

Work pressure Framework for a long-term approach

Progress to date

Work pressure is a multifaceted phenomenon, which is sometimes traceable to specific professions and/or age groups, but often also a very personal perception. That also makes it very difficult to comprehend and influence. However, this does not erase the University's obligation to act as a good employer and to create a good balance in relation to work. A balance which seems to be missing, according to recent statements from university staff around the country. Their sentiments were, in many respects, consistent with the results of the 2015 UM employee survey on work perception, which also revealed a high workload perception among academic staff. As a matter of fact, the new collective labour agreement for university personnel expressly calls for a Plan of Action on Work Pressure. In other words, there's work to be done!

What is the current situation at UM? The University does not have to start from scratch, as some good first steps have been taken over the past years. Indeed, the phenomenon work pressure has been topic of both discussion and policy making on many an occasion. In recent years the Executive Board and Faculty Councils, prompted in part by the University Council, have already implemented various interventions to reduce the workload and improve the working atmosphere. The reference resources granted by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science in 2014 and subsequent years, were explicitly earmarked for spending that could reduce the workload of education and/or the educational process. The main goal was to increase the staff. Another area of focus is the importance of education (read: recognition of teaching roles), an explicit element of the UM Professorial Policy adopted in 2017 and the Tenure Track scheme for assistant professors.

Despite the demonstrable availability of additional resources in recent years for an increase of academic staff with a focus on teaching, this has not resulted in a proportionate reduction of the workload. This was the reason that the University Council and the Executive Board set up an *Educational Workload Task Force*, in late 2016. The Task Force acknowledged that the issue of work pressure cannot be resolved by additional staff alone, rather that it calls for a much wider spectrum of organisational and managerial measures and policy.

The Faculty Councils received the Task Force recommendations¹ shortly before the summer recess 2017, together with the request to indicate which actions they would link to the different opinions of and recommendations made by the Task Force. The response from the various faculties varied, from very specific measures to strategic policy intentions and reflects the differences between the various units in terms of development stage, organisation and culture. The matter has been discussed seriously and the Faculty Councils realise that they must address the issue of work pressure.

The report of the Educational Workload Task Force focused exclusively on academic staff. Work pressure is obviously also perceived by professional support staff, however. The HR advisors therefore have also raised this issue with the deans and directors of faculties and service centres.

We note that non-academic staff represent a large and very diverse category of jobs. Two main categories of non-academic staff can be distinguished:

- a. non-academic staff in teaching and research: this concerns non-academic staff who work closely together with academic staff in teaching and research (laboratory staff, Education Office, etc.)
- b. non-academic staff providing services: this concerns non-academic staff who are further removed from teaching and research.

These two groups have a markedly different work context, which also means that different complementary measures for reducing the work pressure should apply.

Now what?

¹ Educational Workload Task Force report, June 2017

Work pressure is too vast and complex a phenomenon to expect that it could be resolved in one fell swoop, with a single plan under single leadership. Rather it calls for a dynamic and continuously revised programme of diverse responsibilities allocated to various parts of the organisation. Of course, it also calls for patience, long-term policy interventions and for corresponding accountability processes and monitoring. While much of the everyday work pressure can only be resolved close to the shop floor, that obviously does not apply to all aspects of work pressure. Some generic, university-wide measures are certainly also relevant. In other words, a programme to reduce workload should result in a combined decentralised-centralised approach. We thus propose that the various initiatives and interventions be regarded as integral components of a single coherent and dynamic Framework on Work Pressure.

Taking this into consideration, the Executive Board wishes to reach an understanding with the University Council and the Local Consultative Body regarding the framework which is to incorporate the various policy agendas, setting out the steering, planning and control mechanisms, and distributing the roles and responsibilities accordingly between the board, management and employee representation.

The various Annual Agendas will be discussed with the representative bodies once a year as a coherent package of policy measures. Given the possible financial consequences, such discussions can best be held in conjunction with budget consultations.

The Educational Workload Task Force will remain active at the request of the Executive Board, and widen its focus to include non-academic staff. The Task Force will be renamed “Task Force Workload scientific and related support staff”. The Task Force will be requested to consider NWO workload reduction plans (developed in response to high application rates amongst academic staff) when formulating its recommendations. The Task Force advises the Executive Board and faculties.

Monitoring

Succession and monitoring of the action plans Workpressure will be carried out at 2 levels:

- The follow-up and monitoring of action plans for reducing work pressure will be permanently incorporated into the cycle of spring and autumn consultations with the faculties and service centres. These plans will be adjusted annually where necessary. Periodic progress reports will be submitted to the Executive Board, Coordinating Directors’ Board, Management Team, University Council and the Local Consultative Body
- The development of (perceived) work pressure will be monitored on the basis of factors including RI&E, absence figures, periodic PMO and continuation of a renewed Staff Experience Survey (SES). A review of the current SES is currently under consideration. The further development of the periodic employee survey on work perception will serve as guideline for improvements in relation to the perception of work pressure per unit and university wide.

Where necessary, the long-term Workload Framework programme should be annually supplemented with new policy measures and actions, relating to both academic staff and non-academic staff. The decentralized proposals will thus become part of a well-structured, long-term approach and monitoring.

Framework outline

Responsibilities and roles:

The Executive Board will be responsible for:

- formulating and implementing generic policy measures, insofar as possible as part of an integral Annual Agenda, with due consideration for the responsibilities of the university representative bodies
- reporting to the Supervisory Board, University Council and Local Consultative Body on the effects of generic measures
- reporting, once a year, on the decentralised policy measures (Annual Agendas) as part of a PDCA cycle, for the attention of the employee representation body

Faculty Boards will be responsible for (concerning academic staff, non-academic staff in teaching and research and non-academic staff providing services):

- implementing generic measures within the unit

- formulating and implementing policy measures at faculty level or at decentralised level, insofar as possible as part of an integral Annual Agenda, with due consideration for the responsibilities of the faculty representative bodies
- reporting to the Faculty Council on the effects of the aforementioned measures
- reporting to the Executive Board once a year on the decentralised policy measures, as part of a PDCA cycle

Directors of service centres and MUO will be responsible for (concerning non-academic staff):

- implementing generic measures within the unit
- formulating and implementing policy measures at service centre or MUO level or at decentralised level, insofar as possible as part of an integral Annual Agenda, with due consideration for the responsibilities of the Employees' Council
- reporting to the Employees' Council on the effects of the aforementioned measures
- reporting to the Executive Board once a year on the decentralised policy measures, as part of a PDCA cycle

Policy categories:

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The various policy measures, both centralised and decentralised, will be incorporated in an *Annual Agenda*, which will distinguish the following policy categories:

Development of key indicators:

Further elaboration on the following issues:

- number of staff, also in relation to changes in scale and/or scope of tasks. (innovation-related activities should be recognised as such and considered accordingly in the task load)
- job security, i.e. ratio permanent/temporary staff
- leave scope of staff (guideline principle: employees are encouraged and/or enabled to take their leave)
- percentage of average pay available for and spent on development, training/courses and so on

Modification of generic management processes which could reduce regulatory pressure:

To be further elaborated on the following points:

- abolition of University Job Classification forms, appraisal and assessment interviews and the implementation of annual appraisals which specifically focus on performance management by means of reflection of and feedback on the past year, tasks for the coming year in terms of expectations and personal development, as well as attention to motivation, work pressure, the balance between work and private life, and health. The issue of work pressure will also be structurally incorporated into the (new) annual appraisals
- special attention towards under-performers (who increase the team workload)
- HR facilitation (training and coaching) for employees in preparation of their Annual Appraisals
- development of E-HRM to reduce the administrative workload for managers, provide us with reliable data and allow employees easy insight into their own situation and development opportunities (employee portal)

Modification of subject-related processes, university wide:

Issues to be addressed:

- digital assessment
- review of teaching programmes for different elements, such as test opportunities

Modification of subject-related processes, specific:

Attention now goes out to:

- where possible, expanding the control capacity for (autonomous) research and teaching teams and making better use of the various qualities available in the teams

Work perception:

In the first instance, focus will be on:

- career prospects: each employee should at least have an Annual Appraisal every year (see above), during which attention is paid to development and employability in both the short term (within the current position) and the longer term which, in accordance with the collective labour agreement, are laid down in a Personal Development Plan.
- implementation of (several) Tenure Tracks for academic career perspectives.
- transparent and insightful procedures for career stages, with more focus on the importance of teaching performance with regard to career prospects, for example, or on the importance and recognition of managerial teaching positions (such as director of studies)
- review of processes for imbalance in distribution of roles and tasks between employees in a team
- specific attention for identifiably vulnerable groups

Elements of good HRM policy, general and specific

Among others, these items will be addressed:

- professionalisation of academic and managerial leaders, especially HRM skills by developing leadership-enhancement programmes at three levels; for future managers, managers in the early stages of their career, and senior managers.
- reassessment of the recognition and remuneration of teaching-related duties in relation to research duties;
- specific focus on inclusiveness and diversity
- activities in respect of which the Board and/or Management come to an understanding with the employees to exchange information regarding the perception of and approach to work pressure
- attention for team performance and team development and research into more self-regulation of the workload within (self-managing) teams.
- deploying strategic personnel planning / multi-year capacity planning to make the supply and demand of staff more transparent
- research into integrated profit and loss account for the prolonged succession of temporary employment contracts for young academic staff
- more attention for life-stage differentiation and monitoring of any negative effects this may have on career prospects
- sabbatical scheme