

# Pressure Vessels: The epidemic of poor mental health among higher education staff

By Liz Morrish

With a Foreword by Professor Mike Thomas



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## **About the author**

Liz Morrish is an independent scholar and Visiting Fellow at York St John University. She researches the discourse of managerialism in higher education, and is completing a co-authored book on this subject, entitled *Academic Irregularities* (Routledge forthcoming). She also writes a blog with the same name (<https://academicirregularities.wordpress.com/>). Having exited the academy, Liz now has more time for other activities, and has recently qualified as a marathon swim observer.

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to be able to acknowledge by name the contribution of the researchers who gathered and collated the data which has formed the evidence base for this report. However, staff who speak out about mental health in universities fear adverse consequences for their future careers. Many have been cautioned by my own experience in doing this, which I have recounted elsewhere.<sup>1</sup> Now, as an independent scholar, I am more able to articulate unpopular arguments and hold authority to account.

## Foreword

**Professor Mike Thomas, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Central Lancashire (UCLan), 2014 to 2018**

What is striking about the culture of the current higher education workforce is the repeated staff surveys and interviews. These indicate a deteriorating level of sector confidence, frustration about its direction of travel and an increasing level of poor mental health.

Liz Morrish has examined this phenomenon with an expert eye and this HEPI report pulls together some of the main findings regarding poor mental health among higher education staff. Her paper captures potential causes, the negative impact of contemporary work practices and a number of approaches which may begin to address the issues properly.

It is clear and irrefutable that the changes wrought in the last decade have not been positively accepted by many staff working in the sector. As Liz highlights in her report, the growing bureaucracy required to complete regulatory requirements, metrics, audits and sector reviews (such as those within the Teaching Excellence Framework and the Research Excellence Framework) take staff away from what they are good at doing, reduces job satisfaction and increases frustration and stress.

Repeated findings indicate strikingly similar results, over two-thirds of staff, from whatever discipline, academic or professional services, currently struggle for half of their time to complete their workload and nearly one-third struggle all of the time. For those open and candid universities who submitted data

on staff referrals to counselling and occupational health, the picture is one of increasing strain: a 70% increase in referrals to counselling and a 60% increase in referrals to occupation health for female staff. Those on fixed-term contracts experience worry and anxiety about their employment status with over one-third stating they experience poor mental health because of it. Email and social media retain their status as distractions and a burden, taking staff away from being more productive and efficient with their time.

Unsurprisingly, in view of the sector's regulatory requirements, command-and-control leadership and managerialism firmly control planning and strategic thinking. In particular, the drive to define managerialism as some form of specialist cadre without which a university would sink into oblivion remains the most dominant leadership model with staff having to participate, albeit reluctantly, in the surveillance and monitoring of their own and sometimes colleagues' performance, setting individual objectives and targets, participating in metrics measures and completing audit exercises.

This is not my personal opinion here. Liz's report clearly indicates, with evidence, that directive, performance-management approaches are counter-productive to the output, efficiency and effectiveness of the organisation and also to staff wellbeing and mental health. If such an approach works, why are so many of our colleagues so unwell and continue to be so?

Things can change, as Liz also highlights. It is not all negative, and there are some good initiatives happening in the sector. The increasing interest in Stewardship as a

leadership approach, with its emphasis on maintaining a high-trust environment and appreciating colleagues' knowledge and values, appears to be attractive to staff. Collaborative leadership seems to provide hope and optimism with a positive impact on staff mental health. More work can be done to disseminate the efforts which some universities have already commenced, such as reforming structures, working conditions and career progression. Supporting collaboration, rather than competition, between universities also seems to be welcomed by colleagues and university leaders need to encourage initiatives in this area.

There is a quotation in Liz's report from the 'Anxiety machine and the modern university' website (2018), which states that 'Academic work is also by its very nature never finished'. I think this statement relates to a very important aspect of positive mental health. The work of a university constantly evolves and never stops. It has always been like this, but that incessant drive should be for real improvement and not artificial measures which compromise the mental wellbeing of colleagues. 'Resilience', for example, can sometimes be interpreted as a code for expecting staff to 'toughen up', or be confused with management expectation of staff compliance. Artificial leadership and management approaches do not lead to effective staff, a good student experience or a collegiate work environment.

Liz Morrish's report provides a timely challenge for university and sector leaders: how should we create an authentically caring environment that supports genuine staff resilience and good mental health?



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## Executive summary

- This report finds evidence of an escalation of poor mental health among university staff in the period 2009 to 2016. Data were obtained from 59 higher education institutions on referrals to counselling and occupational health services.
- Rises of 50% are common, and some universities have seen much higher rises, up to 316% (University of Warwick, counselling). In occupational health referrals, there have been rises of 424% at the University of Kent and 344% at Keele University.
- There was a sharp increase in referrals after 2012 and implementation of the Browne Review funding arrangements. We suggest that pressure on staff to enhance the student experience has resulted in work-related stress.
- Referrals continue to escalate; in 2015/16 there were some astonishing increases. For example, numbers of staff accessing counselling at De Montfort University went up by 304%.
- Higher education has been described as an 'anxiety machine'. The report identifies the following causes of poor mental health in higher education institutions:
  - Excessive workloads and workload models which frequently under-count time necessary for fulfilling tasks, and many tasks prove invisible to the workload assessors.
  - Audit and metrics dominate the working lives of academics. These are driven by the need to comply

with external nationwide audits, such as the Research Excellence Framework and the Teaching Excellence Framework, but they have also been repurposed as instruments of performance management.

- Many academics exist on a succession of precarious contracts which do not allow for career planning or advancement.
- Performance management in universities is linked to short-term outcomes and expectations which are often unattainable for many.
- The recommendations include:
  - more realistic workload allocations;
  - more responsible use of metrics;
  - better performance management, policies which embed a developmental function and which recognise the long-term goal-setting which is appropriate for academics; and
  - a commitment by universities to sustainable careers and a pathway from postdoctoral research to lectureship.

Enacting these recommendations would help make higher education an attractive profession once more for talented and ambitious scholars. Staff who feel valued and whose demonstrable competence is recognised by security of employment will experience less stress and are likely to

exhibit greater loyalty to their employers. A corollary of this transformation would be an improvement in the relationship between managers and academics, a state which would consequently favour enhanced learning conditions for students.

Universities and other HEIs often boast of being sector leaders, early adopters and employers of choice. We hope the recommendations in this report may act as inspiration to acquire a new competitive advantage - one rooted in staff satisfaction.



## Introduction

It has been clear for some time that the higher education student body has experienced a decline in mental health.<sup>2</sup> *The Guardian* has highlighted a sharp rise in students requesting counselling services.<sup>3</sup> In this environment, new interventions have become acutely necessary and there is now a charity, Student Minds, dedicated to improving student mental health.<sup>4</sup> In June 2018, Sam Gyimah, then the Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation, proposed a student mental health charter for universities.<sup>5</sup> In March 2019, there was an announcement of a new student mental health taskforce.<sup>6</sup>

More recently, there have been claims that the mental health of staff is also at risk. This report will present new findings that show how staff employed at higher education institutions are accessing counselling and occupational health services, which aim to keep employees well at work, at an increasing rate.

Between 2009 and 2015, counselling referrals rose by an average of 77 per cent, while staff referrals to occupational health services during the same period rose by 64 per cent.

This report will consider some of the factors which weigh on the mental health of academic staff:

- escalating and excessive workloads;
- the imposition of metric surveillance;
- outcomes-based performance management;
- increasing precarity; and
- insecure contracts.

Universities have been characterised as ‘anxiety machines’ which purposefully flout a legal requirement to *prevent* stress in the workplace.<sup>7</sup> Given the urgency of the situation, we will propose recommendations which might alleviate some of the pressures.

## The cause for concern

There has been a proliferation of reports in the press on the topic of work-related stress and mental health problems among academics. Some of this surfaced in the wake of the lengthy strike over proposed changes to the Universities Superannuation Scheme (USS) pension arrangements in 2018.<sup>8</sup> It was felt by many participants that the strike was as much about broader working conditions as about the proposed pension detriment.

Another catalyst for concern about academics' mental health was the death by suicide in February 2018 of the Cardiff University lecturer Malcolm Anderson. Reports indicate that Mr Anderson had attributed his distress to excessive workload, and management failure to respond to his objections.<sup>9,10</sup> This was not the first time such an incident had taken place and been attributed to a working environment which appeared to condone excessive pressures on academic staff. The death of Stefan Grimm of Imperial College, London, in 2014 was thought to have been precipitated by pressure from his manager to increase his research grant funding.<sup>11</sup>

In February 2018, *Times Higher Education* published the first major global survey of university staff views on work-life balance. The report pointed to mounting workloads with a concomitant decrease in time for family and leisure.

*About two-fifths of all university staff say that they have been working longer hours during the working week over the past three years. The highest proportion of academic respondents work nine hours per weekday; this falls to eight hours for professional and support staff. Academics*

*are twice as likely as professional staff to work 10 or more hours per weekday; 40 per cent of scholars say that they do so, compared with 20 per cent of non-academics.*<sup>12</sup>

A key complaint for academics was that senior managers failed to address their heavy workloads.

These findings were corroborated in two further studies.

1. In February 2018, Paul Gorczyński of the University of Portsmouth claimed that more academics and students have mental health problems than ever before, with findings that 43% of academic staff exhibited symptoms of at least a mild mental disorder.<sup>13</sup> This is nearly twice the prevalence of mental disorders in the general population.
2. Later in 2018, a *Times Higher Education* article reported a study authored by Gail Kinman, professor of occupational health psychology at the University of Bedfordshire, which concluded that university staff experience stress-related illness at a greater rate than police or medical personnel.

Typical symptoms include disrupted sleep, depression and cognitive impairment.<sup>14</sup> In seeking causes, Paul Gorczyński's report referenced a 2009 UCU study which placed the blame on workloads, lack of time to do research and pressure to obtain research funding.<sup>15</sup>

The spate of stories over the last year suggests a sector-wide crisis of poor mental health, particularly among academic staff who are afflicted at a much greater rate than their peers in other professional occupations. We present



below firm evidence that university staff are experiencing poor mental health at a greater rate than several years ago.

Managers might well claim that there exists a supportive architecture of human resource departments, occupational health and employee assistance programs. Nevertheless, this report argues the mental and physical safety of individuals within the higher education sector, irrespective of contract type, is a matter which requires more action on the part of managers.

Data obtained through Freedom of Information requests provide figures to quantify these concerns. Researchers focused on 74 higher education institutions, in particular those employing over 2,000 staff. The Freedom of Information requests were submitted between July 2017 and November 2017. In respect of occupational health referral data, 55 of the institutions provided data and, in respect of counselling, 61 provided information. In some cases, the data provided were limited. The analysis has excluded higher education institution data where there is no consistency in reporting from one year to the next – this was particularly pronounced in cases where the higher education institution had changed their Employee Assistance Provider (a private provider of staff counselling and corporate wellness services).



## Findings of the Freedom of Information Survey

The figures represent data provided by 59 (which amounts to three-quarters of the sample) of the 74 higher education institutions and point to an alarming rise in academics and professional service staff accessing university counselling services, as well as a steep rise in referrals to occupational health services, since 2009.

There are some caveats that must be acknowledged and some limitations of the data. Universities have not all reported data in the same way; some have outsourced their counselling and occupational health provision to private providers, and in some cases these have changed over the time period surveyed. Some universities allow staff to self-refer to services, while others require managers or Human Resources to refer individuals. In some cases, the numbers are relatively small and so small numerical increases appear as large percentage increases. Additionally, universities with good reporting mechanisms may appear to have worse problems with staff mental health than universities with less efficient systems. It is also possible that access to mental health support in some institutions may be inadequate, which would artificially depress the figures. Given these reservations, it is essential that universities standardise their collection and reporting procedures for this data in order to facilitate monitoring and inter-university comparison.

*Table 1 Numbers of staff referred to Counselling (see Appendix A)*

Institution Name	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
Aberystwyth University				54	39	41	54	72
Brunel University London*	32	58	74	73	64	66	87	84
De Montfort University					123	118	75	303

Newcastle University*	89	65	87	139	157	165	201	201
Sheffield Hallam University*		80	82	85	124	106	125	55
The University of Bath*		25	58	48	53	61	62	118
The University of Bristol	178	209	248	343	442	237	335	497
The University of Edinburgh*	205	183	187	269	232	310	353	368
The University of Glasgow			25	34	23	26	37	37
The University of Kent*	24	94	75	95	102	74	94	
The University of Leeds*		242	253	435	473	554	625	
The University of Portsmouth*	69	76	77	85	65	104	120	
The University of Warwick*	117	148	221	230	312	309	487	

\* Indicates that 2016 data reporting was incomplete at time of FOI request

## *Counselling Services*

While the overall trend for counselling services demonstrates a steep upward trajectory, it is clear that particular institutions are experiencing severe problems. Between 2013 and 2016, rates of staff access to counselling services increased by:

- 61% at the University of Glasgow;
- 85% at Aberystwyth University;
- 123% at the University of Bath; and
- 146% at De Montfort University.

In the period from 2010 to 2015, of those universities able to provide data for this period, access to counselling increased by:

- 56% at Sheffield Hallam University;

- 148% at the University of Bath; and
- 158% at the University of Leeds.

Across the full period 2009 to 2015, figures revealed astonishing rises in access to counselling services overall, with a:

- 72% increase at the University of Edinburgh;
- 74% increase at the University of Portsmouth;
- 88% increase at the University of Bristol;
- 126% increase at Newcastle University;
- 172% increase at Brunel University London;
- 292% increase at the University of Kent; and
- 316% increase at the University of Warwick.

While counselling access is typically recorded as the number of counselling sessions, as opposed to unique clients, the growth in access presents a highly concerning trend with an increase in demand of 293% overall between 2009 and 2015.

*Table 2 Numbers of staff referred to Occupational Health (see Appendix B)*

Institution Name	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
De Montfort University*	133	232	268	273	251	276	269	
Keele University			47	54	120	146	125	240
Leeds Beckett University*			240.5	194.5	461	508	444	416
Newcastle University*	937	1,074	1,054	1,157	1,199	1,212	1,242	1,133

The Nottingham Trent University*			268	315	383	384	483	
The University of Bath*	189	201	53	55	44	48	88	45
The University of Bristol*	38	69	81	110	60	81	92	58
The University of Cambridge*	218	219	263	298	365	516	608	603
The University of Essex	85	112	144	239	217	194	220	243
The University of Kent*	71	79	115	148	243	343	372	396
The University of Manchester		1,306	885	905	684	610	483	179
The University of Reading*			143	132	159	221	236	212

\* Indicates that 2016 data reporting was incomplete at time of FOI request

### *Occupational Health Referrals*

A similar picture is presented in respect of management and other referrals of staff to occupational health services. Between 2011 and 2015, staff referrals to occupational health rose by:

- 80% at Nottingham Trent University;
- 85% at Leeds Beckett University; and
- 166% at Keele University.

Across the complete time span for which information was requested, between 2009 and 2015, referrals rose by:

- 102% at De Montfort University;
- 142% at the University of Bristol;
- 159% at the University of Essex;
- 179% at the University of Cambridge; and

- 424% at the University of Kent – 71 referrals in 2009, rising to 396 referrals in 2016.

Some universities seem to have consistently high rates of referral; Newcastle University is one such example. The University of Cambridge and the University of Kent witnessed sustained increases every year from 2009.

There were also some decreases in rates of referral. The University of Bath saw a 53% decrease between 2009 and 2015, while the decrease in referrals at the University of Manchester was 63% from 2010 to 2015.

Taking another time window, 2012 to 2016, there are some even sharper increases in referrals: Keele University experienced a rise of 344% and Leeds Beckett 114%. This was a period, post implementation of the Browne Review, when recommendations on university funding and increases in tuition fees had come into effect. As a result, many universities felt obliged to enhance aspects of their student experience. Expectations were that academic and professional staff would be required to work harder to deliver this, and the outcome has been to exacerbate work-related stress. However, as we make clear, the new ethos of student as consumer is not the only factor which has worked to heighten stress. The 2016 introduction of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) and greater emphasis on teaching quality has added another stressor to the academic workplace.

There has been an overall increase in referrals to occupational health services of 165% over the period from 2009 to 2015.

### *Overall patterns*

Although not every institution was able to provide figures

for the 2016 calendar year, we received information from just over half of the 74 higher education institutions surveyed, and where figures were provided, there was a continued upward trend. The data for 2016 highlight a 50% increase on 2015 in access to counselling services and 31% increase in occupational health referrals where data is complete for 2016. For some institutions, there were dramatic rises in 2015/16. This can be seen as an indicator that staff were experiencing a sudden increase in stress, although the scope of the Freedom of Information enquiry was not detailed enough to confirm this. Sheffield Hallam University saw increases in occupational health referrals of 240% and the University of Hertfordshire saw a 339% increase. Rises in referrals to counselling in 2015/16 were also revealing of an increase in pressure on staff:

- 176% at the University of Strathclyde;
- 219% at the University of Reading; and
- 304% at De Montfort University.

We have analysed the preliminary findings to identify the distribution patterns across different populations of staff employed within the higher education sector where this information is available. Figures provided on gender and contract type highlight that women, in particular, are more likely to access counselling services (70% of the overall figures were female) and to be referred to occupational health services (60% were female). Members of professional service staff (such as librarians, staff in IT, marketing, recruitment, estates, finance, human resources, registry, student support services and staff development) are also strongly impacted. Across the 2009 to 2015 period, professional service staff constituted 65% of



the total figure of occupational health referrals on average. Between 2009 and 2015, the distribution of women compared to men, and professional service staff compared to academic staff, remained highly consistent.

It is also informative to consider the actual percentage of all staff who require referral to occupational health across the sector, and at particular higher education institutions. Based on data received so far from 34 higher education institutions in respect of occupational health figures, the percentage of all staff each year across the higher education sector being referred to occupational health services has risen by one percentage point overall between 2009 to 2015, rising from 7% to 8% of all staff being referred to occupational health. While some institutions show a decline in occupational health referrals – for example, the University of Glasgow, from 6% in 2010 to 4% in 2015, and the University of Bath, from 6% in 2009 to 3% in 2015 – most demonstrate a steady increase across that period.

The figures reveal a high occurrence of staff referrals to occupational health within particular institutions. Among them, the percentage of staff employed at Newcastle University being referred to occupational health across the 2009 to 2015 sits at 20%. Newcastle University occupational health referrals buck the trend in respect of the distribution of referrals across the staff population, with an average of 22% of academic staff being referred to Occupational Health, and 18% of non-academic staff. A variety of institutions have seen the percentage of all staff employed being referred to occupational health rise dramatically, including at:

- Brunel University London – 6% in 2009 to 12% in 2015;
- Leeds Beckett University – 8% in 2011 to 15% in 2015;

- Nottingham Trent University – 8% in 2011 to 13% in 2015;
- University of Aberdeen – 9% in 2010 to 13% in 2015;
- University of Hull – 9% in 2009 to 12% in 2015;
- University of Kent – 2% in 2009 to 10% in 2015 (this incorporates rates of 3% for all non-academic staff in 2009 and 16% in 2015).

'Meaningful structural changes are needed to address the underlying factors associated with poor mental health, like job security, workload and pay,' wrote Paul Gorczynski.<sup>16</sup> In the next sections, we look at some of the causes of stress in higher education and suggest some reforms. The primary focus of this report is on the academic workforce since the majority of reports have been written about that constituency and there is existing evidence of a long-hours work culture.<sup>17</sup> However, given the high proportion of professional services staff among those who are referred to university occupational health services, there is a clear need to uncover evidence for the causes of stress among this body of employees as well. Sadly, there is no longer a clear incentive for universities to collect data on the working conditions of non-academic staff. Under the new regulator, the Office for Students, the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) is no longer obliged to collect and report this information, together with information on equality and diversity or the rate of zero-hour or hourly-paid contracts within this sector of the HE workforce.<sup>18</sup>

## Causes of stress in higher education

### *Workloads and audit*

As the *Times Higher* reports mentioned above suggest, a common complaint among academics is that workloads are too high. Academics undertake three primary responsibilities: teaching, research and administration. It is the last of these that is often identified as requiring increasing time and effort. Over the last decade, university human resources departments have availed themselves of new technological solutions to workload management.<sup>19</sup> One of the shortcomings of these is that many tasks go uncounted in workload management models, which attempt to break down academic work into individual tasks and allocate hours to them until the available time for each employee (calculated on an annual basis) is filled. This workload calculation will take place prior to the beginning of the academic year. From the managerial perspective, it appears to be the most efficient deployment of the resource if every academic is scheduled to work up to capacity. However, from the standpoint of the academic, this approach has been blamed for a chronic overburdening of lecturers and a reduction in their professional autonomy.

The workload models fail to build in adequate 'headroom' for emergency cover, let alone time for activities which emerge during the year. If staff find that their timetables are filled up to contractual maxima at the start of the year, then it is inevitable that they will end up working well beyond this in terms of hours, and stress is the obvious consequence. A narrative from UCU's Sheffield branch, reporting the extent of undercounting by management of work and the consequent necessity of working unpaid overtime, is typical of the contradictions which reside in the assumption of workload efficiency.<sup>20</sup>

The 2016 UCU *Workload Survey* showed that, in higher education, two-thirds of staff reported their workload as unmanageable at least half of the time, and 28.8% of respondents said their workloads were unmanageable all or most of the time. Academic-related, professional staff work on average 42.4 hours per week, while academic staff across all disciplines work an average of 50.9 hours (full-time equivalent) per week. In fact, 39.0 percent of academics work more than 50 hours per week, while 28.5 percent of academic staff work an average of more than 55 hours per week. Based on this survey, UCU considers that a significant proportion of academic staff are working unreasonable, unsafe and excessive hours.<sup>21</sup>

Some of the staff most vulnerable to overload and stress are those who offer the most support for their colleagues in terms of mentoring, writing references and letters of recommendation, commenting on drafts of articles or books, peer review for journals and external examining. There are a number of other unforeseen activities which may emerge during the course of any academic year: expert testimony; PhD examining; invited lectures; conference papers / panels. These duties can be extremely onerous. It is unlikely that research hours would be credited for such collegial contributions if they are not predictable prior to the start of the academic year. They are not paid activities, but they are nevertheless scholarly obligations and the world of academia could not operate without this willing donation of time and expertise. This operates on what Rob Kitchin calls an exchange economy in which contribution and reciprocity is expected in terms of reviewing, evaluating, endorsing and contributing in the world of research. The full list of activities Kitchin lays out may be illuminating for some human resources managers:

- reviewing (article review, grant application review, book proposal review, review submitted book manuscript);
- endorsing (reference / tenure review, book endorsement);
- evaluating (external examining programmes or PhD theses);
- advising (give an interview/advice/survey, appoint to advisory board); and
- contributing (speak at workshop/conference, contribute paper / chapter, write a book, write a book review, be a partner in a grant application, work on project, be a journal editor, be a visiting professor).<sup>22</sup>

Another complaint is that the hours allocated for the completion of tasks are an unrealistic estimate. In recent years, more and more duties have been emptied into an elastic category called Academic Management and Administration (AMA), which catapults what is already a notional allowance into the realm of the entirely fictitious. Phil Wood details some of the work intensification associated with programme leadership.<sup>23</sup> One notoriously under-counted activity is email contact with students, which is now a regularly sought mode of support for most students. Additionally, there are requirements to keep documentation current and to make this available across multiple learning platforms. Maintenance of learning resources for classroom delivery and on Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) means that, for most staff, allocated preparation time falls well below reality.

Problems with workloads are the most obvious of the structural causes of stress that management could address. However, academics are also obliged to deal with externally-

imposed processes of audit, which present another cause of administrative overload. Many academic contracts incorporate a requirement to teach and research, though this is changing, with almost 50 percent of academics now on teaching-only or precarious teaching contracts.<sup>24</sup> The six-yearly cycle of the Research Excellence Framework (REF), its shifting regulations and requirements, the commonly understood threshold of 3\* quality outputs for submission, the implications of competition, the fear of repercussions for 'failure', as well as the inevitable anxiety which attends the detailed work of knowledge production, all add to stress among academics. It truly is a job like few others.

The Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) introduced in 2017 has increased pressure, with the requirement that student satisfaction, especially with assessment and feedback, be continually enhanced. This has led to rigorously policed turnaround times for the marking of exams and coursework. If the workload model does not make a realistic time allocation, then the burden on the responsible tutor can become critical. Failure to meet marking deadlines may be seen by managers as evidence of poor performance or lack of capability, even in the face of excellent performance over many previous years or in other areas, such as research.

When academics, both individually and collectively, demonstrate with evidence that workloads are too high to be safe, they are told to work smarter. When they complain that many forms of work are erased or under-counted by the workload model, dubbed 'time laundering' by Southampton UCU, this falls on deaf ears.<sup>25</sup> When academics point to the incapacitating effects of management by metrics, they are told of a need to be accountable. We now see the consequences of this indifference and we wonder, along with another

commentator on Twitter, how many more of our colleagues are just one more responsibility away from disaster.<sup>26</sup>

### *Performance management*

If the ethos of academic life mirrors the public sector rather than the corporate sector sometimes embraced by vice-chancellors, its working environment has been fully reconstructed by New Public Management. This is characterised by Deem and Brehony thus:

*Characteristics of 'new managerialism' in organisations include: the erasure of bureaucratic rule-following procedures; emphasising the primacy of management above all other activities; monitoring employee performance (and encouraging self-monitoring too); the attainment of financial and other targets, devising means of publicly auditing quality of service delivery and the development of quasi-markets for Services.<sup>27</sup>*

These will all feel familiar to anyone working in universities today. There is more: a concern with efficiency and effectiveness, internal and external accountability, performance indicators, benchmarking, targets and performance management.

It is the last of these which is mentioned in many narratives of academic stress. Over the last decade, we have seen a shift towards outcomes-based performance management. An account of one such initiative at Newcastle University, and collective resistance to it by academics, is described by Morrish and the Analogue University Collective.<sup>28</sup> The *Raising the Bar* initiative launched new expectations of research-active academics which included, for professors, producing 4\* outputs for the Research Excellence Framework and attaining targets for grant income in a context in which an 11% success rate for

funding applications is common. There were also targets for continual throughput of PhD supervision and completions. Additionally, there was an expectation that academics would produce a significant impact case study, lead high-prestige international collaborations, and of course, continue to teach. These expectations are particularly destructive when applied to early career academics, even to those on probation, with little account taken of career stage or experience level.<sup>29</sup>

A key driver of this kind of performance management is the Research Excellence Framework. This has been criticised by many academics uncomfortable with increasing reliance on metrics and shifting criteria for research quality.<sup>30</sup> Despite the REF's intended purpose to appraise the research capacity of UK universities and offer a rationale for the disbursement of Quality-Related research funds, it has now been re-purposed as a tool of individual performance management. Given that individual scores are unavailable as outcomes of the Research Excellence Framework, these must instead be derived from internal university processes. As Josh Robinson argues, this has become a vehicle for introducing bias, unaccountability and for forcing close departmental colleagues to make ruthless, categorical judgements on each other's work. This is stressful for both appraiser and appraisee.<sup>31</sup>

Because of managerial anxieties about success in the Research Excellence Framework, attention to individual metrics has been heightened. It has become common for academics working in the UK, US and Australia to be monitored by systems of academic analytics. We inhabit a 'watching culture'.<sup>32</sup> This is manifest in technological solutions such as an academic dashboard – for example, Academic Analytics, which collates the performance statistics of every academic: research outputs,



citations and teaching scores, conferring 'metric authority' on the resulting judgements of performance.<sup>33</sup> This surveillance has enabled an elision of audit, performance management and disciplinary procedures to the point where the last of these becomes normalised and expected. There is anecdotal evidence that universities are using performance management and disciplinary procedures more promiscuously and punitively than ever before.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, a new category of 'under-performing professor' has been identified.<sup>35</sup> This designation should, logically, be a contradiction, since to achieve that accolade, the professor must have performed, and be committed to maintaining their eminence. Nevertheless, failure to meet these expectations will result in the public humiliation of improving performance procedures, and possible demotion or even termination of employment. Even professors, then, have been made to join the expanding precariat of academia.

Two key studies have revealed the outcomes-based, directive performance management approach to be counter-productive. In a 2014 study, Franco-Santos et al. distinguish between stewardship and agency approaches to performance management.<sup>36</sup> Stewardship approaches 'focus on long-term outcomes through people's knowledge and values, autonomy and shared leadership within a high trust environment.' By contrast, 'agency approaches focus on short-term results or outputs through greater monitoring and control.' The authors find institutions with a mission that is focused on 'long-term and highly complex goals, which are difficult or very costly to measure (for example, research excellence, contribution to society)' are more likely to benefit from incorporating a stewardship approach to performance management. A later study by Monica Franco-Santos and Noeleen Doherty claims the design of human resource management is often guided

by assumptions about the inherent laziness of employees or their responsiveness to monetary reward mechanisms.<sup>37</sup> These assumptions can become self-fulfilling and engender the kinds of opportunistic behaviours which are ultimately damaging to the institution.<sup>38</sup>

Franco-Santos and Doherty go on to reveal that stress and wellbeing are negatively impacted, 'The more academics perceive the use of directive performance management practices such as performance measures and targets, the worse they feel in terms of stress and vitality.'<sup>39</sup> It is rather mystifying, then, given the mismatch of agency models with the aims of universities, and the evident poor outcomes, that these remain the most prevalent model in higher education.

### *Metrics*

Directive, agency approaches to performance management have been enabled largely by the accident of availability of quantified data on research for the REF. These data sources include quantity of publications and citations, and a formula calculates citations per publication and expresses this as an H-index for each individual. Other indicators include: journal impact factors (the audience and influence of an academic journal), amount of research grant monies awarded by funding bodies, PhD supervisions, and now even alt-metrics which can include citations on Wikipedia and in public policy documents, discussions on research blogs, mainstream media coverage, bookmarks on reference managers like Mendeley, and mentions on social networks such as Twitter.<sup>40</sup> These metrics are being relied upon as proxies for quality, and any grant income is also assumed to reflect the value of the research. Indeed, some universities refuse to promote academics who have not been successful in obtaining funding from Research Councils.

In education, there are two forces acting in concert: the availability of data, and the technology to collate, analyse and rank. Ben Williamson writes of the 'metrological machinery' of 'big' data across diverse domains of societies, in particular, the expanding data infrastructure of higher education in the UK – for example, Jisc, the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) and the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA).<sup>41</sup> Central to metric power is the close alignment of metrics to successive governments' attempts to introduce competition between institutions, accountability, students' consumers rights and to strengthen the dominance of the market in higher education.<sup>42</sup>

Metrics can appear neutral and necessary when they function to differentiate between products, processes or people but, as David Beer points out, 'metric power' allows people to be measured in new and powerful ways such that they order the social world and shape our lives.<sup>43</sup> Metrics have become so embedded we have difficulty imagining any other route to delivering transparency and accountability.<sup>44</sup> Nevertheless, metrics induce wide scepticism among academics as they appear to measure only the measurable and are easily gamed or manipulated. Furthermore, metrics, if used carelessly, can fail to differentiate between publication and citation norms in different subjects. In sciences, publication in journals is the norm; in arts and humanities, historically, books have been preferred. For journal articles, authors might measure the impact of their work by citations. In the case of scholarly books, citations are more difficult to monitor, and accolades such as second editions or translations of a work are better signifiers of esteem. However, these latter may be obscured or ignored if performance reviews are conducted on the basis of metrics.

While the justification for increasing reliance on metrics in research has been the allocation of national (and institutional) support and resources, the Government promised that a

teaching audit (TEF) would enhance information for students and extend competition and choice while driving up standards.<sup>45</sup> The accusations from its critics are that the TEF is based on metrics which academics cannot directly or swiftly control and which are not direct measures of teaching – for example, graduate salaries and student satisfaction scores. Although data on the latter is gathered at institutional level, there is still direct pressure placed on individual lecturers to maintain optimum scores in the related categories. Module-level student evaluation questionnaires have been found to favour white, male lecturers, and significantly disadvantage Black and Minority Ethnic and women lecturers.<sup>46</sup>

Among academics on Twitter there is a lot of support for the idea that the escalation of surveillance, metrics and performance management is driven by university managers' concern with their institution's position in international rankings and league tables.<sup>47</sup> These issues are not confined to the UK; a report from Singapore lists many of the same issues which have led academics to leave the two universities.<sup>48</sup>

Despite the mounting evidence of unease with the culture of metrics and surveillance which is fed by the requirement for data in rankings, this analysis is often refuted by the rankers themselves. This from Phil Baty of *Times Higher* is typical.<sup>49</sup>

Phil Baty (@Phil\_Baty) Tweeted:

Great to see that THE's global university rankings are providing the data and evidence to encourage positive policy responses from governments in developing countries – certainly in India, according to the director of @iitdelhi V. Ramgopal Gao #India #Modi #institutesofemminence

Professor Rowan Williams, the former Archbishop of Canterbury has a more astute understanding of the situation and the

consequence of systems of performance management which align themselves with externally-imposed competition. In the Foreword to *The Metric Tide* report, he is quoted by the report's chair James Wilsdon:

*At their worst, metrics can contribute to what, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, calls a 'new barbarity' in our universities. The tragic case of Stefan Grimm, whose suicide in September 2014 led Imperial College to launch a review of its use of performance metrics, is a jolting reminder that what's at stake in these debates is more than just the design of effective management systems. Metrics hold real power: they are constitutive of values, identities and livelihoods.<sup>50</sup>*

As the penetration of metric surveillance encompasses ever more of the academic's working environment, it is apparent that there is a toll on the emotions when one inhabits a culture driven by systems of measurement.<sup>51</sup> Just as learning analytic technologies work through promoting competition and anxiety about performance, so dashboarded academics are, as one correspondent described it, forced by management into stress positions.



## Analysis

### *The turn to 'wellbeing'*

In the face of evidence of pressure and resulting stress on academic and professional staff, universities have sought to mitigate their legal liability by offering employees enhanced access to 'wellness' solutions. As this report has shown above, in-house counselling and occupational health services have been overwhelmed, and so many of these programmes have now been outsourced to the NHS or private practitioners.

This is not a case of employers admitting that structural problems are the source of employees' distress. On the contrary, both students and staff have been accused of lacking resilience.<sup>52</sup> As a partial solution, some universities have become advocates of resilience training, along with stress management and mindfulness. Such an approach was advocated by Anthony Seldon and Alan Martin in a previous HEPI publication.<sup>53</sup> However, many of the proposed beneficiaries are unconvinced about the legitimacy of a solution which seems to place the onus for recovery squarely on the employee.<sup>54</sup> Sara Ahmed views institutional promotion of resilience as a conservative technique – one which insists that the employee should adapt so that they can endure even more pressure.<sup>55</sup>

One commentator, Grace Krause, points instead to structural effects which are outside the control of individual employees but which may be addressed by management. It is, she argues, a question of unrealistic expectations:

*Framing the suffering experienced by staff and students as a mental health crisis obscures the material causes of this suffering. No amount of counselling will make you resilient*

*enough to be able to mark 418 exams in 20 days without experiencing immense suffering.*<sup>56</sup>

Emily Reynolds writes in 2018 that it is easy to see why such resilience programmes are so popular from the perspective of an employer:

*Engaging in any other kind of reform, after all, would require institutions to acknowledge that many mental health problems are rooted in the very structures themselves. ... One requires workers themselves to be responsible for their mental health; the other requires structural support that simply does not exist.*<sup>57</sup>

### *Higher education as 'anxiety machine'*

The tragic deaths by suicide of Malcolm Anderson at Cardiff University, and Professor Stefan Grimm at Imperial College, London, have prompted discussion on the role of metrics in the excessive pressure which has led to middle-aged academics being at greater suicide risk than either students or peers in other professions. Quoted in an article by Andrew Oswald, an academic says: 'It is almost as though we have consciously designed a system to maximise stress and fear.'<sup>58</sup> Another anonymous blog details the culture of overwork which drove Malcolm Anderson to take his own life in 2018: 'Academic work is also by its very nature never finished. The completion of one research project simply leads to the start of another.'<sup>59</sup> As one observer puts it, 'Academia is like a pie-eating contest where the reward is more pie.' More damningly, 'many academics believed that management had little or no interest in safeguarding against the damaging impact of this culture of overwork.'<sup>60</sup>



Andrea Brady explains that the apparent elastic boundaries of academic work and the academic's own over-identification with their labour can mean 'there is no split between who I am and what I do, then I can be working all the time.'<sup>61</sup> Combined with enduring pressure, and a message from management that one is never doing enough, producing enough or performing well enough or quickly enough, this can rapidly lead to employee burnout, however experienced someone may be.

If performance management and workload have introduced precarity at all academic levels, new entrants to academic careers are particularly afflicted. They may be faced with the prospect of many years in casual employment as postdoctoral fellows, or lecturers on short-term contracts with little official acknowledgment of their need to develop a research profile. The anxiety may be cumulative over many years, and leaves its mark for many more.<sup>62</sup>

HESA statistics for 2017/18 show that 33 per cent of academics are employed on fixed-term contracts.<sup>63</sup> The climate of funding uncertainty induced by anxieties over the terms of Brexit, the removal of student number controls in 2015 and the ongoing review of funding in post-18 education have meant universities being cautious about offering permanent contracts to academics, preferring to be able to respond flexibly to market (student) demand. But from the perspective of early-career academics, it is as if university managers have abdicated the fate of the nation's repositories of knowledge and culture to the capricious choices of the 18-year olds.

It is not just precarity and uncertainty which haunt academics. There is a perception that universities exploit the tendency of academics to over-identify with their work. Rosalind Gill (2009),

writing about the toxic working environment in UK universities, refers to the hidden injuries of neoliberal academia:

*Neoliberalism found fertile ground in academics whose predispositions to 'work hard' and 'do well' meshed perfectly with its demands for autonomous, self-motivating, responsibilised subjects.*<sup>64</sup>

A number of academics have contributed studies which reveal more of these hidden injuries. Richard Hall and Joss Winn have addressed the alienation of academic labour and what they identify as the de-professionalisation of academics.<sup>65</sup> Andrea Taberner, in a series of interviews with academic staff in a range of different types of UK universities, details the fragmentation of academic staff where bullying, workplace aggression and work intensification have undermined the effectiveness of individuals and institutions.<sup>66</sup> Lawrence Berg, Edward H. Huijbens and Henrik Larsen, in their study of higher education audit systems in Denmark, Iceland, the Netherlands, Sweden and the UK count among the causes of academics' anxiety: the shift from equality to inequality (individual and institutional); precariousness and audit-induced competition; command-and-control management; and frequent anticipatory mock-audits.<sup>67</sup>

Richard Hall and Kate Bowles declare academia to be an anxiety machine.<sup>68</sup> This is not accidental in their view; anxiety is designed into management practices so that it becomes a permanent feature of the academy. The calculated exploitation of employee anxiety about job security, promotion and performance adequacy is a key part of its business model. The anxiety machine results in the 'neurotic academic', according to Vik Loveday in studies drawing on interviews with 44 fixed-term employees working in different universities and disciplines in the UK.<sup>69</sup>

There are some even darker interpretations of the state of academia in the UK. Yiannis Gabriel gives an account of recovery from what he terms 'institutional miasma'.<sup>70</sup> Using the analogy of Greek tragedy, whereby the institution is seen to be in the grip of disease, disorder and fear that corrupts the moral fabric of a social unit, Gabriel narrates how the process of cultural change and removal of supposed 'dead wood' ends up reinforcing institutional toxicity rather than cleansing it. Miasma overwhelms and shuts down resistance; it neutralises institutional narratives in order to impose another interpretation of the journey from the past to the present. Gabriel recounts how remaining employees are left with a sense of uncleanness through miasma's deep contagion: 'it undermines people from within; people lose their confidence and self-esteem, moral integrity evaporates and a moral and psychological corruption sets in'.<sup>71</sup>

Often this miasma is mirrored in a kind of discourse which academics find most alienating. It is not just the language which positions the university as a 'business', but the language which reveals a conception of universities as competitive rather than collaborative, and concerned with dominance in the HE market. This is often made evident in managerial metaphors which employ the discourse of war, sports and even torture. It is a discourse favoured by the type of vice-chancellor who casts themselves in the mould of hero.<sup>72</sup> It is even more concerning when these metaphors appear in relation to performance management.<sup>73</sup> One academic, recently promoted, was told they were on a 'burning platform' with a time-limited window before successful progression to the next level would be expected.<sup>74</sup>

A culture which ostensibly claims to value and reward staff, but is experienced as something much more punitive, might in 2019 be called 'gaslighting'.<sup>75</sup> This has led some scholars to label the university as a 'bad boyfriend'.<sup>76</sup> Andrea Brady (2018) writes:

*the competitive, micromanaged culture of modern higher education is often brutal. The contemporary university is a corporate institution which subjects its employees to constant surveillance and forms of slow violence.*<sup>77</sup>

Increasingly, as the evidence of stress piles up, and little is done to alter its structural causes, scholars are looking to less generous analyses of managerial neglect. Vicki Cooper and David Whyte offer the term 'institutional violence' for institutions in which it is possible to trace actions and intent which 'over time deteriorate our mental and physical health'.<sup>78</sup> The question of whether the neglect is benign or intended is an uncomfortable one. Universities strive to ensure that all legal requirements are being complied with, including health and safety legislation. The institution will therefore act towards employees as if these obligations are embedded in policies, are functioning and as if there is no intent to curb their force. Yet the casualties continue to mount.

What should we call it if the demands of the job overwhelm the mitigating effects these structures are able to provide? If the demands of the job now exceed any approximation of the 35 to 40 hours 'notionally' allocated to discharge them? If there is a suspicion of managerial malice towards those seemingly unable to execute the ever-increasing expectations of the job? Is the charge of institutional violence a valid one?

## Alternatives

Having assessed the extent of stress and mental health breakdown in universities, it is time to confront the causes, not merely attempt to alleviate and conceal the symptoms. The alternatives proposed below are in most cases cost-neutral and should be balanced against the wasteful loss to the sector of able and experienced personnel.

### *Workloads*

The issue of workloads must be addressed with full acknowledgment that academics and other professional staff should be granted a degree of autonomy and trust. It is clear that tasks emerge during the year which cannot be foreseen at the start. It is also difficult to allocate hours accurately to specific tasks. Workloads should not be scheduled 'up to the max' but should allow for necessary time for scholarly contemplation and experimentation.

At the same time, there should be conversations between academics and managers to ensure discretionary academic service and related activities do not displace the core work necessary for the institution to function. Rob Kitchin offers some rules of thumb for containing such requests within reasonable limits, such as deciding on a set number of reviews, endorsements or speaking engagements per year.<sup>79</sup>

A constant theme in interviews with academics is the intensification of workloads and the perpetual requirement to produce more, and faster. Different rates of work and apparent productivity may have little to do with diligence and application, but more about expertise and familiarity, research area and norms of collaborative research or single authorship. Challenging the culture of speed in the academy is emerging as a movement thanks to people such as Maggie Berg and

Barbara Seeber, the Slow Professor on Twitter, Mark Carrigan and the Accelerated Academy project and Alison Mountz et al.<sup>80</sup>

### *Metrics*

We are not short of agencies to advise us on the use and misuse of metrics in research. Professor James Wilsdon chaired the 2015 Hefce Independent Review of the Role of Metrics in Research Assessment and Management, entitled *The Metric Tide*.<sup>81</sup> Key recommendations were that institutions, and the apparatus of audit, should use metrics which are robust, transparent and which recognise variation between fields. There was also a call for reflexivity and the need to anticipate ‘the systemic and potential effects of indicators’.

This responsible approach to metrics is endorsed by two other campaigns:

- The San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA) has, at the time of writing, 1,167 institutional and 13,671 individual signatories, who commit to eliminating the use of journal-based metrics, such as Journal Impact Factors, in funding, appointment and promotion considerations. DORA also recommends metrics providers be open and transparent by providing data and methods used to calculate all metrics.<sup>82</sup>
- The Leiden Manifesto for Research Metrics lists ten principles which include recommendations that quantitative evaluation should support qualitative expert assessment, and account for variation by field in publication and citation practices.<sup>83</sup>

The paradox is that the arguments for responsible and contextualised use of metrics have been largely accepted by the Research Excellence Framework, and yet the availability and convenience of metrics continues to drive key decisions on appointments, promotions, resource allocation and even departmental closure by university managers. The recommendations of Wilsdon et al, DORA and Leiden have international credibility and should be more widely embraced, and then enforced, by UK universities. There exists an informative Metrics Toolkit which can be used to assess the appropriacy and reliability of a measure.<sup>84</sup> If the more pernicious effects of metrics could be subdued, at least some pressure on academics might be relieved.

### *Performance management*

When staff appraisal was first introduced into universities in the early 1990s, it was on the understanding that it would serve a developmental purpose. Over the intervening years, this function has become uncoupled within the more judgemental processes which have evolved. Monica Franco-Santos and Noeleen Doherty argue for more attention to performance management that is underpinned by stewardship theories which emphasise enabling strategies like staff involvement, greater consultation, resources and opportunities for development.<sup>85</sup> These, they find, are associated with a direct effect on academics' vitality levels and an indirect effect on their stress levels through improved experience of work. It would benefit all staff if managers were to recognise that universities are environments which operate most effectively with mutual trust and the ability of staff to engage in self-directed labour. As Franco-Santos and Doherty recommend, academics should be given longer-term targets, with adequate support. This approach, together with a reduction in the bureaucracy associated with appraisal and application for promotion, is

being championed by Ghent University:

*This marks the end of the personalized objectives, the annual job descriptions and the high number of evaluation documents and activity reports. Instead, the new approach is based on collaboration, collegiality and teamwork.<sup>86</sup>*

After all, in the UK we do not lack cyclical audit points towards which academics are asked to focus their endeavours.

Performance management should return to its developmental function, rather than a disciplinary and winnowing one. It should be recognised that not every employee will reach the same level in the profession, and expectations should be set accordingly. It is ludicrous to communicate to a junior academic that they should be publishing 4\* research in high-impact journals. Such behaviour has been linked to high turnover of pre-tenure academics.<sup>87</sup>

### *Precarious contracts and sustainable academic careers*

It should be recognised that universities bear a responsibility for the renewal of the profession via the development of newly-qualified PhDs and postdoctoral researchers. This pipeline has now begun to leak talent.<sup>88</sup> An identified breach point for many early career academics is the transition from doctorate or postdoctoral fellowship to a lectureship.

Sophie Jones and Catherine Oakley (2018) argue that the uncertain prospects of postdoctoral researchers are contributing to the severe psychological distress common among their ranks.<sup>89</sup> As well as a lack of autonomy, a succession of short-term contracts means career planning and the development of a research agenda are impossible. One of



Jones and Oakley's recommendations is that funding bodies and institutions should 'work together to develop new bridge grant opportunities for postdoctoral researchers that would enable them to build towards competitive research grant applications.' Happily, we are seeing the first signs of these emerging.

Recently, the University of Bristol, together with the UCU Bristol branch, released a joint statement committing to 'providing secure terms and conditions of employment to University of Bristol staff, and to the fair and equitable treatment of part-time members of staff.'<sup>90</sup>

In the last few years, several other – mainly Russell Group – universities, have created fellowships which typically offer five years of protected time to develop a research profile, with the understanding that the incumbent will progress to a permanent lectureship at the end of that time. Examples includes: University of Birmingham Fellows; University of Nottingham Fellowships; and University of Manchester Presidential Fellowships.<sup>91</sup>

These are examples where the over-used institutional boast of 'sector-leading' might actually be merited.



## Conclusion

Our research has revealed that in the years immediately prior to 2016, universities have seen huge rises in referrals to counselling and occupational health services. The trend is gendered, with women more likely to access counselling.

Causes can be identified from published research and opinion pieces which confirm the following factors:

- workloads which do not take full account of legitimate working patterns;
- new directive modes of performance management, driven by managerial desire to ascend league tables and rankings – these are based on targets, outcomes and metrics which may be set at levels which staff find unattainable;
- higher education has become an ‘anxiety machine’, in which excessive pressure to perform has been normalised; and
- careers in higher education have become more precarious as short-term contracts have become the norm for early career staff.

In the context of these findings, perhaps we should view it as a promising sign that Alistair Jarvis, CEO of Universities UK, was a signatory to an open letter in November 2018 calling for legislation to mandate mental health first aid in the workplace.<sup>92</sup> In November 2018, he tweeted:

Universities UK (@UniversitiesUK)

Morning! Universities UK and CEO @AlistairJarvis are backing calls for mental health to be given equal billing as physical first aid in the workplace. A signed letter sent to Downing Street can be viewed in this @guardian article <https://t.co/QxPIvtQLfy><sup>93</sup>

If Jarvis is trying to send a strong signal to vice-chancellors in order to shape their priorities, he deserves support. We clearly need a new approach when the causes of declining mental health are so widely attested, and yet are left unremediated by those with power. Structures, working conditions and opportunities for career progression all need to be reformed if the profession is to thrive in an era in which new talent may shortly be more difficult to attract.

Solutions such as resilience and mindfulness are typically rejected by academic staff. Inger Mewburn advocates that we should all practise care, rather than resilience. Care is about mutuality as opposed to the individuating, blame-allocating 'resilience'.<sup>94</sup> Mental health provision and working environments need to be sensitive to intersectional considerations: gender, ethnicity, social class, neurodiversity (awareness of the needs of people who have an autistic spectrum disorder, have attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) or dyslexia, or are neurotypical, for example), age and disability status.

Perhaps more university leadership teams could emulate the approach of Professor Mike Thomas, former Vice-Chancellor of the University of Central Lancashire, who conducted research into the area of compassion and kindness in leadership. He recommended this ethos for management, with a commitment to kindness, compassion and trust, and a rejection of the 'heroic

leadership' model imported from the corporate world.<sup>95</sup>

Writing the conclusion of this report has coincided with the first anniversary of the death by suicide of Malcolm Anderson at Cardiff University. His widow spoke out in a moving BBC interview in which she revealed how her husband had mentioned his overwhelming workload in all of his appraisals: 'There was no account taken for it. And it was just more of the same'.<sup>96</sup> She spoke about how he had felt obliged to take on even more responsibility. It is time to let, and encourage, the simple humane value of kindness ameliorate the toxic university, thereby allowing more talented individuals to survive within it.



## Appendix A: Counselling Trends

Institution	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2016 Finished Y/N
Aberystwyth University				54	39	41	54	72	Yes
Bangor University					312	174	274	192	Yes
Birmingham City University									
Brunel University London	32	58	74	73	64	66	87	84	No
Cardiff University	160	195	224	234	260	283	62	98	No
City, University of London†			118	113	141	119	115	0	No
Coventry University									
De Montfort University					123	118	75	303	Yes
Imperial		391	327	278	203	257	178	178	No
Keele University†		31	44	45	70	61	72		
King's College London									
Kingston University	39	54	49	44	68	54	63	50	Yes
Leeds Beckett University									
Liverpool John Moores University	32	28	32	20	37	35			
LSE		98	131	160	156	165	153		Yes
Loughborough University		114	100	94	94	115	97	117	
Newcastle University†	89	65	87	139	157	165	201	201	No
Oxford Brookes University	39	27	34	41	37	50	58		No
Queen Mary University of London									
Royal Holloway, University of London							15	30	Yes
Sheffield Hallam University		80	82	85	124	106	125	55	No
Swansea University		75	74	41	73	83	93	101	?
The Manchester Metropolitan University			108	106	117	114	97	145	Yes
The Nottingham Trent University									
The Open University									
The Queen's University of Belfast	107	85	78	71	88	107	118	94	Yes
The University of Aberdeen		52	74	81	79	102	92		No
The University of Bath		25	58	48	53	61	62	118	No

The University of Birmingham		49	32	65	42	41	47	62	No
The University of Brighton		86	81	91	92	67	85		No
The University of Bristol	178	209	248	343	442	237	335	497	Yes
The University of Cambridge						376	481	577	Yes
The University of Central Lancashire	88	83	90	100	102	123	130		
The University of Dundee	64	69	92	85	92	104	110		No
The University of East Anglia	100	109	106	111	121	134	151	182	
The University of Edinburgh	205	183	187	269	232	310	353	368	
The University of Essex						28	40	60	
The University of Exeter				102	130	173	187	165	No
The University of Glasgow			25	34	23	26	37	37	Yes
The University of Greenwich	38	33	47		29	30	33	33	Yes
The University of Hull	44	38	47	43	45	64	68	0	No
The University of Kent	24	94	75	95	102	74	94	0	No
The University of Lancaster					25	75	60	42	No
The University of Leeds		242	253	435	473	554	625	0	No
The University of Leicester				259	275	238	266	68	No
The University of Liverpool								143	No
The University of Manchester	341	337	440	308	346	300	299	303	Yes
The University of Oxford	158	125	133	112	115	120	141	130	No
The University of Portsmouth	69	76	77	85	65	104	120		No
The University of Reading				26	75	50	27	86	Yes
The University of Salford									
The University of Sheffield	30						700	816	Yes
The University of Southampton									
The University of St Andrews					83	88	69	72	No
The University of Stirling		11	12	5	8	9			
The University of Strathclyde							34	94	Yes
The University of Surrey				97	91	113	126	144	No
The University of Sussex	31	28	30	30	22	4	1	13	Yes
The University of Warwick	117	148	221	230	312	309	487		No



The University of Westminster	18	14	12	14	12	8	7	17	
The University of Wolverhampton									
The University of York		556	773	557	668	694	681	489	No
University College Londont									
University of Derby							82	140	Yes
University of Durham				39	70	91	96	99	No
University of Hertfordshire									
University of Northumbria								283	No
University of Nottingham									
University of Plymouth									
University of South Wales									
University of the Arts, London				102	103	118	138		Yes
University of the West of England	136	134	155	132	151	101	120	97	No
University of Ulster							51	47	
University of Worcester					15	24	25	29	
<b>Totals</b>	<b>2,139</b>	<b>4,002</b>	<b>4,830</b>	<b>5,496</b>	<b>6,656</b>	<b>7,063</b>	<b>8,397</b>	<b>6,931</b>	

Raw data may be accessed at [https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/user/nicky\\_michaels?page=1](https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/user/nicky_michaels?page=1)



## Appendix B: Occupational Health Trends

Institution	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2016 Complete?
Aberystwyth University				57	85	61	62	48	Yes
Bangor University							107	71	
Birmingham City University									
Brunel University London									
Cardiff University							407	381	Yes
City, University of London†			155	264	288	271	246		No
Coventry University									
De Montfort University	133	232	268	273	251	276	269		Unlikely
Imperial		328	344	384	372	374	459	491	Unlikely
Keele University†			47	54	120	146	125	240	Yes
King's College London		76	145	200	156	121	124	126	Yes
Kingston University		89	215	206	231	218	190	233	Yes
Leeds Beckett University			241	195	461	508	444	416	Unlikely
Liverpool John Moores University									
LSE		59	69	26	58	50	23	2	No
Loughborough University									
University of Northumbria	937	1074	1054	1157	1199	1212	1242	1133	No
Oxford Brookes University	156	129	187	196	161	172	159		
Queen Mary University of London									
Royal Holloway, University of London								27	
Sheffield Hallam University							85	289	Yes
Swansea University									
The Manchester Metropolitan University									
The Nottingham Trent University			268	315	383	384	483		No
The Open University									

The Queen's University of Belfast						250	323	304		No
The University of Aberdeen		331	373	490	411	444	437			No
The University of Bath	189	201	53	55	44	48	88	45		No
The University of Birmingham	368	365	399	412	333	380	380	358		No
The University of Brighton		296	308	394	448	413	401			No
The University of Bristol	38	69	81	110	60	81	92	58		No
The University of Cambridge	218	219	263	298	365	516	608	603		No
The University of Central Lancashire	320	371	528	617	730	643	480			No
The University of Dundee					1,009	878	1,019			No
The University of East Anglia										
The University of Edinburgh	462	504	449	468	519	410	473	507		Yes
The University of Essex	85	112	144	239	217	194	220	243		
The University of Exeter						245	387	358		No
The University of Glasgow		366	326	293	296	225	269	268		Yes
The University of Greenwich	112		160	244	161	164	169	157		No
The University of Hull	199	150	180	184	221	251	290			No
The University of Kent	71	79	115	148	243	343	372	396		No
The University of Lancaster					108	104	123	72		No
The University of Leeds								725		Yes
The University of Leicester							269	239		
The University of Liverpool						133	204	194		Yes
The University of Manchester		1306	885	905	684	610	483	179		Yes
The University of Oxford	701	595	602	623	675	809	782	542		No
The University of Portsmouth	299	367	359	413	415	415	386	418		Yes
The University of Reading			143	132	159	221	236	212		No
The University of Salford										

The University of Sheffield								412	Yes
The University of Southampton									
The University of St Andrews					1,150	1,321	1,389	1,589	
The University of Stirling									
The University of Strathclyde	252	242	236	251	273	292	287	267	Yes
The University of Surrey	200	195	235	194	200	223	266		No
The University of Sussex	220	205	235	198	198	167	206	280	Yes
The University of Warwick		745	638	494	687	581	565	666	Yes
The University of Westminster	139		136		170		197		Yes
The University of Wolverhampton									
The University of York	155	138	138	137	173	196	199		No
University College London†									
University of Derby									
University of Durham	220	266	303	306	334	329	345	498	No
University of Hertfordshire		197	362	412	251	250	101	443	Yes
University of Northumbria									
University of Nottingham									
University of Plymouth									
University of South Wales									
University of the Arts, London			155	147	150	131	150	149	Yes
University of the West of England					175	179	195	189	No
University of Ulster	893	894							
University of Worcester				25	48	46	39	39	No
<b>Totals</b>	<b>6,367</b>	<b>10,200</b>	<b>10,799</b>	<b>11,515</b>	<b>14,672</b>	<b>15,285</b>	<b>16,855</b>	<b>13,867</b>	

Raw data may be accessed at [https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/user/nicky\\_michaels?page=1](https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/user/nicky_michaels?page=1)



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## **President**

Bahram Bekhradnia

There may be an epidemic of poor mental health in universities where, across the sector, we see vastly increasing numbers of staff being referred to counselling and occupational health services.

This report attributes the deterioration to factors such as excessive workloads, insecure employment and punitive metrics-driven performance management policies.

Universities need to become healthier environments in order for academics to perform their duties and thrive, argues Liz Morrish, who recommends a new approach to higher education management – one grounded more clearly in notions of care and compassion.

HEPI was established in 2002 to influence the higher education debate with evidence.

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