# Cardiff UCU H&S Inspection 27 Feb-4 March 2024

## Hazards identified during H&S inspection of LAWPL focusing on work-related stress

* **Moderate to severe work-related stress is experienced almost continuously throughout the academic year by staff across all staff categories in all organisational units of the School**.
* **The pace, intensity and amount of work is felt to be at a consistently high and often ‘unmanageable’ level.**
* **Staff health is suffering as a result (detailed below) and many reported that they are ‘close to burn out**’.
* **Staff do not report work-related stress and are unwilling to take time off due to perceived negative consequences for themselves and their colleagues.**
* **For the selected academic roles covered by the Workload Allocation Model, the WAMS for 2022/23 shows that more than 60% of LAWPL academic staff captured have been allocated more work than their contracted hours allow for.** About 25% of staff have been allocated 120% or more of their contracted hours.

This H&S report focuses on what the staff we spoke to or surveyed told us. We have also analysed other evidence provided by the school and/or university and are happy to provide more detailed analyses in future discussions where relevant to aid the university in addressing these urgent H&S hazards. The table below details the types of evidence and whether it is referred to in this report.

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| **Evidence** | **Brief description** |
| HSE Stress Indicator Survey | Covered in this report |
| H&S inspection 27 Feb and 4 March 2024 | Covered in this report |
| Interview with LAWPL Senior Management Team (SMT) 6 March 2024 | SMT members report experiencing high levels of work-related stress themselves and said that work-related stress is likely to be experienced by all other staff members |
| LAWPL Growth Plan (version from 5 March 2024) | This recent document produced by the School appears to confirm that work-related stress, seemingly linked to organisational causes, is widely experienced by all staff in LAWPL P.6: *It is well-known that this School has had considerable, unplanned growth. It has outlived and outgrown its estate, and there is a correlation between that unplanned growth, student experience and* ***significant well-being issues to staff****.* P.9: *Unplanned growth has led to significant issues with our capacity to deliver;* ***academic and PS well-being, “burn out”, and over-burdening on WAM****. Recent staff surveys in this school are all of piece in this regard.*P.18: *staff are already stretched to* ***breaking point*** |
| WAMS 2022/23 | We have requested WAMS data for several years but the University has refused this. The one year of WAMS output they made available (2022/23) supports the assessment that work-related stress is experienced widely across LAWPL although it is important to note that WAMS only covers selected academic roles. WAMS for 2022/23 shows that more than 60% of LAWPL academic staff captured has been allocated more work than their contracted hours allow for. About 25% of staff have been allocated 120% or more of their contracted hours.Feedback from LAWPL academic staff suggests that WAMS is routinely and systematically under-representing real workloads. |
| Staff survey 2023 | Only 30% of LAWPL staff agree with the statement: I am able to manage my workload without regularly working unreasonable hours [this means 70% of LAWPL staff has to work beyond their contracted hours to manage their workload]Only 45% of LAWPL staff agree with the statement: I feel able to cope with the stresses of my job [this suggests 55% of LAWPL staff is not able to cope with the stresses of the job]Only 35% of LAWPL staff agree with the statement: My physical and mental health and wellbeing at work are appropriately supported [which means the University fails to provide adequate health and well-being related support to 65% of respondents] |
| Sickness absence and OH Referral statistics  | Figures made available by University suggest comparatively low levels of stress-related absences and OH referrals relative to other organisational units in the University. Our discussions with staff revealed that many are reluctant to report stress or take time off (covered later in this report).In their current form, the sickness absence data is close to being meaningless. There are no standardised reporting periods, categorisation seems to change between different reporting periods, making comparisons impossible.  |

Cardiff UCU conducted a survey that replicates the [HSE Stress Indicator questions](https://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/standards/downloads.htm) and uses their analysis tool to produce an assessment of the management standard key areas. The results are re-produced below, and show that, in the words of the HSE, “urgent action is needed” across each area except Relationships, which is “good, but need[s] improvement”.

The survey had 33 responses, which we consider a decent response rate, although as the university refused to provide us with staff figures for the school, we cannot give this as a percentage. However, regardless of the proportion, the results show that a sizable cohort of staff are suffering. Appendix A provides averaged scores for each question in the survey, along with the HSE’s colour key.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **HSE stress management standard** | **Current scores** |
| Demands | 2.12 |
| Control | 3.17 |
| Managers' Support | 3.16 |
| Peer Support | 3.49 |
| Relationships | 3.88 |
| Role | 3.21 |
| Change | 2.14 |

## HSE Management Standards

As noted above, there is an urgent need for action across five of the six HSE Management Standards: Demands, Control, Role, Support, Change. The quantitative results from the survey are reinforced by recurring themes in our interviews with staff. Demands, Control, and Role were discussed in the most detail by our interviewees and will be expanded upon below. Support came up a few times: the general feeling was that immediate colleagues were not unsupportive (e.g. they were sympathetic), but that there was no support available, either internal or external to the School. Staff are effectively left alone to deal with stress as there are no organisational structures in place to deal with stress. Even taking sick leave when experiencing stress is often not a practical option according to respondents, because it would mean to overwhelm colleagues and/or returning to an overwhelming amount of work that accumulated while they were on sick leave. Staff at all levels reported feeling undervalued and the phrase ‘cash cow’ came up a few times in reference to the high number of students enrolled in this school.

Demands

Staff in many types of roles indicated that the amount of work in itself is challenging. One member of professional services (PS) staff described it as unmanageable pressure that is consistent every year; and that they have to carry out a few months worth of work in a couple of weeks. Another PS staff member described stress as inherent to their role due to the high volume of work, and the demands and expectations attached to the role.

Two early-career academics said that workload is of constant high-intensity. It is stressful across the year although in different ways – for example marking over the summer is very intense, and term-time teaching is a very heavy workload that impacts on well-being in the way it is organised. There was a feeling of not having time to deal with anything and always ‘fire-fighting’ – this feeling was shared by senior staff as well.

Other staff commented on the crunch points or pinch points at certain times of the year where the work becomes unmanageable.

Two senior academics noted that there are ever-increasing expectations of staff with fewer and fewer resources. Phrases like ‘not enough staff to teach the students’ came up in multiple interviews.

Many respondents also raised a feeling of there being ‘no slack in the system’: everyone’s workload is over 100% so there is no one to take on extra work; if someone is sick then their work has to be allocated onto the already overloaded workloads of remaining staff. There was a sense from longer-serving staff members that being over-allocated has been the ‘norm’ for a few years now.

There was also a feeling that bureaucracy and over-duplication of processes or requests for similar information (e.g. rolling REF) increased the demands on staff. One participant commented in particular that completing a funding bid was made much more difficult by university processes, to the extent they felt that the university was a barrier to them carrying out their work.

Control

At all levels of the school’s hierarchy, and across all role types – from early-career academics, to professional services staff, to school senior management – there was a striking sense of a lack of control, power and autonomy felt by staff. No one we spoke to felt as if they had any control over the demands of their work, or any ability to enact change despite, in many cases, trying to.

The HSE dimension ‘control’ interacts with ‘demands’. Staff at more senior levels (e.g. reader and above, including PS) commented on the top-down imposition of demands from College or University level, with no consultation. One senior academic commented that too many managers are allowed to impose initiatives upon front-line staff, yet have no accountability. There is also no practical possibility to challenge the decisions implemented in case of harm. Staff at senior level commented that they are held accountable, but not empowered – to give one example, they have to meet targets for international student recruitment, but recruitment happens in a central department outside the school.

Role

Staff noted a lack of clarity regarding roles, including ambiguity around other peoples’ roles, even in some cases not knowing which person is doing particular administrative roles such as Director for Learning and Teaching at any given time. More generally, there was a lack of clarity around what particular administrative roles are meant to entail and what they are meant to achieve. New roles created (e.g. “Digital Lead”) without staff input, and without a clear description of what the role should involve.

An early-career academic on a T&R pathway said they were unclear on the role of the line manager and the support they should be offering. They also noted vagueness around research aspects of the job, saying that it seems organisational expectations have changed but this has not been communicated. They commented that line-managers and mentors may not be up to date on latest requirements making it difficult to get clarity. There was an issue around rumours and hearing things informally without being able to check/clarify. Reduced control over this aspect of the job and uncertainty causes stress.

A member of PS staff still has questions over a role change and new role they have been assigned with no consultation. This HSE area, along with ‘control’ above, interacts with the ‘change’ dimension whereby staff feel that they have no voice in changes that take place, but have to deal with the consequences of top-down changes and ‘edicts from above’.

## Impact on Staff Health, Safety and Wellbeing

Staff we spoke to reported the following impacts on their health, work and personal life. We have reported these effects under separate headings but it should be noted that there are crossovers between these – for example, depleted confidence as a mental health effect also affects an individual’s work life.

Mental health

* Depression
* Sadness
* Depleted confidence
* Overwhelmed; burn out; ‘running on fumes’
* Seeking private therapy
* Worry
* Reduced resilience to deal with difficult situations
* Panic attacks
* General anxiety

Physical health

* Brain seizure
* Insomnia; poor sleep; nights with no sleep at all
* ‘Crash’ in health resulting in migraine events
* Exhaustion; fatigue
* Noticeably higher heartbeat
* Light-headedness, dizziness
* Headaches, mouth ulcers
* Crushing weight on chest as a physical manifestation of stress
* Tinnitus (worse at times of greater stress)
* Paying for osteopath for pain and tension relief
* Carpal tunnel syndrome exacerbated by stress
* High cholesterol related to work stress
* Aggravates long-term conditions (e.g. auto-immune, chronic pain, disabilities)

Work life

* Depleted confidence
* No job satisfaction anymore
* Sense of dread when starting the work day
* Reduced motivation
* Feelings of deflation
* Negative impact on morale
* Lack of motivation to do anything beyond compulsory things
* Withdrawal from school activities and colleagues (keeping one’s head down); individualization
* Reluctant to take time off as the work doesn’t ‘go anywhere’, or other colleagues will have to pick up the burden
* Confusion and feelings of being scattered – e.g. resulting in mixing up classes and preparing for a different topic
* Lost enthusiasm for teaching; impact of stress on teaching delivery
* Productivity reduced – burn out leading to feeling frozen/paralysed; weeks to recover

Personal and family life

* Work consumes life
* Negative interactions because of stress
* Irritable; upset; angry – impact on relationships
* No time to look after wellbeing e.g. by doing self-care and chronic pain management activities such as exercise, meditation
* Lower mood at home; less able to do fun things with family
* Impact on parenting – less patience, more irritability

### Potential EDI Issues

* Female staff and staff with disabilities appear to be most impacted by work-related stress (Example from interview [paraphrased]: ‘as a disabled person, there is a compounding of the burden of stress and workload and the fear that when it comes time to review reasonable adjustments that you might be refused them – increased anxiety and stress around any organisational change because it might mean that you’re no longer allowed your reasonable adjustments.’)
* Many staff commented on the high turnover of female staff, both at senior and early-career stages. There was a suggestion of a toxic and misogynistic culture in the recent past that has left staff traumatized.
* Female staff reported having to do more pastoral work with students, and a ‘doubling’ of this type of work: as a personal tutor, being asked for feedback on assignments because the students didn’t feel able to go to the module leader; or as a module leader giving pastoral or emotional support because the students found them more approachable than their assigned personal tutor.
* Potentially different experiences of work-related stress for junior and senior colleagues (a more granular analysis of Staff Survey data should reveal whether this might be the case)

### Sickness Absence

Interviewees suggested that only very few people will take sick leave because staff do not feel they *are able to* take sick leave, both in terms of their own workload when they return, and the impact it will have on their colleagues. Staff take on additional burdens to protect others, even though they risk their own health and safety to do so. Given the fact that the School lacks the autonomy, capacity and resources to do anything meaningful about stress that goes beyond a simple redistribution of workload amongst an already overburdened and exhausted staff body, such dangerous behaviour is not surprising. Many of the staff we spoke to had gone to their GP or ‘come very close to’ going to their GP for work-related stress, but none felt able to go further with requesting leave as they worried about the consequences for themselves and their colleagues.

### Risk Assessments

School-level risk assessments do not appear to provide adequate preventative measures for work-related stress. For example, RA 01.04 related to office-based working, contains the following measures on p.3:

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| --- | --- |
| **Listed RA control measure** | **Issues our inspection has identified** |
| Planned workload | LAWPL WAMS is only made available very late in academic year, which means RA assumption that this is an effective control measure is not reasonable. It is not clear how workloads are planned for staff in roles not covered by WAMS. |
| Managers/supervisors trained in managerial skills | Unclear what ‘managerial skills’ means in this context. Line Manager training in LAWPL is neither mandatory nor adequate to deal with all the responsibilities loaded upon LMs. Senior staff also reported difficulties accessing i-ACT training, including over-subscribed courses and not having time to undertake training. |
| Team meetings | Unclear what this means and how this helps with stress prevention/control |
| Appraisal/probation review | According to staff interviewed, PDRs should contain frequent references to stress but staff reported that the PDR process does not lead to any meaningful actions in response to stress. |
| Staff informed of support services within the University | Can be useful for personal stress but no support services in place to reduce organisationally induced stress which appears to be the main type of stress experienced by staff. This measure is also not preventative. |

There is also no evidence that any of the additional actions outlined in the RA has been undertaken or whether anything else has been done in this regard since 2015/16 (it also appears that the last time this document has been reviewed was 2018 even though this should occur annually).

RA02.04 Teaching & Training and RA05.03 Public Events and Open Days contain similar references to actions and processes to control and prevent stress.

### Recommendations

UCU has provided the following overarching recommendations for the University to fulfil its obligations under the Health and Safety at Work Act. While our inspection focused on one School, improvements at university-level will undoubtedly improve the situation for staff wherever they are based.

* Develop and adopt a proactive and **preventative** approach to dealing with work-related stress – i.e. have mechanisms in place to stop staff getting to the point where they are overburdened and need time off for stress. This can include appropriate planning and monitoring of student numbers or other relevant factors that will impact on staff workloads. Regarding WAM, discuss teaching in advance and publish WAM before the start of the academic year.
* Use existing instruments to monitor, control, reduce and prevent workplace stress. Cardiff University policies already contain processes and procedures that can control and reduce work-related stress. For reasons which this H&S inspection could not establish due to a lack of responsiveness from those with responsibilities, these processes and procedures are not applied. Specifically, the Workload Modelling Policy prescribes the School-level analysis of any workload issues as well as the development of an action plan. The Stress Management Policy prescribes that any incident of workplace stress should result in a co-produced Stress Action Plan that is adequately resourced.
* A stress risk assessment for the School’s growth plan must be carried out to identify the stressors and hazards that these changes may have, and suggest mitigations. LAWPL staff we spoke to had many recommendations for improvements that we can provide.
* In general, stress risk assessments must be conducted for all organisational changes (for example, the recent timetabling changes were mentioned by multiple staff we spoke to as causing considerable stress).
* In the absence of resources to increase capacity in LAWPL (and beyond), develop a clear plan which non-essential processes and procedures to pause or stop entirely in case significant work-related stress is discovered in an organisational unit. University and College senior management should be aware of resource issues in the school and urgently propose an action plan. The communication regarding those challenges should not be filtered at the school/college level and should be openly discussed with UEB and staff. Without a plan in place and changes made, our concern is that staff will ‘burn out’ and experience further risks to their health.
* Urgently and then regularly conduct a full HSE Stress Indicator Survey across the whole university to identify problem areas and work to understand and alleviate them.
* Urgently perform an equality assessment which includes an assessment of the way workload is formally distributed and analysis of staff turnover in LAWPL
* Urgently review existing RAs and revise actions and control measures in line with a realistic assessment of these (e.g. planned workloads and WAM do not have a preventative function within LAWPL and should therefore not be referenced in this way).
* Use a variety of data sources (e.g. staff survey, WAM, committee meeting minutes (e.g. SMT, Teaching and Learning, Research)) in addition to sickness absence data and referrals for stress when monitoring and assessing the issue. As our inspection shows, staff feel that taking time off or raising stress formally is a last resort and not something most are prepared to do, which means sickness absence statistics are not a reliable indicator for workplace stress.

### Appendix A – HSE Stress Management Standards Survey Results LAWPL

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| **The results are grouped by HSE Stress Management Standard, and the average score is shown for each question associated with that stress management standard** |
|  |  |  |  |  |
| **Demands** | **Average** |  | **Relationships** | **Average** |
|  |  |  |  |  |
| Different groups at work demand things from me that are hard to combine | **2.23** |  | I am subject to personal harassment in the form of unkind words or behaviour | **4.25** |
| I have unachievable deadlines | **2.20** |  | There is friction or anger between colleagues | **3.50** |
| I have to work very intensively | **1.90** |  | I am subject to bullying at work | **4.43** |
| I have to neglect some tasks because I have too much to do | **1.90** |  | Relationships at work are strained | **3.32** |
| I am unable to take sufficient breaks | **2.21** |  |  |  |
| I am pressured to work long hours | **2.53** |  | **Role** |  |
| I have to work very fast | **2.07** |  |  |  |
| I have unrealistic time pressures | **1.90** |  | I am clear what is expected of me at work | **3.46** |
|  |  |  | I know how to go about getting my job done | **3.67** |
| **Control** |  |  | I am clear what my duties and responsibilities are | **3.46** |
|  |  |  | I am clear about the goals and objectives for my department | **2.57** |
| I can decide when to take a break | **3.39** |  | I understand how my work fits into the overall aim of the organisation | **2.89** |
| I have a say in my own work speed | **2.79** |  |  |  |
| I have a choice in deciding how I do my work | **3.32** |  | **Change** |  |
| I have a choice in deciding what I do at work | **3.07** |  |  |  |
| I have some say over the way I work | **3.29** |  | I have sufficient opportunities to question managers about change at work | **2.43** |
| My working time can be flexible | **3.14** |  | Staff are always consulted about change at work | **2.07** |
|  |  |  | When changes are made at work, I am clear how they will work out in practice | **1.93** |
| **Managers' Support** |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |  |
| I am given supportive feedback on the work I do | **2.89** |  | **Peer Support** |  |
| I can rely on my line manager to help me out with a work problem | **3.50** |  | If work gets difficult, my colleagues will help me | **3.39** |
| I can talk to my line manager about something that has upset or annoyed me about work | **3.57** |  | I get help and support I need from colleagues | **3.39** |
| I am supported through emotionally demanding work | **2.64** |  | I receive the respect at work I deserve from my colleagues | **3.61** |
| My line manager encourages me at work | **3.18** |  | My colleagues are willing to listen to my work-related problems | **3.57** |

