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A qualitative study of UK academic role: positive features, negative aspects and associated stressors in a mainly teaching-focused university

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Abstract

The literature demonstrates that stress in the working life of academics has increased over recent years (Kinman, 2014). However, qualitative research on how academics cope with changes in working life and associated stress is limited. This paper examines how a sample of 31 academics in a post-92 predominantly teaching-focused UK university cope with teaching, research/scholarship and administration, what they perceive to be positive about work, what is less valued and what is stressful. Online interviews were used to maximise participation. Data were analysed using thematic analysis. Six themes emerged from the data. These were administrative loads, coping with stress at work, task preferences in the academic role, features of the academic role, positive and negative feelings around research/scholarship, and thoughts around leaving the academic environment. The factors that contributed to stress included the increasing the number of students, heavy workloads, increasing administration, poor management, funding cuts, and government initiatives threatening the future of education. Academics reported as negatives that they had less time to interact with students because of increasing administration, difficulties obtaining sufficient funding for research in particular, and feeling that academic posts were less secure. All of this led to greater job dissatisfaction. However, support from colleagues and taking steps to manage their time more effectively were identified as factors that can moderate some of the negative consequences of work stress. Academics overall reported being happy at work because of the satisfactions gained from teaching, their relationships with students, the levels of work autonomy, and support from colleagues.

Keywords: Academic roles, coping, academic work environment, stress, job satisfaction

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Introduction

Changes in the higher education (HE) sector have been well documented especially in Australia (Winefield, Gillespie, Stough, Dua, & Hapuarachchi, 2002) and the UK (Court & Kinman, 2010) over the past three decades and these changes have been associated with increases in work stress. A survey sponsored by the UK Association of University Teachers (AUT) in 2003 found that 93% of AUT members suffered stress at work and 62% were extremely stressed 27% were considering changing their job, 46% reported that their confidence had decreased in the past two years, 72% were dissatisfied with pay, and 86% reported that their workload was too heavy (Tytherleigh, Webb, Ricketts, & Cooper, 2005). While national data on absenteeism due to stress is missing for UK academics, it is estimated that over 11.3 million working days were lost in the UK in 2013/2014 due to stress, depression or anxiety (HSE, 2014).

From reviewing the literature on stress, it is clear that most studies have employed quantitative methods and while these have made a significant contribution, quantitative methods have some limitations. For example, quantitative researchers have produced reliable psychometric scales to evaluate levels of stress but these scales tend to ignore the importance of identifying the stressors from the individuals' perspectives (Mazzola, Schonfeld & Spector, 2011). One aim of this study was to identify using qualitative methods, the stressors faced by academics as a result of the changes in the HE environment.

In terms of conceptualising stress, the transactional model of stress and coping (Folkman & Lazarus, 1985) was adopted. This includes a focus on the person and the environment where stress is conceptualised as emerging from interactions between individuals and their environment. A crucial aspect of the model involves cognitive appraisal which explains the

decision-making process an individual undertakes before coming to perceive a situations as stressful (Elo, Ervasti, Kuosma, & Mattila, 2008). This is currently the most widely applied model as it provides a better conceptualisation of the complexities of the stress reaction than other models do (Bartlett, 1998). In the model, stress is generated as a consequence of the interaction between individuals and their environment. When a new event occurs, the individual cognitively appraises it to see if it poses a threat to their wellbeing. This is called primary appraisal, and events may be evaluated as: (a) irrelevant, (b) harmless and positive, (c) harmful and a threat, (d) harmful and a challenge. Primary appraisal is followed by secondary appraisal where individuals judge their ability to cope with the event and when the demands of the event exceed their coping resources, they appraise the event as stressful. It is these cognitive appraisal processes that explain individual differences in the perception of stress (Elo et al. 2008). Individuals have been shown to have a range of coping strategies for to help them try to deal with stress, some of which are more adaptive than others (Galvin & Godfrey, 2001).

   Within coping theory, Folkman and Lazarus (1985) identified two major types of coping strategy; emotion-focused coping and problem-focused coping. Emotion-focused coping involves the individuals' efforts to regulate their emotional responses to the situation perceived as stressful. This may involve sharing the experience with others to get emotional support for example. Problem-focused coping is used to try to change the situation in some way to decrease the threat or reduce the perceived harm. Most situations are likely to involve elements of both strategies if they are to be resolved satisfactorily but individuals have been shown to have preferences for one or the other. Carver et al. (1989) explored the nature of coping in more detail and found from analysing previous research that they could categorise coping responses as being either functional or dysfunctional in terms of how effective they were at coping with stressor and crucially preserving wellbeing. Initially problem-focussed

coping was conceptualised as being functional while emotion-focussed coping was dysfunctional. However, later research suggested that while emotion-focussed coping strategies such as using denial and substance abuse to forget about the situation are dysfunctional, in circumstances where the individual has little control over changing the stressor, emotion-focussed coping can be functional (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). Certainly, there are situations in academia involving assessment and the like that can be perceived as low control stressors from the academics' perspectives and here seeking emotional support from colleagues could be helpful.

Stress at work

There is some evidence that employees in occupations requiring high levels of communication and personal interaction such as university lecturing are more at risk of experiencing occupational stress (Reis, Hino, & Rodriguez-Anez, 2010). Earlier quantitative studies have demonstrated increasing stress levels in UK academics (Court & Kinman, 2010; Kinman & Jones, 2008). Gillespie, Winefield, Dua, and Stough (2001) conducted a qualitative study of academic and administrative staff from 15 Australian universities. The results revealed that the main sources of stress related to cuts in funding and resources and related job insecurity, increased workloads, unhelpful management practices and a lack of adequate recognition and reward. Heavy workloads and job insecurity were also identified as stressors in other studies (Mazzola et al., 2011; McInnes, 2000). Winefield, Boyd, Saebel, & Pignata (2008) reported funding cuts is one the most common stressors among Australian academics. Ogbonna and Harris (2004) found that the relationships between academics and managers was unclear amongst UK university lecturers and this was perceived as a stressor. A qualitative study emphasised that heavy teaching loads led to more stress amongst academics in Australia and New Zealand (Levenson, 2004).

Traditionally most research in education has examined the negative aspects of work. Only a few studies have included any positive elements of the academic role and these were identified as autonomy and flexibility (Bellamy, Morley, & Watty, 2003; Houston, Mayer, & Paewai, 2006). Rhodes, Hollinshead, and Nevill (2007) identified teaching, involvement with students, autonomy at work and academic freedom were the most positive aspects of the academic role. In a qualitative study, Akerlind (2005) found that Australian academics were satisfied overall with their work because of the ability to undertake research and the freedom and autonomy they experienced at work. Kinman and Wray (2013) suggested that help and support from colleagues may reduce stress and can be regarded as a coping strategy in the academic environment. The aim of this current study was to produce a more holistic view of the academic's working life, by exploring what academics perceive to be the positive and negative aspects of the academic role and discover how they coped with the challenges presented by work.

Method

Participants

Participants were recruited from what can be conceptualised as a teaching intensive UK university in that the main income stream comes from teaching. There is over 2,000 academic staff with 67% having contracts covering teaching and research, 26% with teaching only contracts and 7% with research only contracts. In terms of the national research assessment exercise, 16% of academics were submitted; although this number does not represent the total number undertaking research as a quality threshold was applied. From the total staff group, 31 academics (18 female, 12 male, 1 mixed gender) volunteered to participate. This number of interviews represented an adequate sample size as it allowed analysis to saturation. Two of the interviewees were Associate Lecturers, six were Lecturers, sixteen were Senior Lecturers, five were Principal Lecturers and two were Professors. All

participants are involved with teaching and research. Their job experiences ranged from 2 to 36 years (M = 12 years, SD = 9.54) with the least experienced being a Senior Lecturer and the highest a Professor.

Measures

A structured interview schedule designed to be delivered online, was constructed covering academics' experience of their roles related to teaching, research/scholarship and administration. Participants were told that they could write as much as they liked, that their opinions were valued but that any identifying material they included would be anonymised Twelve open-ended questions about the nature of academic work, challenges and coping were designed, e.g. Can you identify the most rewarding and most challenging aspects of teaching?, Are there any other aspects of your working life that you value?, Are there any aspects of your job that are currently causing you concern? Then participants were asked to identify three changes that would improve their working life and a final textbox was provided for any other comments. Gender, role title, and number of years worked in universities were also recorded.

Procedures

Online interviewing was used as it provides a flexible way of accessing a relatively large number of academics easily and economically, compared with face-to face interviewing (Evans & Mathur, 2005; Kazmer & Xie, 2008). The study was advertised in a staff electronic newsletter with a survey URL link to recruit participants as this allowed anonymous data collection. This method does mean that the interview schedule is structured; however, additional textboxes were included to allow participants to report other material that they considered pertinent. A pilot study to check the suitability of the questions was conducted with four part-time Associate Lecturers and a few changes were made. It was made clear to participants that by clicking the submit button, they were providing informed consent and

permission for their data to be used anonymously by the researchers. At the end of the survey a debriefing section provided details of university sources of help and support if staff felt stressed. A university research ethics committee reviewed and approved the study.

Data analysis

A critical realist approach (McCallum, 1996) was adopted, where the researchers assume that the world of the academic has some shared objective reality for all its members but also has a subjective reality for each member and that this dual reality can be explored. For analysing the data thematic analysis applied inductively as described by Braun and Clarke (2006) was considered appropriate as the study was exploratory and independent of theory or epistemology and contained largely factual questions (Aronson & Aronson, 2008). Braun and Clarke (2006) describe six phases of analysis (data familiarisation, initial coding generation, search for themes based on initial coding, review of themes, theme definition and labelling, and report writing) to find ultimate themes and this was followed. Manual coding was used as the data was already fairly structured. The transcripts were read and re-read to familiarise the researcher with the data set. Codes were identified from each interview sequentially, although at some stages earlier codes were slightly adjusted as new material was analysed. From this basic coding themes emerged which were reviewed, then defined and labelled. To check the reliability of the thematic coding a second researcher read the transcriptions and identified largely the same coding. There were some differences in the choice of labels for themes and these were discussed and a consensus reached. The high level of agreement was unsurprising as the interviews were largely structured.

Results

Thematic analysis revealed six themes; (1) administrative loads, (2) coping with stress at work, (3) task preferences in the academic role, (4) features of the academic role, (5) positive and negative feelings around research/scholarship, (6) and thoughts around leaving the

academic environment. The themes and sub-themes are summarised in Table 1 alongside the number and percentage of participants identifying each theme. Themes are presented in terms of how frequently they were identified by the sample.

- Table 1 -

Theme 1: Administrative loads

As can be seen from Table 1, over 90% of academics were extremely unhappy with the level of administration they are required to undertake and the level of bureaucracy within the university. While recognising that some elements of it were necessary, there was simply too much.

1a Burden of administration

Some strong views were expressed about administrative burdens, with Participant 12 saying, "A necessary evil but sometimes assumes a life of its own-gets out of hand." Many interviewees felt the most negative aspects of the job were related to administration, considering it a waste of their time. They believed that it was not the duty of academics, and that it should be done by professional administration staff, as Participant 8 stated, "Administration should be done by administrators not academics."

1b Increasing administration

A female academic (Participant 15) strongly believed that administration was increasing each year, saying, "There is nothing rewarding- it is the job of an administrator. I have trained to be a researcher and lecturer not a secretary as I now am." Participant 27 became quite enraged about the administrative load:

> Rewarding:? I didn't become an academic to spend my life typing numbers into
> grade book. Challenging: the frustration in filling in sheet after sheet of paper to
> say a task has been done rather than being trusted and allowed to tick a box/sign
> to say it has been completed. The whole exercise takes so much effort and time

that it is the task and not the underlying reason that drives the process. Quality

control sometimes needs to look at the system-not just at the output.

There was a strong consensus among all respondents that some administrations tasks

should be removed from them. Administration negatively affected their productivity,

frustrated and exhausted them. Reducing administration was the top of the three

changes that academics felt would most improve their working life. As participant 21

put it, "1, 2 and 3: Less administration work!"

1c Seeing positives in negatives

While administration was identified as a major stressor by the majority, a few academics did

mention that administration related to teaching and research was a necessary part of being an

academic. As Participant 13 a senior lecturer commented, "It is challenging because it is

time-consuming, it is rewarding because it is still part of our help/contribution to students'

education."

Theme 2: Coping with stress at work

While 87.1% of the sample acknowledged that work was stressful, they chose different ways

of dealing with stress at work, with most trying to cope positively. Focussing on positive

features such as their relationships with colleagues or the autonomy inherent in the job

provided useful coping strategies. Some staff did use a variety of specific techniques to help

them cope.

2a Positive coping techniques to deal with stress

Support from colleagues was the commonest coping strategy identified by academics. They

felt that having a good relationship with colleagues was helpful in decreasing the negative

aspects of work. Participant 11 was very explicit, "Seeking support from colleagues." For

Participant 10 it was informal support, "Peer support (a good gossip)." For others like

Participant 16, managers as well as colleagues were part of their support network, "Talking to

colleagues and manager." However, citing line mangers as sources of support was much rarer than the use of colleagues.

It was clear that the stipulated working hours were not sufficient to cover all aspects of work. Almost all respondents reported working harder and longer especially in the evenings and weekends. Some like Participant 1 described it as a positive coping strategy, "I try to prioritise what I have to do so that really urgent stuff gets done first. Often I do more in the evenings or weekends just till I catch up." Increasing working hours is not a constructive solution. Participant 8 felt his out of hours working was productive, "I compartmentalise and concentrate on doing one job at time and get more done." A few academics felt that the flexible nature of the academic role made it easier to cope when times were stressful. There is freedom to decide what to do and when to do it without consulting with a line manager as long as the work gets done. This view was shared by Participant 22, "Don't take any of it too seriously and remind yourself of the autonomy and creativity that exists still in working in Higher Education." These types of positive coping responses were not rare and are typified by Participant 18 saying what helped her to cope was, "My colleagues, the autonomy of the job, the creative spaces that you can build your own teaching profile in." Others such as Participant 19 identified simple ways of coping, "I count to 10/leave the room." For Participant 3, holidays were used creatively to recuperate, "Short breaks are very important."

2b Negative coping strategies.

While academics mainly used positive coping strategies, some did choose more negative coping strategies. While these negative coping strategies may temporarily decrease stress, their long term consequences are potentially damaging to health. Participant 20 described his coping strategy as, "clenching teeth, sleep deprivation and longing for the end of term." A female academic (Participant 18) was internalising her ability not to fit everything into her working hours and getting stressed, describing it as, "I have a tendency to blame myself

(perhaps unfairly) for not keeping on top of things, which results in me working harder/longer hours." For others alcohol provided a short-term coping strategy, as Participant 21 said, "Not really, - a glass or two of wine at home in the evening?" It is interesting to note that the last interviewee's quote ended with a question mark, perhaps reflecting her unease about drinking alcohol as a coping strategy given the health implications.

It became clear that a few interviewees did not have a specific strategy to cope with work stress, simply accepting the stressful situation. When asked whether she had a strategy for dealing with stress, Participant 12 said, "Not really, just get stressed." While Participant 15 simply responded, "No, I wish I did." Others such as Participant 17 were seeking professional help to deal with the stress, " I get prescription medication." These comments suggest a passive acceptance of stress and a feeling of helplessness in dealing with it.

Theme 3: Task preferences in the academic role

Teaching was the main priority identified in their role by over 80% of the sample, followed by research/scholarship, and a long way behind was administration. This theme includes three sub-themes of teaching priority, teaching and research, and balance of work roles.

3a Teaching priority

Many academic staff pointed out the importance of teaching rather than research and administration in their role. This contrasts with the earlier material when they were asked about research and valued it highly as a core part of their academic identity. One typical response given by Participant 2 was, "Teaching-that's what I joined the uni to do."

3b Teaching and research

For most academics the ideal was a combination of teaching and research with Participant 14 saying, "Teaching and research are my favourite parts because that is what I am most enthusiastic about." Participant 18 summarised the general feeling, "Research and teaching

are synergic both complement the other greatly, if given the appropriate support (time, resources, and encouragement)."

3c Balance of work roles

Balanced workloads of teaching, research and only essential administration were seen as the ideal. This was summarised by Participant 20, "A healthy mixture, cross fertilise each field. The absence of one of them (especially research) does compromise the others!" Participant 16 echoed this, "I value all of them and find them equally rewarding in different ways."

Theme 4: Features of the academic role

This theme explored how academics felt about their role with five subthemes and over 67% of the sample contributed to this theme.

4a. Relationships between lecturers and students

Relationships between lecturers and students were identified as positive elements of the role. Academics reported that seeing students progress and develop their knowledge and understanding over the length of a course was a rewarding element of teaching. As Participant 1 expressed it, "Seeing students develop, begin to understand complex ideas and even to begin to think like psychologists." Interviewees were eager to know their students and foster understanding as Participant 9 comments, "Finding out more about my students, and that moment when the penny drops." There was a real sense of enjoying helping students to achieve and become experts in their area. Participant 1 commented, "With research students they go from students to research colleagues and that is great." When students displayed positive attitudes and clearly wanted to learn, academics were more satisfied.

4b Relationships with colleagues

There was a high level of consensus that their relationships with colleagues were one of the most valued elements of their job. Sharing experiences and support gained from colleagues was identified as being valued as Participant 3 commented, "Talking to colleagues, having

away days, discussing and sharing experience about teaching and research." A very experienced female professor summarised what she valued about her working life as:

> Colleagues and students. I have some wonderful colleagues that I enjoy working and socialising with. Similarly it is a real privilege to see students develop and grow when you are working with them. I have met some really lovely people over the years through work. (Participant 1)

Another female professor (Participant 4) described as valuable, "Having the ability to pass on knowledge and skills to future generations through teaching, research and scholarship." Being aware of what students required and valued in their education such as relationships with tutors and one-to-one support was identified as an important issue from the academics' perspective. However, it was acknowledged that changes in funding in recent years sometimes made it difficult to deliver the contact that students wanted.

4c Flexibility of the academic role

Interviewees found the inherent element of flexibility in the academic role beneficial. Participant 11 responded, "Flexibility about working hours." Participant 17 highlighted that he valued situational flexibility, "the flexibility to work from home." Some academics were from overseas and they valued the flexibility in the summer break to visit extended family, as Participant 12 commented, "the ability to have a lengthy summer holiday as I have family abroad and this allows me to see them."

4d Increasing stress levels

Most academics felt that being an academic was becoming more difficult and more challenging as student numbers increase and resources reduce. Participant 14 responded, "Bad in terms of increasing class sizes and chopping of tutorial time." Similarly for Participant 18 increasing class sizes were a big issue, "MOST CHALLENGING -Large class

sizes-difficult to get that informality/interaction with large classes." (Capital letters used in online interview).

As a result increasing student numbers, reductions in class contact time, academics like Participant 15 reported feeling under greater time pressure, "I feel very stretched; too much teaching and marking; too many students; not enough time to prepare or to mark adequately and give pastoral support." Academics believed that increasing student numbers led to poorer interaction between lecturers and students, which they were unhappy about. As Participant 11 reported, "Teaching undergraduate level is less consistently rewarding." Marking was the least enjoyable component of work. Marking and moderation deadlines were continually getting shorter and the workload around marking was stressful as Participant 26 commented, "Marking to deadlines can be challenging."

The poor quality of management and administration was identified as a contributor to the stress levels of academics. Participant 5 believed that the university should, "Employ more highly educated administrators." As Participant 24 said, "Get decent managers who have some academic qualifications beyond first degree level."

There were real concerns about the changing nature of Higher Education due to external forces and the impact this has on their own future. Academics thought that the proposed cuts in their future pension were extremely problematic. They also felt that in the current financial climate, things could only get worse for universities. Participant 8 expressed his concerns with a question, "What will the Government do to the Teachers' Pension Scheme?" A male senior lecturer with 23 years' experience (Participant 21) identified his only worry as, "Only the general threats to Higher Education of the present government!" Job insecurity was a concern for staff not on permanent contracts as expressed by Participant 13, "Being an Associate Lecturer is very insecure. We are only notified of available work in August, which makes forward planning impossible. "

Some interviewees were dissatisfied with their working environment in terms of office location, lighting and noise levels in open plan offices. One interviewee summarised it as follows;

>An office with windows to the outside world (mine looks inwards, so I try, whenever feasible, to work from other places; a Do Not Disturb sign on my forehead for colleagues with whom I share an office to take notice of (and similar signs for their foreheads); more students who recognise when you're doing your best for them, (Participant 9).

Workloads and how teaching is timetabled and sessions allocated were issues for many staff as was a lack of adequate time for research. Many academics suggested that time for administration should be allocated more realistically rather than simply work plan teaching. As Participant 10 explained, "1) 9am teaching slots (I am not averse to them but the students hate them and don't attend) 2) more time allocated to research 3) proper time given to mark and give feedback (too intense)."

While relationships with students were generally seen to be positive several respondents did comment on negative aspects of their interaction with some students. They reported that some students are less respectful, talking in lectures and some send very disrespectful demanding emails, as Participant 28 commented, "There is a lack of respect with some. They disrupt lectures and send quite rude emails demanding attention."

4e Suggested changes to reduce stress and improve the academic role

Many respondents while sharing their concerns about the increasing levels of stressors in Higher Education spontaneously came up with solutions. For example, participant 12 had concerns about the HE sector and how he would address them, "I would like to see more capable, engaged students entering courses. I would scrap the coming changes to Higher Education. I would ensure a better split between teaching/research time through work loading

timetabling etc." Respondents identified the challenges that resulted in stress as being uncertainty about student numbers each year, poor communication, and lack of time to pursue scholarship and research. For Participant 16 the solution was, "More predictability about student numbers. Better communication between faculties. More opportunities for research and scholarly activities." Another listed his solutions;

> 1. Have more incentives/opportunities for promotion (e.g. to Principal lecturer) for research and writing. 2. Have a work planning system which *accurately* represents and reflects actual time taken on teaching modules etc. 3. Strengthen and develop areas that are doing well-not least by appointing senior individual(s) who will harness and drive a research culture where this is lacking. (Participant 18)

Academics clearly wished to contribute to the university, as Participant 20 wrote, "More influence on the educational environment and standards. More research opportunities and facilities leading to better qualified staff. More discretion in academic work, which is directly linked to more competent line management." Interviewees felt that addressing the problems in HE would decrease the stress levels amongst academics. A female senior lecturer (Participant 8) with 36 years' experience summarised the state of higher education, "There are real problems in the HE sector with privatisation, mercerisation and pressure on resources and academic standards. We need to resist the modification of education and defend education as valuable in its own right."

Not all of these solutions focused on external factors, as (Participant 20) said, "The University seriously needs to consider why in some departments/groups ill health and sudden drop-out figures (usually due to stress related symptoms) are significantly higher than in others!"

Theme 5: Positive and negative feelings around research/scholarship

Many interviewees were concerned that teaching received more attention than research or scholarship. The research/scholarship component was valued greatly. Research was clearly valued and was associated with feelings of job satisfaction. Six sub-themes were identified.

5a Identity as an academic

Many interviewees regarded research as a fundamental aspect of their role. For some academics, doing research epitomises their uniqueness as an academic. As Participant 18 expressed it:

> The research and writing is a central part of my identity as an academic. To contribute actively to knowledge (rather than regurgitate other people's ideas) is something that inspires me. At the moment research/scholarly activity is an area which should be supported and encouraged far more than it is at the moment.

Others, like Participant 12 were a little despairing when writing about how they valued research saying, "This is what I enjoy about the job but I feel I have increasingly little time for research. "It was clear that academics were trying to plan their time to keep some commitment to research, as evidenced by Participant 3, "It is very important to me, I try to concentrate when I can and mostly during summer, when teaching is finished."

5b Rewarding aspects of scholarship/research

In terms of scholarship and research, having a paper accepted for a conference or for publication in a journal, or a book published was identified as extremely rewarding. As Participant 15 reported, "This is the most important aspect of the job-the most rewarding. I live for this."

5c Support for research/scholarship

Interviewees felt that as the university focused more on teaching than research, there was a need to provide more support for research and scholarship. A female senior lecturer (Participant 17) said, "At the moment research/ scholarly activity is an area which should be

supported and encouraged far more than it is." The difficulty in finding time to produce

research outputs was acknowledged and that doing so was an achievement, as Participant 11

reported, "Interesting at present as I am just starting to publish substantial pieces of work,

which feels like quite an achievement."

5d Features of job dissatisfaction

Some frustrations were apparent, such as staff being asked to teach in areas where their

subject knowledge was spread too thinly. So much time and energy went into teaching

preparation that research suffered. A few interviewees were clearly dissatisfied with their

research performance, as Participant 23, a fairly new senior lecturer articulated:

> I came into an academic role as I was primarily interested in my subject area rather
>
> than the teaching element. I hoped to develop this area of my role. I feel that I have
>
> missed the boat on this aspect of the job as the time that was available to develop this
>
> has now been removed. When I first started I was asked to teach in a number of areas
>
> that I was not familiar with and had to do a huge amount of work to gain familiarity
>
> with the material. More established and research active staff are valued more and get
>
> teaching in their key areas. So I felt I was fighting on all fronts. I feel I have failed in
>
> this area of the job.

Some of the responses were truly heartfelt displaying real concern and dissatisfaction

related to their ability to undertake research. As Participant 20 expressed it:

> The feelings are overwhelming, however what research or scholarship can be done
>
> after some faculties took research time off staff work plans, and even scholarly
>
> activities linked to official roles being restricted in a way that the role can hardly be
>
> fulfilled. Talented staff who had joined the university with good research reputations,
>
> if they apply to other English universities get pretty openly told that they are not
>
> qualified for 'proper research based institutions' after such a time at the university. 40

hours off the teaching load for research activities, with the expectation that 2 peer reviewed papers will be published is ridiculous. The 40 hours (x2) do not cover the time to write two high quality publications! When however, is the research to be done?

5e Time pressure

Many academics acknowledged that lack of time due to increased teaching and administrative loads is the biggest barrier to doing research. As Participant 12 said, "This is what I enjoy about the job but I feel I have increasingly little time for research. "A long serving principal lecturer Participant 2 said, "I'd like time to engage more in research. The demands of teaching are increasingly making even scholarship difficult." This was a very common comment and the dissatisfaction was clear in replies such as that of Participant 6, "No time for it = frustration."

5f Funding

Academics felt increasingly pressurised to attract external research funding but as Participant 1 acknowledged in the current economic climate, "Funding for research is now scarce so getting external money for research is a real challenge." For others difficulties developing funding bids were tied up with time constraints as Participant 18 wrote, "Lack of time and internal funding for research and other scholarly activity."

Theme 6: Thoughts around leaving the academic environment

While in most cases, the interviewees reported that they were enjoying work and had no plans to leave academia, there were issues that concerned them. This theme includes two main sub-themes: job satisfaction and job dissatisfaction.

6a Job satisfaction

All the interviews included examples of areas that provided job satisfaction. This included teaching, positive relationships with colleagues, students' progression and research. This led to responses like that of Participant 16, "I'm happy with my current job at the moment."

Others made comparisons with alternatives but concluded that academia was best. As Participant 18 explained, "I couldn't think of any occupation that I would find attractive outside higher education." For others there was evidence of really valuing the life of an academic but salary was an issue as Participant 28 said, "No I like academia (unless the pay was irresistible!). I've been there and done that with most other things and I like and feel privileged to be part of university life." For several respondents the notion of leaving academia was almost unthinkable as Participant 21 said, "I've worked all my life in higher education, so the thought of life outside it is almost unthinkable. Perhaps as a copy-editor for some leading publisher?" Participant 12 had considered it but felt a bit stuck, "Yes, although I would only leave for a job that I would enjoy more. However, I feel I have little to offer outside of the university sector and am unsure what I could realistically go for!"

6b Job dissatisfaction

Only a very small number were considering leaving academia. Participant 5 was in this group saying:

> Leave - At the drop of a hat. I am very disillusioned with university work. There is too much administration and too many students to give them enough time. I am constantly under pressure. I would like to get a job which was not as stressful.

Participant 23 expressed his disillusionment by saying:

> Yes I am from a practice not an academic background. I have failed to establish a research element to my work. I am stuck. I want to go somewhere and do something useful. I feel we have conned a generation of students. I feel conned.

Frustration was evident in some responses like Participant 24, "Yes. I am sick of being in places where I am treated as a dogsbody and idiots are promoted above me."

In one question interviewees were asked to describe what would improve their working life. One interviewee was unsure but the other 30 made suggestions. The most commonly mentioned responses were as follows:

1. Reduce administration.

2. Focus more on teaching.

3. Provide more opportunities for research and scholarship.

4. Provide more job security.

5. Improve the work planning system.

6. Encourage more interaction between faculties.

7. Improve line management.

8. More pay and less work.

Discussion

Six themes are identified from the analysis; administrative loads, coping with stress at work, task preferences in the academic role, features of the academic role, positive and negative feelings around research/scholarship and thoughts around leaving academia. While the term stress was not used in the interview schedule partly to encourage a focus on the positives of being an academic not just the negatives, interviewees used the term and identified a range of stressors very easily as well as identifying positive features of the role.

Sources of stress

The results revealed that the increasing number of students, heavy workloads and administrative burdens leading to time pressures, with insufficient time for preparation, marking and supporting students, poor administrative and managerial support, funding cuts, and the changing nature of Higher Education and worries about their future pensions, job insecurity and stressors related to working in open plan offices are identified as sources of stress amongst these academics in a predominantly teaching focussed university. Lack of

time to undertake research or scholarship is also a frustration for many staff. These are broadly in line with earlier research although disappointingly the list of issues has grown, their nature is similar.

Gillespie et al. (2001) reported five sources of stress; lack of funding for resources and support services, work overload, poor management practices, insufficient recognition and rewards, and job insecurity. Other earlier research in Australian and British universities produce a similar picture of stress related to heavy workloads, increasing student numbers, funding pressures and the difficulties of undertaking research (Kinman & Jones, 2003; Oshagbemi, 2000; Winefield & Jarrett, 2001). The significant growth in student numbers post-dates these studies and with the changes in the funding of Higher Education, are new factors. There have been dramatic increases in class sizes and academics felt that this affects the quality of interaction between lectures and students. While there have been some increases in resources and support services these have not been proportionate and it is felt that this had made the situation even more difficult and has led to increased dissatisfaction and stress for academics. As early as 1998, a report from the Association of University Teachers reported that increasing the number of students without enhancing resource allocation has resulted in more stress and affected the quality of communication between teacher and students. It appears that lessons have not been learnt (Kinman, 1998). Levenson (2004) showed a significant association between larger class sizes, heavy teaching loads and increased stress levels amongst academics in Australia and New Zealand, partly explained by the corresponding increases in marking and moderation of assessments. The pressures associated with marking and tight marking deadlines are highlighted in this study.

Heavy workloads are identified as another stressor at work as academics feel that they cannot deliver as well as they would like to. Tytherleigh et al. (2005) reported similar findings of stress linked to heavy workloads and resultant dissatisfaction as academics have

insufficient time to perform to the standard they would wish. In addition, in this study academics attribute aspects of this heavy workload to the quantity of administration they are required to undertake. They believe that increasing administration wasted time that they could spend on teaching and other aspects of their work and that it should be done by administrators.

Adams (1998) found that the increased demands of administrative work interfered with both teaching and research amongst Australian academics. Akerlind (2005) suggested that working conditions at universities may have become more stressful as a result of workloads that have increased since the reductions in administrative staff. However, a small number of academics expressed a positive feeling about administration in terms of its importance in managing their students and modules. This is a new finding and requires to be explored in more depth in future studies. Kinman, Jones, and Kinman (2006) found that the perception of heavy administrative loads they reported in their study in 1998 had decreased by 2004 when their data was collected. However, in many universities, including the one where the study occurred, student numbers have increased significantly since 2004 with resultant increases in administration.

Poor levels of support for administration and what appeared to be poor local management are concerns for many academics, reporting that it increased their stress levels. Respondents simply used the term managers but from the context of their communications it appears that line managers were the main targets for criticism, not the more distant senior managers. Similarly, Gillespie et al. (2001) in a longitudinal study found that poor management practice was identified as a source of stress among Australian academics. In a qualitative study Ogbonna and Harris (2004) also found that the interactions between academics and managers were not always perceived to be helpful. Consensus about the need for better qualified and

more administrative staff is strong in this study. It is felt that this would ease academics' workloads significantly.

The financial changes in HE funding that started two decades ago (Fisher, 1994; Kinman & Jones, 2003) are still impacting negatively on staff in the current study. This relates to workloads, but also the difficulties in getting time to undertake research and the problems obtaining scare external and internal research funding. There is a considerable body of research that attests to problems related to funding in academia and work stress amongst Australian and UK academics (Jacobs, Tytherleigh, Webb, & Cooper, 2007; Kinman & Jones, 2003, 2008; Tytherleigh et al., 2005; Winefield et al., 2003; Winefield et al., 2008).

Coping with stress

One aim of this study was to investigate how academics coped with stress at work. Using qualitative methodology, the aim was to provide some more in depth understanding of daily practices. Academics in the current study emphasise support from colleagues and time management as positive coping strategies. It was felt that colleagues really understood the problems and provided helpful support. Kinman and Wray (2013) also reported that receiving support from colleagues can reduce stress at work.

A common observation in the study is that the demands of the job cannot be accomplished within normal working hours. Somewhat perversely working at evening and weekends is seen as a coping strategy for many of the academics interviewed. However, other earlier research found that working in the evenings and weekends were identified as stressors by academics (Kinman, 1998; Winefield et al., 2003). This suggests that long working hours are perhaps becoming normalised and is worthy of further study within the sector.

Job evaluation

From these results it appears that the majority of the interviewees are relatively happy with their work as an academic. This is especially true in relation to teaching and relationships

with students. The data was collected from a university where the main focus is on teaching and this may explain why teaching is viewed as the most important aspect of the academics' role. In research intensive universities this may be different as research has to be prioritised. Future research should examine this. Rhodes et al. (2007) in a mixed methods study in university departments of education also reported that teaching and involvement with students were the most satisfying parts of the academic role. Autonomy and freedom at work were also identified as valuable aspects of being an academic. Freedom and academic autonomy also emerged as core valued components of the role for many Australian academics (Akerlind, 2005; Gillespie et al., 2001).

A small number of academics are not satisfied with their jobs. For example, some of them appraise their jobs as being insecure and they are worried about their future. A study by the Higher Education Funding Council pointed out that job insecurity was the highest rated stressor that was mentioned by all types of employees in higher education (Tytherleigh et al., 2005). Kinman et al. (2006) found that employment in UK universities has become less secure in the six years from 1998-2004. The current study also found that the lack of job security was a concern for many academics, especially those employed on temporary contracts. The uncertainties and continual changes in funding universities in recent years in the UK appear to have exacerbated this problem.

The current study found that quite a number of academics are not satisfied with their office environment particularly relating to their experiences of working in open plan offices. Concerns are reported in relation to experiencing constant interruptions and noise making it difficult to get work done. These factors undoubtedly add to the stress experienced at work especially as academics feel they are already working under pressure.

Most academics intend to continue working in the higher education sector. A few are considering leaving at some point because of increased stress levels due to the increasing

number of students, too much administration, poor pay and what they perceived to be non-respectful treatment by students. Previous studies have found similar results in relation to academics wanting to leave universities (Horton, 2006; Kinman et al., 2006). However, the finding that some students are considerably less respectful and polite in their interactions with academics is new. This is worth exploring in more depth in future.

Limitations

The main limitation was that interviews were largely structured as they were conducted online although interviewees could add additional comments in a separate text box and many academics did use the text box. The data was also collected anonymously and while this allowed interviewees the freedom to express their views it did mean that they could not be contacted if further clarifications were required. However, interviewing online did allow for a relatively large number of interviews for a qualitative study and given the time pressures academics report being under, it is unlikely that this number would have been achieved in the more time consuming face-to-face interviews.

Conclusions and implications

Comparing the results of this study with previous research, it appears that academia is not becoming any less stressful rather the converse is true. However, despite the stress caused by recent developments in education such as increased student numbers and uncertainties about funding, the majority of academics are happy with their work. Their frustrations relate to wanting to be able to do a better job to give more to the university by delivering even better teaching, more support to students, and undertake more scholarship and research. They are clear that administration takes an unnecessarily large amount of their time. It is in the interest of universities to address these real concerns that academics have as it will help to reduce work-related stress and allow academics to devote more time to what they perceive to be the core and most rewarding aspects of their role, teaching and research. Failure to do so is likely

to have a negative effect on staff morale and ultimately their wellbeing and the student experience.

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Table 1 Principal themes and sub-themes and the number and percentage of participants identifying each theme (N=31)

Themes and sub-themes	N	% of sample
Theme 1: Administrative loads	28	90.32
1a Sub-theme 1-Burdens of administration		
1b Sub-theme 2-Increasing administration		
1c Sub-theme 3-Seeing positives in negatives		
Theme 2 : Coping with stress	27	87.10
2a Sub-theme 1-Positive coping techniques to deal with stress		
2b Sub-theme 2-Negative coping strategies		
Theme 3 : Task preferences in academic role	25	80.65
3a Sub-theme 1-Teaching priority		
3b Sub-theme 2-Teaching and research		
3c Sub-theme 3-Balance of work roles		
Theme 4 : Features of academic job	21	67.74
4a Sub-theme 1-Relationship between lecturers and students		
4b Sub-theme 2-Colleagues and students		

4c Sub-theme 3-Flexibility of the academic role

4d Sub-theme 4-Increasing stress levels

4e Sub-theme 5-Suggested changes to reduce stress and improve the academic role

Theme 5: Positive and negative feeling around research/scholarship	15	43.39

5a Sub-theme 1-Identity as an academic

5b Sub-theme 2-Rewarding aspects of scholarship

5c Sub-theme 3-Support for research/scholarship

5d Sub-theme 4-Features of job dissatisfaction

5e Sub-theme 5-Time pressures

5f Sub-theme 6-Funding

Theme 6: Thoughts around leaving the academic environment	9	29.03

6a Sub-theme 1-Job satisfaction

6b Sub-theme 2-Job dissatisfaction