

University of Aberdeen

Workload Planning Review Group

Minutes of the meeting held on Wednesday 19 February 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, Marion Campbell, Hulda Sveinsdottir, Lindsey Hamilton (clerk)

1. Minute of Meeting 19 January 2021

The group approved the minutes of the meeting 19 January 2021.

2. Update on Actions from January

All actions from the 19 January 2021 meeting complete.

3. Workload Reduction Toolkit

It was confirmed that the Toolkit had been circulated to the community several weeks ago and the group were asked to comment on the effectiveness and reflections of the toolkit so far:

- Some members of the group noted that the toolkit had made more of a positive difference to Academic Related and Support colleagues rather than Academic colleagues as the reductions in work were more aligned to administrative tasks. However, it was also noted that some Academic colleagues had positively commented that they were receiving fewer emails especially out of standard business hours and benefited from the meeting free Friday.
- It was highlighted that the allocated budget to support teaching duties had been a support for academic colleagues.
- It was suggested that the toolkit was working well as a time management support document rather than workload reduction document.
- It was noted that the Toolkit had started other important local level (School/institute) discussions and forums on workload to look at further ways to reduce and support colleagues.
- A short-term negative impact was mentioned that it had created more work for line managers as they had had to set up individual staff meetings.
- It was confirmed that Schools are being asked to rationalise what their essential work and priorities currently are.
- The group noted it was important that senior staff were seen to be leading this change and that they understood where there was flex and where workload needed to be reduced in the areas they led.
- It was highlighted that the financial position of the University was better than anticipated at the start of the pandemic so plans could be made to look at where additional staffing support was most required.
- The group agreed overall that the Toolkit was worth continuing with.

4. Further Suggestions for Workload Reduction

The enclosed document on further workload reduction suggestions was discussed and the following points made:

- It was suggested that that to make a difference, there needed to be a review in each school about whether all programmes and research being undertaken needed to continue, and a discussion on what areas added the most value to each school and to the University.
- It was highlighted that an open and collective conversations about where we are as a University needed to take place. There will be a presentation at Senate on Research culture that will start this conversation and will look at the collective rather than individual culture of the University.
- It was noted that whilst REF would assess the quality of research at the University, we needed to make sure that our systems and process were aligned to allow us to get further good outcomes and outputs. This included looking at how we recognise, reward and value good research.
- It was suggested that it was important to look at creating a culture where people are rewarded for having a duty to their institution and their team.
- A question was raised that if the ethos of the University was one of team culture would we need to move to team research work rather than individual research work. It was highlighted that this would need a careful discussion to ensure that any movement did not have a negative impact on REF.
- Any change would have to be well thought out and recognised in other procedures and process for reward such as the promotion process.
- This discussion had to be coupled with what resources were needed to take forward any change in research like having the appropriate technical and administrative support in each school.
- There needed to be a similar conversation on Teaching - looking at areas such as how we undertake assessment, how we deliver teaching and how we mark.
- It was discussed that where process improvements had been made in areas, such as changing the use of a PGR form, the information wasn't always disseminated across the University so that everyone was aware. In addition, how we monitor these changes to check progress needed to be highlighted.
- Sarah Duncan noted that the SAMS were looking at process improvement and would look at these business improvements suggestions in more detail. Sarah continued that they were looking at the capacity of administration teams to understand where more support could be given to academics to help them with administrative duties, this included reviewing if there was any duplication of work/effort in tasks across the schools and directorates that could stop. However, there needed to be an understanding that administrative staff already had heavy workloads.
- Brian Henderson commented that he was aware that improving University Digital systems had been highlighted and that the Digital Strategy Group were working on a priority list. It had to be noted that there were budget and personnel considerations when it came to being able to take forward digital improvements.
- It was agreed that a future meeting of the Academic Sub-group needed to take place before another full group meeting to review the above suggestions.

5. Update from the Staff Survey in relation to Workload

5.1 Karl confirmed that the Survey Working Group were working closely with Capita to implement the investigate tool which would allow further analysis of the survey data (such as gender analysis). Brian Henderson and Hulda Sveinsdottir were finalising the process for how the data would be requested.

5.2 It was noted that the Unions and other groups had already made suggestions for further analysis of data.

5.3 It was highlighted that it would be useful for a subset of staff from this group to review what other data would be useful. It was suggested that Amanda Lee and Adam Price be on this group. The subgroup would need to understand different funding models for research in different areas of the University like the Rowett Institute in the School of Medicine, Medical Sciences & Nutrition.

5.4 It was noted that in addition to reviewing the survey data that the Workload Planning Review Academic Subgroup would need to also review the different demands faced by academic and research staff in the different workload load tracks

ACTON – set up a small working group to include AP and AL

5.5 It was highlighted that the survey data captured how staff were feeling at a particular moment in time. Therefore, there should be a better understanding of the peaks and troughs in workload throughout the year that would lead to workload pressures, like the end of the financial year, exam time, during the recruitment of new students etc. At these points it should be understood how the workload can impact on how staff are feeling and subsequently the support that could then be offered.

6. Wellcome report “What Researchers Think About The Culture They Work In”

6.1 It was acknowledged that that this was a useful report for the University and that engagement and discussion with the findings of this report was needed across the University. Work on Research Culture at the University had already begun and was being led by Gary Macfarlane who would be happy to engage further and this report could be a discussion at a future Senate Meeting.

It was noted that the culture of academics working outside of their contracted hours had been discussed many times over the years but that this discussion needed to continue to ensure that the working culture and work life balance of staff was correct. It was highlighted that any culture change can take time, but important that the process started.

5. Date of Next Meeting

It has been agreed that the next meeting would be for the Academic Sub-Group only.

Action Table for Toolkit

ACTION	LEAD
5.4 Set up a small group to consider what data to request from and review data generated by the Capita Investigate Tool	Hulda Sveinsdottir To include Adam Price and Amanda Lee, and include representatives from HR and Planning