

Results of UCU Stress Survey Feb/March 2022

Summary

- Between 8th Feb and 9th March 2022, UCU conducted a stress survey of employees of the University of Roehampton who are also members of UCU. We were pleased to receive a 47% response rate with 79% of the returned surveys complete.
- Very high stress levels were observed with 37% scoring 'severe' or 'extremely severe' stress. 87% of respondents felt frequently overwhelmed, and over 70% reported sleep problems and constant worrying.
- Work-related hazards identified as precursors at Roehampton included high work demands, low control over work processes, lack of role clarity with respect to departmental and university objectives, low levels of support from managers and poor change management practices.
- Analysis of qualitative comments shows that the workload allocation model is perceived as unrealistic, particularly with respect to time allocated for preparation of teaching and marking, requiring significant levels of unpaid overtime. It is perceived to be arbitrarily administered and it does not recognise pressure points.
- The COVID pandemic has had a detrimental effect on workload and staff wellbeing both in its own right and in terms of how matters have been handled by the university.
- Issues with leadership have been identified which particularly affect change management and communication of strategic objectives at university and departmental level. In addition, many participants feel there is a culture of bullying unchecked by management and a lack of management support.
- Schools fare differently with respect to the impact of stress hazards. The School of Humanities and Social Sciences and the School of Psychology are most affected whereas the School of Health and Life Sciences and the Faculty of Education are least affected.
- The levels of stress and stress hazards observed require urgent action at university level. It is, therefore, imperative that the university conduct a stress risk assessment identifying hazards and measures to eliminate or moderate their impact. This must include an impact assessment of the new workload model and the changes to the academic calendar.

Background

Roehampton UCU has been increasingly concerned about the prevalence of issues around workload, bullying and stress levels in conversations with members and in the casework we have been dealing with. This is particularly important in the light of the radical new workload proposals from management. Concerns about levels of stress have not been allayed by either the Academic Experience survey or the 'pulse survey' undertaken by management, the results of which have not been disclosed to us. Requests for disclosure of data relating to levels of absence specifically related to stress resulted in a report of 2% across all staff. The Director of Human Resources and Chief Operating Officer explained that this was in line with expectations from previous years' data. Our evidence of increasing

stress levels amongst staff were anecdotal but did not accord with the numbers given by the University. In order to understand the situation in more detail, we notified the University of a workplace stress inspection to be conducted by means of an online survey. UCU invited the University to collaborate with the survey in the interest of ensuring Health and Safety at Work on at least two occasions, however, Human Resources declined and, furthermore, specifically refused to give us access to all staff.

Method

Participants

The survey was therefore restricted to staff who were UCU members. 46.8% of invitees took part in the survey. Of these 78.9% submitted complete responses, the remainder were partial responses. Participants were predominantly academic staff (94.3%) in permanent full-time (76.2%) or part-time (17.1%) positions. 72.3% of respondents were female, 26.7% male and 3.8% preferred not to say. Just over 40% of respondents had worked at Roehampton for 2 – 10 years, just over another 40 % for 11 - 21 or more years, whilst 14.6% had worked at Roehampton for 1 year or less.

Survey

The survey comprised a widely-used non-clinical measure of stress (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995) - the stress subscale of the Short Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scale (DASS 21) -, an NHS-based stress symptoms checklist and the nationally-recognised Health and Safety Executive (HSE) instrument to evaluate workplace stress hazards. Using these instruments allows comparison with UK norms for stress, other employers and reference to the law on Health and Safety at Work. The measurement scales were supplemented by four open-ended questions in which participants were invited to provide written comments about workload/experience of workload allocation, experiences of bullying/harassment, issues with wellbeing/occupational health arising from the COVID pandemic, and any other issues.

Analysis

The quantitative data were checked to ensure all scales were reliable prior to analysis (all $\alpha > .7$). Cases with missing data were excluded. Two subscales on the HSE stress hazard instrument were reverse scored so that higher subscale scores indicate greater wellbeing across all indicators. A qualitative approach was used to explore the free text responses in the questionnaire. This was conducted from a social constructionist and symbolic interactionist perspective. Social constructionism applies very well to this survey because the University is a community and professional construct that must be maintained. The symbolic interactionist perspective gives the personal interpretation not just of experience but of the social definition of priorities and meaning. The coding was intended to capture consensus, differences and recurring concepts in the perceptions of participants. The method of analysis used was Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis.

Results

Observed levels of stress

Analysis of the data from the DASS21- stress subscale is shown in Figure 1 in comparison with UK norms for non-clinical samples. This shows high levels of stress in the Roehampton sample. In a general, non-clinical population one would expect 7% of people to score in the

‘severe’ to ‘extremely severe’ stress range, but amongst Roehampton academic staff 37.5% score in this range.

Figure 1: Stress measured using DASS 21 (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995) – stress subscale

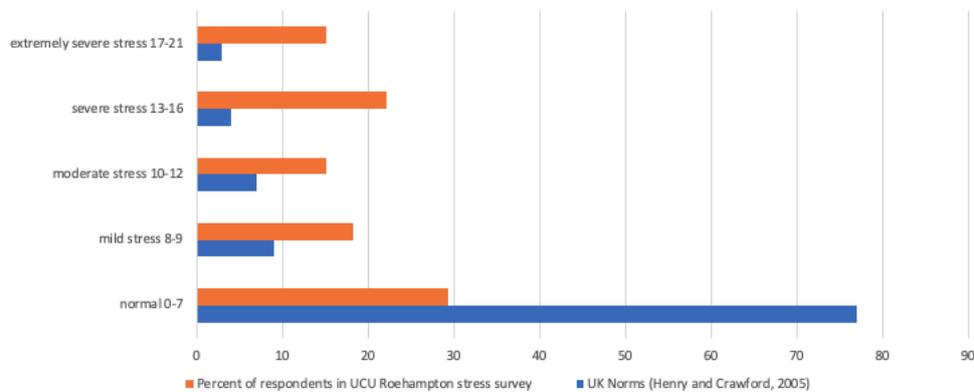
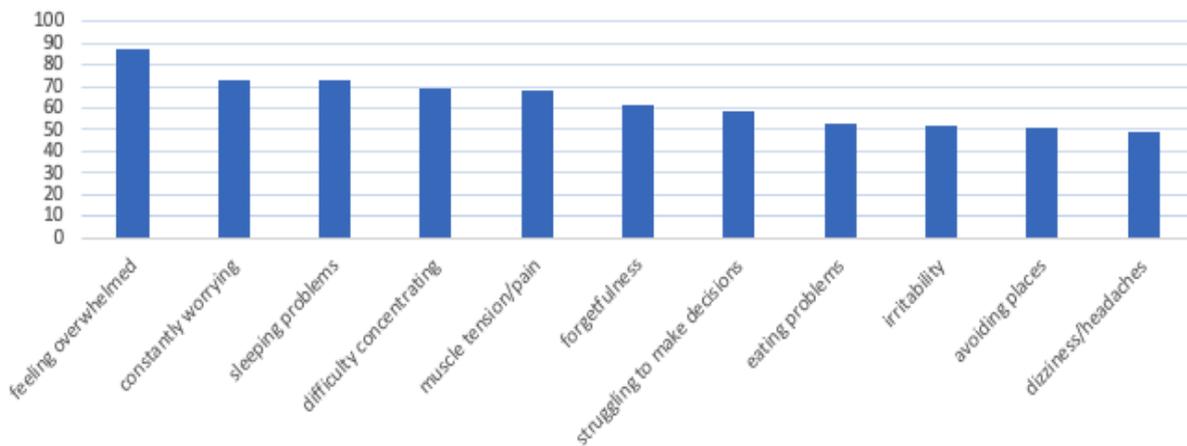


Figure 2 shows the frequency of commonly reported stress symptoms (based on the stress symptom list on the NHS website). This shows that 87% of surveyed staff felt frequently overwhelmed, over 70% had sleeping problems and worried constantly and more than 60% reported cognitive problems such as difficulty concentrating and forgetfulness. 63% of participants report eight or more clinically-recognized symptoms of stress.

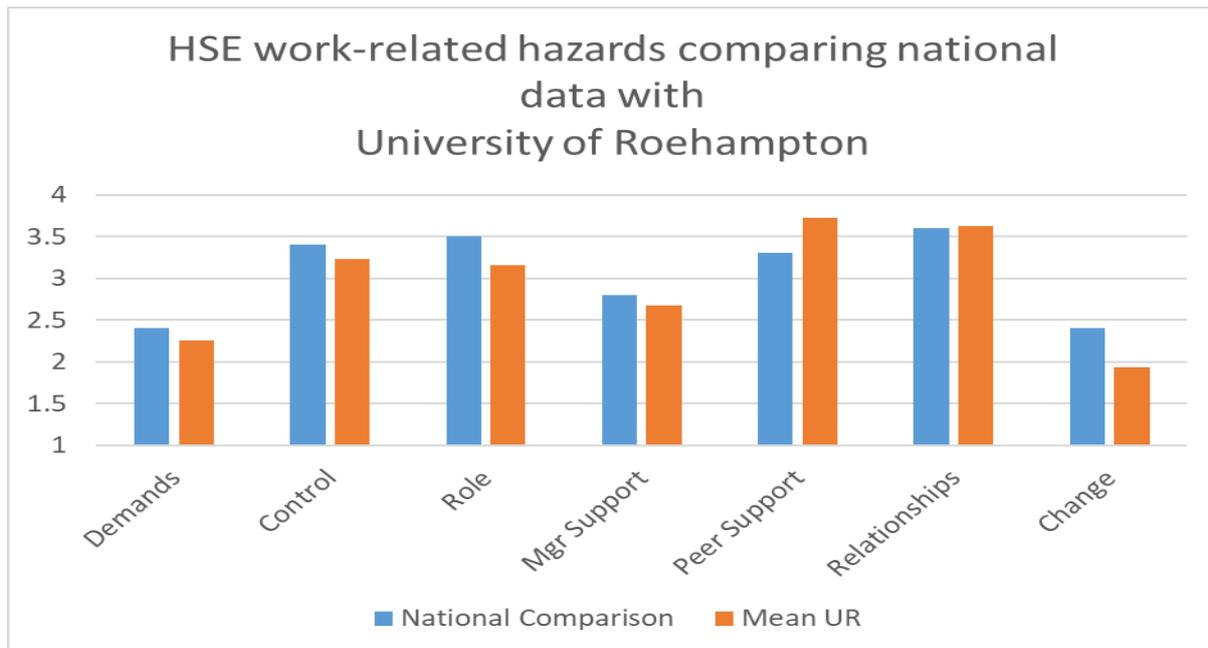
Figure 2: Percent of staff reporting the ten most frequent stress symptoms.



Stress hazards at Roehampton

In order to better understand the causes of stress, we included the HSE stress survey which aims to assess seven known hazards associated with high levels of stress: work demands, control over your work processes, work role clarity, manager support, peer support, relationships at work, and perception of change management. Figure 3 shows the scores on these hazards for Roehampton compared with national HE data (based on Gail Kinman’s work).

Figure 3: HSE work-related hazards. Roehampton data are shown in comparison with national HE data from 2021 (2014 for change).



Higher scores indicate greater well-being, e.g. fewer perceived demands, more control, greater role clarity, more manager and peer support, less-problematic relationships and bullying and more successful change management.

Roehampton scores lower (less well-being) across all hazards other than peer support and relationships at work. 81.2% feel they are 'never' or 'seldom' consulted about change. With respect to role clarity, 44.7% feel they are 'never' or 'seldom' clear about goals and objectives for their department and 43.3% feel they 'never' or 'seldom' understand how their work fits into the overall aim of the organisation. Control over work is usually not a significant hazard in HE, however at Roehampton 35.7% feel they 'never' or 'seldom' have a say in their own work speed. In addition, the demands of academic work are high: 74 % report they have to work very intensively 'often' or 'always', 68.2% report they have to work very fast 'often' or 'always' and as many as 68.4% 'often' or 'always' have to neglect some tasks because they have too much to do.

Support from managers, which can mitigate stressful workplace experiences, is lower at Roehampton than in HE in general: 69.8% of participants report 'never' or 'seldom' being supported through emotionally demanding work and 54.4% report 'never' or 'seldom' being given supportive feedback on the work they do. The peer support scale yields higher wellbeing scores at Roehampton than in the HE sector in general, indicating that collegiality may serve as a compensatory factor for shortcomings in management.

Workload (Demand and Control)

Participants' responses to the open-ended question "Have you experienced any issues with workload/workload allocation/workload system during your time at Roehampton?" further explain why job demands are high and control is low. Three main themes emerged: 1. the workload system/workload allocation is unrealistic; 2. the way the system is administered is poor and seems arbitrary and 3. the system does not recognise pressure points. Illustrative quotations from participants' comments for each of these themes are shown in Table 1.

There is a strong theme that the workload allocations are not realistic, possibly by design. In particular, time allocations for teaching preparation and marking are problematic. This is more than complaining about workload. It is often a perceived mismatch between the time allocation and the experience of professionals at work. Some participants also commented that it does not serve students well either.

Participants viewed the workload system as opaque, poorly run and arbitrarily administered, and this caused anxiety. Respondents were in favour of a workload system but experienced the process at Roehampton as poor, particularly with respect to time sensitivity in scheduling tasks leading to pressure points. Where the new system was mentioned, participants expressed a belief that it would make pressures significantly worse.

Table 1: Themes emerging from qualitative comments on experiences of workload.

<i>Theme</i>	
<i>The workload system is unrealistic</i>	<p>“A workload model which awards only 1 hour for teaching preparation, approx. 15 minutes to mark (an essay) and give feedback on an essay, and only 20 hours to design and deliver a new module is unsustainable by design”</p> <p>“It takes more than 20 minutes to grade individual student papers”</p> <p>“The allocation of time to tasks is also made to undervalue anything related to teaching and supervision, and when I mention that 4 hours is not enough to design a two-hour lecture from scratch, for example, I am told that I need to be more efficient.”</p> <p>“Prep time for teaching sessions and time allocated for marking - which are completely unrealistic unless you don't care about your teaching and/or you are a robot.”</p>
<i>The workload allocation is poorly administered/seems arbitrary</i>	<p>“The workload allocation has not been completed for this year. It has been incorrect, aspects were missing, or wrongly allocated.”</p> <p>“Workload sent to me without a meeting to discuss it. Workloads are rarely sent to colleagues in a timely manner.”</p> <p>“often hard to understand why colleagues are tasked with the work they are allocated”</p> <p>“Colleagues allocated to modules outside their expertise because they have hours available on their workload.”</p> <p>“The main issue for me is the lack of transparency in workload and allocation”</p> <p>“Over the years, my teaching load has steadily increased and yet my workload always seems to stay the same.”</p>

<p><i>The workload system does not recognize pressure points</i></p>	<p>“When I raised my workload with my line-manager because I was suffering health problems caused by over-work, they passed on a message from a more senior colleague that it is not going to change.”</p> <p>“Simultaneous marking and teaching mean there are times in the year when it is difficult to manage workload”</p> <p>“bottlenecks of workload that can go on for months, requiring one to work evenings and weekends to meet deadlines”</p>
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Impact of the COVID19 Pandemic

Although participants clearly and repeatedly comment on rising workloads and stress levels from before the pandemic, they also report the last two years as more stressful, more challenging and less well managed, leading to increases in perceived stress and ill-health. Two themes emerged from qualitative comments on the impact of the pandemic: 1) the impact of the crisis on workload and mental wellbeing and 2) the impact of the University’s handling of the pandemic on staff wellbeing.

Table 2: Impact of the COVID pandemic on staff workload and wellbeing

Themes	
<p><i>Impact of the pandemic on workload and wellbeing</i></p>	<p>“Increased workload through double provision of in person and online teaching as well as simultaneous curriculum changes that have increased workloads for some colleagues to breaking point”</p> <p>“I have been massively over-worked throughout the ongoing pandemic: this has directly caused me severe physical difficulties, from which I am still (nearly two years later) trying to recover.”</p> <p>“I have taken time of [sic] with severe stress twice - for the first time in a 30 year career.”</p> <p>“Mental health breakdown as a result of overwork caused by the switch to remote teaching while home schooling.”</p>
<p><i>Impact of the University’s handling of the pandemic</i></p>	<p>“Lecturers were forced to learn new skills without proper training or support, and when things went wrong were expected to deal with them, often humiliating themselves in front of their students.”</p> <p>“The decision by the university to not impose a face covering mandate throughout the whole of the current pandemic has caused unnecessary anxiety and occasional conflict with students, which should have been avoided at all cost.”</p> <p>“I was very frustrated that we were asked to continue teaching in person after the government offered WFH guidance at the beginning of the Omicron surge, especially as it was shortly before the holidays when staff and students alike would be hoping to see family”</p>

	<p>“Increased stress and demoralisation due to increased expectations to provide higher levels of student pastoral support at the same time as the constant threat of redundancy leading me to feel devalued and symptoms of depression”</p> <p>“...it is very discouraging to see how much emphasis there is on student wellbeing and how little staff wellbeing is considered.”</p> <p>“The University made so many adjustments to help students but no adjustments to support academics. The adjustments for students actually mean more work for academics, that is not acknowledged in practice by management.”</p> <p>“Some RSI and eye strain from having to work on a small personal laptop when working at home”</p> <p>“I felt bullied to work on campus as [did] all my colleagues.”</p>
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Leadership and change management (Manager support, Role clarity, Change)

Participants’ comments in response to an open-ended question inviting further comments on stress and workload provide some evidence that management failures, lack of consultation and failure to communicate are perceived to be causes of additional stress. Participants’ comments matched the quantitative data relating to job role clarity in that they felt alienated from departmental and university strategies and were unclear about their role within this. Managers were perceived as unsupportive in stressful times and there was a lack of communication and consultation in times of change. Table 2 illustrates these themes with quotations from participants.

Table 3: Leadership issues identified in open text comments

Theme	
<i>Lack of consultation and control</i>	<p>“There is a lack of genuine consultation at Roehampton, although a lot of lip service to it. I do not feel that my opinion matters.”</p> <p>“We are held accountable for things we have little control over e.g. the NSS. Exceptional effort is not recognised and there is no career progression causing demotivation due to feelings of injustice and exploitation. “</p> <p>“I'm so disillusioned with academia, and especially Roehampton's senior management, that I am close to leaving academia for good. I feel totally undervalued and like I'm just a number on a spreadsheet.”</p>
<i>Failure of strategic leadership</i>	<p>“There has been a lack of leadership, and direction in the department. Aims are unclear and there is a general lack of direction and vision for the School, its development and curriculum development.”</p> <p>“The situation in my department is completely out of control. We are losing colleagues at an alarming rate (either due to resignations or sick leave) and there isn't sufficient staff for the number of students that we have.”</p>

	<p>“senior management have done everything they could to make staff feel more insecure. Especially lecturers with yearly contracts are a disgrace. ... Roehampton's management have treated staff as obstacles, not assets, and that is short-sighted, unproductive and very sad indeed.</p>
<i>Lack of management support</i>	<p>“management has no clear plan to support staff who are stressed and ill due to the pandemic.”</p> <p>“The lack of interest in, and understanding of, institutional responsibility towards the wellbeing of staff and the assurance that they are allowed to progress in their career (instead of stunted due to lack of time and opportunities for research), means that I do not feel valued in my work”</p> <p>”... colleagues are exhausted and quite bitter about the university and how it is treating them. There are systematic failures ...”</p>

A culture of bullying

While there was no quantitative evidence that work relationships are any better or worse at Roehampton compared with HE sector in general, 11.4% of participants reported being subject to bullying or harassment ‘often’ or ‘always’. There were a large number of responses to an open-ended question about experience of bullying or harassment at work. Of these 12% made reference to historical events, 7% reported having witnessed bullying and 80% reported direct experience of bullying by managers (42%) or colleagues (26%). Types and sources varied, from subtle undermining to more direct bullying. Open-ended responses in Table 3 represent excerpts attesting to 1) a general perception of a bullying culture and 2) the unwillingness of management to recognize and address this.

Table 4:

Themes	
<i>Bullying culture: Bullying is normalised within the university</i>	<p>“blame culture (module grades are deemed as personal responsibility of tutors) as well as fear culture”</p> <p>“Culture of bullying in some areas seemingly designed to upset colleagues”</p> <p>“Line management is a serious concern. A culture of blame is evident and students evidently always come first at the expense of staff.”</p> <p>“I have seen numerous instances of bullying in my department which has resulted in long-standing colleagues leaving or having to take time off from work as a result of stress or ill health.”</p> <p>“I have personally experienced misuse of power by managers that have seriously undermined me, made me feel humiliated and have caused me to feel suicidal at the lowest points.”</p>

	<p>“ ... it does seem that there is a pattern of behaviour directed at particular members of staff - I hope it will not be directed at me one day. A number of colleagues have moved on to other jobs because of their experiences”</p>
<p><i>Tolerance of bullying behaviour: it is seen as an appropriate style of management</i></p>	<p>“There is zero support from management with this.”</p> <p>“This colleague has seemingly gone unchecked, even when I have witnessed her conduct in front of other senior staff.”</p> <p>“She knows that she can do it as NOBODY checks on her. Complaints have been made at the HR level and have been completely ignored.”</p> <p>“...despite some of the allegations being upheld he was promoted”</p>

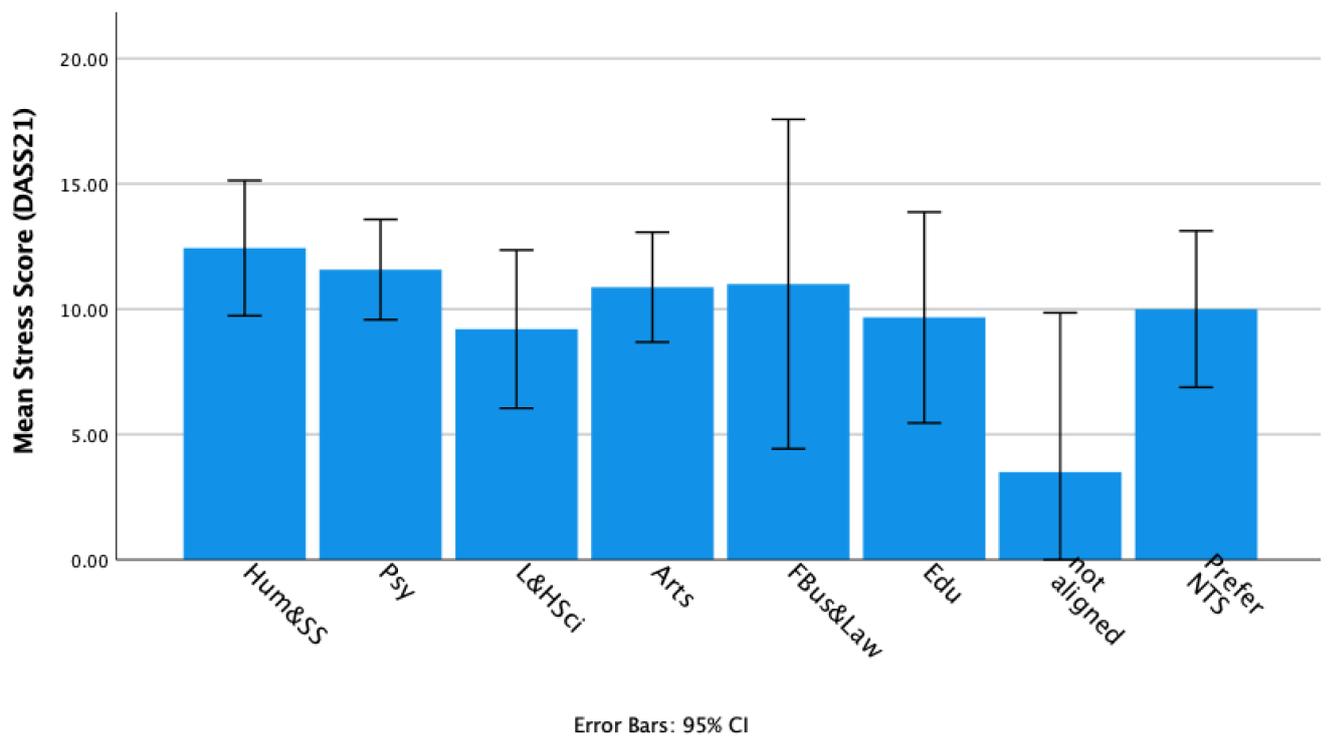
Differences in stress across different schools

Five of the Roehampton academic Schools were well represented with complete responses, however, the data from the Faculty of Business and Law (FBus&Law) and from participants not aligned with a school/faculty were excluded from statistical analyses due to low complete response rates, but are shown as separate categories in some of the descriptive graphs. There is no reason to believe that participants in these categories were substantially different in terms of demographics or other characteristics based on analysis of the small number of complete responses received.

Figure 4 shows mean stress scores broken down by school/faculty. This shows that measured stress levels are highest in Humanities and Social Sciences, Psychology and Arts. This may be reflective of the significant level of change these three schools have experienced over the past three years. In fact, stress levels in these three schools combined is significantly higher than in the other two schools combined ($t(86)=1.8, p < .04$). Business & Law and participants not aligned with an academic department categories show large confidence ranges due to small number of responses and are therefore excluded from the statistical analysis.

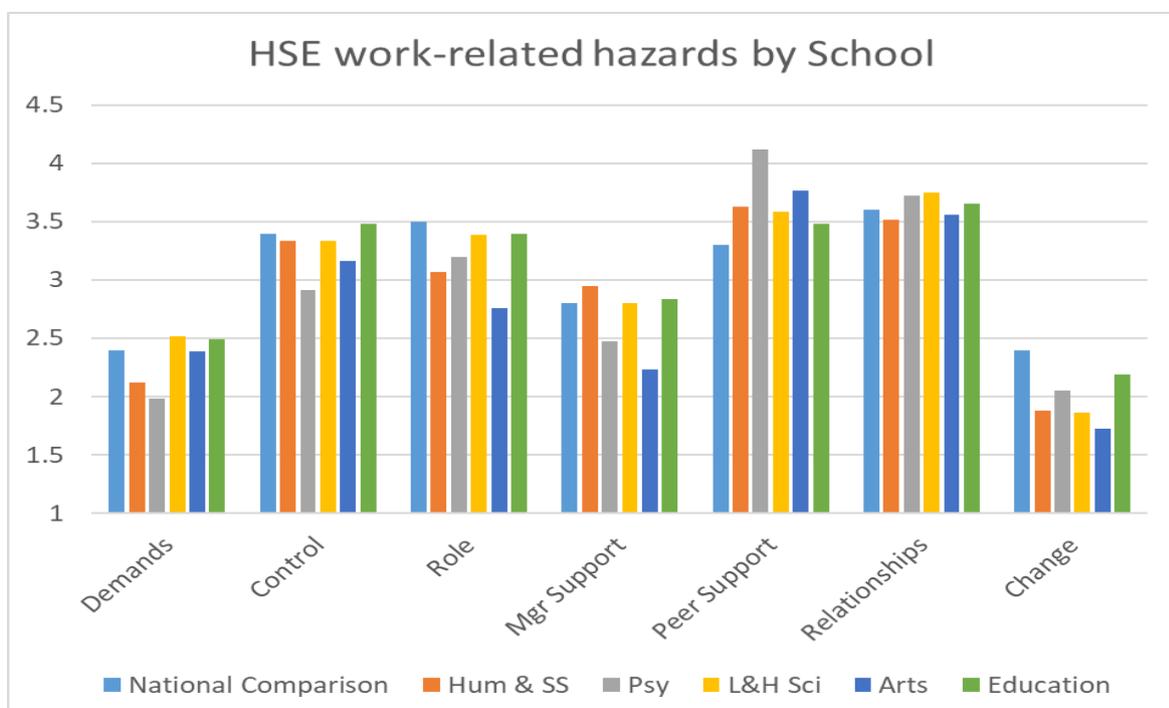
There is some evidence that stress is a particular work-related health and safety hazard in Higher Education. Kinman and Wray (2013) have reported high levels of perceived work-related stress in a sample of 24000 UCU members (14667 of whom worked in HE), with 32.6% in HE strongly agreeing that they find their job stressful. Nevertheless, the data presented here indicate that there is a significant issue with stress for academic staff at the University of Roehampton. None of the individual schools fall in a normal range of stress and most of them yield mean scores indicating moderate stress levels or above. On the other hand, participants ‘not aligned’ with a department yield a mean score firmly within the normal range. The indication is that stress is particularly associated with academic roles.

Figure 4: Mean stress level by school (normal stress < 8)



Differences in hazards across schools

Figure 5:



Higher scores indicate greater well-being, e.g. fewer perceived demands, more control, greater role clarity, more manager and peer support, less-problematic relationships and bullying and more successful change management.

From Figure 5, it is worth highlighting the following-

The perceived job demands are highest in Psychology followed by H&SS. Control is below the national average in all schools except Education (note: this indicates an erosion of employees' perceived autonomy which is associated with low motivation in the occupational psychology literature). Role clarity is below the national average in all schools (note: this refers to Dept and University goals rather than individual job clarity. The lack of clarity is associated with how their role fits with departmental and university objectives).

The lack of manager support is most evident in Arts, Psy and L&HSci. Peer support is high in all schools but highest in Psych, followed by Arts, followed by H&SS (note: Roehampton has a long history of being a very collegiate working environment. This has not been significantly eroded. Positive peer relations may compensate for issues in other areas). Relationships (bullying, strained relations) are responsible for lower well-being scores in H&SS and Arts (note: given that peer support is high in Arts and H&SS, this result is likely to reflect relationships between academic staff and management). Finally, poor change management is a significant hazard across all schools.

Although high stress levels were associated with all academic roles, the extent to which bullying from different sources was reported varied considerably across different schools. In the School of Psychology, 88% of qualitative comments referenced direct line management or senior management, whereas only 16% did in the School of Life and Health Sciences (60% in Arts, 46% in H&SS and 29% in Education).

Across departments/schools the following conclusions can be drawn-

Psychology:

High demands and low control – associated with a high likelihood of burnout. The consequences of this are predictable from the demand-control model (Karasek and Theorell, 1990). This follows on from a period of extremely high turnover (27 members of staff have left over the last three years).

Lack of management support – associated with high staff turnover, demotivation and high levels of stress and sickness absence

H&SS:

High demands - associated with burnout, high levels of stress and sickness absence (Siegrist, 1996)

Lack of role clarity in relation to departmental and institutional strategy – associated with low morale and lower contributions

Poor change management - associated with a lack of commitment to institutional strategies and goals, increased resistance to change, low morale, higher costs and reduced retention of staff. This has a negative effect on the “citizenship” of colleagues ([Rakhshanimehr & Jenaabadi, 2015](#)).

L&HSci:

Lack of role clarity in relation to departmental and institutional strategy - associated with low morale and reduced contributions

Poor change management - associated with a lack of commitment to institutional strategies and goals, increased resistance to change, low morale, higher costs and reduced retention of staff. This has a negative effect on the “citizenship” of colleagues ([Rakhshanimehr & Jenaabadi, 2015](#)).

Low control – associated with demotivation, low productivity and raised sickness absence, This is predictable from the demand-control model (Karasek and Theorrell, 1990).

Arts:

Lack of role clarity in relation to departmental and institutional strategy - associated with low morale and reduced contributions

Lack of manager support - associated with high staff turnover, demotivation and high levels of stress and sickness absence

Poor change management - associated with a lack of commitment to institutional strategies and goals, increased resistance to change, low morale, higher costs and reduced retention of staff. This has a negative effect on the “citizenship” of colleagues ([Rakhshanimehr & Jenaabadi, 2015](#)).

Education:

Poor change management - associated with a lack of commitment to institutional strategies and goals, increased resistance to change, low morale, higher costs and reduced retention of staff. This has a negative effect on the “citizenship” of colleagues ([Rakhshanimehr & Jenaabadi, 2015](#)).

Lack of manager support - associated with high staff turnover, demotivation and high levels of stress and sickness absence

High demands - associated with burnout, high levels of stress and sickness absence (Siegrist, J, 1996).

It is striking that participants in almost all departments report refer to high staff turnover and staff losses, with that in Psychology being particularly notable. Respondents report this as a result of burnout and bullying but also identify it as a source of stress in itself. This suggests that recent rounds of voluntary redundancy and a tendency to replace experienced, full-time members of staff with hourly-paid staff has not only hit morale but also increased the stress of those who remain, including those hourly-paid colleagues.

UCU would normally expect a work-related hazard to be addressed with a risk assessment which outlines measures to mitigate the impact of stress on wellbeing. We have asked to see the Roehampton stress risk assessment, but so far have had no response to this request, not even an acknowledgement that one exists. Instead, we have been offered one seat on a management 'working party' to discuss stress. While UCU is more than happy to participate, the issues thrown up by this survey are far too urgent to wait for the possible outcome of an open-ended working party.

In our view we need:

- An immediate stress risk assessment
- Urgent steps to *reduce* workload before next academic year, not just to make it unquantifiable and to deal with 'pinch points', mostly when marking coincides with other teaching or administrative duties
- Immediate discussions about staffing
- Immediate training for all managers and HR partners on stress, bullying and workload pressures

In the longer term, the working group needs to develop a stress management policy which defines stress and looks to address its root causes at Roehampton, including:

- Employing more staff to reduce both workloads and the practice of asking people to teach areas outside their specialism
- Developing a realistic assessment of the time needed to carry out tasks at Roehampton
- Changing the management culture to one that is supportive of staff and their aspirations, creating realistic routes to staff development and promotion; ending the culture of blame and above all, abandoning the attitude that workload and the working environment is a zero-sum game: if students are to benefit, staff must lose out.
- Ensuring that there is a proactive approach to preventing bullying or 'pressure' on staff
- A new policy on the use of fractional and hourly-paid contracts
- Tailoring the work environment to the needs and the strengths of staff
- Consulting staff fully, listening to their expertise and developing an approach to change that is inclusive rather than secretive.

We look forward to hearing your views and assure you that we shall be pressing management for action.

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