University of Aberdeen

Workload Planning Review Group

Minutes of the meeting held on Tuesday 20 January 2021 (Teams Meeting)

Present: Karl Leydecker, Debbie Dyker, Amanda Lee, David Muirhead, Chris Collins, Tracey White, Ruth Taylor, Syrithe Pugh, Laura McCann, Neil Vargesson, Brian Paterson, Adam Price, Laura Benvie, Sarah Duncan, Garry Fisher, Tracey Slaven, Lindsey Hamilton (clerk)

Apologies: Marion Campbell, Hulda Sveinsdottir

1. Minute of Meeting 29 October 2020

The group approved the minutes of the meeting 29 October 2020.

2. Update on Actions from 29 October / Matters Arising

Karl confirmed that whilst the two sub-groups had formed and the academic sub-group had held their first meeting, the rest of the actions from the last meeting had only been partially completed due to the recent lockdown creating other urgent work priorities.

3. Workload Reduction Toolkit

Karl explained that everyone was aware of current workload pressures which had been exacerbated with the new lockdown measures and schools closing. He was aware that staff were busy getting ready for the second half session and that preparing online material also added additional challenges. Karl advised that SMT felt it important to address and respond in a supportive way to the concerns that had been highlighted since the return from winter break and concerns raised through the recent staff survey. To address these, a toolkit of options has been drafted that Heads of School, Directors and those who lead teams might implement at a local level according to the circumstances/needs of their teams to try and reduce workload pressures.

Karl asked for comments on the draft toolkit and structured conversation template; the following was suggested:

- It was queried whether more staff could be recruited to deal with the extra work. In response it was confirmed that whilst recruitment was part of the long-term solution, the toolkit would help to address current work demands immediately.

- Could there be further clarity and guidance on the how the conversation template for managing conversation should be used and whether it was mandatory. It was explained that the template had been suggested by the Parents and Carers Network and it could be used as an aide memoire and also to record a discussion, however, it is not essential that the document is completed and this will be made clear to the community.

> **Action: TW to ensure guidance on the use of the structured conversation template is clear**

- It was discussed that individual schools/teams/directorates need to review current workload activity and determine those that are a priority, those that could be paused or where the requirements could be reduced, and duties lightened.

Proposal for emailing in business hours only

- The recommendation of not sending emails (or Teams messages) out of business hours was discussed. It was highlighted that some individuals choose to work out of hours to fit in with their family/personal circumstances needs. However, it was highlighted that whilst colleagues could draft emails they should refrain from sending out of hours as it could make more junior colleagues feel pressure to respond (even when an email suggests an immediate response is not needed). It was suggested that for those that need to email out of hours, guidance be issued on how to send emails with a time delay so that individuals did not receive emails out of hours (unless there was an urgent need, or working with colleagues in a different time zone etc)

Action: TW to include the email time delay guidance with the toolkit and also guidance on how to turn off alerts on Teams

- Consideration would be given to responding to students out of hours or in different time zones to ensure appropriate support was available so that everyone's expectations were managed appropriately.

Action: RT to raise and discuss at relevant teaching committees

- It was discussed that having further guidance on email etiquette to keep messages sent within business hours allowed staff and gives people permission to switch off from work.

- It was noted that the toolkit was not meant to be prescriptive, there would be local variation and a need for flexibility within teams that preferred to have meetings/emails out of hours to fit in with their service needs.

Proposal for meeting free Friday and between 12 noon and 2pm each day

- It was agreed that it was important for staff to have a break in the day where they could get outside when there was daylight, and for those home schooling to spend time with children. It was recognised that there would have to be flexibility, so activity was not paralysed and to allow staff to be responsive to situations when needed.

- A flexible working schedule has been trialled in Digital and Information Services and would be circulated for consideration

Action: BH to send to TS & KL

- It was recognised that it would take time to adjust to the new way of working, and hopefully the change would make people reflect on when meetings and emails were necessary.
- It was proposed that meetings should be held between 9.30 and 4.30 and meeting free day on a Friday.
- It was likely that any new arrangement would be in place until at least Easter and where there would then be a review of the arrangements.

- It was also suggested that the meeting guidelines be revisited to ensure it was clear that only essential items should be on an agenda and meetings were managed in a timely manner.

Action: TW to revisit meeting guidelines

Other considerations for the Tool Kit

- It was suggested that a letter be sent to staff with caring responsibilities confirming that there would be no detriment to careers. However, it was discussed that this would add extra work and it might not be welcome from all staff. It was also recognised that it wasn't just members of staff with caring responsibilities that were impacted by the lockdown. It was confirmed that those worried about promotion should speak to their Head of School and that personal circumstances can be taken into account in the promotion process.
- A recommendation was made that as there is a wealth of books and podcasts on work/life balance / 'deep work' / digital minimalism which could help empower staff around workload and stress. The information from these books etc. could be put together as a pre-recorded 5-10min training videos in the staff pages. could complement a number of ideas mentioned in the meeting today.
- It was discussed that Heads of school / Directorates need to train their staff and line managers on the aim of the toolkit, as soon as it is launched to have a session and explain what it is, and ensure that the information is cascaded appropriately.

Action: TW to review best approach to cascade information

- The use of overtime for support staff was discussed, however, it was agreed that it should only be used as per the current guidelines for business-critical situations.
- The group were advised that SMT were considering the proposal for another 3 additional rest days over Easter and this would be confirmed by the next meeting.

4. Date of Next Meeting

It has been agreed that there will be a further meeting in approximately four weeks' time

Action Table for Toolkit

ACTION	LEAD
Ensure there is guidance on the structured conversation template	Tracey White
Toolkit to include guidance on using email delay and also guidance on how to turn off alerts on Teams	Tracey White / Brian Henderson
To discuss out of hours support requirements for students with relevant teaching committee	Ruth Taylor
Brian to send Karl and Tracey Slaven the flexible work schedule trialled in IT Services	Brian Henderson
Meeting guidelines to be reviewed	Tracey White