce their workload. One lecturer described how, *"Changes in ways of working counted pre-recorded material towards student engagement time."* For others, greater transparency or equity in workload was thought to have reduced the demands made of them, for example, *"A fairer distribution of administrative and teaching responsibilities has been introduced across my department at last."*

More generally, some early career academics observed that increasing *"familiarity with the job and new policies and practices"* helped them manage their workload more effectively. Respondents described the challenges they had experienced in their first year or two of teaching, for example, *"I had to prepare new materials and familiarise myself with the systems, but I now feel more in control because I am more familiar with the university procedures and can re-use my materials."* Another wrote *"I am now more settled in my role and have learned my way around and how to better manage my workload and my time."* A more established academic also reflected on how the pressure of work often reduced over time, "*The sense of being overwhelmed with work reduces once you get more experienced. You can achieve more per week when everything is familiar."*

Some respondents from higher education who had recently changed institutions observed how *"getting to grips"* with new policies, processes and systems was initially time-consuming but, like the early career academics discussed above, growing familiarity had reduced their workload over time. One lecturer also described how feeling more established in their new role had given them the confidence to set boundaries for their working hours, "*I have been doing the same job for a while now, so have my experience to draw on. I am learning to delegate and to do the job in the time allocated. If my employer wants a better job, they will need to allocate more time to it."*

Change in role or institution

Respondents from higher education frequently reported having reduced their workload by moving to a less demanding role. Examples included reducing administrative responsibilities, taking on a role that was not student-facing, or stepping down from a management position. Others had moved to a function that was better resourced (in terms of staffing or funding allocation), with a line manager who was *"more respectful of work-life balance"* or with a "more realistic workload allocation model". One respondent commented on their experience of moving from a student-facing to a professional services role, *"I agree my work tasks directly with my line manager, rather than according to a workload model that vastly under-estimated the amount of time I need to put in."*

Some respondents described how moving to a more secure role, or to one that was less pressured, had reduced their workload. As one researcher wrote, *"My workload has decreased due to my getting a permanent contract – I have been under pressure for so long to prove myself by writing grants and bring in more and more funding."* Another described moving to a new role that was just as demanding as their previous position, but the increased autonomy and flexibility was able to help them cope more effectively, *"I am now in a research role which is still highly pressured, but where planning ahead makes for a smoother process of workload management and gives me a better work-life balance".*

As well as changing roles within their current institution, some respondents reported moving to another organisation with a less pressured culture, for example, *"I used to work close to 80*

hours a week – it made me ill. I am now working in an institution with more realistic expectations." Some described moving to a more prestigious university with a lower teaching workload where *"research time is better protected and I no longer have to do it during evenings and weekends."* Respondents who had moved to a better resourced institution also reflected on the impact on their working life, *"I worked for over 24 years at pre-1992 universities and recently moved to a Russell Group institution. The difference is profound. The teaching is around a third of what I was used to and, unlike my previous university where we had no support, we have admin staff who are the absolute backbone of the department. I know where I would prefer to work!"* Others had done the opposite, for example, *"I left a job at a Russell Group institution where the pressure I was under to gain funding and publish was unsustainable, to a newer institution that seems more committed to work-life balance."*

Another strategy used by respondents in higher education to reduce their workload and improve their work-life balance was to move from a full-time to a fractional contract. As one lecturer commented, "I dropped from 1FTE to 0.6FTE as I was unable to cope with the pressure and one of my two main areas of responsibility has now been picked up by a new member of staff." The financial implications of such a move were acknowledged, but some indicated the reduced pressure could compensate for the lower salary, for example, *"I dropped teaching a module, so now earn less for doing a similar amount of work, but I feel less stressed"* and *"I have had to take a significant pay cut but overall it is better for my workload and my mental health."*

Working at home
How working at home could extend working hours and blur boundaries between life domains was discussed in the previous section, but others described how it could help them manage their workload. As one lecturer commented, *"We aren't interrupted or distracted by colleagues and students and we don't have to try to look 'busy' to stop people from giving us more work. Basically time spent working at home is just doing what needs to be done."* Others described how a *"lack of visibility"* had resulted in a reduced workload, *"As a result of working at home during COVID I have fallen off the radar at work, so I am no longer given additional work to do."*

As discussed above, working at home also saves commuting time meaning that people can be more productive. One lecturer also described how working at home had significantly reduced the amount of time they spent travelling, *"Not just in terms of the standard daily commute, but also for work-related intercampus travel. I can now use my time more efficiently and I am under less pressure."* Others wrote about how virtual meetings saved time and energy that could be spent on other tasks, with many roles and duties that had *"traditionally"* been face-to face, such as PhD examinations and attending examination boards, having moved online. One respondent commented, *"I used to have to travel up and down the country to examine PhD students and have research meetings – often it would involve an overnight stay. Now I can do it from my study at home in a few hours."*

Respondents from higher education frequently wrote about how about the increased flexibility of homeworking made their working life *"more relaxed"*, for example, *"I can work at my own pace and at times to suit and actually be more rather than less productive."* Others commented on how working at home encouraged them to take *"proper breaks"* that benefitted their wellbeing as well as their professional effectiveness. As one lecturer commented, *"There seems less pressure if I can just walk away from a meeting, or at the end of teaching, and go to my kitchen or garden. I can take a decent lunch break without having to eat over my keyboard."*

Reconsidering priorities and stepping back

Making a conscious decision to reduce their workload, either through reconsidering their priorities or due to health problems, was an additional reason provided by respondents from higher education. As one lecturer commented, *"I have chosen to work less and to prioritise other facets of my life."* Others reflected on their decision to *"step back"* from work, *"I was working over 55 hours every week and this was not sustainable – I now work 9 – 5 as much as I possibly can",* and *"I decided not to kill myself through overwork so have reduced after-hours work and cut weekend working entirely"*.

As well as the need to manage a heavy workload, the role of high self-expectations and perfectionism in *"driving"* over-work was recognised. Respondents often described how the pandemic had led to them reappraising their priorities, for example, *"COVID was a useful reset for me. I was often working 12-hour days. Lockdown allowed me to take stock and put in place some healthy barriers and boundaries to ensure that, while work still 'matters', it matters a more appropriate amount."* Another academic described how the pandemic had resulted in reduced their working hours, **"COVID meant I had to prioritise other things in my life. It turns out it was more the expectations of myself than my bosses that was driving my long hours before."**

A number of respondents reported that their workloads had decreased because they had been signed off sick with work-related stress, either through adjustments made by their employer or their own actions. One lecturer wrote, *"I was diagnosed with a mental health condition brought on by my excessive workload. I had a period of medical leave and my line manager acted to reduce my workload. I had been trying to do this for 4 years previously."* Another commented similarly, *"This period of illness resulted in my employer being forced to reduce the excessive workload I had previously been under. I am now only working the hours (and only the hours) stipulated in my contract."* Others described having purposefully taken steps to limit their working hours in response to signs of stress or burnout, although some continued to work in excess of their contracted hours, *"I couldn't go on at this pace. I have cut down from 80-hour weeks to 60-hour weeks."* The impact of ageing and associated experiences such as menopause were also cited as reasons for cutting down on working hours, *"I am just not able to work at the same intensity as when I was younger."*

Some respondents with health conditions described having been formally given a **"lighter load"**. For example, one lecturer wrote about having been recently diagnosed with a long-term condition requiring them to manage their energy levels carefully, *"It started to have a serious impact on the amount of work I can do, essentially through fatigue. My managers, colleagues and students have been very understanding in helping me manage this problem."* Others reported receiving little support to manage their health problem, for example, *"I had cancer last year and this made me reassess my work-life balance. My manager still expects me to get everything done though."* People employed on insecure contracts can find it particularly difficult to negotiate reduced hours, as one lecturer wrote, *"I am having treatment for cancer which I am finding very tiring, but as I am on a temporary contract I worry about asking for a reduction in workload."*

The implications of reducing working hours for job performance were acknowledged by some respondents, for example, *"After cutting my working hours I am falling behind on a number of core elements of my job, but refusing to make up this deficit as I am no longer prepared to work more than 40 – 45 hours per week."* A lecturer expressed concern about the repercussions of reducing their working hours without formal agreement from their line

manager, *"My workload was such that I was routinely working until 2 a.m. surviving on minimal sleep. I had gone beyond breaking point – my health was suffering and I was becoming less effective in my work. I decided to work reasonable hours only. I now have a massive backlog of work that I will never catch up with including several thousand unread emails. I am waiting for the moment when my employer finds out about this and punishes me for under-performance."*

The potential consequences of **"stepping back"** and reducing working hours for career progression were also recognised. As one senior researcher commented, *"In my faculty, overwork is expected and people on fixed-term research contracts can only deliver publications and required number of grant applications if they do so."* The impact on professional self-esteem of reducing one's commitment to work was also identified, for example, *"I have become less able to put in the time required to do the best job possible, so have prioritised what needs to be done and, as such, my work quality has slipped. I am not proud of this, but it was necessary to avoid complete exhaustion."*

Whether respondents had reduced their working hours by personal action or via negotiation with their employer, the difficulties in sustaining these *"good intentions"* were widely recognised. The need to be *"ruthless"* in protecting personal time in the face of *"continuous pressure and demands"* from managers, colleagues, students, as well as from internal pressures, such as interest and involvement in their work, was identified. Also acknowledged were feelings of guilt about maintaining personal workload boundaries while colleagues may be less able to do so.

Changing circumstances

Reducing workload due to health problems was discussed above. Becoming a parent or taking on other caring responsibilities was another reason provided for respondents placing restrictions on their working hours. The need to balance the competing demands for time and energy from roles in work and personal life were recognised. As one lecturer commented, *"I have become a parent – I can't work outside nursery hours and would be too exhausted to do so anyway."* Another wrote about the actions they had taken to set boundaries for working hours, *"Since returning from maternity leave I have been tracking my working hours and deliberately keeping within my contracted hours."* Similar to the theme relating to re-evaluating priorities outlined above, the implications for career advancement of reducing one's hours were acknowledged, *"I have given up on ever getting another job in the sector if I am ever made redundant. I have a small baby to look after and spend time with now and that is more important than an academic career."*

Some respondents wrote about decreasing their working hours and the effort they put into their job in preparation for retirement, for example, *"I have moved from a major leadership role into one that has no management or teaching responsibilities. I guess I am winding down to retirement."* Others described moving to a part-time contract in preparation for flexible retirement, *"as a process of gradual disengagement from the job and the institution."*

Learning to say 'no' and 'caring less'.

Another reason for a reduction in workload was gaining the confidence to refuse to take on additional tasks. Some respondents from higher education reported taking strategic actions to reduce their workload. As one lecturer wrote, *"I am only making time for things that are 'measured'."* Others described withdrawing from external commitments, such as committee work,

and reducing voluntary roles, such as editorial or review roles, to help manage their workload. Others had decided to reduce their research commitments and, as a consequence, "attend fewer research meetings and conferences." *Nonetheless, the impact that this can have on opportunities for advancement, particularly for people earlier in their career, was acknowledged.*

Other reasons for reducing workload and working hours that fell in this category involved the loss of enthusiasm and motivation for one's job. As one respondent remarked, *"I have honestly stopped caring and no one has noticed!"* Others reflected on how a *"change in attitude"* and *"stopping feeling guilty about saying no"* had made it easier for them to step back, for example, *"I have given up trying to get anywhere – career advancement is over for me".* Another academic observed that what they described as their *"laid-back"* attitudes towards their job helped them avoid workload pressure, but acknowledged the impact on their career, *"I avoid workload stress by not taking my job too seriously. I don't really think about strategic stuff. I just do my job and go home. This is probably why I haven't been promoted to the level one might have expected given my age."*

Reduced demand for input or expertise
Some respondents from higher education indicated that their workload had been reduced, not through their own actions but due to *"diminishing demand"* for their work. This involved courses or individual modules being discontinued, or specialist teaching areas having become less popular. As one lecturer commented, *"I have a much-reduced workload as most of my modules were cancelled at undergraduate and postgraduate levels."* As well as less teaching, this also reduced the amount of administrative work and pastoral care required. People in this situation expressed concerns about their job security, or the need to diversify. Others wrote about the reduced workload pressure following the completion of research projects. One researcher reflected on their decision to cut back on applying for funding in order to reduce their workload, *"Many of the research projects I was involved in have now finished and I am no longer bidding for so many new ones."*

Notes
Although a substantial number of respondents indicated that their workload had reduced, either through increased support from their organisation, growing experience, or their own decision to "step back", it should be noted that many reported continuing to work in excess of their contracted hours. This is well illustrated by one lecturer's comment about their move to a fractional, insecure role, "Following redundancy, I moved from a full-time salaried position to an hourly paid casual role, which included admin, research and teaching. Although my workload is less, my hourly rate does not include any research time and has minimal, teaching related admin, so I am trying to do all of that unpaid."

One change

Respondents from higher education were asked to nominate a single change that would reduce their workload. The suggestions made are summarised below.

➡ **Improve staffing levels.** Offer more competitive pay and conditions and opportunities for career development to attract talent and ensure they remain in post. Replace staff promptly on a "like-for like" basis when they leave, rather than expect their work to be absorbed by those who are left.

➡ **Limit the use of insecure contracts.** Where they are used, ensure they have a minimum number of hours of work and a clear career progression. Make sure that hourly paid staff receive payment for support, admin, training and associated activities as well as for their formal teaching hours.

➡ **Provide more administrative and student support** to reduce the burden on academic staff.

➡ **Simplify and streamline** the monitoring and reporting requirements, plan ahead and set timelines and deadlines that are realistic and take other responsibilities into consideration.

➡ **Realistically appraise workloads.** In consultation with employees, identify the time and resources required to perform tasks. Review regularly to ensure that any additional tasks are captured.

➡ **Ensure that workload models are valid** and include all of the tasks that employees do through the year. As well as 'core' responsibilities (such as teaching, research and administration), workload systems should include tasks such as attending meetings, managing email, "extra" duties (such as institutional citizenship) and take into account the full entitlement of annual leave. Ensure that adequate time is provided for preparing new lecture content and materials and moving courses online and that there is spare capacity for development activities and providing cover for staff shortages and sickness.

➡ **Monitor workloads and working hours**. Ensure that all tasks can be completed during contracted hours and that people do not have to work during evenings and weekends on a regular basis. Be aware of the risk of 'creeping workloads', especially where support from administrative and support staff is limited.

➡ **Ensure workloads are transparent**, equitable and fairly distributed across all staff.

➡ **Assess capacity before embarking on new ventures.** Establish whether key staff are available and have sufficient time and that the necessary resources are in place.

➡ **Ensure that a good student-staff ratio is maintaine**d. Recognise that an increase in student numbers requires investment in staff and infrastructure, as well as additional staff time to plan, mark and provide learning and pastoral support. When widening participation, ensure staff have sufficient time and expertise to provide support and develop skills.

➡ **Reduce centralised bureaucratic control.** Review the culture and, if required, introduce a more democratic and collaborative ethos that encourages professional autonomy and

trust and enables employees and teams to have a meaningful input into planning and change processes.

➡ **Challenge poor management** and invest in appropriate training. Make sure that managers are aware of their duty of care to protect the mental wellbeing of employees and have the necessary skills to do so and the knowledge to refer them for support if required. Ensure that managers act as role models for work-life balance and self-care.

➡ **Plan for the future** taking into account the resources that are available and, wherever possible, avoid urgent requests for immediate action.

➡ **Avoid excessive change and reorganisation**. Realise that it can take a while to reap the benefits of changes that have been introduced. Be realistic about what can be achieved under the circumstances. Focus on a manageable number of priorities during a set time period and then review.

➡ **Cut down on unnecessary meetings**, both face-to-face and online. Develop a meetings policy with input from staff to help identify when a meeting is warranted and when it is not. Consider introducing meeting-free days, register time spent on meetings and provide guidance on their structure and timings.

➡ **Be aware of the time taken to manage email** and, where possible, reduce email traffic. Provide guidance on the effective use of email and etiquette rules and the need to switch off.

➡ **Implement robust and user-friendly electronic systems** and consolidate the IT packages used. Provide more IT support.

➡ **Manage students' expectations of staff availability**, how to communicate with staff appropriately and how staff should respond to their requests. Realise that giving students what they want may not necessarily be aligned with what they need to maintain good quality university education.

➡ **Provide specialist support for students.** Acknowledge that many have social, economic and emotional issues and staff are not likely to have the skills, knowledge or time to support them. Recognise that this can be a considerable source of stress for staff.

➡ **Encourage employees to take their full entitlement of annual leave.** Consider introducing a policy where a minimum amount of leave must be taken each year. Provide adequate cover for staff leave and also for sickness absence.

➡ **Provide opportunities for hybrid working** that are flexible and fit employees' needs and preferences. Offer guidance on how to work remotely in a healthy and sustainable way, bearing in mind the need to support emotional as well as physical health.

➡ **Address the "culture of overwork"** that has become the norm in many higher education institutions. Appreciate how the pressures of the job mean that a healthy work-life balance is essential for the continued wellbeing of staff and for optimum performance. Be aware of the overwhelming evidence that long working hours make people less rather than more productive and more vulnerable to health problems.

➡ **Change expectations of what it means to be a successful academic** worthy of promotion and ensure that people are not expected to do "everything" excellently. Make sure that people do not have to choose between work and family life to progress their career. Be aware that limited employment opportunities for early career academics and

intense competition for permanent positions can encourage and reward over-work among contract staff.

➡ **Do not take the goodwill of staff for granted.** Value people as individuals and recognise their strengths rather than see them as a commodity that is easily replaceable.

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