

## **SESE & WLP: Resourcing the Academic Experience**

### **Introduction**

This document is the outcome of consultations with UCU members. The central argument is that the University's 'Strategy for Enhancing the Student Experience' (SESE) needs to be resourced through its 'Workload Planning Framework' (WLP). UCU highlights below the need for more hours and for systematic calculations of the academic hours that are required to resource the whole academic experience, in the interests of students, academics and indeed the whole university.

The next section argues that the University's aspirations for quality teaching and assessment, as articulated in the SESE, must translate into the WLP framework. Following this is a section on research tariffs, which calls for clarity in research categorisation criteria and an annual full year's advance notification to academics of these measures, in order that university research strategy can inform personal research plans (PRPs). Some academic hours are wasted on overly complicated academic processes and hence there is a section arguing that the university should streamline some of the academic processes. Again with reference to the SESE, we then argue that UCU and students should work together to enhance the academic experience (in joint discussions about workload planning). Finally, the document culminates in recommendations for enhancing the academic experience, for management's consideration.

### **Resourcing Quality Teaching & Assessment**

Nationally, according to researchers for consumer watchdog 'Which?' and the Higher Education Policy Institute, "students complain of 'poor value for money' courses...The raising of fees paid by students from England to a maximum of £9,000 a year...has put universities under increasing pressure to deliver, and be seen to deliver, value for money" (BBC, 2013). Although many students and academics contest the marketization of higher education, if students are to be regarded as customers, then they ought to receive more time for each item in the WLP framework, commensurate with the significant increase in tuition fees.

Since the WLP framework was introduced, there has been very significant intensification of academic workloads, with greater emphasis on the use of technologies and virtual learning environments, research excellence, enhanced assignment feedback, and overall demands for increasing teaching quality as a result of the student survey. However, the WLP framework has yet to adjust to these changes.

Although the university has not given academics sufficient time to meet these new challenges, it does recognise the increased demand on them in its strategy statements. The 'Strategy for Enhancing the Student Experience' (2015-2020) supports the University's strategic goals: "We will be a university that enables a student experience of the highest standard possible" (SESE,

1.1) and “we will ensure that learning and teaching are at the leading edge” (SESE, 2.2). The institution wants “outstanding teachers” (SESE, 3.6.1) who “inspire students” (SESE, 3.2.1) with pedagogy that is “enriched by using technologies” (SESE, 3.5.5, 3.8.2, 3.8.3). The university WLP framework needs to take full account of the use of digital resources (e.g. the VLE) and recognise the increased level of communications with students that digital communications have generated (e.g. via social media). Furthermore, academics’ investment in technological innovation needs to be rewarded in the WLP system (currently, those who want to experiment have to do it in their own time).

Brookes promises to provide students with “a research-informed curriculum” (SESE, 3.5.4). Moreover, “all academic staff who support learning undertake research and/or scholarship into pedagogic practice since these are key to being better teachers, and to the University being a premier learning and teaching institution” (SESE, 3.6.4).

The university undertakes to “actively implement...the Brookes Assessment Compact” (SESE, 3.7.4) and to “...help students learn by providing formative feedback. Students will be given supportive, constructive and timely feedback as an essential part of learning. Such feedback enables students to build on their positive achievements and have a clear sense of what they need to do to improve” (SESE, 3.7.2). However, the University Workload Planning framework provides insufficient time for assessment. The assessment tariffs do not match the reality of marking, since academics are expected to provide detailed feedback to students, moderate, upload marks, write module reports, prepare external examiner packages, and attend examination committees.

The University asserts that it is “committed...to the enhancement of the staff experience” (SESE, 3.6.1). However, the implementation of the ‘Strategy for Enhancing the Student Experience’ is severely constrained by only referring to “Infrastructure and services in support of learning” (SESE, 4.5): it should also address academic resourcing. Moreover, the ‘Programme to Enhance the Student Experience’ makes no mention of enhancing academic hours in order to enhance the academic experience.

Brookes asserts that its ‘Strategy for Enhancing the Student Experience’ must be implemented through “evidence-based policy development and evaluation” (SESE, 4.4). Other universities recognise that “Workload planning models should be based upon measurements of time for tasks performed” (University of Stirling, undated) and likewise Brookes needs to engage in systematic workload planning - by identifying the actual academic time taken to undertake a growing number of complex tasks - in order to fulfil its aspirations for teaching, learning and assessment. Information from programme and module evaluations and staff surveys needs to be fed into reviews of workload planning. Academics express significant concerns over the framework in staff surveys. UCU members complain that each year they are given an increased workload (more students, course deliverables, and overly complicated procedures) - and yet, over time, the number of full-time academic staff is being reduced and associate lecturers have had their contracts diminished.

Academics work hard to receive excellent student feedback but because of inadequate WLP resourcing, these results are often achieved at the expense of other roles and responsibilities (e.g. research outputs) and work-life balance. Nationally, UCU (2010, p.15) asserts the need for “sufficient time to enable all work to be performed to an acceptable quality. Excessive workloads inevitably result in a trade-off in standards – this should be taken into account in devising a workload agreement to ensure that quality is not sacrificed to quantity.” For example “an agreement should incorporate time spent on developing the curriculum, course design and review” and “an additional element of time should be provided when a member of staff is required to develop new modules or courses” (UCU, 2010, p.20).

### **Timings & Tariffs for RKE & Scholarship Hours**

This section argues for clearer criteria in RKE tariffs and makes the case for advance notification of the criteria before they are used to decide which tariff applies to individual academics. The following initial background is relevant to both issues.

According to the University’s (2014, p.1) WLP framework, the rationale for having such a framework is so that there can be a “university-wide” approach “in order to secure greater consistency in managing workloads.” The Centre for Diversity Policy Research (2004, p.10) called for “the use of a university-wide workload planning framework that provides clear guidance.” Other universities call for “equitable, reasonable, fair and transparent” systems (University of Stirling, undated) and academic research recommends a “transparent and accountable approach” (Hull, 2006). However, a previous staff survey showed that many Brookes academics lack confidence in the WLP framework (the university states that it is committed to addressing the concerns of the survey). For example, the “lowest scoring areas” in a Faculty of Business Staff Survey (18 June 2013) included:

1. “Within my Department/Team it has been explained how the Workload Planning tariffs are drawn up” (academic staff 27%, support staff 17%, total 22%).
2. “There is transparency in relation to budgets and resource allocations” (academic staff 5%, support staff 38%, total 17%).

Bearing all of this in mind, the university ought not to have moved (in recent years) from clear to vague requirements for research tariffs. The criteria in the 2014-2015 framework include words such as “substantial”, “likely”, “significant”, “possible”, “quality”, “volume”, “limited”, “some”, and “basic”, which are undifferentiated, overly generalised, unreliable and unusable performance measures that cannot be implemented in a consistent manner. In practice, this non-transparent approach has led to perceptions of inconsistent, unfair and inequitable allocation of research hours and an overall downward trend of research categorisations.

Compounding academics’ perception of unfairness, the university retrospectively applies new criteria to research categorisations every year, moving the goalposts at the very last minute, informing researchers what they ought to have achieved but without ever providing the advance guidance that is obviously needed to direct their research activities. It is unfair and ineffective to

announce new retrospective performance measures and then apply them to an elapsed time period. Personal research plans need to be informed by university research plans that clearly articulate the criteria for research categorisations in advance. Otherwise, personal research plans will constantly be overturned by new research category criteria, instead of being informed by them. In summary, research performance measurement and evaluation should be strategic, equitable, transparent, effective, and focused on developing a research culture – while being sensitive, flexible and enabling (not constraining) individual research plans and a range of outputs (including publications, funding, and impact statements) across the university.

### **Streamlining Academic Processes & Avoiding Duplication**

Some academic hours are wasted on overly complicated processes. In full consultation with academic staff, the university should streamline its academic processes in the interests of economy, efficiency and effectiveness in the use of academic time. For example, the uploading of assessment marks is unnecessarily complicated. In another university, lecturers record feedback and enter marks only once, within one shared online assignment database. However, in Brookes, academics enter marks on the assessment form, then in Moodle, and then within PIP, unnecessarily extending time spent on assessment (which is already too limited by WLP), whilst also introducing the possibility of human error through multiple entries. We call for a review of this process and the implementation of a more streamlined approach.

A second example is the university process for approval of research funding bids, which includes initial peer review, submission to 2 readers from the grant panel, and then approval by HoD, RL, the grant panel, the research office, faculty finance, faculty AD Research, and RBDO. Academics complain that this long process takes up too much time and stifles entrepreneurship.

The above are only examples. There is a need to review and simplify other academic processes in order that academics can focus on the needs of students and the demands of research.

### **Students, Management & UCU Cooperating to Enhance the Academic Experience**

In a spirit of cooperation, students should be given a say in the resourcing of their academic experience and there should be joint working between students, management and UCU in order to achieve this. The University's 2015-2020 'Strategy for Enhancing the Student Experience' (SESE) promises that the institution "will seek to have a continuing partnership with our students, consulting with them" (SESE, 3.3.1) and that it "will provide an environment where students are proactively engaged in shaping their experience through influencing learning and extra-curricular policy, processes and outcomes" (SESE, 2.3). Therefore, students ought to be involved in discussions and decisions on the most crucial university resourcing issue that affects their final grade and future employability - the hours allocated for their research-informed pedagogy and assessment.

Furthermore, collaboration between students and UCU on academic workload planning (WLP) is supported by university statements: "the importance of staff and students in partnership" (SESE, 3.3), "the University is committed to developing further opportunities for students to more

effectively engage with its communities, through increased contact with staff” (SESE, 4.3.1), and the University “will work with the Brookes Union to identify opportunities for students to contribute to academic development projects, as members of working groups, organising focus groups or carrying out research” (SESE, 4.3.4). Accordingly, students and UCU should work together with management on the resourcing of the academic experience to ensure that “student representation, engagement and partnership all have a role in improving educational outcomes and institutional change” (SESE, 3.3.2).

## Recommendations

To enhance academic resourcing, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. **This first recommendation is the most important of all.** Workload planning should be calculated on the basis of how much time academics actually need for teaching, assessment and research. For each item in the WLP framework, calculations need to be on the basis of firstly identifying student expectations and university aspirations and then, secondly, calculating how much time will be needed to deliver that academic experience. Systematic workload planning should also be informed by data collated from module and programme evaluations, student reps, the Students’ Union, examination committee recommendations, and staff surveys. Such “evidence-based policy development and evaluation” (SESE, 4.4) can help to realise the aspirations for teaching, learning and assessment described in the Strategy for Enhancing the Student Experience.
2. Resourcing of the academic experience should be a standing item for the University Senior Management Team, the Joint Staff Consultative Committee, and the University WLP Group - and all groups should have the mandate to discuss and agree improvements to academic resourcing.
3. The ‘Programme to Enhance the Student Experience’ should include a project on enhancing academic hours, in order to enhance the academic experience.
4. Both pedagogy (re)design and WLP should reverse the trend of workload intensification for academics, which militates against critical reflection and debate.
5. Research and teaching allowances should be enhanced overall, recognising that they are investments in core capabilities that are critical to the performance of students, academics, departments, and indeed the ranking of the whole university - and its consequent ability to recruit students and academics.
6. Academic timetables should be practicable, in terms of timing and location, and also allow space for planning, reflection and review.
7. Additional hours should be allocated to take account of lecturers’ increasing use of technologies and virtual learning environments.
8. There should be increased staffing of seminar groups and small group teaching, which will help Brookes to compete with other universities.
9. The SESE, the Assessment Compact, and student surveys should be used to inform the calculation of assessment hours.
10. There should be much clearer research categorisation performance measures, notified to academics one year in advance of their implementation and consistently applied to academics across the university, to properly inform individual personal research plans

and management decisions on research categorisations. Specifically, new research categorisation criteria should be announced annually before PDR/PRP meetings, in order to inform future individual research planning, and then should only apply to evaluating academic performance over the course of the following academic year, in order to inform research categorisation decisions at the end of that academic year. For example, new research categorisation criteria should be announced in April 2015 to inform and direct personal research plans for the academic year 2015-2016. Then the criteria can be used fairly and effectively to confirm research categories in May 2016 for the academic year 2016-2017. This would end the current system of moving the goalposts immediately before research categorisations, which is demotivating, unfair and ineffective.

11. In full consultation with academic staff, the university should **streamline its academic processes** in the interests of economy, efficiency and effectiveness in the use of academic time.
12. Any institutional plans for the implementation of **online marking, increased amounts of second marking** and anonymous marking all carry substantial implications for academics' workload - and the WLP framework will need to be adjusted accordingly. Any such changes require consultation with UCU in advance of any decision about whether, how and when to implement them.

**Jeff Waistell, UCU Branch Secretary, 4 February 2015.**

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