

Chapter 3

Changes in the workload

Key points

Expanding workloads: staff reported a significant expansion in their workloads due to a combination of three main factors:

- changes in the student population;
- resource constraints;
- staffing levels.

Increasing student numbers: an increase in student numbers had resulted in:

- more users or 'customers' with queries and complaints;
- more general pressure to keep up with demand.

Changing student profiles: the changing profile of the student population had resulted in:

- a wider range of needs and demands on staff; and
- a student body which was perceived to be more demanding than had previously been the case.

Resource constraints: all staff were aware of the impact of resource constraints:

- these were seen as a 'constant black cloud';
- they made staff feel increasingly insecure;
- staffing had not increased in line with student numbers - some departments had experienced real cuts in staffing levels;
- most staff had had to take on additional work which had previously been undertaken by other people.

Additional responsibilities: staff did not object to taking on additional areas of responsibility but were concerned about the impact on their work:

- they were finding it increasingly difficult to keep up with the amount of work they were expected to complete;
- they felt that the pressure this created was having an adverse affect on the quality of the service they were providing.

Changes in the workload

Introduction

3.1 This chapter outlines staff perceptions of the changes in higher education which have impacted directly on the size and nature of their workload. It covers the interplay between three key factors:

- changes in the student population;
- resource constraints;
- staffing levels.

3.2 The chapter draws primarily on the experiences of *niche-finders* and *subject specialists*. The *new professionals* had only limited experience of the changes because they had joined higher education more recently.

Changes in the student population ⁵

Increasing student numbers

3.3 Increasing student numbers was one of the biggest changes experienced by administrative and support staff. It had led to an overall expansion in their workloads. More students meant more users or 'customers' to be managed, more general pressure and, above all, more queries and complaints to deal with. This pressure resulted in an increase in the pace of work to try to keep up with demand. Hence a computer services staff member felt that he was always '*backed up against a wall*' with the demands on his time.

The changing profile of the student population

3.4 Staff clearly recognised the emergence of different characteristics in the student body and, for some, this was as significant as the overall increase in numbers. An administrator explained:

'The biggest change has been the differences in the type of student. When I first came [here]... the type of student you saw [here] was very middle-class, that was the kind of student we were getting. But now we're getting lots of different students... lots of single parents, mature students who are trying to support themselves ... I don't know the proportions they form, but there's a lot of different types of students coming in.'

3.5 This meant that the notion of the 'typical' student - as an 18-year-old school-leaver - was no longer valid. Many of the 'new' types of students had varying needs and made different demands on staff when compared with the 'typical' student.

3.6 Staff felt that non-traditional students often had unrealistic expectations of the type and level of service that administrative and support staff should provide. An administrator remarked:

'Because they've made the access so much easier to get into university, the quality of the candidate that you're dealing with... sometimes you wonder whether they're capable of wiping their noses... And it's not because they're not intelligent enough, they probably are, but their expectations of what we provide for them, and our expectation of what we'll do for them are just not [the same].'

3.7 A librarian explained:

'[With] the big change towards more mature students and stuff, you get people... coming in and they've got very little experience of what a [university] library is because they've been in a commercial organisation, like they have a specialised person that literally does everything for them. And so they come into a university library and.. their natural expectation is to get the same type of service. But, I mean, we don't get the same level of funding for the number of people coming that a commercial organisation does. So we can't provide the same thing.'

3.8 The increase in numbers of overseas students with only a limited grasp of spoken English was also perceived as creating additional work for administrative and support staff.

3.9 Staff felt that the growing financial pressures faced by many students placed yet another strain on them. They believed that the erosion of student grants and the introduction of student loans meant that students were more likely to feel that they were paying for their own education which, in turn, made them more demanding. A systems manager explained:

'... because [students] are stressed out themselves and they're living in debt because they can't get any money to go to university, or they're shelling out for a loan, they're expecting so much from us.'

3.10 Many staff also thought that students were starting to behave more like 'customers'. This, too, made them more demanding and, in particular, resulted in a preoccupation with value-for-money. This was perceived to be the case with mature students, in particular, who were often self-funding. A library assistant commented:

'If they've been in business they've got a much better idea of what value for money is....We'll do things for them that maybe ten years ago we would have said, "Well, you've got your A levels, you're studying for an undergraduate/postgraduate degree, you do it".'

Resource constraints and staffing levels⁶

3.11 It was not only the increase in student numbers that staff thought had resulted in growing workloads. More important was the combination of a rise in student numbers with ever-tightening resource constraints. The result had been the absence of an expansion of staffing levels in conjunction with rising student numbers. It was this combination which staff believed had made the biggest impact on their working lives, and especially their workloads.

Resource constraints

3.12 Administrative and support staff were clearly aware of the real constraints on the funding available to support the infrastructure of higher education. These constraints, and the increasing competition for funds which they necessitated, had a number of consequences for these staff.

3.13 For most, funding issues were a '*constant black cloud*' which was '*permeating every area of work*'. A few staff, particularly departmental administrators, were directly affected and, in some cases, threatened by funding constraints. For these staff, finding ways to work within the constraints had become almost a full-time job in itself and led to increasing workloads. A senior computing officer working in a science department explained:

'It all depends on how many students you can get through the door. So you've got that competitive edge of trying to get as many students as you can...'

3.14 Resource constraints also meant that administrative and support staff who were on a management grade found themselves spending an increasing amount of time in budget meetings trying to balance resource needs with the money available.

3.15 In addition, resource constraints resulted in growing insecurity for many administrative and support staff. Insecure funding meant that long-term planning was not possible in many departments and led to concerns over short-termism.

Staffing levels

3.16 All staff were fully aware that staffing levels had not increased in line with the numbers of students entering higher education. One remarked:

'Where the universities have grown, [this university] has probably increased ten, twenty per cent in student numbers in the last few years [but] they don't increase the staff budgets.'

3.17 Some felt that the mismatch between student numbers and levels of administrative and support staff was even greater than the relative shortages of academic staff. They reported that in many administrative and support departments, staff numbers had remained static or declined. Consequently, these staff had to cope with the reductions in staff in other support functions. Several of them noted that when they required tasks to be undertaken by other support staff there were often long delays because of staff shortages in all support functions.

3.18 Most staff had experienced the impact of staff cuts. An assistant subject librarian explained: '*What happens is either the post is not replaced... because*

they're trying to save up on that money. And even if it is replaced, it's replaced at a very low grade'. Reductions in staffing levels affected these staff in two ways.

3.19 First, the reductions were a key influence on the context in which they worked. Many reported the growing levels of insecurity they experienced at work. Second, the cuts meant that staff were increasingly having to take on work which had previously been done by others. This significantly increased their already growing workload. A subject librarian explained:

'So what happens is, X amount of job that was done by that person [who has left] is slowly scattered and spread around ... the existing members. So, according to me, that's an added job to my existing job.'

3.20 Sometimes, taking on additional responsibilities meant that skilled administrative and support staff were deployed to undertake manual tasks, such as room changes and moving equipment. More often, however, it involved them undertaking responsibilities which were beyond their own jobs. Several members of staff noted that this meant that they were operating machinery or equipment that they were not trained or insured to use.

3.21 Usually staff felt obliged to take on this additional work in order to maintain the level and quality of the service they provided. Often they did not acknowledge the extent of the additional work they were taking on until it was too late to resist. A librarian explained:

'In time, what happens is... these new changes have crept in so slowly that you start to think "Shall I do this? Shall I do that?". Before you can think it's already there, you're already doing it. So it all gets submerged into [your job].'

3.22 An administrator told a similar story:

'...it's not the manager saying "Will you please do this?".... It just happens insidiously.'

3.23 However, they also strongly believed that they were not in a position to refuse to take on the extra work. They felt that the vagueness of their job descriptions made them particularly vulnerable to expectations to 'pick up the slack' where colleagues had left and not been replaced. One described her job as '*like a mopping-up cloth that picks up every drop.*

Concerns about increasing workloads²

3.24 Administrative and support staff expressed some serious concerns about the expansion in their workloads. It is important to note that these were not simply the result of fear of resistance to change. Almost all the staff who took part in the focus groups recognised the need for change and were accustomed to dealing with it. One joked: '*Ever since I've been there it's just constant*

change. It's a way of life!' Their concerns were genuine and related to their ability to fulfil the demands now made of them. Many were worried about the sheer volume of work now entailed in their jobs and the consequent effects on the quality of service they were able to provide.

The volume of work

3.25 Some administrative and support staff felt that their workload had expanded beyond their capacity to cope. They found it increasingly hard to keep up with the work and were concerned about the large backlogs building up, which they could not foresee having the time to deal with.

3.26 All the administrative and support staff reported that they were having to work increasingly long hours to keep on top of their work. They worked much longer than the hours set out in their contracts, often until quite late at night, and during weekends. A computer services assistant said:

'There are some... particularly in our area, coming in at weekends or working in the evening because that's the only time that they can access facilities without too much disruption... It's expected of them... you work until the job's done... I've logged on in the evening and at weekends to try... to catch up on some of my duties.'

3.27 Staff rarely felt that their managers forced them to work long hours. Yet most perceived an element of coercion because their managers did expect them to keep on top of their work. They were unable to do this without working additional hours.

The impact on service provision⁸

3.28 A common theme among administrative and support staff was an anxiety that the volume of their work was having an adverse impact on the quality of the service they were providing. A careers adviser explained:

'The trouble is... we've got a constant stream of students, we're booked up for six weeks in advance, throughout the year. We can't see anyone now for six weeks, which is absolutely ridiculous.'

3.29 Computing staff were worried that they did not have sufficient time to undertake some of the core, maintenance elements of their job. One explained:

'... what we're finding is that we haven't..because of other stuff we've got to do, the core elements that we should be doing, like basic back-ups... instead of being, as it used to be, once a week, once a fortnight, it's perhaps once a term, if we're lucky...'

3.30 This was a constant source of concern and frustration for staff. They felt powerless to do anything about their situation. Another staff member admitted: *'It becomes a worry actually. You know, it's nagging in the background, you've got to get that done. But the trouble is there's constant interruptions and you can't.'*

3.31 Library staff had similar nagging doubts about the quality of service provision. In particular, they questioned the value of submitting to pressures for longer opening hours. They strongly believed that the service that they were able to provide outside core opening hours was too limited to be of any

real value to users. One explained:

'If you're maintaining a service outside the sort of nine-to-five office hours, there's a limit to what you can do. So you're constantly referring people [elsewhere, saying] "Come back [between] nine to five, Monday to Friday".'

3.32 Participants believed that short-term and temporary staff taken on to cover extended opening hours were unable to provide a high level of service compared to full-time permanent staff. This was because they were less experienced and had insufficient knowledge about the institution. In turn, this led to a lack of cohesion and coordination in the services provided. A subject librarian commented:

'Well, they haven't got the experience have they? They can't always deal with various problems that come up... And not only that, if... changes have taken place from Monday to Friday, and the Saturday person is not updated on it... the response of the service that's provided on the Saturday is not to the [same] standard... across the service.'