

Summary 22nd of September 2021 @Crea

University Forum

How do we tackle work pressure?

Work Pressure

At the first physical meeting of the University Forum in a year, an important theme was immediately central: work pressure. For years, curbing work pressure has been high on the agenda, but the situation in the workplace remains precarious. What makes work pressure such a complex problem? Which factors play a role? At the UvA, we set high standards for ourselves. That's great, but doesn't that get in the way of a reduction in workload? The members and other interested attendees have discussed these questions and the results of their discussions can be read in this summary.

Wilma de Munck, director of operations at the FEB and program leader of the 'Grip op Werkdruk' project, gave an introductory presentation for inspiration and background. After this presentation, the attendees tackled the following questions:

1

Statement: sometimes reducing the workload is not possible without a reduction in the quality of education or research. That is a sacrifice worth making.

2

Statement: the current layout of the academic year plays an important role in the level of work pressure.
Case: is 7-7-4 a solution?

3

Question: What role can students play in reducing the workload of their teachers?
Could that be asked of them?

4

Statement: the main causes of work pressure are beyond the scope of UvA policy.
What are these causes? If the answer is yes, what does that mean for UvA policy?

Guest Speaker

Wilma de Munck

Wilma de Munck is director of operations at the Faculty of Economics and Business and has been leading the 'Grip op Werkdruk' program since 2018. Along four different lines of action, ranging from analysis to active support, the program tries to curb workload within the current limited funding. It has delivered a multitude of different trainings, tools and studies between 2018 and 2020. An overview can be found on the [UvA website](#). Responsibility has since been transferred back to the management, with a smaller workload committee in the background as support. This committee encourages and assists workload reduction initiatives from all corners of the university. An example of such an initiative is the introduction of 7-7-4 at the Faculty of Humanities.



Statement: sometimes reducing the workload is not possible without a reduction in the quality of education or research. That is a sacrifice worth making.

Quality is currently considered more important than work pressure. We see a development in which we have to work harder and harder to continue to meet the same quality requirements. This is largely due to the large number of students. There are currently insufficient resources to exercise control over this. More support is needed to manage those large numbers. All tasks that are not directly related to content could in principle be taken over by student assistants, such as arranging facilities. Especially now that organizing hybrid education takes a lot of time, it would help to standardize and outsource a larger part of these facility tasks. More student assistant positions is also something the students would be happy about.

Reducing the amount of responsibilities of professors could also help. They bear most of the administrative burden, which is also undervalued within the university. Ultimately, the fastest way to reduce workload is to simply do less. However, it is too short-sighted to think that you automatically compromise on quality. Certainly in the field of research, less may actually mean more. In the current control culture, where researchers are raced by the number of publications, quality is exchanged for quantity and workload. The same control culture results in extra work pressure because so much has to be recorded, for example the mandatory interview reports of study advisors, which can all be extremely time-consuming. This also includes having to write a comprehensive study guide, although a detailed guide later in the course can theoretically ease workload as well. When students find the answer to their question in the manual, they don't have to burden their teacher with it. Unfortunately, in practice it appears that even when all information is available, students still regularly choose the easier way and approach the teacher. That could be better.

Reduction of workload should not come at the expense of quality, but that is rarely the case. The reverse is much more likely. Less control culture, more trust, less burn-outs, less dropout, more permanent appointments, everything ultimately leads to more quality of both research and education.

Statement: the current layout of the academic year plays an important role in the level of work pressure.

Case: is 7-7-4 a solution?

2

For some of the measures against work pressure, there is de facto a shift of work from the teacher to the student. Because the workload for students is already high, that is something we have to keep a close eye on and be careful about. The workload in education is partly related to the layout of the academic year, but not in a one-to-one relationship with the number of education weeks.

More important than whether or not education is provided is the question of what exactly is expected of students within a teaching block. How often is the examination and how? There is an increasing amount of testing, which means that students are on the edge of their seats throughout the course and teachers are constantly checking. So the question may not be what the annual format looks like, but how you use it.

Question: What role can students play in reducing the workload of their teachers?

Could that be asked of them?

First of all, we must avoid shifting the workload problem from teacher to student. Students certainly have a role to play, but only when there is a reduction in tasks. The control culture mentioned above is also applied to students. This includes the administration of attendance, but also keeping track of participation and the ever-expanding rules and conditions surrounding assignments. It would ultimately be in the interests of both students and lecturers to formalize less and to arrange more through mutual agreements and trust. Make students part of the course design.

We can expect students to respect the structure of the course and only visit the teacher when the answer to their question cannot be found in the syllabus. Another way students could help is through student assistant positions, for payment or (when substantively) even for credits. At the moment, teachers spend a lot of time on things that could have been arranged just as well, if not better, by a student. Think, for example, of arranging facilities, keeping track of attendance and answering practical questions from students. Student assistantship is a great opportunity for students and can relieve the workload for teachers.

Statement: the main causes of work pressure are beyond the scope of UvA policy.

What are the causes and what do they include? If the answer is yes, what does that mean for UvA policy?

The most important factor from outside the UvA is the limited government funding for both research and education. As far as research is concerned, researchers are increasingly dependent on competing for external funding. NWO participates in this by raising the bar ever higher. In combination with the fact that academics are currently mainly judged on research (and much

less on education), this results in an increased workload.

We should appreciate the other tasks – education or administrative work – equally and ensure that scientists can focus on the task that suits them best. Good teachers should be able to do less research without negative consequences for their careers and good researchers could then teach less. For the connection between education and research it is important that scientists continue to do something about both research and education, but this does not have to be done in fixed proportions, as is often the case now. An important condition is that education and research are then valued equally. As the UvA, we have some control over that, but this is also largely something that comes over from the larger academic community outside our own university. Moreover, the differences in the education/research ratio between faculties and even departments are very large.

Another external factor that is currently increasing the workload of researchers is the emergence of Open Science. Researchers have to navigate between research data legislation on the one hand and the expectations of Open Science on the other. This is complex and largely new matter that researchers could use more support for than they currently receive from the UvA.

Another problem that is partly due to factors outside the UvA is the flexibility of employment contracts. More and more, especially novice scientists, are trapped in successive temporary contracts. This uncertainty fuels the workload and is at the expense of the well-being of our employees. In many places within the UvA, places that are actually structural in nature are filled with constantly changing temporary employees. This development is only partly due to limited funding and trends in the Dutch labor market; Above all, the UvA itself has the opportunity and responsibility to take action in this regard.



Vragen? Neem dan contact op met secretaris
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