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The irresistible rise of managerial control? The case of workload allocation models in British universities

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Abstract

This chapter investigates the role and practice of Workload Allocation Models (WAM), as managerial devices used at system and institutional level to manage academic work. Our data is drawn from a survey in five British institutions with 581 respondents overall. WAM appear to be widely known, understood and used, however, in the perception of academic staff, they do not reflect accurately the allocation of time to academic activities. In this sense, our analysis points to the limits of WAM to manage academic work at institutional level. Specifically, it highlights the differences in how WAM are used according to employment contracts – combined teaching and research, teaching-only, research-only and to terms of employment – open-ended and fixed-term contracts. Our findings point to the significant persistence of academic normative frameworks, in which research is considered a key activity for career prospects regardless of job descriptions. Overall, our chapter illustrates how the tensions between academic and managerial logics play out in the practice of WAM, and discusses the implications thereof at systemic, institutional and academic levels.

Keywords: Human Resource Management, Academic work, British higher education, Workload Allocation Models, Managerial logic

1. Introduction

In the last 30 years academia has witnessed the emergence of a managerial, bureaucratic and rationalised logic, called managerialism by critical management scholars (Deem & Brehony 2005). The managerial logic has aimed at the efficient use of resources to accomplish planned outcomes, as such, it is based on reporting,

modelling and accountability systems as well as on the university as a more integrated formal organisation (Brunsson and Sahlin-Andersson 2000, Bonaccorsi and Daraio 2007). The managerial logic has contrasted, overlapped and conflicted with academics' traditional professional logic, characterised by collegiality and by the ability of academics, i.e. the professionals, to organise their work and time with significant autonomy (Waters 1989, Freidson 2003, Hull 2006, Larsen 2017). While in other traditional professional sectors the shift towards organisational rationality has been witnessed more extensively (e.g. healthcare sector, Scott et al 2000), academia has responded with more resistance and criticism (Hull 2006, Grossi et al 2020).

One of the consequences of the changing conditions in which universities operate has been the implementation of several reforms in personnel policies. These, now called Human Resource Management, are conceived and devised through a set of tools available to university managers to enforce institutional control and coordination at staff and task level (Aldrich and Ruef 2006, Fumasoli 2014). Since academics have historically enjoyed flexibility and freedom in how to carry out their activities (Hull 2006, Kernohane 2019), it is not surprising that Human Resource Management has become a controversial arena for the rising of managerialism in higher education. From the point of view of academic staff, the issue of rationalization is disruptive, as it clashes with the necessity to guarantee freedom of teaching and research. Against this background, extant literature has discussed how monitoring performance alters academic freedom (Cohen et al. 1999).

In order to explore the diffusion and implementation of Human Resource Management tools in higher education, this chapter looks at one of its most contentious instruments, workload allocation models (WAM), which are used by university managers to assign academics' time to their activities. We do so by analysing how academics themselves practice WAM, and by uncovering the extent to which WAM reflect time allocation in academic work.

We draw our empirical data from a survey conducted in 2019 in five universities in the United Kingdom; the survey collected 581 responses from academic staff. As the UK higher education system is considered one of the most marketized and managerialist (Deem 2011), we assumed an advanced implementation of WAM in British universities. In this context, the transformation towards a more rationalised academic work is intertwined with competitive pressures at institutional, national, and global levels. Such competitive pressures are in fact a by-product of an increasingly market-driven higher education sector, in which state funding has become scarcer and more competitive (Decramer et al. 2012; Melo et al. 2010; Carvalho & Correia 2018). As a result, a shift from professional to organisational control and to a progressively more hands-on management supervision of academics' everyday life has been observed. In other words, Human Resource Management has become an increasingly overriding force, as the higher education system tries to catch up with other sectors' practices (Jackson 2001).

The chapter is organised as follows: in the next section we conceptualise WAM as an organisational tool and as a policy instrument, in section 3 we contextualise our case in the United Kingdom and present our methodology. Section 4 outlines our analysis with descriptive statistics and a correlation analysis. Section 5 presents the discussion of the findings and a research agenda.

2. Conceptualising Workload Allocation Models (WAM)

From an *organisational perspective*, WAM has been introduced as an innovative practice in academia, aimed to support time and work management, so that efficiency and performance can be improved to the satisfaction of the institution and of its staff. Imported from other economic sectors, WAM was considered a rational tool to clarify workloads, enhance resource allocation, and overall, support a better costing between more and less expensive disciplines, particularly in relation to the teaching function (Kernohane 2019).

Concretely, WAM are systems, usually digitalised, to allocate time to employees through a fine-grained breakdown of key activities. WAM are based on the assumption that workers should spend a specific amount of time in several predetermined tasks in order to ensure that their organizational unit covers its main functions and achieves its goals. In the context of higher education, WAM have been introduced to define and ensure that a specific amount of time is defined *ex ante* and is dedicated to key activities such as teaching and administrative work. WAM entail differentiated distribution of workload among employees in the same unit.

From an *institutional perspective*, WAM's overall rationale is to decrease the amount of idiosyncratic activities; for this reason WAM was essentially conceived as a tool for modelling workload allocation across the university or across the higher education system and not as an individual-related control mechanism (Kernohane 2019). WAM's declared advantage is enhanced transparency and strategic direction in order to perform efficiently and effectively key activities in the university. The existent literature highlights potential benefits of WAM, such as the diffusion of a sense of transparency across the university, the tangible evidence of fair Human Resource Management and equal opportunities implemented across the institution. WAM are also considered vectors to diffuse new institutional culture, for instance rebalancing teaching and research priorities among staff. Regarding negative effects, scholars indicate WAM's inaccuracy in allocating academics' use of time and a perfunctory usage, whereby complex problems are mechanically addressed by uncritical implementation. WAM can also diffuse distrust if implemented across the university, or faculty and departments, without the necessary transparency being ensured by management (Field 2015). Finally, WAM are likely to be linked to contract details at the moment of hiring. These allocations (e.g., 40% of time for teaching) are usually annually revised according to several factors, such as student enrolment or individual research performance. The practice of WAM may not be uniformly present across and within institutions, as middle managers usually have large autonomy in modelling and negotiating WAM.

From a *policy perspective*, WAM have been connected to public funding: workload allocation reporting (*ex post*) becomes instrumental in modelling future costs of higher education and allocating funding where it is most needed. This has been particularly the case of teaching in expensive disciplines. Moreover, certain components of WAM monitoring are a regulatory requirement as they support the modelling and costing of teaching funding. In the eyes of the funders, WAM help ensure that universities are fairly compensated for their operations.

From an *academic career* perspective, WAM are also considered helpful in better allocating time to academics in different career tracks. An indicative, ideal and broad workload allocation entails Combined teaching and research career track: 40% teaching, 40% research, 20% personal development; Teaching-only career track: 80% teaching, 20% personal development; Research-only career track: 80% research, 20% personal development. To be noted that personal development (or scholarship) includes activities such as training, education, or unfunded research, while administrative work is included in teaching and in research. This said, as every higher education institution, or indeed their faculties and departments, decide whether to set up their own WAM, how to break it down and whether to negotiate it with the unions, one can expect a variety of approaches across the sector. Finally, the sector-leading trade union in the UK recommends taking into consideration activities such as: teaching and related duties; research, consultancy and knowledge transfer; academic management roles; general academic duties; routine administration; professional and trade union activities; work-related travel.

3. Methodology

This chapter uses data from a survey developed within a wider project about the academic workforce in the UK (Marini et al. 2021)[i]. The questionnaire addressed themes around academic careers, career planning, work in other sectors, and managerial practices. For this chapter we have used the demographic data (gender, age, academic position, disciplinary field, citizenship, qualifications, employment conditions) to provide an overview of the respondents. We have used the questions related to human resource management practices for our analyses.

There is a tradition of surveying academics and collecting their own opinions about managerial practices. As WAM is articulated around *ex-ante* measures about how much time staff is supposed to deploy in different work-related activities, quantitative measurement of staff perceptions about the same issue through survey is appropriate (Kallio et al. 2017). Research about the impact of WAM on actual working activities is still relatively under-investigated. Indeed, more recent literature highlights a missing link between the *ex-ante* measures of academic work, and *ex-post* performance evaluation of that same academic work aiming to meet institutional goals (Graham 2016).

3.1 Employment conditions and academic activities of university staff in the UK

We outline the UK context in relation to university staff, which we draw from the Higher Education Statistics Agency. HESA statistics 2019/2020 cover staff in more than 190 universities across the United Kingdom and its countries (England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland). The total amount of academic staff is 223,525, of which two thirds (66,6%) are in an open-ended/permanent contract. Two thirds (66,5%) are in a full-time contract, 86,4% are salaried, while 13,6% are on an hourly paid contract.

Academic staff is categorised by HESA in four groups, called “academic employment functions”: Teaching and Research, Teaching-only, Research-only and Neither teaching nor research staff. The academic employment function of a member of staff relates to the academic contract of employment and not to the actual work undertaken. Teaching and research staff are those whose contracts of employment state that they are employed to undertake both teaching and research. Teaching-only staff are those whose contracts of employment state that they are employed only to undertake teaching. Research-only staff are those whose contracts of employment state that the primary academic employment function is research only, even though the contract may include a limited number of hours of teaching (up to 6 hours per week or *pro-rata tempore* for part-time staff). Neither teaching nor research staff are those whose academic employment function is neither teaching nor research, e.g. Vice-Chancellor (HESA 2019/2020).

The distribution of these four groups in 2019/2020 was as follows: Teaching and Research staff 98,085 (43,9%), Teaching-only staff 72,540 (32,5%), Research-only staff 51,510 (23,0%), Neither teaching nor research staff 1,390 (0,6%). However, there is a lot of variance across institutions, with some practically only using the traditional Teaching and Research contract, others having started to introduce differentiated contracts, others focusing more on teaching-only contracts. This variety can be observed also in the universities that participated in our survey.

3.2 The cases

The survey, administered in 2019, has gathered responses from 581 staff in five universities based in three of the four countries of the United Kingdom: England, Scotland, and Wales. These universities have different standings in the national higher education landscape, an indicator of which is their belonging to one of the mission groups. The most important mission groups include *research universities* (Russell Group), *modern universities* that contribute to business and industry (MillionPlus), and *professional and technical universities* (University Alliance). As polytechnics and colleges achieved university status in 1992, a common differentiation used to characterise UK universities is pre-92 and post-92. Generally speaking, pre-92 universities have a higher status because of their age, history and

research-oriented mission. Post-92 universities are broadly described as more teaching oriented and/or with a more local mission.

Table 1: University characteristics[1]

N=581	**Apricot University** N=142	**Violet university** N=226	**Yellow university** N=45	**Green University** N=142	**Gray University** N=26
UK country	England	England	England	Scotland	Wales
University type	Pre-92	Post-92	Pre-92	Post-92	Post-92
All Staff 19/20 (rounded, HESA)	900	900	2,000	800	200
Teaching and Research contracts	50%	82%	45%	80%	90%
Teaching only contracts	30%	1%	22%	2%	2%
Research only contracts	20%	17%	33%	15%	2%
Neither Teaching nor Research contracts	-	-	-	1%	8%
Students 2019/20 (rounded, HESA)	15,000	17,000	20,000	18,000	6,000
Income 2018/19 (£, rounded, HESA)	160m	170m	390m	120m	40m
Mission group affiliation	-	University Alliance	Russell Group	MillionPlus	-

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3.3. Characteristics of respondents (N=581)

The respondents were 277 female and 183 male. When it comes to citizenship, 284 were British, 57 came from the EU, 29 from overseas (EU excluded). 345 held a PhD or a professional doctorate. There were 27 respondents that were 30 or younger, 266 between 31 and 50, 162 between 51 and 65, and 7 above 65 years old. To be noted that the questionnaire allowed for a “prefer not reply” choice.

[1] In order to anonymise the universities, we have rounded numbers by thousand. Universities with less than 20 respondents were not included.

Respondents were distributed among the following disciplinary fields: Medicine, Dentistry and Health (116), Administrative, Business and Social Studies (111), Education (85); Engineering and Technologies (76), Biological, Mathematical and Physical Sciences (62); Humanities, Language-based Studies and Archaeology (38); Design, Creative and Performing Arts (32), Architecture and Planning (8).

Respondents self-attributed themselves to the following roles: 147 lecturers, 154 senior lecturers, 24 readers and 48 professors; 64 researchers; 33 teachers; 30 middle and senior managers; 57 worked in academic services.

3.4 Data analysis

Our analysis considered three sets of variables. First, we accounted for employment conditions, which, following HESA categorisation, were broken down into *terms of employment* (open-ended or fixed-term), *mode of employment* (full-time and part-time), and *academic employment functions* (teaching and research, teaching-only, research-only or neither teaching nor research). Second, we looked at the existence of WAM. On the one hand, these were indicated by a *formal work allocation model* at institutional, faculty or department level. On the other hand, more *informal agreements* about workload allocation between individual staff and their line managers were also taken into consideration. The third set of variables concerned how the respondents reported *average time spent on six main academic activities:* Teaching, Research, Management and Administration, Knowledge Exchange, Engagement, and Pastoral Care. These six categories were designed to capture in as much detail as possible the *main academic activities* that are, generally speaking, expected from academics in UK universities. We also looked at the extent to which WAM reflected the actual time devoted to the academic activities. This includes whether respondents indicated that they conducted additional activities, i.e. not part of WAM, and worked overtime.

In order to explore the correlation between the employment conditions, the time reported as devoted to academic activities and the alignment of actual activities, and alignment with WAM, we conducted a Pearson coefficient correlation analysis.

4. Findings

Employment conditions: a) ***Terms of employment*** - Out of 527 respondents overall, 82,9% indicated to have an open-ended contract, while 17,1% indicated a fixed-term contract. b) ***Mode of employment*** – out of 559 respondents, 82,6% worked full-time, 13,2% worked part-time and at least 50% of full-time equivalent (FTE), and 4,1% indicated having a part-time contract of less than 50% FTE.

WAM: Academic staff (N=527) were evenly divided between those who declared to have a workload agreement with their line managers (50,3%) and those not having

one (49,7%). However, when asked specifically whether there was a formal Workload Allocation Management in their university, 66,8% replied positively, 16,6% replied negatively and 16,6% said they would not know (N=524). 12,4% said that their actual activities were reflected fully in WAM. For more than one third (34,5%) it reflected at least 75% of their work, 26,1% between 50-75% and for 27,0% it reflected less than 50%. When asked whether they carried out tasks not included in WAM, 38,2% of respondents (N=510) replied positively, and 61,8% negatively.

Self-reported time devoted to academic activities: On average, our respondents spent 37,3% on Teaching (478), 25,8% on Research (484), 28,2% on Management and Administration (479), 6,7% on Knowledge Exchange (254), 7,7% on Engagement (280), 10,1% on Pastoral care (370), 15,1% on Other (77).

Table 2: percentage of time devoted to activity type by academic employment function (N=525)

	Teaching & Research (N=358)	Research-only (N=63)	Teaching-only (N=75)	Neither teaching nor research (N=29)
Research	21.5	73.5	7.0	9.1
Teaching	38.3	7.1	50.2	17.2
Management and Administration	27.1	22.4	26.4	52.6
Knowledge exchange	5.9	9.4	7.6	9.1
Engagement	6.7	7.1	8.8	16.9
Pastoral care	10.2	6.0	10.8	9.1
Total (average worked time as % of fraction due to contract)	109.7	125.4	110.8	114.2

When we look at the time spent according to academic employment function (Table 2), we can see that a typical week for teaching-only and research-only staff may also contemplate research and teaching functions, respectively. As totals may indicate more than 100%, (i.e. respondents declare to work above their stipulated working time), we observe that research-only personnel work on average 25% overtime, whereas staff on both teaching and research academic functions show the least overtime, though the exceeding unpaid overtime remains significant (9,7%). We think that this finding has less to do with their academic employment function than their terms of employment. Those on combined teaching and research contracts are more likely to be on open-ended contracts. Similarly, teaching-only contracts, particularly in teaching-oriented universities, are more likely to be open-ended. Those on research contracts, however, are typically on fixed-term contracts, being paid by research grants that are finite in time, in other words, they belong to the so-called research precariat. Under these conditions, research-only fixed-term staff need to put in overtime to get research output, i.e. publications, in order to increase the probability of getting an open-ended contract.

Looking at the breakdown by academic employment functions, it is possible to appreciate that research-only staff worked predominantly in research functions and teaching-only staff in teaching functions, thus reflecting overall their specific WAM. However, staff on teaching and research employment, indicated a significant below-standard time for research, which should be, indicatively, 40%. Indeed, research time for this group of staff has almost halved to 21.5% on average, something that could indicate the preponderance of teaching and management and administration activities overall. This figure resonates with the findings from a previous survey (Tight 2010) and adds evidence in support of extant research arguing that higher education has been increasingly bureaucratized.

The percentage of staff who regularly carried out functions that are not included in their contract and WAM (e.g., doing teaching or administrative tasks that were not part of the call for recruitment, nor negotiated at the moment of the offer of employment) is 38.3%. We note that average length of the hours actually worked per week is 42.6, whereas the nationally stipulated hours per week is around 37.0. The indicated extra time has been calculated pro rata tempore for part-timers. On average, those surveyed spent 14.2% on overtime.

How working conditions and time devoted to academic activities align with WAM

Drawing on the findings, we assume that the extent to which WAM reflects one's workload allocation can be explained by one or more of the listed variables. Table 3 reports our correlation analysis, which we carried out positing a relation between WAM alignment and working conditions, academic employment functions, and time allocated to activity types.

Research-only academic employment function and time devoted to research are positively associated with alignment to WAM ($p<0.05$). Open-ended contract, full-time position, and overtime are negatively associated with alignment to WAM ($p<0.05$). The other variables are not statistically significant.

Table 3 – Association between employment conditions and self-reported time devoted to academic activities *and* the extent to which the WAM reflect one's work in university (Pearson correlations)

Variables	r
Terms of employment - open ended (=1); any other terms of employment (=0)	***-0.120****
Mode of Employment - full-time (=1); any other mode of employment (=0)	***-0.145****
Academic employment functions (career track as per contract) - teaching and research - teaching-only	 -0.090 -0.016

- research-only	***0.168****
- neither teaching nor research	-0.009
Self-reported time devoted to academic activities	
- Time devoted to teaching	-0.101
- Time devoted to research	***0.256****
- Time devoted to management and administration	-0.074
- Time devoted to knowledge exchange	0.128
- Time devoted to engagement	0.060
- Time devoted to pastoral care	-0.113
Overtime	***-0.129****
Additional activities not included in employment conditions	-0.104

* $p<0.05$

These findings indicate two main points. First, research activity correlates positively to WAM alignment in two aspects: being in a research-only academic employment function and devoting time to research correlate positively to alignment of one's work with WAM. We hypothesize that research, as an activity cherished by academics, is carried out more than other tasks with what is envisaged in WAM. In fact, research formally amounts to a significant amount of time in formal WAM across all academic employment functions: 40% for Teaching and Research, 80% for Research-only, and is included in Personal Development 20%.

The second important point relates to the negative correlation between open-ended and full-time employment and alignment of one's work with workload allocation models. We note that, based on our data, this does not necessarily mean that staff whose work is less aligned with WAM has more freedom in organising their work. Equally noteworthy is the fact that being on a traditional teaching and research academic employment function or in a more recent teaching-only academic employment function does not present a significant correlation to one's work being aligned to WAM. Less surprisingly, overtime correlates negatively with alignment of one's work to WAM.

5. Discussion

Our findings indicate that WAM was largely but not overwhelmingly diffused across the five universities. However, only around 50% of the respondents confirmed having an agreement in place with their line managers on their work allocation. Among these respondents, a minority confirmed full alignment between what is envisaged in WAM and their actual work time. The rest of the respondents acknowledged different degrees of (mis-) alignment to WAM. With respect to the allocation of time to the main academic activities, overall and according to academic employment function, our data shows that they do not correspond to the indicative WAM (40-40-20, 80-20). Our data also indicates significant overtime up to 26% according to the different categories.

At institutional level

Our study points to the fact that WAM appears not to be a good indicator of workload allocation, and the evaluation of its managerial effectiveness should be nuanced. The general finding about WAM's capacity to reflect actual work is in line with the argument that academics' advantage in the use of WAM would be the enhancement of personal development as a result of transformational leadership (Nguyen et al. 2018), rather than measurement per se related to broader organisational goals.

This said, we agree with other studies in the field advocating for an analytical and critical approach to WAM. As Papadopoulos (2017) aptly describes, WAM reproduce the phenomenon they are supposed to measure, without pretending to measure it only. In other words, WAMs are simulations of measurement, and reflect a narrative of transparency and fairly allocated time for each academic function.

An agenda for future research on HRM in higher education should integrate the perception of WAM and other managerial tools within the more comprehensive institutional context (Fumasoli et al 2020), comparing over time and across institutions whether such tools have achieved some results, and the extent to which their implementation has been efficient and effective in terms of strategic goals and resource allocation.

A conclusive remark might be that if university senior and middle managers wish to support staff performance, they ought to consider carefully if and how to use WAM, because this tool reflects only partially the actual work carried out, especially staff's overtime. Leadership communication of WAM appears to be key in order to use it as an instrument for organisational coordination and control.

Teaching and research nexus

Our correlation analysis shows which factors affect the extent to which WAM reflect actual working load and pursued tasks. All other factors being equal, the more academic staff spend time on research, the more they declare their WAM is accurate. This result suggests that when contracts and WAM are focused on research, WAM reflect better the actual work being carried out.

While this requires further investigation, it could mean that, regardless of the type of contract, WAM and other Human Resource Management tools, normative pressures persist in academia, in that research is viewed as the key activity leading to higher status and career progression. Another possible explanation is that teaching-oriented universities tend to reduce time dedicated for research, which, for many institutions, is not a priority, as they get their financial revenues primarily from student enrolment. Nevertheless, staff may have more formal time allocation for research than they can actually perform within the stipulated amount of weekly working hours (including respective fraction for part-timers).

At policy level

The UK higher education system, and particularly the English higher education system, has recently produced policies aimed to reorient itself towards teaching, e.g. through the introduction of the Teaching Excellence Framework and the establishment of the Office for Students (in England). In parallel, recent changes in the Research Excellence Framework have pressured universities to distinguish more and more between academic employment functions, i.e. establishing teaching-only contracts for staff not participating in the evaluation conducted by REF. In other words, UK universities have been adapting to the policy environment. Against this backdrop it is quite surprising that WAM is not more extensively used and practiced. We believe that our findings point to the enduring professional logic, in which academic activities are difficult to capture due to their complexity and in which research continues to represent the most important task for academics. As our study has looked at five universities across all disciplines, future research should investigate the teaching and research nexus taking into consideration organisational characteristics and disciplines, where we expect variance as well.

At academic career level

Finally, we argue that career studies offer a useful perspective to understand the implementation and usefulness of WAM in universities. On the one hand, as academic staff continue to aspire to vertical career progression (i.e. towards professorship), WAM become instrumental in measuring the expected performance to achieve promotion (Fumasoli et al. 2015). On the other hand, WAM potentially represent a managerial device to bring about organisational change and, importantly, organisational culture change. Future research should investigate the contribution of WAM in changing rationales of academic careers, and academics' resistance, as well as enduring loyalty to traditional normative understandings of their profession.

Academic vs. managerial logics: the way forward

WAM are embedded in different aspects of higher education, institutional management, national policy, university missions and academic careers. Academics appear to interpret WAM as a further accountability duty adding to their regular academic tasks. As such WAM, amongst other managerial tools, are perceived as imposed top-down from management and as disruptive of academic collegiality and professional autonomy. In this sense, WAM should be designed and implemented through a double way round process: top-down implementation from one side, and bottom-up contributions by academics about what may facilitate sound and viable measures on the other side (Simmons 2002, see chapter by Vandevelde on Human Resource Management).

Such approach would also counterbalance the unequal distribution of power exercised via WAM by line managers and middle managers (Kenny 2018; Grossi et al 2020, Boncori et al 2020). A more flexible adoption of WAM would be consistent with other findings suggesting that a tight implementation of performance and time management is detrimental to academic work, whereas involvement of academics in the implementation of WAM would instead improve their wellbeing (Franco-Santos & Doherty 2017) and satisfaction (Vardi 2009).

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[i] Full data and metadata can be made available upon request.