

UCU University of Kent Workload Report

The Effects of Blended Learning on Staff Workload

UCU University of Kent Branch
Workload Campaign
1 December 2020

‘If every staff member works the contracted hours only, management should be aware that NOTHING will get done’

— Member of staff at the University of Kent

Summary

As part of the campaign on workload, the UKC branch of the UCU opened a survey for its members for seven days commencing 20th November 2020. Over the course of the week, there were 72 responses to the mixed-methods survey, consisting of 9 questions. The clear message to be learned from the survey is that UCU members stepped up to the plate that was required of them to provide high quality teaching in shadow of the Covid-19 outbreak and lockdowns. Academic members spend on average double the time necessary to create one hour of lecture for blending (8.7 hours) than it took for face-to-face learning - an excess of 4.6 hours.¹ It is also clear from the data, however, that the extra work members put into their work has no correlation with student participation in taught activities - a particularly galling conclusion for the members of staff who put so many hours into this work. Of the members of professional services staff who responded to the survey, 70% reported that they had seen at least a ‘moderate amount’ of increase in demand for their time since the transition to online learning or more. The same members reported working an average of 7.7 hours more than they would usually, with one member reporting that they worked 20 hours more.

As will become evident in the analysis below, the extra effort that members have put into their duties since the move towards blended learning has come at a high cost, with workers reporting burnout, a worry that the extra effort will have significant negative impacts upon their professional and career development, and that the current state of exception will become the operative norm for the foreseeable future. As one member puts it, summing up the tone of the survey overall, **‘we have been going to the limits before. Now it's well over. And warm words from Karen do not do anything for me**

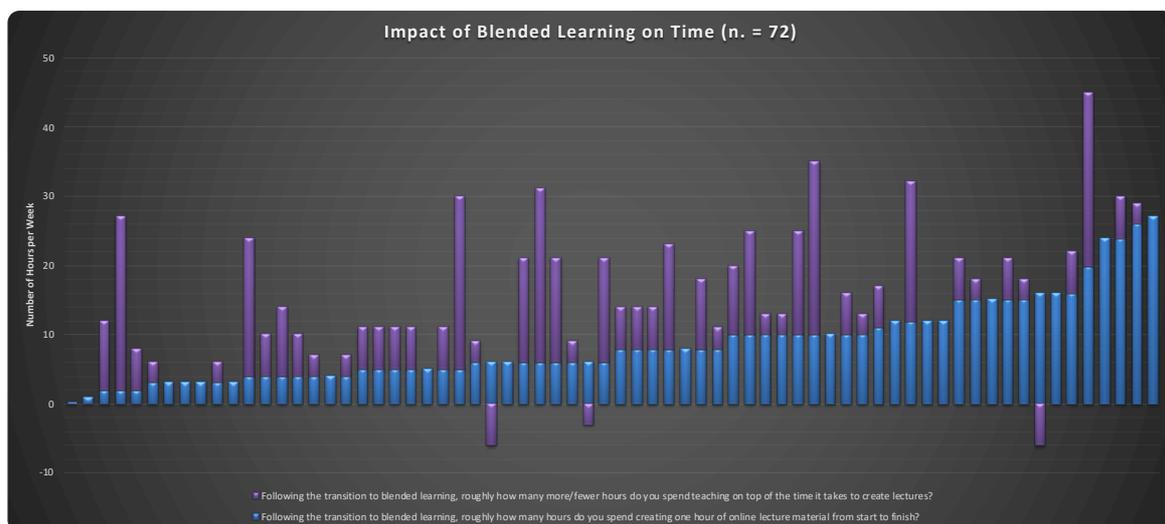
¹ This indicates that it takes 4.1 hours to create one hour of lecture content when teaching is conducted face-to-face, which must be born in mind, first, when calculating WAM credits and, secondly, remuneration for HPLs (although the latter are unlikely to have the same subject expertise and will likely take longer to prepare each lecture hour).

to want to stick around'. Recognising the precarious financial position the University is in, it is clear from the survey's results (both in themselves and when read in conjunction with Kent Union's recent survey) that the current operating practices (which members feel they were not consulted upon) will have serious negative impacts on the physical and mental health of the University's staff, academic integrity, and the tenability of the University's operating procedures.

Quantitative Analysis

UCU members were asked four questions, the quantitative data for which can be analysed to draw conclusions regarding the amount of extra work members are putting in, as well as the impact of this work on student engagement. This section is divided into three sections that focus on the amount of extra work put into blended learning, student engagement with the current approach to blended learning, and the extra work professional services staff are putting into the transition towards blended learning.

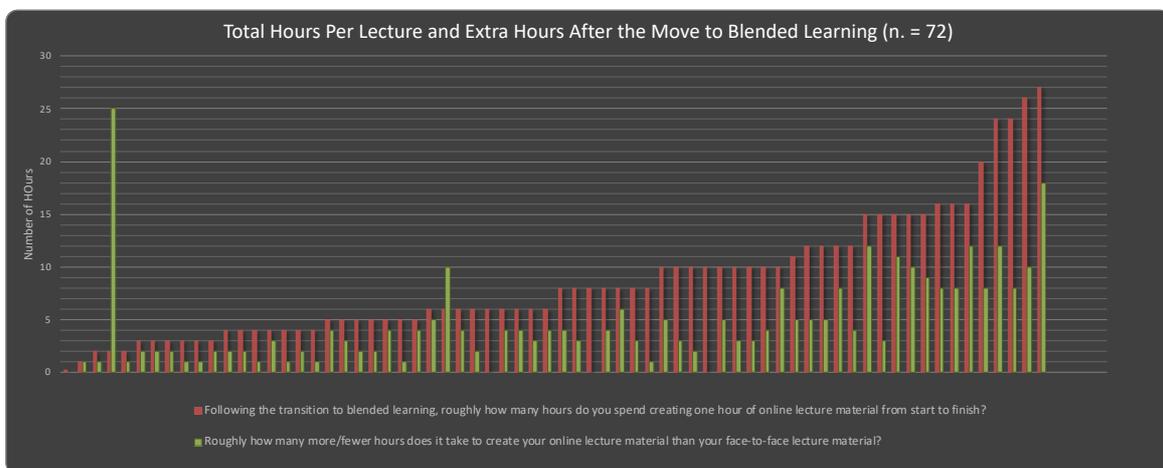
Extra Time Spent on Blended Learning



The above chart highlights the extra work that members put into blended learning in comparison to that put into face-to-face teaching before the Covid-19 outbreak. On average, members who responded to the survey

spend 8.7 hours preparing for each hour of lecturing they undertake, as well as work 6.2 extra hours on top of this per week (although the ranges for both answers vary considerably). Noticeably, only two members out of the 72 surveyed spend under two hours per lecture, whereas some take up to 27 hours. This is an important finding both given that the previous HPL multiplier figure of 2.5 for every hour teaching implied that each lecture should take 1.5 hours to create, and to demonstrate the large amount of time required to prepare for blended teaching. Put simply, academics spend huge amounts more time preparing for blended learning than they did to prepare for face-to-face teaching before lockdown, and the *actual* amount of time that lecturer preparation takes must be recognised by the University.

The chart below shows the amount of extra of the time spent creating each hour of lecture following the transition to blended learning. Whilst different members spend proportionately different amounts of time creating their lectures, members spend on average 6 more hours writing lectures since the transition.² It is not clear from which of their other duties members are to subtract these extra hours.

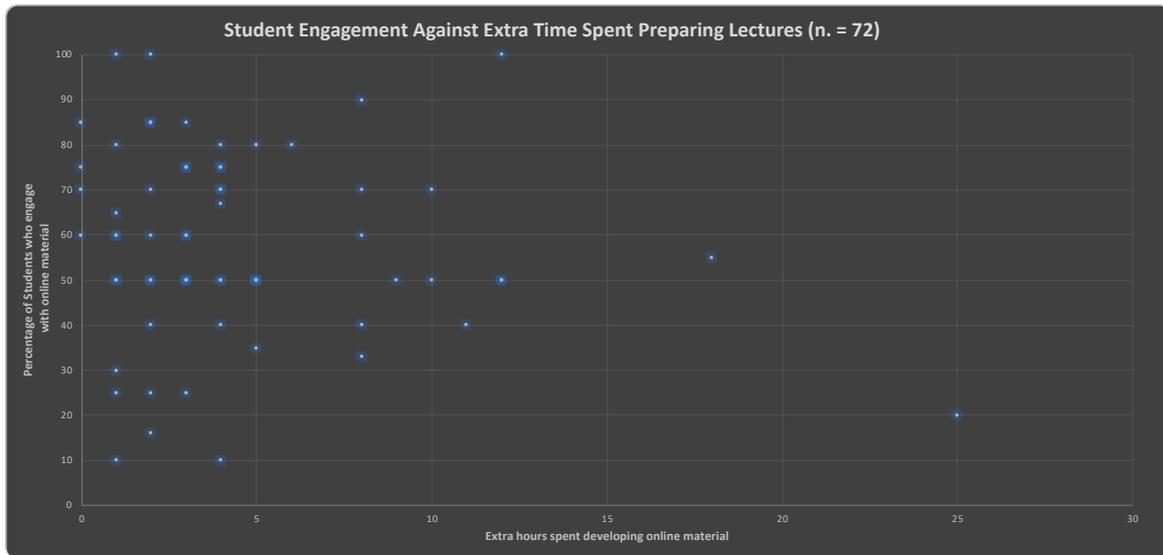


Student Engagement with the Current Approach to Blended Learning

Given the significant efforts that members of staff have put into blended learning, we might expect to see a correlation between the amount of time

² Given rounding, this figure is the same whether or not the (possibly erroneous) 25 hours reported by the 4th respondent is included.

put into each lecture hour and the percentage of each lecturer's students who engage with online material. Following instructions from the University to include them, members who spend a large amount of time developing activities for students to engage with as part of the lecture facilitation might expect that students engage with these lectures more so than others who do not.

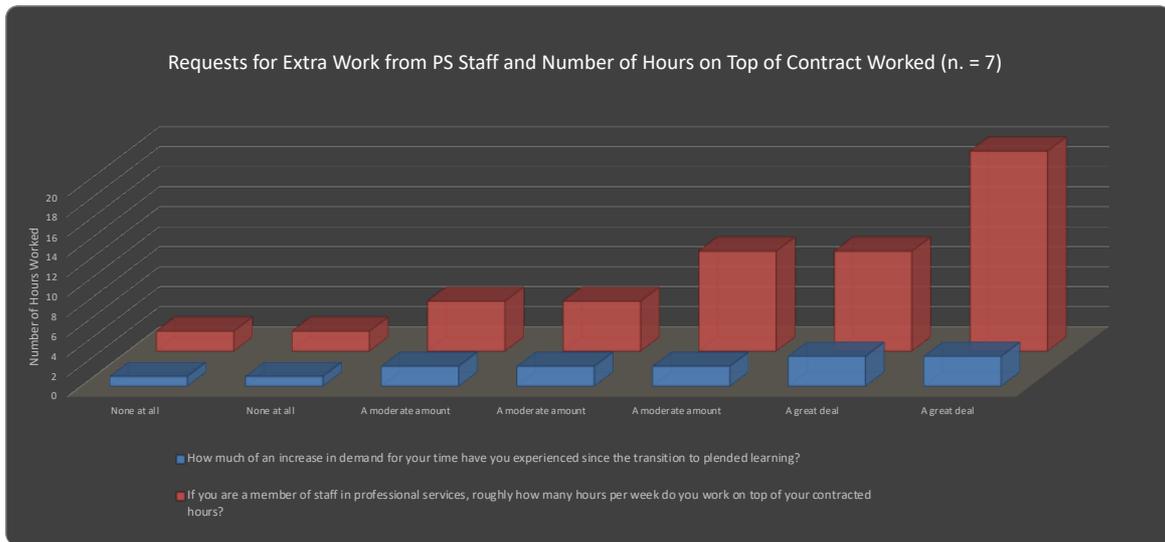


The above chart compares the number of extra hours spent developing online material with the percentage of students who do engage with online material. As can be seen, there is no correlation between the two measures and therefore no evidence to support the hypothesis that the current approach to blended learning supports an increase in engagement with students. This is not, of course, to say that forms of online learning are unsuitable for university teaching, and the recent Kent Union report on blended learning speaks to the reliably high quality of online facilitation (even if students do not think that it represents value for money).

However, read in conjunction with the qualitative comments below, it seems that the form of blended learning currently used at the University does not lead to higher levels of student engagement, and there appears to be no added value from the asynchronous provision of lectures and the inclusion of extra activities, at least from the perspective of academics and students. The burden of time that these place upon lecturers, in conjunction with the lack of consequent student engagement, suggests that they should be revised - if not removed from teaching requirements entirely.

Extra Workload for Professional Services Staff

The transition towards blended learning has increased the workload for professional services staff as well as it has for academic staff. Although the number of reports received from professional services staff is lower than those received from academics, the following chart clearly shows that professional services staff are both *expected* to work longer hours in light of blended learning, and *do* work longer hours.



Members in professional services who reported in the survey work on average 7.7 hours per week more now than they did before the transition to blended learning, a figure higher than the academics who reported (6 hours). Even despite variation in individual cases, members in professional services are working three quarters of a full day extra, on top of their usual duties. As is the case for academic staff, and as is developed in the qualitative comments below, it is not clear from where members in professional services are to gain these hours, nor whether they will gain these hours in TOIL later in the year.

Qualitative Analysis

Two open questions were put to members in order to allow them the possibility to feed back their experiences and thoughts: 'Do you have any suggestions for how blended learning might have less of an impact on your workload than it currently does?' and 'Do you have any further comments for the workload campaign?'. This section synthesises and analyses responses to these two questions.

How Might Blended Learning Have Less of an Impact on Staff Workloads?

Synchronous Lectures

The overwhelming message from the qualitative feedback (a full third of the responses) is that the current practice of blended learning is not fit for purpose, requiring unacceptably high levels of energy and time commitments for benefits that fall below what was predicted of them. One member sums up the feedback well:

'Streamline the process, in our school we need to still deliver the lectures live and then provide significant amount of post-work material e.g. quizzes for students to engage with. The university/school should choose which of these to engage with'.

Members are largely of the opinion that the quizzes etc. that are prepared (ostensibly for attendance monitoring purposes) are of little pedagogical importance, take too long to design and facilitate, and are not appreciated by students. The only members who expressed a different view are those who stated that these materials could be re-used next year, although the pedagogical implications of re-using material year after year are potentially significant. Two members claimed that having students both online and in person in the same session is stressful, whilst students have anecdotally reported that this form of teaching is more disruptive to their studies than online-only classes.

Instead, in their suggestions on how to address the excess workload caused by the transition to blended learning, members reporting on the survey are near-unanimous in their support for synchronous online lectures that are also recorded for those who are unable to make the class/reasons to

do with learning support. Indeed, and whilst it is not clear why this has not been the default practice anyway (other than for situations involving students studying remotely in different time zones), the move towards synchronous, timetabled lectures would address the impact of teaching on members' time to a large extent.

It is important to note however, that this recommendation does not imply that members prefer online teaching to face-to-face lecturing in general. Nor is it a comment on the *quality* of the teaching able to be delivered. Indeed, no survey comments mentioned the quality of the teaching delivered, or respondents' abilities to provide high quality teaching being prohibited by blended learning. Rather, comments argued that the current mixed approach to teaching detracts from the ability of members to *effectively* provide it in a time-efficient and attentive manner. A permanent move to online learning is not supported by the results of this survey, nor discussion in UCU branch meetings, but a temporary move towards it *is* supported on the grounds of workload reduction and stress.³

Technology

A number of survey comments pointed out problems with IT/the software commissioned for use by the University in their teaching. One member listed a range of issues that have plagued teaching staff over the last two terms:

'Tech can go wrong (theirs and mine); if the registration was automatic via Teams (one fewer admin job for teaching staff); if panopto worked properly; if the lecture recording made during the session dropped automatically into the Moodle page - i.e. talked to Teams/Stream; it's often the extra admin/processing around a session which is cumbersome and also frustrating e.g. when the recordings haven't got through for any reason, leaving us looking incompetent and the students without a recording'.

Whilst the UCU branch officers acknowledge and thank IT services for their efforts to provide a range of training options for members of staff to help members prepare for, and operate within, the blended environment, it is nevertheless clear that members are being let down by the software

³ This finding supports the arguments made nationally by the UCU, NEU, as well as both SAGE and Independent SAGE, although for different reasons.

commissioned for use. Frequent Moodle down-time, Panopto upload corruptions, as well as an unwillingness to subscribe to other teaching software on the part of some Departments, all combine to frustrate members efforts to provide high quality teaching.⁴ The inaccuracy of the automatic closed captioning feature of Kent Player, and the need to correct it, further adds time to the lecture creation process.⁵

Whilst these issues might seem to act as currency for an argument in favour of face-to-face learning (in the sense that these operational issues can be circumvented simply by not using the software), we believe that the health & safety and pedagogical requirements in favour of online teaching call instead for faster responses by both the software companies and the University. As it currently stands, members feel that the software used cannot be relied upon to work properly when needed and that they are constrained from using other software packages as and when they are more fit for purpose. We call on the University to ensure that the software used to facilitate online and blended learning be functional 100% of the time and to be commissioned in order to respond to staff demand.

⁴ One member commented on the assumption that their IT is up to the task of teaching as follows: **'The recording equipment we are offered is unbelievably below standard. No microphones are supplied, which translate to either bad audio recordings or extra time spent on video editing. We now have to also master video editing tools on top of everything else. Also the University assumes that we have state of the art computers at home that can cope with heavy video editing software, which is not the case. Computers struggle with such heavy processing and rendering waiting our time while waiting for our computers to carry out the work. IF blended teaching is becoming part of our job, we must be given IT equipment that can cope with this, not rely on what we have purchased for our personal use. This is exploitation. And the excuse that it does not need to be perfect is tragic. This means that the university does not care if we offer substandard quality of teaching resources. Should the students know about this?'** Whilst branch officers recognise that there are facilities to loan IT equipment from the University, we request that these are more clearly signposted and that use-case analysis is undertaken in order to determine whether or not the equipment available is sufficient for the tasks required of it.

⁵ Two members requested specific functionality in order to facilitate assessments: **'[we should be] given platforms that ensure that students do not cheat during tests which will save on our online test planning; link test questions to TurnItIn so plagiarism can be detected'** and **'could the uni /IT send around some easy-to-follow tips on how to 'clean up' our pcs/ laptops so they work more efficiently please?'**

Further Comments

Meaningful recognition of contributions

A number of responses stated that they do not believe the University recognises meaningfully the contributions that staff have made to the transition to blended learning and the support of students in that period. One representative member added to the feeling that emailed praise from the VC is not sufficient, requesting **'acknowledgement of the increased workload with less pressure to continue with additional projects and ad-hoc meetings'**. Another highlighted the 'command and control' nature of University management since the pandemic's outbreak (we note here the militaristic 'gold' and 'silver' command structure that has subsequently been employed), locking out meaningful engagement with staff in the response.

This response sends the message that the University, at best, does not understand the effects of its policies on staff or, at worst, does not care about them. As one member puts it,

'I think the university under-estimates how stressful it can be running a session from home, often on our own ageing kit, as you have students waiting or enduring your tech problems as well as their own'.

Colleagues at the Medway campus in particular **'feel [they've] received very little support or acknowledgement'**.

Members also report worry that their professional and career development will be hindered, rather than helped, by the extra work they have committed to blended learning. How, members have asked, is this time commitment going to be reflected in their diminished ability to meet REF requirements in the future? One member puts the problem clearly:

'It is clear that the university can simply move the goalposts in terms of expectations and in terms of rewards, and it does never does to our benefit. It is unclear how the university will mitigate the effect of this covid-year on our research and whether the people who have devoted their time this year to making sure that the university continues to function will be acknowledged or in fact penalised for not performing as 'expected' in research and income'.

Another member writes that **'I have never been so tired. And there is little time for research or other activities'**.

Although it is not possible from the survey to understand the responders' seniority of employment, branch officers are particularly concerned by the impact that blended teaching has had on early career academics who are highly susceptible to publication competition and are often often precariously employed. Any extra demands on the time and resources of early career academics will have a significant negative impact on their ability to enter an already-competitive field with a strong research portfolio or administrative experience. Furthermore, these academics are more likely to feel pressured into accepting work that they would otherwise be uncomfortable doing; whilst senior academics are more capable of articulating their concerns to their managers due to their more established employment positions (although often still report uneasiness doing so in UCU casework), junior colleagues feel significantly more at risk when doing so. As such, we believe that junior members of staff must be consulted with directly—and without records of identifying information being kept—in order to determine suitable best practice for their teaching.

It is impossible to read these comments outside the context of KVSS (and the associated loss of staffing at the University), as well as the (so called) 'pay freeze.' The latter constitutes a real-term pay cut for University staff and, again, disproportionately effects junior members who are the least likely to be able to shoulder a cut in pay without affecting the bottom rungs of Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Notwithstanding the significant financial pressure that the University finds itself in, falling income from student accommodation, and the extra costs of coping with Covid-19, the impact felt by members of the cuts to their pay (and threats to their jobs) is all the stronger given the demands being placed upon them.

This also must be said for capturing whether the respondents are in a disproportionate position because of their relationship/identification with a particular equality community. Covid-19 has clearly led to an exacerbation of the already disproportionately adverse experiences felt by so many who fall within the intersections of communities that might broadly be termed – BAME, LGBT+, women and those with disabilities. Some examples include, but are not limited to, the fact that BAME staff are disproportionately more likely to retain lower grade and/or precarious contracts and so are much

more adversely affected by the loss of earnings caused by the 'pay freeze' or that disabled staff, who may already experience a higher sense of pressure to keep up with the pace of workload, are disproportionately more likely to incur a heightened level of stress/damage to their physical/mental health.⁶ Whilst branch officers note that an impact assessment has been carried out in order to measure the effects of KVSS on equality communities, it is imperative that the University also commissions a report to discern the impact of additional workload on workers in these communities.⁷

As an immediate response to these concerns however, the University should guarantee that all extra time which has been put into teaching by members who are not GTA contracts will be financially remunerated. Those who are on a GTA contract and who put in extra time should be offered the choice of either, a) direct financial remuneration or, b) the equivalent time deducted from their required teaching time for the rest of their contract. This remuneration should include all the training that staff have undertaken in order to equip themselves with the skills necessary to teach in a blended context - this time has been required of them by the University in order to fulfil the reasonable management request of teaching in a blended contexts and is therefore covered by contractual terms and conditions.

Staffing Levels

A significant number of comments mentioned the cuts in staff numbers over the last two years and/or the lack of action to hire staff in order to ease workload demands on already-stressed staff. One member put the problem clearly, stating that **'We have lost ~25% of [department] staff due to KVSS and younger staff are disillusioned and leaving. The lost staff are not being replaced, their teaching being passed onto the remaining staff. My**

⁶ Disabled staff may work at a different working pace to their able-bodied colleagues. The allowance for this is, ideally, provided for by their workplace reasonable adjustment, but, although legally well grounded, this does not necessarily translate to workplace culture.

⁷ It should be noted that members of the equality staff networks (Disability, LGBT+, Women's, BAME) have commented that this impact assessment only accounted for Phase 2 of KVSS and questioned the absence of an assessment concerning phase 1. They also noted that the assessment did not adequately seek to analysis the root causes of disproportionately affected experience at the institutional level.

workload has increased by ~25%’.⁸ Such an increasing in workload, particularly without any clarity over the probable length of the increase, is highly concerning. In particular, there seems to be no auditing process to account for the actual time members *do* work versus the contractual hours they *should* work. Whilst members are demonstrably willing to go to significant lengths in order to provide high quality teaching, it is unreasonable to expect them to do so for extended periods out of good will alone.

Whilst members of professional services are stretched thin by cuts to staff, and are often put under pressure by senior management to make decisions they know will negatively impact junior colleges, academics are forced to give up more and more of their research time to teaching. One academic member notes that,

‘we are now in a mode where we are expected to be available constantly (you could teach online all day with no breaks as there is no need to ‘walk’ between lecture theatres) and we receive constant feedback’.

This being the case, and as noted above, academic members of staff are increasingly under pressure to sideline their professional and career development by reprioritising their research in favour of teaching. It is not only staff who are harmed by this, but students’ interests too: the very idea of research led teaching is threatened when academics do not have the time to ensure they are at the cutting edge of research. If it is not the University’s wish to see members of staff routinely undertaking the work necessary to do so during the weekends and their holidays, concrete action must be undertaken in order to ameliorate the impact of increasing demands on their time.

Branch officers do recognise that some lengths have been gone to in order to ameliorate the workload requirements in some departments. This

⁸ Another member requests that the University **‘Staff the department properly so we don’t have the worst staff student ratio in the UK’**. The member is presumably referring to the Times Higher Education *ranking*, according to which the University of Kent is ranked in the category 351-400 universities, with 20 students per member of staff. Other universities with this ratio include the University of Bedfordshire (rank 801-1,000), Glasgow Caledonian (rank 601-800) and the University of Wolverhampton (801-1,000). Although the University of Kent does not have the *worst* ratio in the UK, we can infer from this ranking that the ratio does bring down our ranking significantly. Further cuts to staff will only serve to exacerbate this ratio.

has been reported by members both in emails and the survey itself, with one member writing that,

‘Non-teaching management staff have been making a concerted effort to discuss concerns regarding workload; however, this is limited to a discussion, and almost never followed with any concrete action. There needs to be a focus on solving issues arising from the new teaching context, and practical steps taken to ease workload’.

Ultimately however, the loss of roughly 400 members of staff is a bruising blow to capacity, and it is hard to countenance how this loss is not largely responsible for the lack of concrete action that the member notes.

Recommendations

It is clear from this survey that members of staff at the University of Kent suffer from exhaustion, stress, despondency, the feeling that their efforts are not meaningfully recognised, and the recognition that many of their colleagues still potentially face redundancy processes. Branch officers are of the view that the workload increases following the onset of Covid-19 have exacerbated longer-standing issues with workload and stress, themselves exacerbated by Organising for Success.

Notwithstanding the current financial circumstances the University finds itself in, both as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic and a number of other reasons, it is clear that the University must take as large steps to address this issue as it did when undertaking Organising for Success. Drawing on the responses received from the survey, put into context in the discussion above, we have therefore made a number of recommendations in that discussion. For clarity, they are outlined here:

1. Revise, if not remove, added activities and asynchronous lectures from teaching requirements entirely, and ensure that all teaching move towards synchronous, timetabled lectures (unless requested by convenors).
2. Clarify how staff will be paid for the extra hours they have worked since the transition to blended learning, or how much TOIL they will receive.
 - a) In particular, guarantee that all extra time which has been put into teaching by members who are not on GTA contracts will be financially

remunerated. Those who are on a GTA contract and who put in extra time should be offered the choice of either, i) direct financial remuneration or, ii) the equivalent time deducted from their required teaching time for the rest of their contract.

3. Clearly commit to the suspension of any redundancies, whether compulsory or in any other way stemming from Organising for Success, in order to prevent conditions worsening.

4. Commit resources to a concerted and comprehensive investigation of the added workload pressures and accompanying negative health consequences created by the Organising for Success initiative.⁹

5. Commission a report to discern the impact of additional workload on workers in equalities communities, and then carry out the report's recommendations.

6. Consult with junior members of staff directly—and without records of identifying information being kept—in order to determine suitable best practice for their teaching.

7. Signpost more clearly the IT equipment loan facilities and commission a use-case analysis in order to determine whether or not the equipment available is sufficient for the tasks required of it.

8. Ensure that the software used to facilitate online and blended learning is fit for use and has 100% uptime.

a) Ensure staff have platforms that guarantee students cannot cheat during tests, whilst linking test questions to TurnItIn so plagiarism can be detected.

b) Distribute easy-to-follow tips on how to maintain computers for optimal working efficiency/speed.

⁹ Given the short period in which we sought to gather data on matters concerning workload, branch officers fear that our report has only just begun to uncover the scale and severity of these problems. For the sake of staff wellbeing, and in a bid to ward off some of the damage that is set to be done to the reputation of the University of Kent if it is to be made known as a 'bad employer' that does not fulfil an adequate duty of care for its front-line staff, such an investigation needs to be carried out as a matter of urgency.