

UCU WORKLOAD SURVEY REPORT

April 2019

Section 1: Executive Summary

In autumn 2018, Universities and College Union (UCU) launched a workload survey for Open University staff. The context was ongoing change programmes and a large 'Employee-Led' Voluntary Severance (ELVS) scheme through which over 370 experienced staff (non-Associate Lecturers) were scheduled to leave the university from October 2018. This also followed the departure of the Vice-Chancellor and the decision to move away from what was called the 'Students First Transformation' project.

Anecdotal evidence suggested a severe and ongoing workload problem, with staff anticipating that this was increasing or likely to increase in severity. The purpose of the survey was to capture the workload picture **before** the effects of the latest round of Employee-Led Voluntary Severance (ELVS) had been felt.

The results of the survey, in which 150 Associate Lecturers (ALs) and 641 other staff took part, support these concerns. Responses indicated significant workload issues for both ALs and other staff categories.

The response rate to this survey (14.2% of staff not including ALs) was not as high as the regular Staff Engagement Survey run by People Services on behalf of the University. The survey data are therefore indicative rather than conclusive, and further work will allow greater understanding of issues.

Given the circumstances unique to Associate Lecturers, it has been agreed that separate reporting and actions will be needed for this staff group, and a separate short report is expected in June 2019. This initial UCU Workload report will therefore focus on the findings relating to staff in other categories.

Headline findings include:

- The average member of staff reports working **116% of their contracted hours** in a typical working week (so an additional +16% over and above their contract).
- 78% of respondents say their workload is **heavier, or significantly heavier** than they would like it to be.
- Over the last 6 months, 61% report that they **often** find it difficult to complete their workload within their contracted hours (with 'often' being defined as at least a quarter of the time). Within this, 32% say that this is the case **very often** (defined as occurring at least half of the time).
- Of those who reported an excessive workload:
 - 73% have coped with this by **working longer hours**
 - 72% say that it has negatively affected their **physical and mental health**
 - 54% have **reduced personal development activities** which are relevant to their current role, and
 - 35% report that they have **reduced their annual leave**, in order to deal with their workload.
 - Academic staff who reported an excessive workload say they are spending less time on **research** (54%), and taking less **study leave** (72%). This is despite the fact that this is a key period for preparation for the Research Excellence Framework (REF2021).

A set of conclusions and recommendations has been developed as a result of the survey (see Section 4). This is aimed at generating prompt action on workload issues at a University-wide level, as well as proposals for developing long-term strategies to better monitor and address overwork.

Section 2: METHODS

An online survey was made available to all OU staff in Autumn 2018. The questionnaire was developed by the OU branch of UCU, in conjunction with UCU regional office, in order to benefit from best practice in collecting data on workload. Survey data are one tool to allow health and safety representatives to identify areas for further workload investigation, alongside casework statistics and informal feedback. Investigation then happens through local review or 'inspection' to gain additional evidence and work with managers to develop a local plan to address workload issues.

The questionnaire consisted of 43 questions [see copy in the appendix]. The majority of these were closed questions with a small number permitting open-ended responses. Some of the key questions were compulsory, but many others were optional. This means that base sizes may vary according to which question is being analysed.

The coverage of the questionnaire includes some direct and indirect measures of workload. Direct measures included asking staff how many hours they worked in their last typical working week (Q16), and how many hours they were contracted to work in that week (Q17). Respondents were also asked how often in the last 6 months they had found it difficult to complete their workload within their contracted hours (Q19). A range of other measures looked at workload perceptions, such as whether respondents felt their workload is affecting their health, and whether they have had to sacrifice other activities in order to keep up with their workload.

The proposal to create a workload survey was raised by UCU at a Joint Negotiating Committee. At the time People Services had no plans for an institutional wide workload survey as the Staff Engagement Survey had just been completed. However, given the importance of staff wellbeing it was agreed that People Services would publicise the UCU Workload survey, using OU News on the intranet. A link to the survey was also sent directly to UCU and UNISON members by email. Reminders were issued to all staff groups, including a reminder on the OU intranet, before the survey closed on 3rd December 2018.

Analysis for this report has been carried out by UCU Representatives, using Excel. Results have not been analysed within individual units, because of small sample sizes in some units, however data have been reported in the following groupings:

- **Total** for all staff (other than ALs)

- **Unit type** (staff working in the Faculties, compared to those working in professional services and support units)¹.
- **Staff category** (Central Academic and Research, Regional/National Academic, Academic-related, and Support staff.)

¹ Please note that the former LTI Academic and LTI Curriculum Innovation teams are included within Faculties, while other parts of the former LTI are included in professional services and support units.

Section 3: DETAILED FINDINGS

The survey looked at the following areas: overall perceptions of workload, contracted versus actual hours of work; perception of capacity for increase; methods of coping with excessive workload; and perceptions of health and wellbeing. The findings show a significant workload problem across the University.

HOURS OF WORK

In the last 6 months, a large proportion of respondents had found it **difficult to complete their work within their contracted hours**. 61% of respondents said this was often the case (happening at least a quarter of the time), and within this figure 32% of respondents said it was very often the case (happening at least half of the time).

A very high proportion of staff reported a **heavier workload than they would like** (78% of respondents have a workload which is heavier than they would like overall, and within this figure 34% of respondents said their workload was significantly heavier than they would like). Among staff working in Faculties, 84% felt their workload was heavier than they would like.

On average, staff reported **working 116% of their contracted hours** in their last typical working week. This average is based on all staff who answered the relevant questions, including those who worked exactly their contracted hours.

The average hours worked, in comparison to contracted hours, are displayed visually in the charts overleaf, broken down by high-level units and staff categories.

Among staff working in Faculties, the average proportion was 120% of contracted hours (which would be equivalent to working an extra day a week, on a standard 5-day working week).

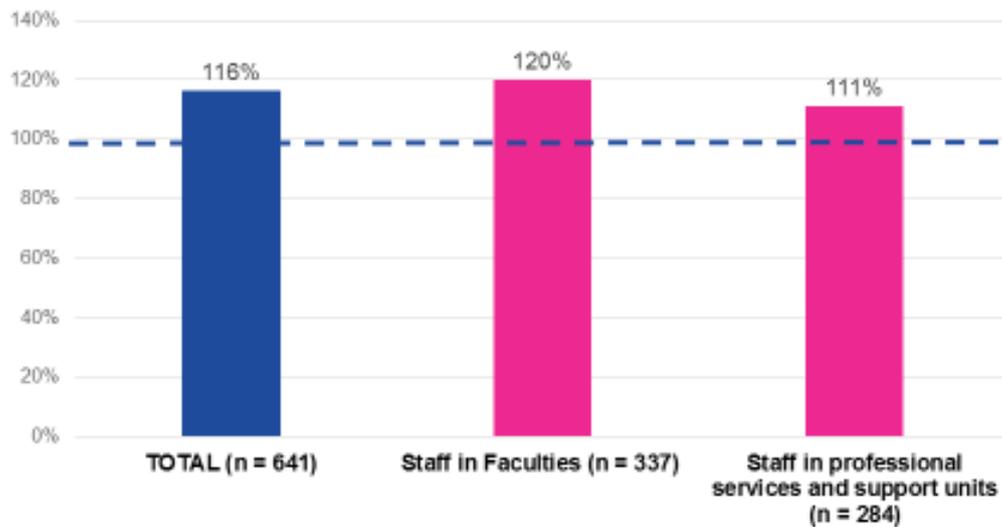
There was also some variation by staff category, with **central academic and research** staff (127%), and **regional and national academic** staff (123%) showing the highest ratios of hours worked. Academic-related staff had an average ratio of 111% of their contracted hours. Support staff who responded were working an average of 103% of their contracted hours.

Some 78% of respondents report not having the capacity to absorb any **further increase in workload**. Despite this, 55% are predicting an increase in the next 12 months, with consistent figures across all staff categories and unit types.

Q16/17: AVERAGE PROPORTION OF CONTRACTED HOURS ACTUALLY WORKED IN LAST WEEK

ALL RESPONDENTS, BY HIGH LEVEL UNIT GROUPING

Base: all respondents giving valid answers to all question parts, includes staff who worked the same or less than their contracted hours

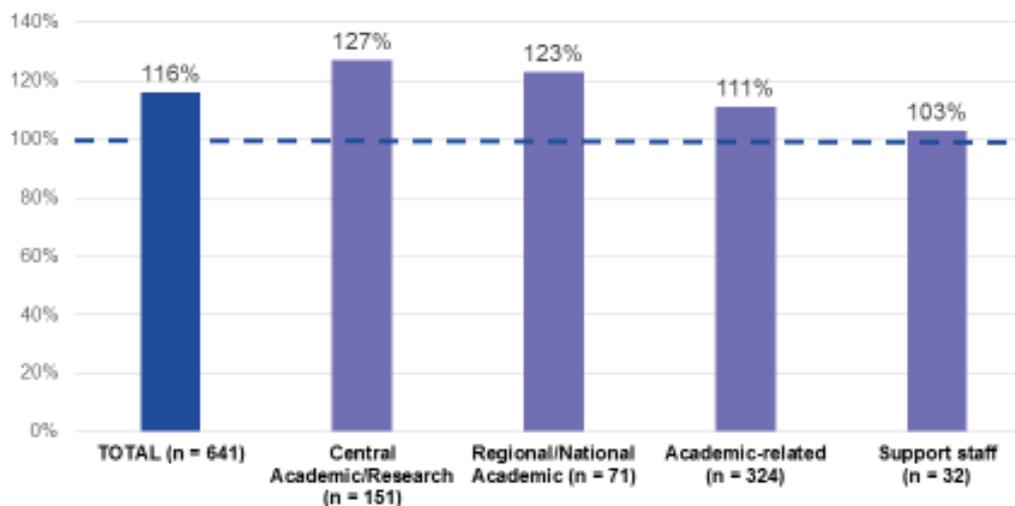


NB For the purposes of this analysis, former LTI Academic and LTI Curriculum Innovation teams have been included within Faculties. Other former parts of LTI are within professional services and support units.

Q16/17: AVERAGE PROPORTION OF CONTRACTED HOURS ACTUALLY WORKED IN LAST WEEK

ALL RESPONDENTS, BY STAFF CATEGORY GROUPING

Base: all respondents giving valid answers to all question parts, includes staff who worked the same or less than their contracted hours



COPING STRATEGIES

Respondents who reported excessive workloads used a variety of methods to manage the workload – many (73%) responded by **working longer hours**, some by **working more quickly** and possibly less carefully, and some by **leaving parts of their role undone**.

Staff who reported excessive workloads in the **Faculties** were more likely to say they cope with workload issues by working longer hours (81%), although the figure for all other units was still high at 63%.

Staff in the Faculties were generally less likely than other units to say they cope with workload issues by **asking colleagues and managers for help** (27% had asked colleagues and 25% had asked their manager, compared with 40% and 32% respectively in professional services and support units).

Prioritising and **leaving less important parts of the job undone** was a common way of coping (56% of respondents said they had done this).

The least common action, **leaving more important parts of the job undone**, was still mentioned by 18% of respondents who reported excessive workloads.

PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

The survey provides evidence that **personal development activities have been sacrificed** to cope with high workloads. This is particularly worrying given the University's focus on change and encouraging staff to adapt to change.

- 54% of respondents who reported excessive workloads said they had stopped or reduced **personal development related to their current role**, such as training and conferences.
- 49% of respondents who reported excessive workloads said they had stopped or reduced **personal development related to their future career**.

HEALTH AND WELLBEING

Some staff who reported excessive workloads said that they had stopped or reduced their **annual leave**, with potential implications for wellbeing. Overall 35% of respondents with unmanageable workloads report a reduction in annual leave, although there are large differences across units and the figure was 44% in the Faculties.

Very large proportions of staff are reporting a **negative impact on their personal lives** (relationship with family, physical and/or mental health, and personal interests). The responses indicate the following negative impacts for staff who reported excessive workloads:

- 55% of respondents reported that workload has negatively affected their **relationship with family**.
- 75% of respondents reported that workload is negatively affecting their **physical and mental health**.
- 76% of respondents reported an impact on their **personal lives**, e.g. ability to pursue personal interests. Staff in the Faculties (85%) were generally more likely to report this than those working in professional services and support units (65%), which would be consistent with staff in Faculties reporting longer working hours (though 65% is still a very high figure).

A higher percentage report an impact on family relationships (55%) than the percentage reporting negative impact on **relationships with peers** (31%) and **manager** (23%). This could suggest that staff may be prioritising work or work relationships over personal relationships.

Similarly, a higher percentage report a negative impact on health (75%) and personal life (76%) than **productivity** (57%) and **quality of work** (56%). This may point to staff (however unintentionally) sacrificing their health and personal lives in order to maintain their work performance.

The impact of workload on **morale at work** is high, with 74% of those reporting an excessive workload saying that their morale had been negatively affected.

Section 4: CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

In conclusion, workload issues and impacts on staff are widespread. There is some variation by different staff categories, between the Faculties and professional services and support units. However, there are no parts of the University which appear to be problem-free.

Action is clearly necessary and urgent at a University-wide level. Positive discussions with OU management have already begun in order to create an action plan, with UCU recommending the following:

1. Provision of unit plans for post-ELVS workload. While ELVS decisions focused on individual cases, few areas have shared their post-ELVS plans with the unions. This is a crucial exercise, not least to check unexpected impacts, and to improve how workload impact is assessed in future.
2. Managers in all units should regularly review annual leave take-up, professional development, study leave and research time (where applicable), turnover, workload norms, exit interview data and other relevant information. These should serve as 'flags' for proactive investigation and remedy on workload. Unit management should meet with union reps to review their action plan for improvement.
3. The University should urgently develop and implement an improved policy for sickness absence cover.
4. In response to these initial findings, UCU health and safety representatives and the unit People Business Partners should further investigate workload issues with unit management, with a view to understanding more about local unit issues and creating local action plans to address any issues found.
5. The University should develop a joint workload group with the unions, with a reporting line to the University's Health and Safety Committee, to tackle immediate issues and enable long-term planning.
6. UCU are asking People Services to commit to including new questions relating to workload on the Staff Engagement Survey, from the next round onwards. This will enable regular monitoring of staff perceptions on a larger survey, which can then be broken down in more detail.

Appendix 1: Detailed analysis

Responses and breakdowns for all questions in the report are included below.

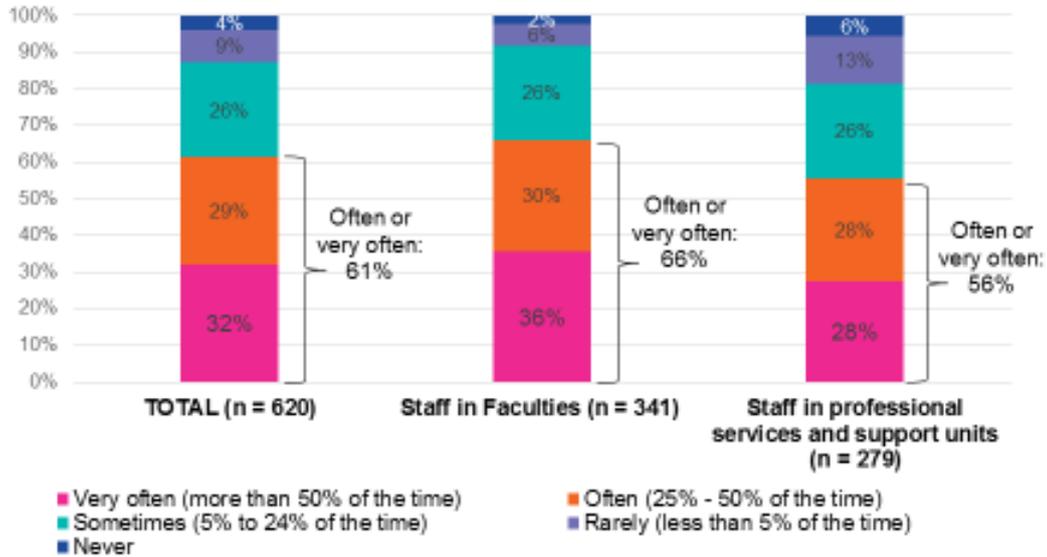
The charts throughout this report are based on all staff other than Associate Lecturers (labelled as TOTAL).

Note that some questions were optional, so base sizes vary.

Q19: IN THE PAST 6 MONTHS, HAVE YOU FOUND IT DIFFICULT TO COMPLETE YOUR WORKLOAD WITHIN YOUR CONTRACTED HOURS?

ALL RESPONDENTS, BY HIGH LEVEL UNIT GROUPING

Base: all respondents giving valid answers to all question parts

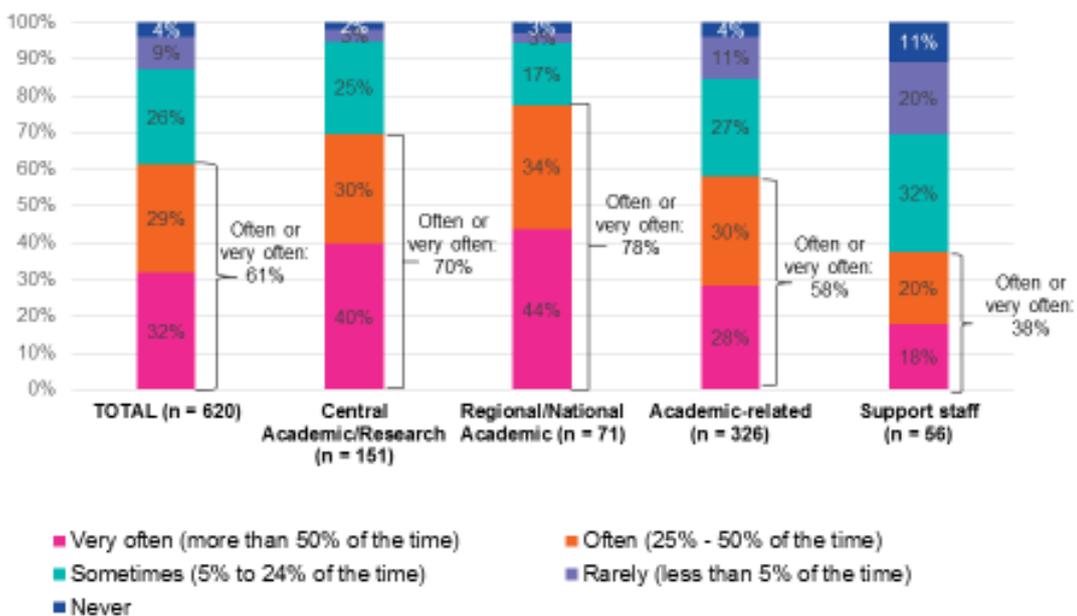


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Q19: IN THE PAST 6 MONTHS, HAVE YOU FOUND IT DIFFICULT TO COMPLETE YOUR WORKLOAD WITHIN YOUR CONTRACTED HOURS?

ALL RESPONDENTS, BY STAFF CATEGORY

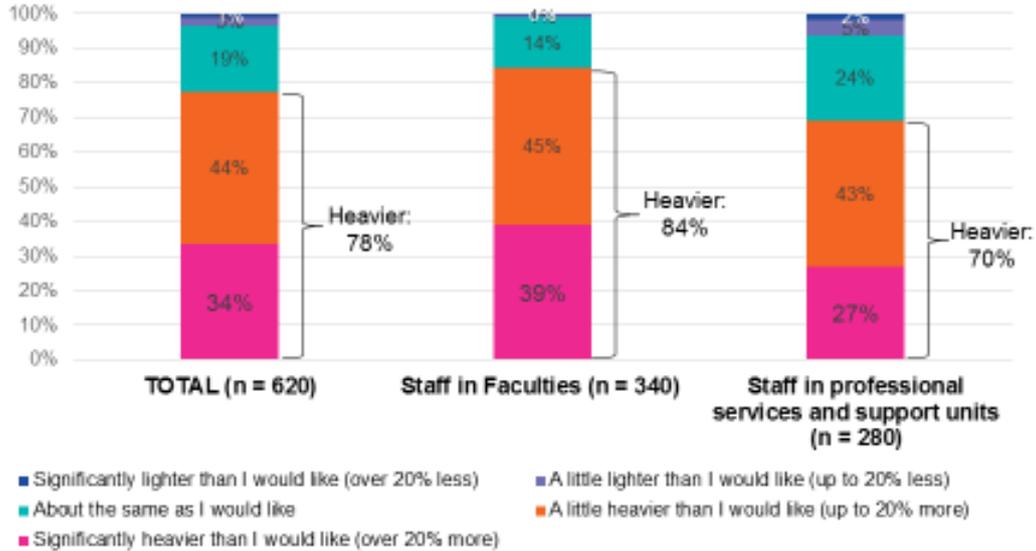
Base: all respondents giving valid answers to all question parts



Q20: HOW DOES YOUR WORKLOAD COMPARE TO WHAT YOU WOULD LIKE IT TO BE?

ALL RESPONDENTS, BY HIGH LEVEL UNIT GROUPING

Base: all respondents giving valid answers to all question parts

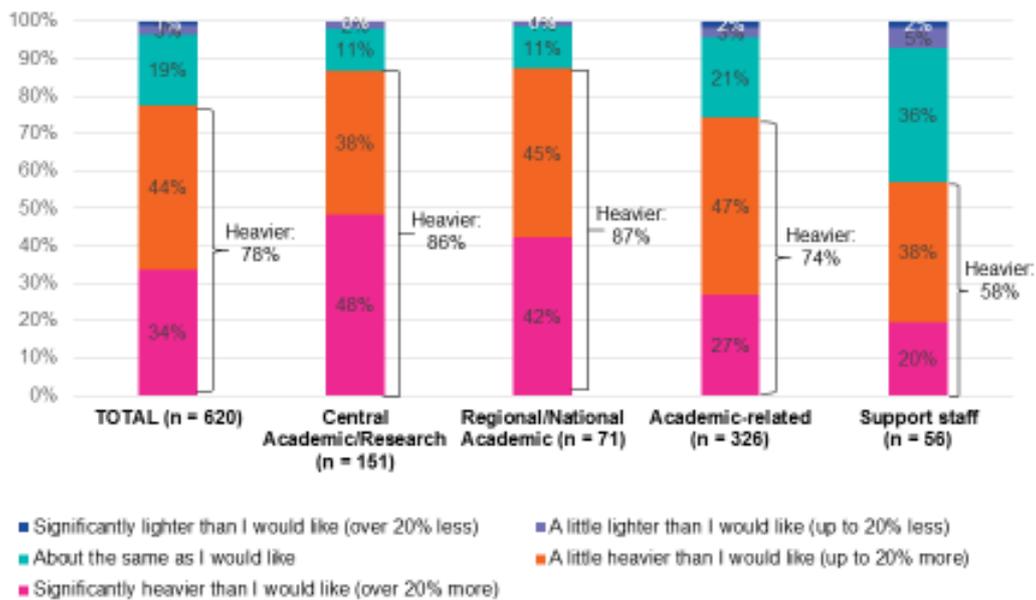


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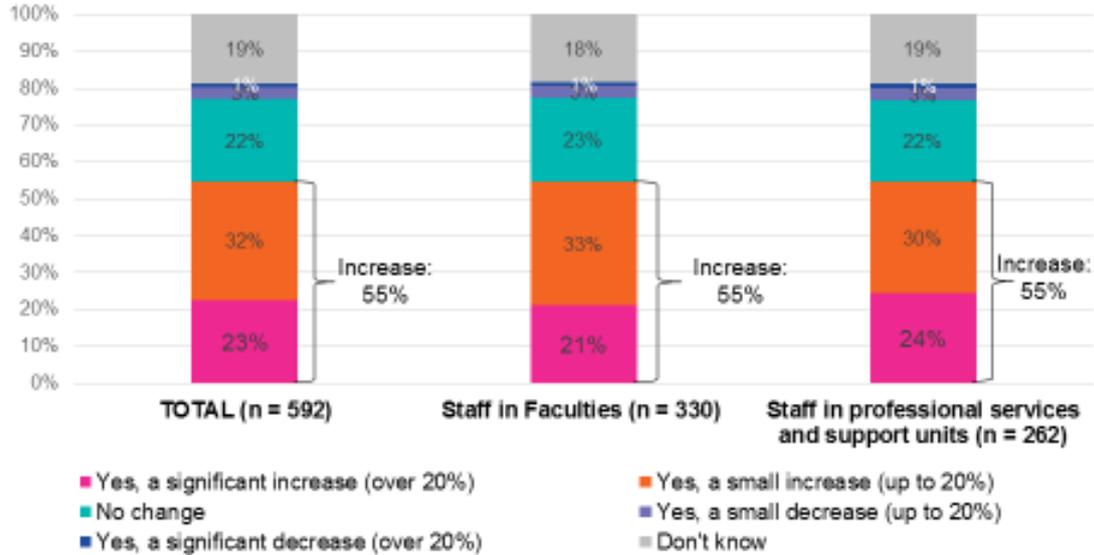
Base: all respondents giving valid answers to all question parts



Q25: DO YOU THINK THERE WILL BE CHANGES TO YOUR WORKLOAD IN THE NEXT 12 MONTHS?

ALL RESPONDENTS, BY HIGH LEVEL UNIT GROUPING

Base: all respondents giving valid answers to all question parts

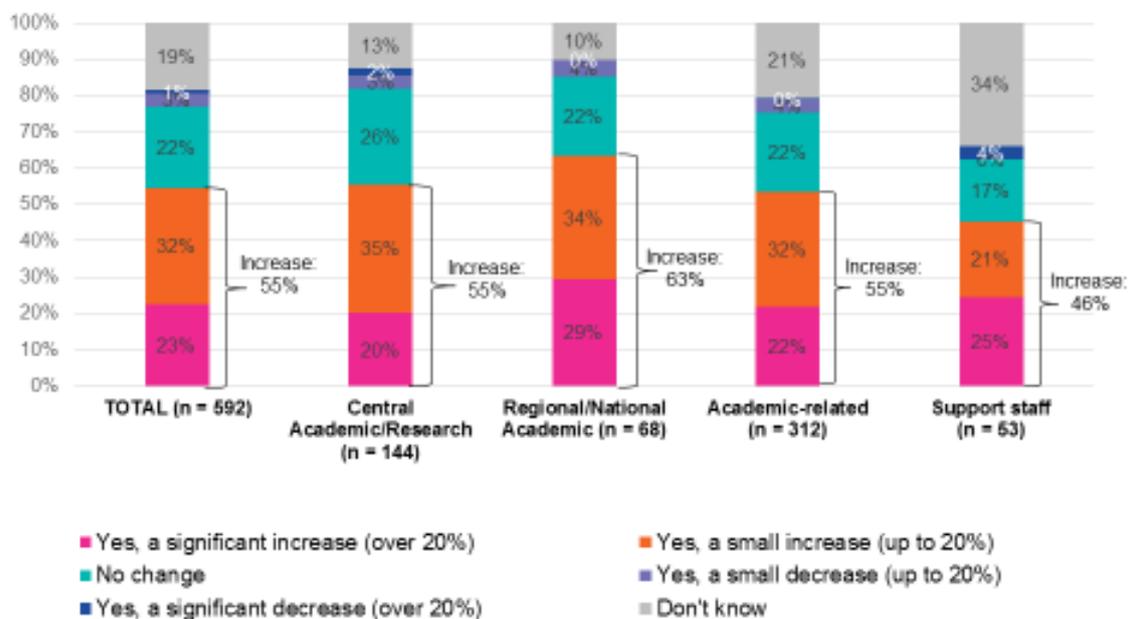


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ALL RESPONDENTS, BY STAFF CATEGORY

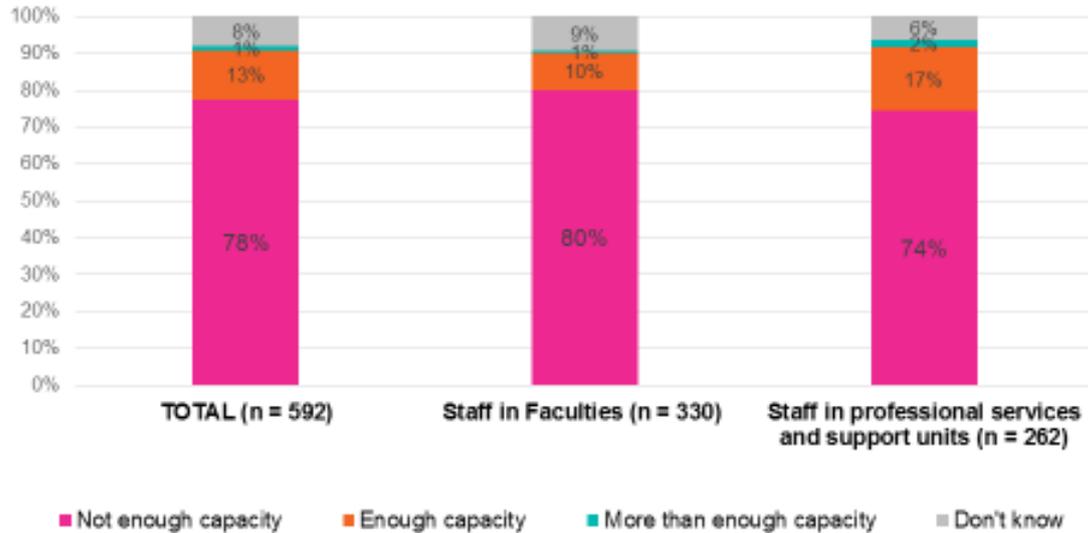
Base: all respondents giving valid answers to all question parts



Q26: HOW MUCH CAPACITY DO YOU HAVE TO ABSORB ANY FUTURE CHANGES TO YOUR WORKLOAD?

ALL RESPONDENTS, BY HIGH LEVEL UNIT GROUPING

Base: all respondents giving valid answers to all question parts

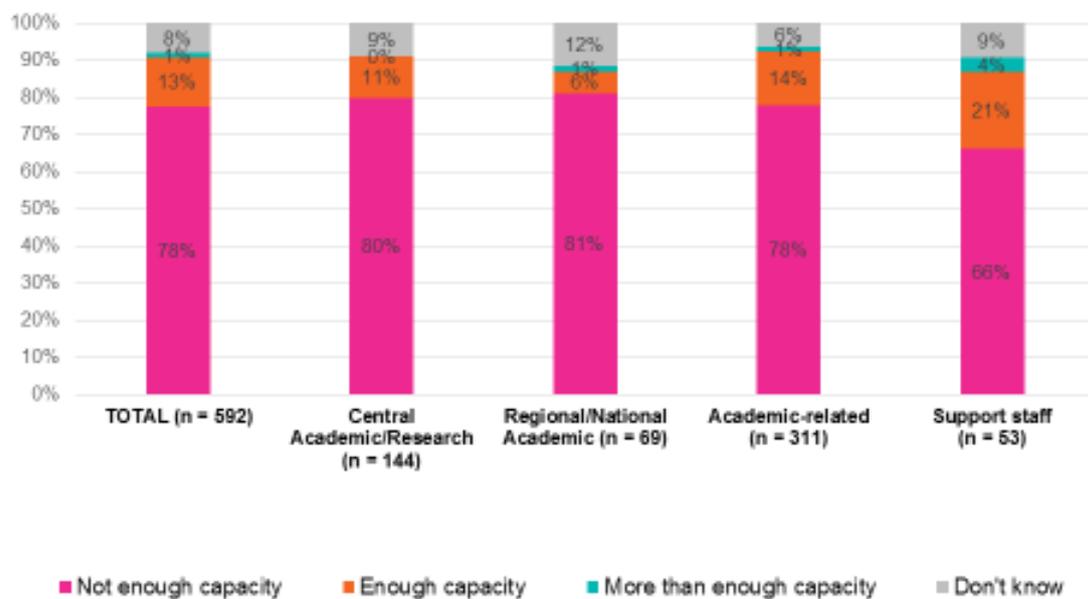


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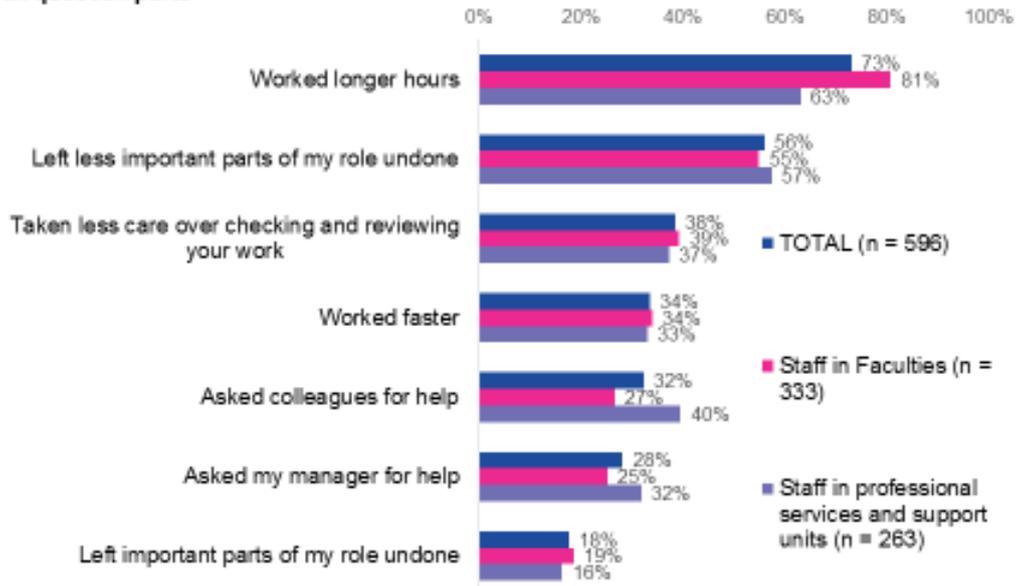
Base: all respondents giving valid answers to all question parts



Q27: IF HAVE YOU FOUND YOUR WORKLOAD TOO HEAVY TO COMPLETE IN YOUR CONTRACTED HOURS, WHAT HAVE YOU DONE TO COPE?

ALL RESPONDENTS, BY HIGH LEVEL UNIT GROUPING

Base: all respondents who found it difficult to complete their workload, and gave valid answers to all question parts

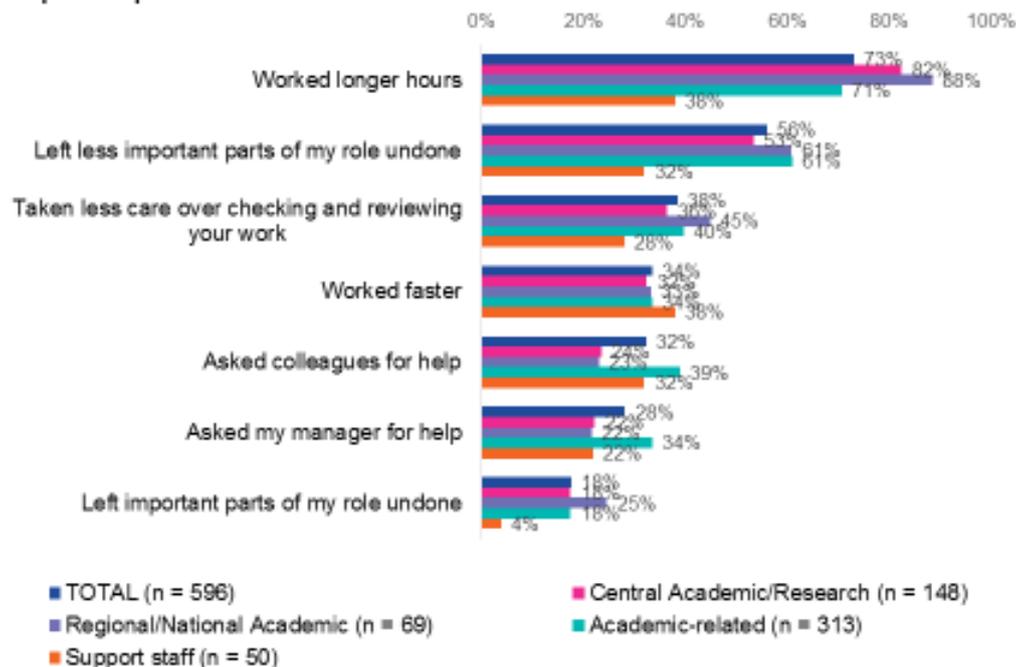


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ALL RESPONDENTS, BY STAFF CATEGORY

Base: all respondents who found it difficult to complete their workload, and gave valid answers to all question parts



Q29: HAVE YOU REDUCED OR STOPPED DOING ANY OF THE FOLLOWING OVER THE LAST 6 MONTHS, BECAUSE OF A HEAVY WORKLOAD?

ALL RESPONDENTS, BY HIGH LEVEL UNIT GROUPING

Base: all respondents who found it difficult to complete their workload, and gave valid answers to all question parts

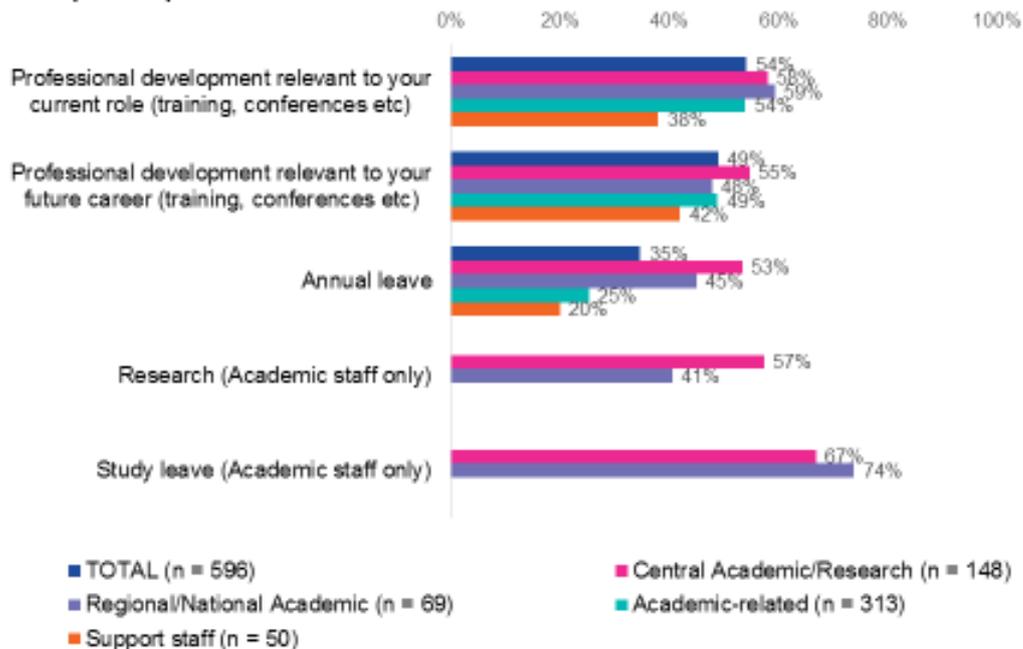


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ALL RESPONDENTS, BY STAFF CATEGORY

Base: all respondents who found it difficult to complete their workload, and gave valid answers to all question parts



Q30: HOW HAS YOUR WORKLOAD AFFECTED EACH OF THE FOLLOWING (POSITIVELY, NEGATIVELY, NOT AT ALL)?

ALL RESPONDENTS, BY HIGH LEVEL UNIT GROUPING

Base: all respondents who found it difficult to complete their workload, and gave valid answers to all question parts (bases vary for each question part, lowest bases are shown)

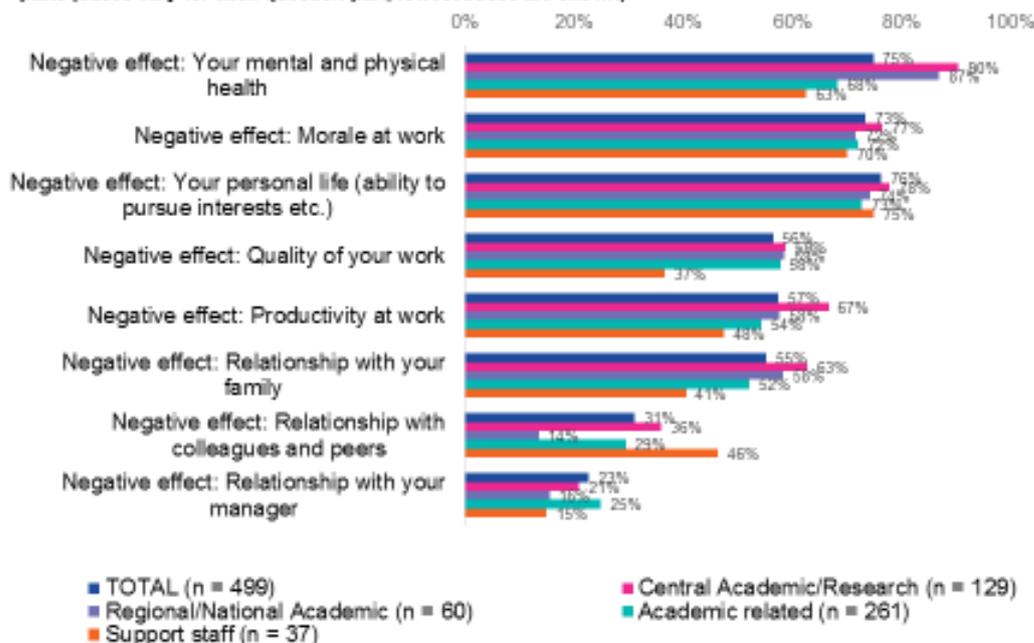


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ALL RESPONDENTS, BY STAFF CATEGORY

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Appendix 2: questionnaire (as PDF)