Report of the RGS Heads of Geography Workload Model Working Group

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Introduction

This Working Group met throughout the 2023-2024 academic year in response to concern among Heads of Schools/Departments about rising workloads among staff and associated stress and mental well-being issues. It was felt that Geographers share certain commonalities regarding workload that differentiate us from neighbouring Schools/Departments within our institutional contexts, and therefore there would be value in trying to find principles or best practices that might be shared. The members of the Working Group came from a wide range of Schools/Departments, as became clear early in the discussion, and they faced widely different institutional contexts. While this limited the Group's ability to spell out specific policies that might apply to all Schools/Departments, we nevertheless were able to explore the elements of the workload crisis that spoke to all of us. The group met four times online (via Zoom) to formulate the contents of this report, and then the report was circulated among the membership for final revision.

Context

Persistent concerns regarding excessive workload and occupational stress have characterised the UK higher education sector for over two decades. These trends were recognised by all members of the working group, accentuated by the time-intensive nature of some elements of the discipline (e.g., field study) and the restructuring of many Geography departments/schools in recent years. A pivotal benchmarking study conducted in 2004 by Kinman, Jones, and Kinman (2006) reported that 62% of academic staff worked in excess of 48 hours per week, with 69% identifying their work as stressful. Furthermore, approximately 42% of respondents indicated that they routinely worked during evenings and weekends to manage their workload. The study underscored the problematic nature of both the volume and the heterogeneity of academic tasks. Notably, the authors observed a weak correlation between the number of hours worked and indicators of wellbeing. Complementing these findings, Barrett and Barrett (2008) undertook a comprehensive investigation into the management of academic workloads. Their study, which included an extensive review of the literature, provided further evidence of widespread stress and challenges to work-life balance among UK academic staff.

The persistence of high academic workloads within the UK higher education sector has been consistently documented through successive surveys and institutional responses. Notably, the University and College Union (UCU) has played a central role in highlighting these concerns, alongside research commissioned by the Universities and Colleges Employers Association (UCEA). A 2016 UCU survey involving over 12,000 academic staff revealed an average working week of 50.9 hours across disciplines. A subsequent survey conducted in 2021/22, encompassing more than 9,000 respondents, found that 68% reported a marked increase in the pace and intensity of their work over the preceding three years (Kinman, 2023). Of these, 29% described their workload as unmanageable most of the time, while 10% considered it entirely unmanageable. Workload emerged as a central issue in the 'Four Fights' industrial dispute between UCU and UK universities from 2019 to 2023, which led to widespread and sustained industrial action. More recent data from a comprehensive 2025 survey commissioned by UCEA indicated that fewer than half of academic staff felt their workloads were manageable or that they were able to maintain a satisfactory work-life balance (People Insight/UCEA, 2025). The findings also revealed a significant disparity between academic and professional services staff, with the former reporting greater difficulty in managing workloads and coping with job-related stress, attributed to the distinctive demands of academic roles.

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A range of interrelated factors have been identified as contributing to unsustainable workload levels among academic staff. These include the expansion of academic responsibilities, fluctuations in staffing levels and student enrolments, and heightened student expectations (UCU, 2016). Tight (2010) argues that the perceived escalation in academic workloads in the UK is largely attributable to the intensification of administrative demands. Relatedly, but in the Australian context, Miller (2019) called into question the commonly cited 40:40:20 model—representing teaching, research, and administration/service respectively—suggesting that a more accurate reflection of academic practice is closer to 40:25:35. Recent empirical research further substantiates these claims, indicating that the proliferation of administrative tasks has adversely affected academics' capacity to fulfil core teaching and research responsibilities. Woelert (2023) noted contributing factors include the increasing administrative burden embedded within teaching and research activities, the paradoxical effects of digital transformation which have amplified rather than alleviated bureaucratic demands, mandatory training aimed at institutional compliance, and diminished support from professional services staff (particularly in the wake of organisational restructuring, which is all too common these days due to pressures on university finance). Collectively, these findings suggest that institutional expectations regarding academic output are misaligned with the time and resources available, resulting in diminished morale and compromised academic productivity.

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A further contributor to the intensification of academic workloads in recent years has been the increased reliance on digital communication technologies. Empirical evidence indicates that such technologies are associated with heightened perceptions of overload and diminished psychological detachment from work—an essential component for recovery, job satisfaction, and the prevention of burnout (Sandoval-Reyes, Acosta-Prado, & Sanchís-Pedregosa, 2019). The proliferation of digital tools across multiple platforms has accelerated in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, which necessitated a rapid transition to remote and hybrid modes of working. This technological shift has likely exacerbated workload pressures, as academics navigate increasingly complex digital environments and expectations (Raghavan, Demircioglu, & Orazgaliyev, 2021; People Insight/UCEA, 2025). This digitalisation of academic work is

evidenced by rising volumes of email correspondence and the adoption of new platforms such as Microsoft Teams (Choudhury et al., 2022). Email alone is estimated to consume up to 25% of the working time of knowledge workers in contemporary organisational settings. This intensification of digital interaction has contributed to the emergence of technostress—a phenomenon characterised by feelings of overload, continuous connectivity, and insufficient competence in information and communication technologies (ICT). Such stressors have been shown to negatively affect work-life balance, with adverse implications for employee wellbeing and overall productivity (Bencsik & Juhász, 2023).

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The transition to remote work has also been associated with reduced physical activity, prolonged sedentary behaviour, and the penetration of work life into the home. These changes have implications for health-related behaviours, work-life balance, overall wellbeing, and the cultivation of collegial communities (Keightley, Duncan, & Gardner, 2023). For some individuals, hybrid working has further complicated the delineation between professional and personal life—a challenge that is particularly pronounced among academics, many of whom regard their work as a vocation rather than a 9-to-5 job. Studies have shown that academic staff report lower mental wellbeing scores, attributed to excessive working hours, persistent work-related rumination, difficulties disengaging from professional responsibilities, and diminished physical activity (Fetherston et al., 2020; Corbera et al., 2020).

In view of the preceding, academic workload has been identified as a widely acknowledged workplace concern within universities in the UK and comparable higher education systems. This issue has been further intensified by post-pandemic developments, including the accelerated integration of digital technologies and persistent structural and financial instability within the sector. But what can Departments and Schools of Geography do about these structural problems? We are clearly limited in our agency, but some things are within our grasp. Some of this involves workload models, which do not reduce the overall workload but can incentivise equitable contributions across staffing. Other solutions are found in the field of people management. They are detailed below.

Tariffs

The Working Group had extensive experience in workload models, and therefore solutions related to them loomed large in our thinking. Nevertheless, we noted that many universities – especially those with stronger focuses on teaching – maintained institutionally centralised workload models that were beyond departmental control. It was noted by the committee that the use of such centralised workload models posed real challenges of equity given the variety of practices across disciplines.

A key dimension of workload models is whether they are framed in reference to units of time, or more abstract 'points'. While either can produce equity, a key concern for the Working Group, only a link to actual units of time allows for assessment of overall load. Therefore, **measuring in hours allows for some tracking of overall department load (even if imperfectly) but also, crucially, for individual members of staff**. This was seen by the Working Group as an important corrective to concerns of excessive workload, either in total or at particular 'crunch points' in the academic year. If only abstract units are used, it is impossible to put a ceiling on workloads that connects to contracted hours.

Another issue related to time is the **temporality of workloads** across the year. Workloads can be fine in an annualised sense, but unfair in that the timing of work can produce crunch points or workload crises at specific moments for specific staff. These can emerge unexpectedly as various tasks 'drift' through the academic year because of various curriculum or other reforms. For this reason it is important to survey staff either formally or through various check-ins such as appraisals about not only their overall workload but also its timing.

Another fundamental question for workload models is whether to include research time within them. It was noted that there were varied practices for taking account of funded research time, which stretched across the workload allocation/performance management divide. It was further noted that some institutions allocate little time for unfunded research despite expecting it. For that reason, it was felt that ensuring the allocation of research time (unfunded or funded) within workload models was important, at least if they were time-based workload models. Doing so helps to ensure that staff are not expected to do their contractually required research outside of contracted hours. That being said, it was generally agreed that micro-managing research time was to be avoided in favour of simply preserving a block of time for research activities.

Challenges were noted by the Working Group, however, with **giving credit for grant proposal writing**, which was a common practice. It was noted that doing

so required heads to pick winners in advance, with those not chosen having to pick up the teaching of those who were (with implications for their own research productivity). A similar problem was identified **for Impact Case Study authors**, who might take teaching load reductions but then produce case studies which are not selected for inclusion. The Working Group noted that there were other, non-workload-related, ways of recognising these contributions, such as credit towards promotion or one-off financial payments.

A principle emerged from discussion on tariffs, which was that while workloads should be equitable, senior staff should have more responsibility for core activities, and might be expected to do more work in the same number of hours. This was consistent with both the commensurate increases in pay and the expected efficiency in completing tasks that comes with experience. Where possible new staff should be given reduced teaching loads to allow them to go through a period of relative inefficiency, learning new systems and writing new lectures. At the other end of the seniority ladder, it was noted that senior staff who had just gone through a period of administrative duties or grant buy-out might not be fully reintegrated into teaching because their gap in the curriculum had been solved for the period they were away. Therefore, additional work must be put in by HoDs to ensure that these staff return to an equitable workload.

A particular concern for Geography departments is **field course provision**, which is **rarely understood institutionally**, and which therefore is always in danger of not being recognised (particularly in those departments with centralised workload models). The organisational work behind the trip is another hidden labour that can be missed out. A workable model that seemed to work in a range of contexts across the Working Group was a credit for 8-10 hours per day of fieldwork, with a flat rate for field course organisation (e.g., 25 hours)**.** Alternatively field class organisation could be considered academic service and workload could be allocated there. It was noted though that the investment of this kind of labour could also lead to some staff members having an excessive amount of their workload result from field course teaching, shifting 'regular' teaching burdens onto others. Therefore, it is important to ensure that opportunities for field course teaching are spread equitably across the relevant teaching staff.

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Also of concern for Geography departments are lab-based or computer-based classes, especially where student cohorts exceed the allowable numbers in a specific laboratory or computer cluster. This can lead to colleagues, usually physical or quantitative geographers, having to teach repeat classes which can be experienced as demotivating as well as physically draining (given that lab- and practical-based classes are often longer than standard lectures). While workload models might not allocate preparation time for repeat sessions, consideration should be given to how to support academic staff using technical staff and graduate teaching assistants.

It was noted that tariffs for citizenship roles will vary by institution given local circumstances, but that it was **important to give a baseline of workload credit for citizenship roles**. This should not, however, mean that those who volunteer for ad hoc work that is important to the department should not be given additional credit, as determined appropriate by the Head.

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Equity

Another key concern for the Working Group was around equity. Indeed, this was seen as the major contribution that models can make. For instance, one practice identified by the committee was the possibility of allocating a block of time in the workload model to BAME staff to account for mentoring of BAME students, and other forms of racialised labour unseen in traditional models. Nevertheless, the question of what equity looks like proved quite challenging. Equity is important, but the number of dimensions in which equity can be prioritised are daunting. These dimensions include equity within career stages, across race/ethnicity categories and gender identifications, and for those with caring responsibilities or disabilities. It was also noted that staff undergoing a crisis should be relieved of some workload, but that this also required all staff to not already be working at maximum workload so that someone else can reasonably assist. Building in this contingency time into workloads should be considered going forward so as to avoid crises.

It was noted that working towards equity in one dimension could lead to inequity in others. For instance, there is a tension between equity for supporting those with caring responsibilities and giving senior staff higher workloads, as carers tended to be mid-career or higher. One solution in that case was to give priority timetabling of lectures in core hours for carers, while continuing to expect an equitable workload. It was also noted that for smaller departments equity would be difficult to achieve as there were fewer resources to move or redeploy to relieve workloads. Given there will always be *some* inequity given inequalities in student interest in different subjects, or the relative time commitment needed for different modes of teaching, a related problem is what degree of inequity was tolerable and what degree of inequity requires intervention. It was agreed that ideally all staff ought to be between 90% and 110% of the departmental mean (however that was calculated), and that all workload allocations should be assessed for overall equality impacts.

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A final question of equity focused on the time it takes to do tasks versus the normative time built into models. It was noted that frequently staff complain that they do not have enough time for research, and that teaching and administration take up all their time. This is important for equity as promotion and pay are usually dependent on research activities. However, a workload reduction for someone who works inefficiently (in comparison to other staff, or the normative allocation of time to a task, or both) can lead to other inequities, moral hazard, and staff resentment. Therefore, workload models cannot produce equity in and of themselves. There is a processual element to generating staff buy-in to the workload model. For instance, using widespread consultation to establish and update tariffs is crucial, as is the transparency of the eventual product (barring any private details that might be known by the line manager).

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Managing staff workloads

As mentioned above, one problem is when a member of staff returns from a grant or administrative role, and in the interim their teaching has become permanently part of someone else's workload. What should they teach? Another version of this scenario occurs when there is a new starter, although in that specific case there ought to be a year or two of lower workload to help mitigate. In both cases, the problem is exacerbated by the decreasing flexibility of universities in teaching delivery and curriculum due to Competitions and Marketing Authority (CMA) guidelines on advertising. It can take several years to change an advertised curriculum, and this can lock in existing teaching arrangements. It is noted that these moments (staff returning to teaching or starting new) are opportunities for systematic re-thinking of teaching arrangements, rather than moments for *ad hoc* teaching allocation, as these can bake in inequities that can last for many years.

Of course, managing workload is only partly about allocating teaching. One experience common to the Working Group was the colleague who practices 'studious incompetence' to avoid being given additional workloads. Two solutions were discussed. One is ensuring – perhaps paradoxically given their past behaviour – that their work will be as public as possible. Alternatively, another strategy to produce greater equity in administrative workloads is to have a rule that every member of staff must always have at least one administrative role. This allows for some flexibility (not all jobs are equivalent in workload or importance) while still ensuring that everyone is contributing *something*. It is also indirect and will not seem to be directed at anyone specific. The Working Group agreed that even minimal performance management – such as mentoring or telling staff which specific tasks to prioritise (e.g., "don't do anything else until your marking is done") – could produce significant gains in departmental efficiency.

One final question emerged around the utility of workload models during periods of rapid change, such as the Covid-19 pandemic or the administrative reorganisations that are sweeping across the sector. Workload models rely on a kind of 'folk knowledge' about how long various tasks take. During periods of massive change, this folk knowledge can rapidly become out of date. It was recommended that rather than relying on a workload model to ensure equity, heads of department during large institutional changes should take it on themselves to do lots of personal check-ins with staff to see if they are coping, and to ground truth the workload model.

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Conclusion

The problem of workload is a thorny one, and the suggestions offered here are more emollient than cure. Like a lot of problems though, they are most challenging when they remain submerged. Hearing how different schools and departments were experiencing the problem of workload, and speaking about the tactics we had each adopted, was broadly comforting and therapeutic. The Working Group would like this report to be more of an opening than a closing and hopes it will prompt more discussion among staff and administrators.

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