Workload Report
Newcastle University UCU
August 2021

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Newcastle University UCU surveyed members to determine how the pandemic has changed working hours and workloads, and how members experienced the change to working practices and workloads. The survey ran between 25 February and 21 April 2021, all UCU members were invited to take part.

Executive Summary:

- **Workload is unmanageable.** 78% of staff find that their workload is unmanageable at least half of the time. Almost half of respondents (48%) find their workloads unmanageable most of the time, or entirely unmanageable. Only one in five found their workloads manageable most of the time.

- **Workload intensity has increased, and tasks take much longer to complete.** 86% of respondents said the pace and intensity of their workloads had increased in the six months prior to completing the survey. 64% reported that it had increased significantly. 83% of respondents reported that tasks now take between 50 and 100% longer to do with the switch to online working.

- **Working much longer than the expected working hours per week is the norm, not the exception.** 85% of respondents reported working more than the normal expected working hours per week at least half the time over the six months prior to the survey. Over 75% said that this was a frequent occurrence (70% of the time or more) and 40% report that they are always, or almost always, working more than expected working hours.

- **Staff are working over 120% of their expected hours.** Respondents reported how many hours they had worked in the seven days prior to completing the survey. **The average (FTE) reported is over 50 hours** (Full-time and fractional staff, open-ended and fixed-term). Those on fractional contracts find their duties are even less likely to fit in the hours they are expected to work, with respondents on fractional contracts reporting, on average, working 140% of their expected hours.

- **The pandemic has made things worse, but workloads were already excessive and unmanageable prior to the pandemic.** The 2016 UCU Higher Education workload survey reported excessive workloads. Reflecting on conditions prior to January 2020, 71% of respondents reported that they were used to working more than their expected hours half the time or more. Over 50% of respondents reported that overwork pre-pandemic was more frequent than half the time.

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Introduction

Staff grievance about workloads and its effect upon health has been a major contributor to recent unprecedented scales of industrial action across the higher education (HE) sector being part of the 2019-20 UCU ‘four fights’ campaign. In May 2019, the Guardian reported an ‘epidemic’ of poor mental health among higher education staff wherein Newcastle University occupational health referrals for stress increased 126% over a five-year period.  

Workload is well known to be a key driver of poor wellbeing amongst HE staff. A 2019 Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI), report concluded that workload issues are a major cause for increased levels of stress, anxiety and poor mental health amongst university staff. Not only excessive workloads, but the poor management of those workloads with sector-wide problems of “workload models which frequently under-count time necessary for fulfilling tasks,” in a context where “many tasks prove invisible to the workload assessors.”

Casualisation, another key factor in poor mental health amongst university staff, compounds workload issues, with many staff on casual contracts even less likely to find workloads manageable. Hourly paid staff, in particular, are likely to be allocated payment for tasks that greatly underestimates time taken. Across UK higher education, hourly paid staff are conducting 45% of their working time unpaid in conditions that are often invisible to colleagues, management, and institutions.

The pandemic has made matters worse. The HE gender divide—which has a major workload and stress component—has widened, leading to a slowdown in progress made to date, or even worse a regression. At Newcastle, University Executive Board (UEB) decided not to honour the 2019-20 promotions round, cancelled the discretionary pay review last year, stripped away research allowances and cancelled last year’s promotions round.

The Newcastle UCU 2021 workload survey ran between 25 February and 21 April 2021, all UCU members were invited to take part. Responses were received from all disciplines and units, all academic role profiles and professional services staff as well as full-time, part-time and precariously employed members. Prior to analysis, and inclusion in this report or any other materials, any personal information related to identifiable individuals was removed from the qualitative responses. In total 429 members responded to the survey. The following topics were covered:

- Manageability of workload
- The size or intensity of workload
- Work-Life balance
- Mental and physical health
- Access to adequate resources

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4 Megoran, N. and O. Mason (2020) Second class academic citizens: The dehumanising effects of casualisation in higher education. UCU Report Available at: https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/10681/second_class_academic_citizens/pdf/secondclassacademiccitizens
5 AdvanceHE (2021) February - How has Covid-19 impacted on gender equality in HE? Available at: https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/membership/member-events/February
Excessive workloads: Comparison with pre-pandemic conditions

Even before the Covid-19 outbreak, university staff cited excessive workload and poor wellbeing as among their main concerns about the quality of their working lives. Staff surveys have repeatedly indicated a deteriorating level of anxiety and stress about work. A work-life balance survey published by the *Times Higher Education* in 2018 confirmed the damage this overwork does to mental health.⁷

These sector-wide conditions are repeated at Newcastle University. Of the respondents from Newcastle University to the *2016 UCU workload survey*, 85% reported that workloads had increased, (national average 83%) with 54% stating that they had “increased significantly”.⁹

Working in excess of the ‘expected’ 40 hour working week is far from exceptional, it has been the norm for a long time (Figure 1). Respondents to the 2021 survey were asked to report a ‘snapshot’ of the number of hours worked in the previous seven days. This has increased from the figure in the Newcastle University respondents to the 2016 survey.

Covid-19 has exacerbated already known problems with excessive and unmanageable workloads. In the 2016 survey, only 35% of respondents reported that workload was manageable most of the time. In the 2021 survey this had substantially worsened, with only one in five respondents finding their workload manageable while 1 in 2 found their workloads entirely unmanageable all or most of the time (Figure 2).

The move to online in March 2020, while necessary, was sudden and without adequate training, and it has increased the amount of time it is taking to do tasks:

> “just trying to manage to develop and deliver materials online and seminars to try to keep students engaged is incredibly time consuming - even though we have an additional allowance it comes nowhere near what is required to rethink the 'lecture' material, record, edit, and do closed captions. Fitting this in around a heavy management role is bonkers.”

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¹⁰ For full-time, fractional open-ended and fixed-term respondents. (Excludes hourly paid respondents). FTE calculated based upon a 40-hour expected work week, and so is a conservative estimate as contracts at lower grades have a shorter expected work week.
Survey respondents reported that shifting to working online has invariably increased the time tasks take. When asked to consider core duties which require more online working than prior to the Covid-19 pandemic (e.g. administration, teaching or research where applicable), 83% of respondents reported that the shift to online working has increased the time tasks take, with 30% reporting that the time tasks take had doubled, or more.

Workload intensity has substantially increased. 86% of respondents reported that workload intensity has increased over the six months prior to the survey, with 64% stating that it had increased “significantly” (Figure 3). 85% of respondents reported working more than the normal expected working hours per week at least half the time over the six months prior to the survey (Figure 4). Over 75% said that this was a frequent occurrence (70% of the time or more) and 40% report that they are always, or almost always, working more than expected working hours. However, although things have become substantially worse in the pandemic, working in excess of expected hours had already become the norm prior to the pandemic. 71% of respondents reported that prior to January 2022 they were working more than their expected hours about half the time or more (if they were employed by Newcastle University at that time).
Over the last six months, has the pace and intensity of your workload...

Figure 3 Workload intensity

How regularly have you worked more than the normal expected working hours per week?

Figure 4 Regularity of working more than the normal expected working hours (as per contract). Comparison with pre-covid situation.
Respondents identified that these are not new or temporary problems, but add to the existing context of unsustainable workloads, increased stress, and poor mental health. The findings revealed that the past 18 months has provided very little down time or the chance to recover, and that many staff feel they are constantly working in fifth gear, leading to burnout:

“We already have a heavy and intense workload which has only been exacerbated by pandemic needs. I feel like the University has allowed staffing levels to get to the stage where no one has any slack time at all. We are constantly working at turbo speed, rather than being able to cruise comfortably in fourth gear most of the time with the occasional area to park up, rest and refuel from time to time. I never feel like I have any time to reflect and revise what I do - just constantly shift from one thing to the next.”

“Too little investment in staff has led to extraordinary workloads. We had no spare capacity before Covid now we have overloaded staff.”

“Our department has been severely understaffed for years (colleagues who left have not been replaced). As a result we were vulnerable when Covid struck. With various colleagues on sick leave we have reached a real crisis situation. I now officially work [part time], but I work 7 days most weeks and this is completely unsustainable physically and mentally.”

The survey responses replicate the HEPI report conclusions regarding the under-counting and invisibility of much work. A very common issue raised by respondents was how little recognition there has been from management about how time-consuming and exhausting the work is:

“A massive increase in workload. Moving to online teaching means redesigning all materials, and thinking about how seminar and small-group activities can be delivered by Zoom takes a lot of time. The most time-consuming is Non-Synchronous OnLine lectures: 1 hour’s lecture which I have previously taught takes a good 8 hours to re-plan, record, caption and upload to Canvas, as compared to about 4 hours’ preparation + delivery in face-to-face mode. Our Workload Model assumes 4 hours’ work per lecture hour.”

“[T]here have been consistently unreasonable expectations with production of online materials such as videos etc. with no support and no reduction in workload to accommodate the extra work.”

“The move to online teaching has added tremendously to workload, not just the amount of time taken to prepare asynchronous materials, but also to 'translate' in person seminar plans to Zoom seminars, added admin to remind students and help them navigate the materials (which is harder for them without in person schedules), the expectation by students that we have to provide everything weeks in advance or respond immediately has increased on previous years' expectations. Pastoral work is also much more, for UG and PGT students alike, and this is not only time consuming but also emotionally draining due to the nature of the support needed by students who have been anxious, depressed, bereaved, etc.”
Research has significantly suffered, for many halting entirely. For academic staff on teaching and research and teaching and scholarship roles, research / scholarship time has been sacrificed. A majority of these staff feel that there is no time for research, and the only way they can keep on top of core tasks like teaching, or responding to student needs, is to sacrifice their research:

“I just want to say that I have done nothing else but for working. My marking is behind, my planning, my class preparation. I can never catch up with work, I’ve never worked so much and I feel I’m failing the students.”

“It has been awful - teaching and teaching preparation has completely taken over my life. Research is a distant dream. I no longer have weekends. I’m constantly running to catch up.”

This also leads to concerns about the future:

“An intensified workload has certainly raised stress levels about both present and future work. My sense is that this year has been an emergency and everyone has had to work much harder. I am more concerned now that expectations return to a more manageable level as we come out of the emergency, and not to ramp up the expectations to make this year into a new baseline or normal.”

“I’m really worried about this situation being used as an excuse to push through changes to teaching under regular circumstances, with a lot more ‘blended’ learning.”

A key message from comments in the survey was that this kind of working is unsustainable, and we must ensure that it does not become part of a new ‘normal’ moving forward. Workload has been an issue in HE for many years. The pandemic has exacerbated it and highlighted the very damaging results it can have on mental and physical health.
Institutional management

The survey demonstrates that many staff feel that the employer takes their goodwill for granted. Some respondents noted that in March 2020, University Executive Board (UEB) claimed that they would suspend strike deductions as a show of gratitude for how staff had so quickly turned their teaching to online platforms, and worked extra hours during what would be free time to ensure that students would not be detrimented by a global pandemic. However, once exams boards were concluded in June of that year, they announced that strike deductions would indeed be made. Yet, goodwill of staff is still imperative for the running of the university:

“Intensification of workload due to Covid is already coming on top of heavy work load. The university would not function without significant numbers of people working over what they are contracted.”

Respondents commented on the numerous emails from University Executive Board March 2020 that encouraged us all to just ‘do what you can’ and that they understand that staff capacity for work may be lower due to extra caring responsibilities. But many respondents expressed that they found this sort of messaging has not been helpful, as there is no clear indication of what is ‘business critical’. Everything seems to be important, and ‘quiet Fridays’ or the rollover of 10 annual leave days has done little to ameliorate the situation, as it does not reduce the workload, only delays the work:

“What is the point of additional days of annual leave when we don’t have time to take them? I was so stressed in January that I needed to take time off, but I didn’t feel like I could because there would just be MORE work and stress when I was back. So we struggle on. We are at breaking point.”

“Everything is deemed business critical: teaching, impact case study & ref etc etc. No joined up thought that it can’t all be critical right now. Giving quiet periods is not a win, now have more to do in the remaining weeks with less flexibility.”

Furthermore, a common sentiment amongst respondents was that they believed that UEB rarely go beyond words to actually help staff. That the soft messaging has not translated into practical help for staff on a longer-term basis, and as time has gone on, the ‘business as usual’ approach has started to creep back into the communications:

“Everyone offers warm words, but those are hollow without real action. We still have to deal with REF, with NSS Action Plans, getting MOFS in etc. etc. There is talk of additional requirements on tutoring amongst many others. I am fed up with warm words about quiet Friday and how much everyone cares. The warm fluffy hands are not talking to the people sending out directives. We need new staff and to actually drop (or shrink) activity so we can focus on what is important.”

“During the first [lockdown], it felt like the voice of concern was genuine and the relaxation of workloads felt real. Now it seems like, despite a lot of similar situations continuing from the first lockdown, the message seems to be - do some yoga and meditation - if you’re struggling here’s EAP but get on with it- oh and be excellent - but do the bare minimum and look after yourself - but don’t let anyone down...”

“I sympathise with how utterly impossible the situation was/is, my confidence & trust in the Senior team, especially the VC, has been gravely damaged. No amount of thanks, kind encouraging words, or Town Halls
will repair that in the absence of concrete action to genuinely address the problems with the resources needed.”

Several respondents observed that, beyond a move to online, there has been very little change made to how the university functions – student expectations continue to be fuelled (with a promise for in-person teaching in 2020-21, that had to be dropped within weeks of the first semester). That, despite asking staff to prioritise teaching, the REF had to be completed; the National Student Survey continued; all without providing staff with adequate resources and infrastructure to do this work from home:

“The university has absolutely failed to meet its obligations: no IT, no workstation, no safety inspection, constant downward-facing pressure as UEB changes its mind, a complete refusal to acknowledge that its frontline staff who keep the show on the road and that its UEB failure to address the real problems and infrastructural support needs that are causing staff and student dissatisfaction. And they still keep talking about the NSS and student satisfaction. UEB haven’t a clue and management is completely out of touch with what it is to be an employee in this institution, as well as what it is their business is - ie education and research.”

“UEB have not managed student expectations. They have abdicated responsibility for the duty of care for staff onto middle management and wellbeing seminars.”

Several respondents noted that last minute and confused changes to regulations exacerbated an already difficult situation. The decision not to move teaching online for 2020/2021 until we had one of the highest student infection rates in the country in September 2020, changing assessment hand-in dates last minute, and updating Module Outline Forms at very short notice, all added to the already stretched and stressed-out colleagues’ workload:

“Our workload has significantly increased because UEB didn't show leadership by saying we'd only teach online this academic year. Instead they have flip-flopped between in-person and online delivery for 12 months, making any sort of long-term planning, aspirations for delivering excellence or having a work-life balance impossible.”

“poor decision making has led to repeated work and wasted effort on several occasions.”

“I am annoyed at the constant moving of the goalposts.”

“At one of the most intense periods of the past few months, where we were being asked to update modules for 2021/22 at very short notice, on top of all the extra work we're doing, admin, lectures/seminars taking more time because they're online, vastly increased pastoral care responsibilities, getting an email from UEB with handy tips about exercises you can do at your desk was galling.”

Despite recognising the ‘warm words’ from UEB, respondents overwhelmingly expressed dissatisfaction with the management of workload, both during the pandemic and in general. That despite communications from UEB to staff which have recognised both the increased intensity of tasks, and the likelihood of reduced capacity, respondents regularly commented on how they have seen very little being done to actually reduce workloads.
Equalities impacts

The shift in workload and workload manageability has a gendered dimension. The vast majority of members reported very regularly working more than the expected hours, both prior to the pandemic and during it. When recollecting conditions prior to the pandemic, a somewhat smaller percentage of women (22%), than men (31%), reported that they exceeded their expected hours “always” or “usually”. However, reflecting on the past six months of the pandemic, both 60% of women and 60% of men responding reported that they were “always” or “usually” working longer than expected hours. This identifies a greater increase in overwork amongst women respondents during the pandemic (figure 5). There are multiple possible reasons for this difference, that link to broader gender equality concerns in HE, which have been exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic. For example, it is well established that personal caring roles are particularly significant in the context of pressure on academics to work beyond contracted hours, and where women are more likely to receive the message (both implicit and explicit) that “children and academic progression don’t mix”. In turn, women in the survey reported more often than men that workload has been unmanageable during the pandemic, and much fewer that it had been manageable most of the time (figure 6). There was some difference in the reported hours worked in the previous seven days, with the average for men being 50 FTE and, for women, 52 FTE.

![Figure 5](image-url) Regularity of working more than expected hours, women respondents only.


Over the past six months I have found that my workload is ______.

![Workload manageability, comparison of men and women](image_url)

**Figure 6** Workload manageability, comparison of men and women

During Covid-19, have your caring responsibilities had...

- No impact on my ability to manage my workload
- Some impact on my ability to manage my workload
- Severe impact on my ability to manage my workload

![Caring responsibilities and workload](image_url)

**Figures 7 & 8** Caring responsibilities and workload

Have you had any adjustments made to your expected workload because of childcare or other caring responsibilities?

- Yes
- No
46% of respondents reported having caring responsibilities in the home. Almost all (90%) of respondents with caring responsibilities reported at least some impact on their ability to manage their workload, with 40% reporting a “severe” impact on the manageability of workload (figure 7). However, in a context where the onus for requesting an adjustment was placed on staff, some of whom felt unable to make such a request, only 14% reported that they had had any adjustments to their workload made due to caring responsibilities (figure 8). However, in the few cases where workload adjustments for caring responsibilities had been made, the majority (81%) reported that this had a positive impact on the manageability of their workload.

Several respondents noted that the impact of caring and home-schooling has been disproportionate on those with caring responsibilities, on their careers and their mental and physical health, as illustrated by these comments from some women respondents:

“It's killing me. I am working 2 jobs which both take 80h a week - caring for young children and doing the teaching and admin. My research is dead or dying as I have NO TIME for it. Teaching and admin are taking longer than normal online...It will take ages for my research to revive and recover, as even when this stops I will be in a worse position than when it started, as I have to catch up.”

“home schooling and working is shattering my physical and mental health. There just isn't enough of me to go around. I'm failing at everything.”

“Frequently feel guilty that not performing either caring responsibilities or work to required standard.”

“I'm right at the edge of what I can do and feeling completely overwhelmed by the task of juggling everything I have to do. I'm already working beyond my contracted hours but it's never enough and I haven't had time for any of my own research for a year.”

Problems with workload during the pandemic also disproportionately affects those with disabilities. Of those with reasonable adjustments, less than half had had these adjustments applied to working from home. Those who suffer from visual impairment, or usually have adjustments made for screen time, reported to have been told to “get on with it” with the pivot to online.
Precarity and casualisation

The pandemic has also deepened the crisis of precariousness in HE, and has likely set it back. Hourly-paid and precariously-employed staff indicated that not only have they struggled more with setting up a home working environment (especially because key resources were not provided by the university and had to be taken out of their own pocket), but also by not having access to any of the very limited ways that UEB tried to relieve the stress of permanent members of staff (through quiet Fridays, extra annual leave days, etc.).

Workloads have increased as the time tasks take to complete has increased during the pandemic. However, the majority (60%) of hourly paid respondents reported that they had not been offered any additional hours than they have previously been offered to complete tasks during the pandemic that take longer during pandemic conditions.

Respondents attest that PGR, hourly-paid, and those on short-term contracts have often been an invisible casualty of the fallout of the pandemic on Higher Education:

“I feel that all aspects of work have been impacted, including productivity, motivation, relationships with colleagues and peers, opportunities for outreach, engagement and dissemination, and facilities available. While I do feel that the university is trying to tackle some of these issues, I feel that the focus has been on staff and taught students, and as a PGR we have been left behind, both in terms of how it affects our work as demonstrators, but also in our PhD projects, and general health and wellbeing.”

“I worry that the teaching work occupies a lot of my energy/brain space so my productivity is lower than usual for my PhD work, but I can’t afford to ease off because I’m unlikely to be able to access a funded extension to my PhD candidature.”

“The difference between how the university has treated staff and how it has treated PGRs is noticeable. The former have been supported, although not sufficiently. The latter have had their experiences totally ignored by upper level management, despite these being raised with them – and despite the best efforts of some individual supervisors, departments, and professional services colleagues to provide ad hoc support.”

“PGRs get no considerations for being parents.”

“I just think it is an incredibly exploitative situation, and that my precarity is being manipulated. I’m being pressured into face-to-face teaching by the department, and told that if I do well I will get more work next year.”

These comments from PGR staff highlighted, in particular, a situation where staff with low or temporary status in the institution felt powerless to ask for help or accommodation, fearing that this might negatively impact their future prospects with a department or the university.
Conclusion

The already existing situation of unmanageable workloads, and normalised over-work has only been exacerbated by the pandemic. Workload, and the poor management of workload, is known as the major driver of anxiety and stress amongst HE staff.\textsuperscript{13} A recent survey and report into the mental health and wellbeing of university staff during the pandemic indicated how prevalent poor mental health is across our sector.\textsuperscript{14} Indicating that one in two university staff reported experiencing chronic emotional exhaustion (55%), worry (53%), and stress (51%) during the academic year 2020/21 with half of the staff surveyed (47%) describing their mental health as poor.

Reading the survey’s free comments, the most devastating and widespread impact of the pandemic and increased workloads has been on mental and physical health. Alongside the quotes above, these capture the general exhaustion and anxiety many of us are feeling:

“\textit{I can’t shake the feeling that in trying to keep up with work demands I’ve let down my child, and if I try to accept the ‘just do what you can’ approach, my own stress and anxiety rockets to nearly paralysing levels - which I have to push through. Most days I feel like I’m just barely clinging on with my fingernails in the cliff face. I’m pretty stoic and able to cope with tough times (lots of practice) but I cry most days now.}”

“\textit{Mental health in the toilet and wellbeing webinars and employee assistance programmes not appropriate.”}

“\textit{As of a couple months ago, over 10% of my colleagues were off work due to stress and related problems. I saw people literally in tears about this in a meeting.”}

“\textit{I have been overworked for years. It has a massive impact on my home life and my health and fitness. I feel exhausted all the time. The pandemic has made this worse.”}


\textsuperscript{14} Dougall, I., Weick, M., & Vasiljevix, M. (2021, June 22). \textit{Inside UK Universities: Staff Mental Health and Wellbeing during the Coronavirus Pandemic}. Available at: \url{https://psyarxiv.com/23axu/}
Acknowledgments

Newcastle University UCU Branch Committee would like to thank all members for filling out the survey and being as honest as they were. Hundreds of comments were received, and those included here are only a small selection. It is clear that the pandemic has had huge impacts on both personal and professional life and it has been both humbling and devastating to read what our members are going through. We will endeavour to work as hard as we can to ensure that management are both aware of these issues and make plans to address them.

Thanks also to committee member, Nick Rush-Cooper, for creating the survey, collating the responses and tables, and to the committee members, reps and workload sub-committee for writing the report.