

# Placing a value on academic work

The development and implementation of a time-based academic workload model

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This paper presents a detailed case study of the development and implementation of a quantifiable academic workload model in the education faculty of an Australian university. Flowing from the enterprise bargaining process, the Academic Staff Agreement required the implementation of a workload allocation model for academics that was quantifiable in terms of hours with a stipulated annual maximum. Upon its eventual implementation, evidence emerged of academic workloads well beyond the supposed upper limit to hours. The case study demonstrates the highly political nature of defining academic work. With the emphasis in a modern university on competition driven by reduced funding and limited resources, academics are increasingly held accountable through performance management for teaching and research outcomes. The case study revealed the inherent tensions that arose between academics and managers as the related issues were negotiated.

## Introduction

In recent years, changes to the university operating environment have resulted in reduced funding for higher education and greater external and internal accountability for academic work. The push for efficiencies and a focus on mass education which has placed increasing emphasis on utilitarian forms of knowledge and research have occurred contemporaneously with issues about good teaching and research. Increasingly staff are expected to conform to externally defined performance outcomes in research, teaching and administration (Barnett & Middlehurst, 1993; Henkel, 2007; Houston, Meyer & Paewai, 2006; Lyons & Ingersoll, 2010; Vardi, 2009). In this new context:

Managers, leaders and individual academics are expected to be responsive to diverse student needs and expectations, a competitive research environment, community expectations for relevance, declining public funding, and increased administrative and fiscal

accountability. Meeting challenges to deliver outputs and outcomes while simultaneously preserving valued process and academic discourse is a complex balancing act (Houston *et al.*, 2006, p. 20).

The academic role includes teaching, research, engagement with students, local communities and professional bodies, and leadership within the university. The degree of complexity of the role makes its definition somewhat problematic. Individual differences, due to discipline, career stage or emphasis placed on research, teaching or administrative duties, add an extra layer to nominally similar roles. Houston *et al.* (2006, p.27) argued that the complexity of universities and the diversity of academic work both within and across disciplines make any attempt to 'standardise workload expectations... is fraught by different realities'.

Traditionally, many academics approach their role as a vocation (Lyons & Ingersoll, 2010), characterised by a high degree of personal commitment, intrinsic motivation

to succeed, self-regulation, flexibility and autonomy (Belamy, Morley & Watty, 2003), which is difficult to reconcile with the new managerial approach. The consequences include intensification, de-professionalisation, increased casualisation, along with a more demanding and diverse student cohort and greater use of technology in mass education (Barnett & Middlehurst, 1993; Bexley, James & Arkoudis, 2011; Burgess, Lewis & Mobbs, 2003; Coates, *et al.*, 2009; Dearn, Fraser & Ryan, 2002; Kenny, 2008, 2009; Langford, 2010; Lyons & Ingersoll, 2010; McInnes, 2000; Vardi, 2009; Winter & Saros, 2002) to the extent that '(t)ime for research appeared to be that remaining after teaching and administrative requirements had been met' (Houston *et al.*, 2006, p.25).

Although intensification of academic work is an international issue (Altbach, Reisberg & Rumbley, 2009), it was observed by Coates *et al.* (2009, p.27) that by comparison 'Australian academics - both in junior and senior ranks - report among the highest number of hours worked per week', 43.8 and 50.4 hours respectively. Langford's (2010) benchmarking survey of 17 Australian universities, 26000 respondents, comparing 31 work practices and outcomes with a range of other industries, is also pertinent. Over half, 17, of the practices were significantly worse than in other occupations. It was concluded that 'the high levels of stress' reported by academic and general staff 'are worse than observed in many other industries' (p.41) and, more disturbingly, the levels of stress 'may be the combined result of both high work demands and poor work control' (p.50). Despite academic workloads being the second worst of 'all other measured practices and outcomes', and experiencing the highest levels of stress the 'dissatisfaction with many management practices ... is outweighed by the belief...that they are involved in important work and contributing to the community' (Langford, 2010, p.52). Furthermore, academic staff were 'moderately satisfied with their jobs' (Langford, 2010, p.50). This sense of mission and commitment to work is also reported by Houston *et al.* (2006, p. 27) with the qualification 'that workloads allocation (is) underpinned by principles of equity and transparency.'

unless workloads are managed well and... time is provided for scholarship and research as well as teaching and service - those things that are valued by academics... the lifestyle of an academic will be affected and the original motivators for career choice may dissipate' (Houston, *et al.*, 2006, p.28).

The previous quote implies 'staff well-being, motivation and work performance' are central to the effectiveness of modern universities (Vardi, 2009, p. 500; Kenny, 2009).

## Managing academic workload

Despite the difficulty of defining academic work, many universities have developed models to allocate and monitor academic work (Houston *et al.*, 2006; Lazarsfeld Jensen & Morgan, 2009; Soliman, 1999; Vardi, 2009). A National Tertiary Education Industry Union (NTEU, 2011) report reveals that in 32 of 34 Australian universities, industrial agreements include an academic workload clause with an upper annual time limit on academic working hours. Many also contain provisions for transparent, equitable and quantifiable mechanisms to determine academic work, including the establishment of a committee with union representation.

Vardi (2009) described some advantages and disadvantages of three basic types of workload models: Contact hours model, based on actual time spent teaching; Actual hours model, which attempts to allocate time for various activities and; Points based model, which assigns relative points to a range of activities. Another approach not mentioned by Vardi (2009) is one based on Equivalent Full-time Student Load (EFTSL). She noted a trade-off between complexity and simplicity in the models, adding that 'where academics are required to undertake a wide variety of duties, or where the work duties between academic staff vary greatly within an area, greater detail in a model is often demanded.' She therefore advocated using an approach with a blend of allocated times (presumably for components such as teaching) and undifferentiated times for other duties (e.g. research) as a way of meeting these needs.

Research also links the success of academic workload models to other factors such as the degree of collaboration, transparency, credibility and regular review (Burgess *et al.*, 2003; Houston *et al.*, 2006; Vardi, 2009), but this provides no description of how the collaboration should occur, or to what extent academic staff had input into the development of the workload processes. A key goal of this research was to fill this gap.

The apparent failure of workload models to prevent work overload is linked to factors such as the lack of credible time allocations and issues not usually covered in workload models, such as the number of staff available, the budget, and change initiatives within an organisation (Houston *et al.*, 2006; Vardi, 2009):

Some departments were simply attempting to do too much, leaving the achievement of objectives largely dependent on the willingness of a dedicated workforce to add additional work without corresponding decreases in other duties. Concerns were also raised

about the match between resource distribution and work requirements (Houston *et al.*, 2006, p. 25).

Burgess (1996, p.69) noted that in time-based models 'workload hours which do not accurately reflect actual hours are no better than utility values. In fact they may be worse since they foster a spurious sense of accuracy.' Lyons & Ingersoll (2010, p.144) identified more general limitations: ineffectiveness in placing 'limits on the exercise of managerial prerogative in the development of workload policies generally, and the resolution of disputes concerning the allocation of academic workloads in particular'. Kenny (2008, p.6) attributed managerial reluctance for meaningful engagement to an awareness that 'the process of truly quantifying what academics actually do would finally expose the extent of 'good will' associated with academic work' and 'would provide hard evidence ... that many academics are working significantly over what might be considered a fair and reasonable workload...'

Although noting the inverse link between increased complexity of workload models and transparency, Vardi (2009, p.506) commented on the comprehensiveness of time-based models' coverage of academic work and their direct link to 'human resourcing and costing of units'. To explore how academic work can be managed in the context of broader organisational and sectoral concerns, this paper reports on a case study in which academic staff took a leading role in the development and implementation of a time-based academic workload model in a faculty of education over the period 2005-2010.

The aim was to reflectively explore the situation in detail as the academics and faculty managers, often with competing priorities and perspectives, dealt with the

issues that arose during the development and implementation of the model and address three key questions:

1. What factors impinge on academic workload?
2. What are the characteristics of a realistic and fair academic workload model?
3. What are the future implications for academic work?

## Methodology

A case study approach, involving the study of a bounded system, (Creswell, 2008) was chosen because it provided a rich description of the events which unfolded as the workload model was developed.

This account clearly reflects the authors' perspective as participants and insiders, faculty members and elected academic representatives in the events. In acknowledging this potential for bias, the authors point out that they drew extensively on a wide range of evidence such as correspondence, minutes of meetings, records of emails and discussions with many academic colleagues and management representatives during the relevant period. Because the case study is localised, the findings are not necessarily generalisable to other situations, but some factors may have relevance.

The 2006 Enterprise Bargaining Agreement guidelines were very general, specifying the need for transparency, equity and balance, whilst allowing faculty and school discretion in balancing the components of academic work, teaching, research and administration/service.

As there was no systematic analysis or evaluation of the implementation of the workload clause at the University during this period, the degree of staff input into the various models remains unknown.

### A Case Study: Developing and implementing an academic workload model

#### Context

Prior to the case study period, the Faculty of Education operated a legacy system of workload allocation, largely based on effective full-time student load (i.e. teaching duties only). Over the previous decade the load per staff member had slowly risen from about 15 EFTSL to 20-25 EFTSL. In terms of workload, EFTSL did not adequately distinguish between many related tasks related to teaching such as the time involved in preparation or actual

hours in class. Workload was therefore spread unevenly between staff.

#### Workload balance, funding sources

In accordance with the Academic Staff Agreement (2006-2008) (ASA) and 'Guidelines for the Allocation of Academic Work' (The Guidelines), negotiations began in 2005 between management and academic staff in the Faculty to devise a time-based academic workload model. A model based on a workload balance of teaching (40 per cent), research (40 per cent), and service/administrative related duties (20 per cent) (40:40:20) was proposed. To be compliant with the ASA, the model

had to be demonstrably fair, transparent and equitable and ensure the annual workload for academics was no greater than 1800 hours.

Problems soon arose when the then Dean disagreed with the assumption of (40:40:20) and proposed an alternative, 50:30:20 model. Its implementation, without staff consultation, in 2006 increased staff teaching time and reduced that for research. At the behest of staff, the NTEU became involved and, in February, mooted a 'Workload Review Committee'(WRC) to develop an ASA-compliant workload model. The brief of the WRC, consisting primarily of academic staff, was to 'consult widely with staff, ... collect data and mak(e) workload comparisons both within and external to the university' and offer advice to academics on workload.<sup>1</sup>

In response, the Deputy Vice-Chancellor and the Director of Finance, asserted that academic research should be self-funded so to justify a 35 per cent research allocation for staff:

'would need to generate approx (sic) 35 per cent of their salary cost. A staff member earning \$85000 (pa) would need to earn block grant funding of \$30000 (pa)...The faculty currently earns less than 5 per cent of its income from research...I would suggest 15 per cent allocation to research at most. Within that overall allocation of 15 per cent, some staff might be allocated much higher allocations for research and others might dedicate most of their time to teaching.'<sup>3</sup>

Following this directive, the Dean then altered her proposal to (70:15:15), with teaching clearly to be the overwhelming priority for academics.<sup>2,3,4,6</sup> It emerged from the development of a workload model that there was a clear divide between staff and management on the place of research and the earning capacity of the Faculty.

Despite some further resistance, the WRC was established<sup>4</sup> and with staff consultation, developed a revised model, the 'May 19th model' which proposed a (50:30:20) workload balance and provided for more realistic times for teaching and related duties; but left research and administrative tasks less clearly defined. At an extraordinary Faculty meeting, called by the WRC under University ordinances, the May 19th model was overwhelmingly accepted by staff, with one abstention. Again the Dean objected on financial grounds and insisted on the (70:15:15) model.<sup>5</sup> Continued opposition by the Dean resulted in academic staff protest, the Vice-Chancellor's intervention, an offer of another post for the Dean and the appointment of an Acting Dean.<sup>6</sup>

Academic staff were soon disappointed in their hopes for a more collegial approach to the workload issue. The Acting Dean, appointed in mid 2006, proposed an alternative model (deemed the 'Trust model') describing it as a more 'flexible' approach to the 'complex' May 19th model.<sup>8</sup> Despite the overwhelming vote in its favour, many academics remained unsure about the time-based May 19th model, and were willing to try the Trust Model, even though it was not supported by any documentation nor quantified academic work time in any transparent way. Some well-established academics feared that a time-based model would prevent them from pursuing their research and feared the focus on time would de-professionalise their work. Other staff, generally those less established in their careers or with large undergraduate teaching loads, wanted the more transparent time-based model.

NTEU sent an open letter to the VC expressing its concern that there was still no academic workload model compliant with the Academic Staff Agreement, ASA(2006-2008),<sup>7</sup> and soon after the Acting Dean released a one page description called 'Workload Principles 2007' proposing a balance of 80 per cent teaching and 20 per cent research.<sup>9</sup>

### Tactics of delay

The catalyst for further action was a letter from the NTEU of intending formal dispute, 2 May 2007, on the grounds of non-compliance with the ASA and citing underfunding of the Faculty as a cause.<sup>10</sup> A response by the Director of Human Resources rejecting both claims increased dissatisfaction<sup>11</sup> and led to the initiation of a formal dispute by the NTEU. The Acting Dean proposed a series of fora for staff to discuss 'further revisions to the current workload model which both reflect the needs of individual colleagues and the Faculty and are consistent with the EBA'.<sup>12</sup> However, these fora were delayed until late August due to the Acting Dean taking leave, meaning staff workloads for 2007 could not be revised. Two one-hour 'workshops' for staff were scheduled in September, with a decision on the revised workload model to be made at a full faculty meeting on October 23.<sup>13,14</sup> The aim was to implement the new model '...BEFORE the end of the year'.<sup>15</sup>

The workshops and discussions were conducted in good spirit<sup>16</sup> resulting in a report<sup>17</sup> proposing some 'Notional Reference Points' (NRPs), or estimates of the times to be allocated for a range of academic tasks. The

report stressed the aspirational goal of having a 40:40:20 model implemented by 2010.<sup>17</sup> To help staff calculate workloads, the NTEU developed a spreadsheet with the NRPs built in, which enabled academic staff to easily estimate their total workload on a holistic basis.

In December 2007, the Acting Dean accepted the report and committed to its implementation.<sup>18</sup> The NTEU was prepared to work with the newly negotiated model, despite noting the limited range of NRPs for teaching duties. Unexpectedly, however, the Acting Dean stepped down in January 2008 and was replaced by another Acting Dean.<sup>19</sup> Despite initially avowing to implement the new model, adding that 'our intention is not just to fix the immediate issues but to put in place better processes which will provide greater certainty and transparency'<sup>20</sup>, the new Acting Dean unilaterally reduced a key NRP, the preparation time for a 12.5 per cent unit, from 75 to 36 hours.<sup>21, 22</sup> In arguing for this change, the new Acting Dean also indicated the need for further changes 'to ensure a more equitable distribution of workload across staff...'<sup>21</sup> The NTEU raised concerns about the lack of transparency and suggested a joint consultative committee of management and NTEU nominees to discuss the situation.<sup>22, 23</sup> This idea was dismissed on financial grounds, with the Acting Dean arguing the NRP was 'not reasonable (or even sensible)', without presenting any evidence to support this claim.<sup>24</sup>

Another formal dispute was initiated by the NTEU which was heard by an internal University 'Dispute Resolution Committee' (DRC) on April 17, 2008.<sup>25</sup> NTEU presented specific examples of staff who were disadvantaged and argued that the level of trust of the workload process in the Faculty was very low.<sup>26</sup> The DRC did not reach a consensus about the dispute and recommended further consultation to resolve the problems.<sup>27</sup> Following receipt of the report of the DRC<sup>27</sup> the VC opined that 'an average research workload component of 40 per cent in a vocationally oriented discipline area sounds very high to me and it is something that the ...Senior executive will need to discuss with Professor ... (the soon to be appointed permanent Dean) shortly after his arrival.'<sup>28</sup> It was at this stage that the NTEU decided to pursue the case in the Australian Industrial Relations Commission (AIRC).

## Going to court

By the time the case reached the AIRC for the formal hearing, a new permanent Dean had taken up his post. In line

with the suggestion of the AIRC, the Dean agreed to the formation of an Academic Workload Review Committee (AWRC), to develop a time-based workload model compliant with the ASA. The AWRC comprised three representatives of Faculty management (Head of School, Associate Dean Teaching and Learning and a senior professor) and three staff representatives (the authors of this paper).

Fundamental differences between the two parties were soon apparent. The appointed chair (the Head of School) insisted that the workload allocation process had to operate within the constraints of the Faculty budget whereas staff representatives insisted that the model had to be able to quantify individual workloads to determine whether they were ASA-compliant. The staff representatives also argued that the model should allow for the aggregation of individual loads, so the Faculty would be better able to estimate the Faculty's teaching resource needs and thus help frame the budget.

The decision was made to build on the existing NRPs and to determine realistic time allocations for other tasks not covered in the earlier consultations. The workload spreadsheet was used to calculate academic workloads, with individuals reporting estimates of 124 per cent, 168 per cent, 165 per cent, 130 per cent, 104 per cent (an average of 138 per cent), equivalent to an average of over 50 hours per week, with a maximum of over 60 hours.<sup>29</sup> Comments gave further insight into staff attitudes:

'I was worried that ...(protesting about workload)... would make me visible, vulnerable and a target for retribution. The track record of our management to date has been marked by vindictive responses to the issue of workloads...at no point has my performance manager looked at my total workload with me and considered my research or admin needs...'<sup>29, 30</sup>

'I face the dilemma of sacrificing my research while I seek to maintain high standards of teaching. I'm tired and saddened by a climate of despair amongst diligent staff members.'<sup>29, 30</sup>

The staff representatives presented a draft document to the AWRC, including a rationale for the model, restating the commitment to a 40:40:20 balance by 2012, defining key terminology and descriptions of academic activities. The teaching section expanded to cover tasks not included in previous staff consultations and recognised gradations within teaching patterns. It followed a similar pattern for research and service/administration to ensure a holistic coverage of workload. The time allocations were benchmarked against models collected from other universities and faculties. Management rep-

representatives opposed some time allocations but did not support their views by research or evidence. In regular meetings, the AWRC progressively refined the draft and periodically presented it to staff for consultation and comment over the remainder of 2008.<sup>31</sup> A negotiated revised workload model was eventually adopted for trial at the start of the 2009 academic year.<sup>31,37</sup>

The revised model provided a rationale, a comprehensive set of transparent time-based allocations for key aspects of academic work, a common language to discuss workload, and outlined a process to raise grievances about workload. The spreadsheet was also further refined to enable individual academic staff and their performance managers to accurately estimate workloads on a holistic basis and negotiate adjustments as needed. To ensure transparency, the documentation was made available to staff, along with the spreadsheet via the Faculty website. For those less inclined to accept a time-based model, the notion of 'allocated hours' was introduced. This deemed that the time for which academic staff could be held accountable was limited to 1800 hours p.a., thus enabling those who wished to work longer hours to do so by choice.

### Implementation of the workload model

Implementing the model in practice, however, presented new problems. It was complex, and neither staff nor their managers were used to looking at their work this way. The staff representatives designed and conducted a series of training sessions, including scenarios of typical cases, with individual staff and performance managers to facilitate understanding of the model and use of the spreadsheet.

As predicted, implementation of the model had consequences for the Faculty budget, framed on the presumption of 70 per cent teaching loads, resulting in an increase in the expenditure on casual teaching. Some senior staff remained skeptical and uncommitted to the model, complaining of staff 'double dipping' or inflating their workloads, and arguing that aspects of the model were 'generous'. Staff representatives countered that these were training or performance management issues rather than faults with the model, adding that the process was in trial so needed monitoring and evaluation.

Eventually, a table was compiled summarising the total and balance of workload for 95 per cent of the academic staff and made available at a school meeting.<sup>32</sup> Here the Dean noted the 'artistry' of the model and usefulness of

summary data for planning by identifying overloaded staff or areas needing more resources. The data also re-confirmed that staff were working considerably over 1800 hours, (even allowing for a 10 per cent tolerance margin), estimates indicated that 50 per cent of the staff were working over 150 per cent of the annual limit, and 60 per cent of staff were working over 130 per cent.<sup>32</sup>

AWRC meetings continued throughout 2009-2010, consulting with individual staff, groups such as course coordinators and new academic appointments. Gradually the workload model began to be embedded within normal Faculty processes. Once again, however, financial considerations threatened the model. The centrally-determined Faculty budget had not increased to support the adoption of the new model and the Dean's requests for more funds were unsuccessful. Early in 2010, with a \$1 million deficit looming, University management insisted that the Dean balance the budget.

In a specially convened meeting of senior Faculty staff that followed, the AWRC managerial representatives, led by the Head of School, argued that the workload model was unaffordable and had exacerbated the financial problems. However, the staff representatives pointed to other factors, such as the Faculty decision to initiate a full redevelopment of all degree courses during 2009-2011, which also involved duplication of all courses for delivery in a fully online mode in 2010 were more relevant. Arguing that these course changes had created significant extra teaching work and required substantial additional support staff and infrastructure costs, the staff representatives claimed that the workload model simply quantified the increased teaching burden, but had not created the problem. When it was revealed at the meeting that the Faculty had unsuccessfully applied for \$1 million in strategic funds to finance the course redevelopments, the real source of the financial stress became evident.

So at the start of 2010, after 18 months of meetings and a year of operation, rather than abandon or modify the course re-development project, the AWRC management representatives targeted the workload model. They expressed a lack of confidence in the model and withdrew from the AWRC. The Dean re-structured the AWRC into an 'Academic Workload Advisory Panel' (AWAP) to conduct further benchmarking and advise on changes to the model.<sup>32</sup>

The benchmarking, however, re-confirmed the reasonableness of the teaching time allocations. Some minor adjustments and improvements were made, based on

the experience in 2009, and a revised model was used in 2010. No aggregate summary workload data was made available for 2010 because some senior staff expressed concerns about privacy. Without this information the staff representatives argued that transparency of the process was compromised.

In September 2010, a new industrial agreement was implemented, ASA (2010-2012)<sup>34</sup> which contained an amended workload clause that stipulated a (40:40:20) model for most academics. This required some further refinement of the model for 2011 because it also stipulated a reduction in the total working hours to 1717 p.a.

Aggregated workload summary data published at the end of 2011 indicated the persistence of high overall allocated workloads for individuals, with an average of 128 per cent (one as high as 183 per cent).<sup>33</sup> On average, teaching loads had not reduced significantly but there was evidence of staff increasingly negotiating teaching relief which was not presented in the data. However, with the 40 per cent teaching component largely accepted, there was evidence that teaching loads reduced significantly in 2012.<sup>33</sup>

## The Future- beyond the Faculty

While the model has undergone constant refinement, it still needs reasonable time allocations for administrative tasks, and fair mechanisms to account for research. Gradually, however, the idea of the workload model is being accepted. Reduced teaching demands through marking relief has enabled many staff to improve their research performance: a recent Faculty report noted 120 per cent increase in research output in 2011 and contributions to research by 75 per cent of staff, in contrast to the situation in 2006-2008, where research was in decline.<sup>35</sup>

The new industrial agreement, ASA (2010-2012)<sup>34</sup>, embedded the 40:40:20 workload balance across the University and also mandated the University to negotiate with the NTEU to establish common workload guidelines for all academics, through the establishment of the Academic Workload Development Committee (AWDC), with equal membership of NTEU and University management. This committee was to monitor compliance of all workload models at the University to ensure that fair, transparent and realistic workload expectations apply to all academics.<sup>34</sup>

Recently (April 2012) the AWDC and UTAS management agreed on a set of common academic workload

guidelines which are published on the UTAS website and set minimum 'thresholds' for research, and standard time allocations for teaching duties and administrative roles.<sup>36</sup> These are to be implemented across the University in 2012.

## References – Documentary evidence

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7. Letter: NTEU to VC, December 20, 2006.
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9. Document: 'Workload Principles 2007' Feb 2007.
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## Discussion of the case study

The difficulties encountered in implementing an academic workload model in the Faculty, despite the existence of a workload clause in the academic staff agreement, have been used to illuminate a range of potential issues. Other faculties in the same university had managed to devise and successfully implement models in 2006, whereas the Faculty took over five years. Thus, generalisations from this case study may be difficult because of specific factors and personalities involved.

As Burgess (1996) and Burgess *et al.* (2003) warned, the case study demonstrates that an inadequate Faculty budget can cause conflict and affect the workload allocation process. In this case, differing priorities about resources to support research hindered the development of the model. Whereas managers emphasised teaching as the key source of funds for the Faculty, academic staff valued their research time. Thus the allocation of academic work raised concomitant issues such as the nature of the academic role and equity for academics. In this context, the industrial agreement was crucial because it required academic as well as managerial input to ensure credibility of the workload allocation process.

Ultimately, the case study demonstrated some improvement in workloads. As teaching was the only quantifiable component of academic work during this period, an analysis of the teaching workloads was undertaken using the published summary data. Based on teaching loads of 19 staff who were continuously employed at the University during this period (about 40 per cent of the on-going academic workforce), Table 1 shows average teaching workloads in 2009, 2011 and 2012.

The data collections in 2009 and 2010 were raw data derived from the workload spreadsheets. In 2011, there was anecdotal evidence of the workload model being used to negotiate lower workloads than indicated here. By 2012, the data collection was more reliable and showed the actual teaching time (percentages).

The data reveal that the average time (percentage) allocated to academics for teaching remained constant for the first two years, then changed significantly. Because

**Table 1: Available summary teaching workload data.**

Year	2009*	2011**	2012**
Mean time estimated for teaching (hours)	1037 (58%)	1035 (60%)	850 (49.5%)

Note: two different industrial agreements applied as indicated:  
\*ASA(2006-2009) and \*\*ASA(2010-2012)

the industrial agreement underpinning the results was the same for 2011 and 2012, statistical comparison was done and a two tailed t-test reveals ( $p = 0.0094$ ) indicating a significant decline in teaching loads at the 99 per cent confidence level. Overall, this shows the model has been effective in reducing teaching loads, and, the authors argue, this is a key factor in the improved research performance reported in the case study.

The final part of this article explores the three research questions.

## What factors impinge on academic workload?

The case study illustrates explicitly the potential for political tensions inherent in considering academic workload priorities in a climate of resource limitations (Burgess, 1996; Burgess *et al.*, 2003). In a higher education environment beset with insufficient funds and greater accountability requirements, issues of power and control soon arose around the question of how to quantify the work of academics. In this case, the main priority of management to meet a pre-determined budget clashed with the staff priority to develop a fair, transparent, quantifiable workload model compliant with the ASA.

The research emphasising the importance of collaboration in the development of a credible workload model (Burgess *et al.*, 2003; Houston *et al.*, 2006; Vardi, 2009) was illustrated in the case study, by the key role of the staff representatives. They insisted on realistic time estimates, a fair and a transparent mechanism to quantify academic work, and other key aspects of credibility. Under pressure to meet an inadequate budget, and with teaching the major source of Faculty income, managers tended to focus on maximising the teaching component at the expense of other aspects of the work.

The industrial agreement, and the willingness to use its legal status, provided the staff representatives with a degree of authority to back-up their insistence on an evidence based process to determine realistic time allocations. This avoided the situation noted by Vardi (2009, p. 502) that in time-based workload models 'allocation often underestimates the real time it takes to complete tasks.' Equal staff and management representation on the AWRC ensured that this point had to be taken account of and attempts to distort the process could be challenged. The meetings provided an opportunity to discuss the issues and present alternative arguments. Due to the demands of the role, the NTEU insisted that the staff representatives were provided with some time release to do the neces-

sary background work and attend the meetings of the committee.

With confidence that the model was realistic, due to the consultation and benchmarking, the staff representatives argued that the model should do more than simply ensure that everyone was equally overloaded. Rather, the model's validity should allow staff to confidently determine if their workload exceeded the annual limit, as provided for in the industrial agreement, and seek some reduction accordingly.

The spreadsheet empowered academic staff to estimate easily their workloads on a holistic basis for the first time. It provided objective quantifiable evidence rather than the more anecdotal or self-reported data in much of the research, and coupled with the release of the aggregated academic workload data, it provided evidence which forced management to take genuine steps to reduce workload.

The case study revealed inherent doubts for some academics which impinged on the model's development and acceptance. Consistent with Soliman (1999, p.4) some felt using time to quantify academic work compromised 'the notion of professionalism.' In particular for some more established in their careers, or some younger ambitious academics, it raised fears that a workload limit might prevent them from pursuing their research passions and thus negatively affect their career or promotion prospects. When the first estimates from the model appeared, many academics and managers doubted the credibility of the model. It also highlighted the inherent tensions between the traditional self-regulation that many academics wanted to retain over their work and the managerial paradigm requiring control over the allocation of resources (Lyons & Ingersoll, 2010; Bellamy *et al.*, 2003).

The data revealed a degree of normalisation of work overload, probably flowing from the way in which many academics approached their work as a vocation. The authors argued, however, that in a managerial paradigm, the quantification of this level of commitment is necessary, as individuals, particularly younger academics, are increasingly held externally accountable for performance and have less control over their work. The deterioration in working conditions for academics in the Faculty occurred in the absence of a fair and transparent mechanism. The development of a credible model was the first step in putting limitations on ever increasing workload demands and expectations.

The dedication of 40 per cent of self-regulated workload time specifically to research, and the workload limit on 'allocated hours', provided a means to limit perfor-

mance expectations on academics. Academic staff were empowered to enter performance management with a realistic estimate of their work and a tool to negotiate a fair and reasonable outcome within the limitations of the allocated hours. Staff, however, remained free to devote any extra hours they wanted to their passions, but this would be a personal choice rather than a requirement driven by unrealistic expectations. This approach preserved elements of a vocation attitude approach (Coates *et al.*, 2009; Langford, 2010; Barnett & Middlehurst, 1993). The case study's evidence indicates this approach has contributed to a significant improvement in research output in the Faculty.

### What are the characteristics of a realistic and fair academic workload model?

Despite the need to quantify academic work, and the fact that workload models from other faculties and institutions indicated that such a task was possible, the case study documents a highly fraught process. This chiefly arose due to the different priorities of the management and academic staff.

Staff AWDR representatives, supported by the NTEU, were intent on meeting the requirements of the ASA (2006-2009) by working with the AWRC to develop a credible time-based workload model. Through an evidence based process of consultation with academic staff and benchmarking against existing models, the AWRC was able to identify the range of activities in academic work, develop clear definitions, consistent terminology and realistic associated time allocations. The model was framed to include a range of measures including both input (e.g. preparation for teaching) and output activities (e.g. research publications, or number of students taught) and process guidelines for the allocation of work and internal resolution of any grievances.

Extensive consultations with staff and the benchmarking against other workload models added considerable validity to the figures in the model. In discussions about the draft documentation in the AWRC, any attempts to adjust time allocations were met with a call for evidence to support their view. This prevented the previous practice where time allocations were determined according to financial considerations, rather than reflecting the actual nature and complexity of the tasks which would undermine the model's credibility (Houston *et al.*, 2007; Burgess *et al.*, 2003).

Ultimately, time based allowances were developed for all identifiable activities with a 'catch-all' allowance to

acknowledge a range of unforeseen minor tasks. By 2010-2011 the model had evolved into a hybrid of the models described and recommended by Vardi (2009). It contained detailed time-based elements for teaching, incorporating allocations for tasks that were independent of student numbers (e.g. preparing a lecture); some that were dependent on student numbers (e.g. marking & consultation); and undifferentiated time allocations for administrative and research duties. Consistent with the research, while this tended to increase the model's complexity it also contributed to its credibility (Vardi, 2009).

Lazarsfeld Jensen and Morgan (2009) emphasised that a lack of understanding of the model could be a major source of dissatisfaction. In an attempt to alleviate the unavoidable complexity of the model, training was organised to explain it and instruct staff and performance managers in the use of the spreadsheet. Individual staff could quickly obtain an accurate and holistic estimate of their total workload, including breakdown of the teaching, research and administration-service components. This improved transparency of the process and enabled staff to approach their performance management with a clearer picture of the demands on their time, and led to more meaningful discussions about their workload and career priorities.

Transparency and fairness was further enhanced by the aggregation of individual workload data into a summary workload document showing the total workload and percentage of teaching, research and administrative duties for every academic in the faculty. Consistent with the research (Burgess *et al.*, 2003; Vardi, 2009), the case study showed that this information could assist Faculty managers to better determine the level of staff resources to meet the work demands and to identify gaps and staff who may be overloaded.

## What are the future implications for academic work?

The case study illustrates the inherently political nature of developing a workload model because it raises tensions between the managerial and collaborative paradigms. In this case, it manifested itself as the different priorities relating to meeting an existing budget model. The transparency of the process involved a fundamental change in the way managers had to negotiate workloads with individuals. Gradually, as academics learned about the process and it became embedded in the normal operations of the Faculty it changed the way many academics thought about their work.

As the case study illustrates, the problems were largely budget driven, but while the resource needs are more clearly quantifiable, the constraints on the Faculty remain, as these decisions are made centrally by University management. At the time of writing, in early 2012, political and economic factors within the Faculty and University again threaten the implementation of the model. This emphasises the importance of an institutional approach to these matters and does not imply ineffectiveness of the model.

Central to driving through these changes in the face of contradictory cost pressures to increase teaching loads and improve research performance, a clear picture of what the academic role entails is essential. The vision underpinning this model is that research and scholarship are fundamental to the role of academics. This view is also embodied in the industrial agreement ASA (2010-2012) which has required the formation of a joint committee of management and NTEU representation, to review and develop common standard guidelines for academic work to apply across the institution.

The case study indicates that the AWDC can be an effective way to develop a meaningful approach to allocating academic work. It also has a monitoring role to ensure adherence to the ASA. The intention is to build on the experiences of the last five years and improve on the existing situation by providing a common language to discuss workload, common transparent time-based allocations and other measures to equitably determine academic workload across the Institution. This outcome will ensure a more transparent link between the budget process and staffing needs in all schools, and a more reliable and fair platform to gauge the performance of academics. This will lead to further research, as called for by Lazarfeld Jensen and Morgan (2009, p. 69) for 'comparative information about the methods of (workload) calculation other universities are using at schools level, and how agreements are invigilated.'

The authors also contend that tackling the widespread deterioration in academic working conditions as reported in the research, requires an urgent response from professional bodies, such as the NTEU, to capture workload data across the nation. Taking control of the development of a set of common, credible, academic workload guidelines and practices for the academic profession as a whole will be a step towards adequate resourcing of universities. The proposition here is that in many ways this managerial debate has been lost. In this reality, the only option is for the academic staff to be actively involved in the development of credible workload processes that are designed to

retain the essence of their work, and serve the needs of the institution.

In a modern university environment, to be effective in their work, academics need credible and transparent mechanisms to quantify and justify what they do and to place reasonable limits on the performance expectations imposed on them. A credible workload model, developed by genuine consultation, as outlined here, is an important step towards this outcome; one which will protect the health and well-being of academics by limiting excessive demands on them.

## Summary

Our goal in this research was to use the case of the development of a quantifiable time-based academic workload model in an education faculty in an Australian university to explore issues around academic workload. With increasing managerial control, accountability and reduced funding having a dramatic effect on the way universities operate, the quantification of academic work has become an important issue throughout the tertiary education sector.

If academic performance is to be properly evaluated and universities are to be effective, then clear, credible and meaningful guidelines for defining and estimating reasonable workload expectations are needed. These guidelines must account for the nature and extent of academic work in a credible and transparent way such that the processes for allocating the work and measuring performance are demonstrably fair and retain the essence of academic work. The authors point out that the serious deterioration of academic work has occurred in the absence of clarity about how to quantify academic work within a managerial paradigm that mandates accountability and measureable outcomes.

The case study indicates that the development of a quantifiable model is only the beginning. Implementing a time-based model requires a significant cultural change in how many academics, and their managers perceive and support academic work. The processes must link into broader organisational performance mechanisms and provide credible data for planning purposes and to ensure adequate resourcing through the budget.

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