

Structural Changes to Tackle Work Pressure

Young Academy Leiden – *Position Paper*

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Summary

Many academics struggle with work pressure. This is a well-known problem. We believe that there is not only a high workload but also a fragmentation of tasks, rigid timeframes and other factors that make it difficult to avoid having many peak moments and, especially, to reserve time for focused research. A severely competitive environment and a focus on quantitative targets worsens things. So we face a complex mix of factors that creates high levels of stress, is not conducive to science and ruins the equal playing field.

Recommendations that we outline below include the following:

- Allow a diversification in talents and accomplishments, and focus on the quality of contributions to the respective field(s) instead of on the quantity of research output.
- Introduce a shorter and more clearly structured academic year, so that (early career) researchers can manage their research time properly.
- Allow lecturers to organize their teaching (including assessment and content) more freely and aim for a better match between research interests and teaching.
- Provide guidelines on how and when we communicate, emphasizing office hours and sticking to work-only communication channels, also among colleagues.
- When working with hour tabulations (*programmanormen*), these should genuinely be close to realistic hours spent and include such tasks as outreach, peer review, fostering initiatives to improve academia, and other forms of collegiality and academic citizenship.

Background

A recent [report](#) of the World Health Organization has found that long work hours are ‘estimated to be responsible for about a third of all work-related disease, making it the largest occupational disease burden.’ Academia is one of the sectors where work pressures are often excessive. This is an international problem, which finds its roots in developments in the academic world but also in society at large. In the Netherlands, roughly 70% of academics indicate that work pressure is too high and there have been various movements protesting this (see e.g. [Normaal Academisch Peil](#), [WOinActie](#) and [protests by students](#)). The Leiden Staff & PhD survey from 2018 ([‘Personeels & Promovendimonitor’](#)) makes clear that

Leiden University is no exception. The COVID-19 crisis has further [intensified the feeling of an unhealthy work pressure and stress](#) at Leiden University.

The issue of unhealthy work pressure is well known and [has triggered an investigation](#) of the inspectorate of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment at all Dutch universities. Leiden University has several initiatives in place, such as those of the [Healthy University](#), and [guides](#) to help cope with work pressure. Nevertheless, it seems that initiatives in the past years have had limited effect and target symptoms rather than causes. This suggests that the problem runs deep and will not be easily solved. We believe that to truly alleviate work pressure, we need structural changes to how we organize our teaching and research, changes in our own mindset about how we see academic excellence, as well as smaller changes in our daily practices.

Points of concern

The excessive work pressure that especially early career academics experience does not have a singular cause, and the extent to which these issues affect particular individuals vary. Still, there are several overall points of concern we wish to raise.

Work pressure arises from the large number of tasks academics are expected to carry out simultaneously throughout the academic year. These include a large number of tasks that are contractually required but also a wide range of 'supplementary' tasks, such as acting as a peer reviewer and acting on editorial boards. Tasks can come all at once and the fragmentation in tasks can have an adverse impact on research. This all adds to the pressure academics experience. The structural overwork for academics is not only unhealthy but also skews the equal playing field (some are more able to work overtime than others), and hence also negatively impacts inclusion and diversity.

Those who have heavy teaching duties face further obstacles to their time management. At Leiden University, the current academic calendar has semesters back-to-back. For many, the majority of research has to be conducted in short periods of time, such as before the start of the new academic year or during a teaching-free block. These periods are, however, often dedicated to, among other things, (i) the supervision of Bachelor, Master and/or PhD theses, (ii) teaching and assessment preparations for the new academic year, and (iii) a wide range of activities that are crucial for early career academics to establish themselves as internationally-recognized scholars, such as attending conferences and completing grant (pre-)proposals. During this time, which many academics try to 'reserve' for research given the intensity of teaching and administrative tasks during the semester, unforeseen tasks and heavy email traffic make it hard to actually use that time effectively for research. This creates stress. As a result, many face an unhealthy choice between being able to conduct focused research and taking a proper summer holiday. These issues are worsened by the absence or gradual disappearance of periodically scheduled research sabbaticals at some institutes and faculties. This overall structural setup makes it hard – sometimes simply impossible – to do the in-depth research required to make one's mark as an early career academic, feeding into the widely experienced feeling of 'just not doing enough' and 'not developing as an academic'.

A highly competitive work environment is also a contributing factor. When the atmosphere is intensely competitive (which it certainly is for early career academics), peers can give each other the feeling of underperforming in different areas of the academic work. Even within different areas of performance, our understanding of 'excellence' continues to be inflated: to attain 'research excellence', for instance, it no longer suffices to regularly publish in renowned, international, peer-reviewed journals -- one is also

expected to regularly obtain large grants from prestigious funding bodies (which report small success rates). The rat race (and the inflation of excellence that fuels it) is acknowledged but too little has been done so far to stop it; academics are *expected* to excel, and to do so on many fronts (see [Rethinking Academic Excellence](#)).

Another point of concern is the unreasonable divergence between the time given by employers for certain tasks and the actual time it takes to properly complete those tasks. Many academics are expected to produce a certain number of papers and grant applications per year, while also completing administrative tasks and, in most cases, teaching and/or coordinating various courses. Delivering on all of these tasks is simply not possible within normal working hours. There is not always a single party to blame. Tasks are often given by different parties (different programmes, institutes, faculties). Unreasonable hour tabulations increase the likelihood that academics sacrifice their personal time for uncredited overwork.

A deeply unfortunate effect of the unreasonable expectations of what academics can achieve across-the-board is the undermining of the quality of science. Researchers are forced to produce 'output' in rapid order just to meet publication and application targets and are under pressure by a perceived *publish or perish* culture that leaves little room for engaging in the long-term, meaningful contributions to one's discipline that requires research that is slower, harder and riskier. It runs contrary to the purpose of academic institutions when academics are under severe pressure to 'learn how to cut corners' to meet unrealistic quantitative targets.

Communication is another exacerbating factor. Handling emails is a substantial portion of the academic's time. The change to various online channels of communication have made it very easy to send out messages, and hence many are sent out, often requiring answers. Overwhelmed by crowded inboxes it becomes increasingly tempting to also use alternative means of communication such as various messenger apps. A proliferation of communication channels, however, makes it harder to manage time spent on professional communication. The quantity and scattering of work-related information can make it difficult to keep an overview of tasks and can cause one to feel overwhelmed.

Finally, early career academics who are on a short-term contract face tremendous levels of stress that accompany job insecurity, and this severely intensifies all the points of concern outlined above. Many feel that overwork is unfair, and unhealthy, but a necessary requirement to improve their chances in the increasingly competitive job market.

Recommendations

To address these concerns, Young Academy Leiden offers a number of recommendations. We recognize that some of these are harder to implement than others, so we distinguish between recommendations that are relatively easy to implement within 6 months, those that can be implemented within 6 to 18 months and those recommendations that require larger structural changes that we think are needed.

Recommendations for changes that we can implement within the next 6 months:

- *Autonomy in teaching organization.* Especially in positions that require a staff member to juggle a multitude of (teaching) responsibilities, there should be enough components to the job that are satisfying and staff members should be granted enough autonomy to ensure this, including the content of the course and the way they organize coursework and assessment.

- *Teaching closer to research interests.* We should strive hard for the optimal match between a lecturer's courses and (research) expertise. If a lecturer is required to take on a (new) course outside of their immediate expertise, additional time should be allocated for this.
- *The role of supervisors and the R&D interview in tackling work pressure.* Working overtime should not be expected or normalized by supervisors. Supervisors should try to monitor factors that create overtime or too much stress, and they should take the necessary steps to help eliminate overwork and fragmentation of tasks. It's essential that a fair assessment is given, which takes the academic's personal situation into account.
- *Less emphasis on quantity of papers.* The main emphasis of evaluating research excellence should be on the quality of contributions to the respective field(s) instead of on the quantity of research output. If any quantitative targets are nevertheless set, they should be very reasonable and they should leave room for long-term and interdisciplinary projects, and not be used to put pressure on researchers to produce, which can lead to 'filler' publications, pieces simply repackaging old ideas with minor additions.
- *Internal communication charter.* To help reduce pressure due to handling and keeping track of emails, messages and other forms of communications, there should be a university-wide endorsement of a communication charter that is occasionally distributed among staff. An example of such a charter is [this one](#), which sets out a clear email etiquette.
 - *Professional communication ideally takes place within working hours.* Recipients should feel free, and be encouraged, to answer messages only within their own working hours if an answer is required.
 - *There should be a clear agreement between co-workers on the number and nature of professional communication channels.* It should in principle not be necessary for co-workers to sign up for a social media platform in order to stay in the loop concerning university-related matters. A clear agreement regarding the number and nature of communication channels should be reached between co-workers and supervisors, and clear boundaries should be set.
 - *A strict distinction between professional and private communication channels should be maintained.* We should ensure that work-related communication takes place via agreed professional channels only. Contacting co-workers via their personal/private phone number, email address or social media account(s) should not be considered acceptable, even within working hours. If staff should be reachable by mobile phone, this should be provided by the employer.

Recommendations for changes that we can start implementing over the next 6 to 18 months:

- *Diversification in appreciation of talents and accomplishments.* We support a change in how we perceive academic excellence (see [Rethinking Academic Excellence](#)). When a diverse variety of career tracks are perceived as proper, this improves job satisfaction and reduces pressure. We welcome the current efforts to implement this.
- *Fewer short-term contracts.* Short-term contracts should be kept at a minimum. Early career academics on short-term teaching contracts should be given meaningful teaching responsibilities that help their professional development and improve their CV and, if in any way possible, a chance to work on research.
- *'Programmanormen' (hour tabulations)* are only helpful when they are realistic and meaningfully capture the time spent on various tasks. Hour tabulations should include ample time for 'hidden' but central tasks, such as outreach, strengthening their research community by organizing events, engaging in peer review, keeping track of the literature, grassroot initiatives (e.g. for Open Access,

Open Science, etc.), and other forms of collegiality and academic citizenship. If not included in hour tabulations, academics are either incentivized not to engage in this or forced to do this in personal time.

- *Reasonable support and expectations for relocating staff.* Many staff members get little or almost no reduced workload when coming from abroad. A soft landing should be standard, and of reasonable duration. If staff members are asked to learn Dutch, they should be given the time and financial resources to do so.

Recommendations for larger, structural changes that we should start working on now:

- *Shorter academic year.* The university should aim for a stricter partition of the academic year across faculties and, where possible, a shorter academic year. More faculties should reserve longer periods between semesters that are strictly teaching-free, and more clearly demarcated for research and organizational tasks (at least a brief one in January and an extended one in June-July-August). During these periods there should be a stop in assessments, including exams and theses, which should be scheduled earlier in the semester.
- *Structural changes to research funding to reduce the number of grant applications.* We support the recent KNAW proposal for [rolling grants](#), providing every researcher with a starting research budget, circumventing grant applications. This saves time, combats the unhealthy levels of competition and the reception of many rejections that unnecessarily demotivate researchers.