

Safe Academic work?

Executive Summary

Academic workload is a major contributor to staff psychosocial safety. Any estimate of academic workload needs to be empirically based, comprehensive, inviolate and negotiated with agreed units. Empirical data is available to standardise most elements of academic work, from teaching activities to research article writing and service meetings. A good estimate of workload includes all activities, even peer review, rather than teaching alone. An inviolate estimate will not change from year to year because one party unilaterally changes specifications or classifications (e.g. changes preparation from teaching to service). Agreed units can vary, from 'points' to hours. The latter generally matches annualised workload in staff enterprise agreements.

Introduction

The publication of the Australian Universities Accord Interim Report has triggered questions about the meaning of 'safety' in the academic workplace. Priority Action 5 (of 5) includes the following:

"Through National Cabinet, immediately engage with state and territory governments and universities to improve university governance, particularly focusing on: ...

- student and staff safety"

Digging into the document with respect to staff safety, we find "higher education institutions need to be better and safer places to work" (p.15) and "Staff and student safety, including in relation to sexual assault and sexual harassment, requires concerted action." (ibid). Staff underpayment is highlighted as a safety issue on p. 30, and is included in:

"Some submissions to the Review raised concerns around psychosocial stress in higher education workplaces. It is critical that workplace conditions, including employment security, workload, remuneration, appropriate funding for core activities, and engagement with staff, support psychosocial and physical safety". (p.116).

Student safety is interrogated in a far more extensive fashion. This lone sentence is not unpacked or given constructive comment, hiding critical issues for working academics that affect their retention, recruitment and the economics of human resources in universities.

The working week

It wasn't until about 2013 that the National Tertiary Education Union insisted all university enterprise agreements contain annual working hours for academics. These are averaged over 52 weeks, whereas the national employment standards state the maximum span of averaging is only 26 weeks (Fair Work Ombudsman, 2017). For instance, the University of Tasmania staff agreement stipulates 1702 – 1717 academic working hours per year (UTAS, 2022, p. 41). Some other countries have adopted annualised working hours for academics. Lund University (2023) in Sweden has a sliding scale according to age, with 1,756 hours for those under 29, ranging to 1,700 for the over 40s.

Despite these stipulated annual working hours in staff agreements, the research shows actual working hours have been consistently rising. Coates et al. (2009, p.28) noted weekly working hours for academics rose from 45.4 per week in 1977 to 50.6 in 2007. 50.4 hours per week was the average in Australia by 2017 (Kenny & Fluck, 2017, p. 507). These average weekly working hours are 34% higher than the 35/38 hours they are predicated upon in staff agreements, and the maximum determined by the Fair Work Ombudsman.

So, what are the results of this overwork by academics? According to Vesty et al., there is “evidence for emotional exhaustion due to high workload” (2018). It seems reasonable to identify this overwork as a safety risk for academics.

Work, health and safety for academics

Safe Work Australia is a national peak body providing policy advice in this area. In describing psychosocial hazards in the workplace, one description given by workers is “stressed, burnt-out or emotionally exhausted about their workload” (SWA, 2022, p. 19). This state of affairs can emerge from risk identification which should then be followed by risk mitigation. Greater attention is being paid to such hazards in reflection of the costs they impose on the organisation:

“Psychosocial hazards can cause psychological and physical harm. On average, work-related psychological injuries have longer recovery times, higher costs, and require more time away from work. Managing the risks associated with psychosocial hazards not only protects workers, it also decreases the disruption associated with staff turnover and absenteeism, and may improve broader organisational performance and productivity.” (Safe Work Australia, 2022, p.5)

In determining why actual academic workloads are so much higher than those specified in the staff agreements, several reasons have been proposed.

Firstly, academics are largely self-directed, particularly in the realm of research. Research is largely determined through personal interest. In so doing, they exercise their rights to intellectual freedom, often included in staff agreements.

“Many facets of the academic role have been traditionally self-managed and driven by an intrinsic sense of commitment and motivation” (Kenny & Fluck, 2017, p.2).

“I had to explain to somebody quite recently that researchers often see their job as rather more important than a job. It’s a vocation, it’s a way of life kind of thing. That’s something that for an outsider is not very easy for them to understand.” (The Wellcome Trust, 2020, p.8)

Secondly, there is competition for resources such as research funding, which is a key to promotion. Even the Australian Research Council only funds 18.5% of applications (ARC, 2022), and it is rare that preparing these time-consuming documents counts as workload.

“The work week is insufficient to both teach and maintain the research standards that would ultimately lead to career progression.” (Survey respondent in: Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia, 2021, p. 28).

Thirdly, there is the ‘glorification of overwork’ as a cultural phenomenon in universities. Some academics admit to “feeling guilty when I am not working, constantly checking emails outside of work, working long hours, and feeling unable to meaningfully relax” (Mittelmeier, 2023). Allen et al. described the impact of this glorification in terms of mental health outcomes for academics:

“Mental health problems among academics are already at an all-time high. These problems occur at twice the rate of the general population, an incidence higher even than among police or medical staff.” (Allen et. al., 2021).

Finally, there is dispute about what constitutes academic work. Which activities are core business and which are voluntary contributions to university operations can be grey distinctions. Even for activities such as lecturing, writing research articles and the like, there is a lack of mutually agreed work-time values.

Given these reasons, where does the onus of responsibility lie in mitigating the risks of academic overwork? Safe Work Australia promotes a process whereby persons conducting a business or undertaking (employers) can identify and control psychosocial risks. In this case, a duty of care exists in a legal sense, which is the responsibility of the company board/university council. In addition, “workers must take reasonable care for their own psychological and physical health and safety and to not adversely affect the health and safety of other persons” (Safe Work Australia, 2022, p.7). Thus, this is a shared responsibility.

The union takes this link between overwork and mental health very seriously: “These hazards can, and do, impact on the mental health of tertiary education workers and have the capacity to inflict psychological injury and physical harm” (National Tertiary Education Union, 2022).

Academic safety and workload estimation

For academics and their managers to share the responsibility requires a joint effort to reconcile the allocation of workload and actual workload. The approximately 34% difference between negotiated allocated workloads and average actual workloads needs to be explained. The disparities between the two have many causes.

From the perspective of the individual academic, they fulfill the requirements of any institutional staff/enterprise agreement by working the stipulated number of hours each year. These hours are the inputs they provide to the university.

However, it would suit government and management if key performance indicators or outputs were measured. How many students completed their courses of study? How many research grants were won? Some institutions blur this distinction by measuring ‘points’ instead of working hours (University of Queensland, 2018).

The trouble is, inputs are within the locus of control by the individual academic, but outputs are not.

Therefore, ‘what is measured’ becomes a salient point when determining the overwork which leads to expensive psychosocial harms and burnouts.

Various tools have been developed and are proposed (University of Queensland, 2021, para. 8.1) to assist in this measurement process. There are commercial systems such as the [Workload Allocations Management System](#) (WAMS) originating from the University of Southern Queensland and deployed in five institutions. Terminological customisation is vital, since there is little agreement on nomenclature in this area. Any such tool depends upon the validity of the data used in its creation, with an emphasis on the link to actual hours required for each academic task.

Based upon extensive sampling nationwide, we also developed a tool to permit academics to measure their own personal workloads. Using data from over 2000 broadly representative

academics, we used median values for their estimates of workhours for activities. In most cases the median was lower than the average workload, so this is a rigorous and conservative tool.

Let's take 'what is measured'. In devising the Academic Workload Estimation Tool (AWET), we made decisions about what to include as 'work', and what to not include. Our tool tends to be (from our perspective) quite expansive, but there are always discipline and institution-specific matters that can only fit into our ubiquitous 'other activities not included above' category. Also, there are several work-related tasks in the AWET which many universities omit from their own workload calculators. 'Peer review' is a classic item. No academic would be able to claim their quota of published peer reviewed articles if no-one took on this task. We've placed it into the 'Administration and Service' category, since it provides service to your discipline.

Categorisation inconsistencies are also rampant across the sector. Take the supervision of PhD candidates. In the AWET we included this in the 'Research' category on the basis of government funding categorisation (ref). But we have encountered universities where this task is firmly in 'Teaching' and others where it is an entirely separate category of its own. We have also found examples of category-switching. For instance, in one year 'Teaching preparation' might be in the 'Teaching' category, and next it is relocated to the 'Administration' category. This mercurial inconstancy makes planning and acquitting academic workload fraught with difficulty.

Conclusion

If Priority Action 5 of the Australian Universities Accord Interim Report is to be taken seriously, then members of governing bodies will need to be aware of the link between overwork and staff psychosocial harm. To assure themselves of staff safety, they will need to ensure proper tools are available for departments to measure academic workload.

This goes beyond the current defective tools in use. There needs to be clear agreement about what is measured – inputs which are under the control of individual academics. Also, such tools need to be expansive because failing to measure critical academic tasks as work will increase stress and staff harm. Finally, such tools need to be realistic. They cannot be nominal workhours for each task plucked from thin air. They need to be actual hours required to complete each activity, based upon representative samples of similar academics.

If this is achieved, we may see the incidence of mental health problems amongst academic staff reduce from twice that in the general population to something more on par with it.

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