

Open letter on the issues facing Professional Services staff at Essex

March 2021

This letter aims to highlight some of the most pressing issues facing Professional Services (PS) staff at the University of Essex by:

- Raising awareness across the university of the problems faced; and,
- Asking both academic and PS staff to provide details of any problems they are aware of which are not covered below, and to provide concrete examples of all issues raised to help illustrate these.
- Using this letter, and the responses it receives, as the basis for raising these issues with senior university management.

The problem

In general, substantial anecdotal evidence from PS staff points to heavier workloads and longer working hours over the past few years. This pre-dates the Covid-19 pandemic, but has been exacerbated and accelerated by it. Given the diversity of roles within PS, this manifests in different ways, across the different sections and teams.

This includes working:

- Over 80 hours a week in extreme cases but generally very long hours regularly throughout the year;
- During weekends; and,
- During annual leave.

Impact on staff

Reports of staff feeling overwhelmed, stressed and exhausted are common. There is a feeling of not being valued, and being resentful and angry at how workloads are being managed (or not). Resilience is being eroded at increasing rates, particularly given the covid pandemic.

Workload pressures

It appears that there has been a confluence of issues which has negatively impacted on the PS staff workloads:

- A steady (re-)allocation of additional tasks to staff over time, leading to their original job description and FTE bearing little resemblance to their current role and FTE;
- The re-structuring of some departments/teams, leading to the termination of some posts, with the tasks associated with those posts being redistributed to existing staff, without any of their current responsibilities being re-assigned;
- Leaving both permanent and temporary roles unfilled, or delaying recruitment to these (including not arranging parental leave cover for the full period);
- It is acknowledged that some posts are still recruited to; however, there is often a lack of transparency as to why these posts are filled, whilst other vacant posts are not;
- Not providing cover for those off on long-term sickness absences, especially where the absence is due to stress or ill-health as a result of work; and,
- Increasing student numbers, without necessarily any commensurate increase in PS staff (noting that the University plans to continue its large and rapid increase of student registrations, with little or no indication that PS FTE will increase accordingly).

Other, linked issues/problems

- PS staff are “normally” required to work 36 hours a week. However, there is the expectation that they will work flexibly, to meet the needs of the university. The annual academic lifecycle was originally perceived to consist of peaks and troughs, with extra hours worked at one point in the year being cancelled out during the troughs. However, even before Covid-19, as a result of the workload and staffing issues identified earlier, there were fewer and fewer troughs, and more and more “peaks”, resulting in longer working weeks becoming the norm.
- Nevertheless, different employment terms and conditions govern different staff grades within PS:
 - Until 2020, Grades 7+ received 5 additional days’ leave a year in comparison to Grades 6 and below (anecdotally, some staff were led to believe this was to compensate for the lack of TOIL (time off in lieu) and paid overtime for Grades 7+).

- In April 2019, the university standardised annual leave across all Grades, rightly so, in our view (all now receive 28 days).
- However, PS staff in Grades 6 and below are still entitled to TOIL (or, in exceptional circumstances, payment for overtime worked), whilst Grades 7+ are not.
- PS staff are often asked to volunteer their time, e.g. to take part in graduation and welcome week. This is mostly done on top of their “normal” workload, and TOIL is often not given for this (in calling for volunteers, reference is made to demonstrating the “Essex spirit”, so that staff feel unable to say no).
 - PS staff have been asked to volunteer for further tasks as a result of Covid-19, e.g. supporting students when they’ve been required to self-isolate.

Working “smarter”

There is, rightly, an emphasis on “working smarter”, and PS staff are doing their best to rise to this challenge. However:

- In order to work smarter, staff need time to identify where this is possible, and how to achieve this. It is very difficult to find the time to do this;
- There is a limit to how much smarter staff can work when faced with workloads exceeding their FTE;
- Working smarter often requires being up to date with new techniques, for which training may be necessary, which requires time to undertake.

Training

- Although PS staff are officially encouraged to undertake training, this does not always appear to be taken seriously in practice.
- Some PS staff report not having had their annual personal development review (PDR) for two or more years. In addition to adding to the feeling of not being valued, it also means that there is little space for staff to talk through possible training options with their line managers, let alone find the time to undertake that training.
- PS staff report feeling that they are stagnating in their roles when working in a section in which the possibility for career advancement to Grade 8+ is limited.
- The training open to PS staff is also limited, and what there is, seems to be role-specific, rather than aimed at developing or investing in individuals in any meaningful way, and especially to enable them to apply for higher Grade roles, in the event any become available.

The formal complaints process

- There appears to be little recognition that relying on existing staff to absorb this work is a failure of senior university management.
- Although there is an official complaints process, PS staff mostly appear to not feel able to use this process, given the power imbalances that exist. The fact that few official complaints are received indicates that people aren’t comfortable making complaints, rather than that all is well in PS.
- In addition, anecdotal evidence is that PS staff do raise issues/complaints informally. However, these do not appear to be acted on, given the ongoing issues.
- UCU is open to receiving informal complaints and would be happy to work with and support PS staff in taking these up with their line managers.

Finally, there is sometimes viewed as being a divide between PS and academic staff, which can lead in some cases, to an “us” and “them” stance. But as a university community, we are all being asked regularly to do more with less, and to put in longer hours to achieve the university’s strategic aims and goals. There is therefore a pressing need to find ways to overcome this unhelpful narrative and work together to develop ways of working that protect the wellbeing of all staff.

Sincerely,
Branch Committee, UCU Essex

UCU represents academic-related professional service staff at grade points 7 and above, but we care about the safe working conditions of all staff at the University of Essex. If you are on an academic-related professional services contract, grade 7 or above, we encourage you to join us at [UCU](#)! Other staff are typically represented by the other campus trade unions: [Unite](#) and [UNISON](#).