HR contribution to business efficiency: management of academic workloads

Nottingham Trent University
What is this about?

In early 2010 the university’s corporate HR team scoped a project that looked at how academic staff were deployed and how the current contract of employment was being applied. It became the Management of Academic Workloads Framework and Planning Tool (MAW).

As a post-92 university, academic staff at Nottingham Trent University are employed on the national 1991 contract of employment, which includes some very restrictive clauses. For example, a 30 week teaching year within a 38 week period; no more than 12 consecutive teaching weeks; not allowed to teach more than 16 hours per week, or 500 hours per year. Within annualised hours of 1575, further restrictions and contractual guidelines produced a counting hours culture that is not conducive to a progressive organisation wishing to respond to financial and economic challenges and increasingly challenging student requirements.

In the autumn of 2010, the corporate HR team reviewed how the academic contract was being applied in the 42 subject discipline teams (located within nine schools). While there were some common approaches, essentially there was a wide variety of practice. Methods of recording and developing team/individual annual work plans ranged from the basic (paper files) to sophisticated databases.

The major issues identified were:

- Low and variable average levels of teaching (against the contracted maximum 500 hours per annum).
- Wide variance in the ratios being applied to determine time required for teaching-related duties.
- Varied approaches to the time allowances for administrative and scholarly activity.
- Wide ranging “tariffs” for cross team/school roles.
- Lack of a direct relationship between workload planning and the institution’s appraisal scheme (performance, development and contribution review).

The project was sponsored by one of the university pro-vice-chancellors and supported by the corporate HR team and a business analyst from the information systems department. The introduction of the MAW framework and related systems have been successful in providing a practical planning tool for the schools and colleges across the university and enabled some additional initiatives to be implemented which improved the student experience without an associated increase in academic staff resources.

Over time the management of academic workloads using the tool has continued to develop and realise further benefits through the implementation of a new online system, which has significantly improved management reporting capabilities, including the utilisation of MAW data to inform our Transparent Approach to Costing return.
What we did and why

In October 2010, the university senior management team agreed, as a priority, the HR director’s recommendation to establish a project to introduce arrangements to:

- Ensure that the current academic contract is applied consistently, fairly and transparently.
- Maximise the value of the current academic contract.
- Ensure accurate data on workload planning is available.
- Minimise the use of casual staffing.
- Inform any future discussions regarding revised academic contractual terms.

The scope encompassed all staff that are employed on the standard academic contract, plus all other staff that “teach”, eg academic managers, researchers, professors, technicians (to give a full picture of teaching resource).

In December 2010, academic managers across the university involved in workload planning were consulted on a Managing Academic Workloads Framework. The framework sets out the elements of the academic contract of employment associated with workloads, including the “classification of activities”, under the four main elements of contracted time:

- Scheduled teaching duties.
- Teaching-related duties.
- Academic management and administration.
- Scholarly activity/staff development activities.

The university’s implementation guidance was provided for the benefit of both staff and academic managers, which gives some flexibility of local decision-making eg the ratio of teaching duties to teaching-related duties, the tariffs of time under academic management and administration provision for certain activities. Alongside this, the corporate HR team undertook a market appraisal to ascertain if there were any “off the shelf” software products that could be used to support the workload planning process. In the absence of any such product the information systems department developed a bespoke Excel-based planning tool as an interim solution.

Formal consultation with trade union and employee representatives was carried out in a sub-group of the employee consultation and information forum. By April 2011, the planning tool was implemented across the academic teams, supported by briefings and training delivered by the corporate HR team.

The planning tool was pre-populated with relevant data for both staff and modules. This was retrieved from other existing university systems, which reduced the amount of data input by users. The corporate HR team established, using SharePoint technology, a MAW team site with publishing sites to which academic team leaders were required to “post” their workload plans against a planning timetable through the teaching year.

For the first two years of operating the planning tool, detailed and extensive analysis of the workload plans was undertaken by the corporate HR team and presented to a wide range of interested parties, including the senior management team; college and school management teams; associate deans of research; and finance and timetabling staff.

In late 2012, the corporate HR team moved into the next phase of the project with the procurement of an online software solution from an external provider with a background in working with HEIs. Data from the previous Excel-based workload plans and other existing university systems was imported into the new system. The new software system functionality enables all hours input for individual staff workload plans to be coded against Higher Education Statistics Agency and Transparent Approach to Costing reporting categories from the outset, thereby significantly extending the value and use of MAW information. In addition, the software is adaptable for different applications of the academic contract, allowing for future flexibility.

The new system was implemented across the institution in May 2013, supported by guidance and training sessions delivered by the corporate HR team. It provides improved reporting outputs and data exports which are available to all users, removing the requirement for detailed analysis to be undertaken at a central level. Briefings on the strategic benefits of the new reporting capability were delivered to the senior management team, pro-vice-chancellors and deans.
What impact did it have?

As a consequence of MAW, the university has been able to progress a number of strategic activities.

- Since 2011-12, deans of school have been reporting on workload planning at the quarterly business review against institutional KPIs around financial efficiency.
- The institutional academic plan 2012-14 identified specific activities in support of enhancing the student experience. The MAW planning tool was used to enable resource (staff time) to be identified and allocated at the individual level to ensure delivery of these activities, including course tutorials and teaching observation.
- Information from the MAW planning tool is being used at a school level to inform timetabling and estate utilisation.
- A full review of the curriculum structure was implemented in 2012-13. This impacted significantly on how staff time was allocated against teaching at the module level. The MAW planning tool was instrumental in the successful realignment of resources.
- Resource allocated to those performance, development and contribution review objectives which support the delivery of institutional and school level strategic priorities can be monitored to ensure those objectives are being supported.
- Allocation of the necessary development time for academic staff to achieve professional recognition for their academic practice. In September 2012 a new learning and teaching professional development framework was introduced as part of the institutional academic plan. Supported in part by the allocation of dedicated scholarly activity/staff development activities time in MAW workload plans, core teaching staff are actively engaged in applying for, or have already attained, professional recognition with the Higher Education Academy.

Benefits of the approach include:

- University senior management and HR business partners can monitor the completion of the team workload plans at the individual member of staff, academic team and school level in a consistent manner.
- Reduction in the number of enquiries from staff about comparative workloads, following the publication of workload plans.
- Reductions in “over contract” payments and in the cost of employing casual staff (£2m saved in 2011-12).
- Where institutional performance, development and contribution review objectives are established, the requisite link to the allocation of resources in workload plans can be reported on, monitored and checked (see above regarding Higher Education Academy recognition).
- Data analysis of the team-level plans gives comprehensive and live information about the amount of staff resource allocated to any (all) activity; comparisons of efficiency at team and school level; indicators of under-utilisation of staff resources are highlighted.
- MAW data and analysis of team capacity forms an integral part of resource planning by college management teams, to approve or decline staff requisition authorisations.
- Enhanced the university’s ability to support new initiatives that require academic staffing resource without increasing costs.
- MAW workload plan data will now inform the Transparent Approach to Costing return. By aligning these reporting requirements with an existing business process, this brings a valuable efficiency, eliminating the need for all academic staff to complete the time allocation survey data collection.
Lessons learned

While it is acknowledged that there are examples of academic workload planning within the sector, it is very unusual for the HR function to be the institutional lead.

At Nottingham Trent University the proposal for the project was developed and delivered by the corporate HR team within a period of six months. This required considerable project management and organisational skills to bring together contributions from deans of school, academic team leaders, the information systems department, trade union and employee representatives. The learning from this has been carried forward into other future projects.

The key learning points were:

1. The need to ensure that a high level of technical competence is available within the HR function if systems-based projects are to succeed.
2. Enthusiastic support from the senior management team is essential.
3. The project leaders must possess highly developed influencing and persuasion skills.

NTU’s approach to academic workload planning has been shared with HR colleagues in the sector, including presentations at a UHR development day, February 2013, and UHR Regional Forum, June 2014.

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Also in this series:

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New case studies will follow this launch series, so please check back on our website for the latest resources.
About the case studies

This series of case studies has been developed from the work of the Leadership Foundation and partners for the report ‘Efficiency, Effectiveness and Value for Money’ led by Professor Sir Ian Diamond and published by Universities UK in February 2015.

Partners in the ‘Diamond’ higher education workforce group (UCEA, UHR, Hefce, GuildHE, UUK and the Leadership Foundation) commissioned the case studies with support from the joint Hefce/Leadership Foundation Innovation and Transformation Fund.

Dr Lesly Huxley, director of membership and organisational development, leads the LF’s Innovation and Transformation Fund and our contribution to the HE workforce group. She said: “The leadership, development and commitment of people at all levels in higher education is fundamental to successful change and delivery of greater effectiveness in the core activity of our universities and colleges. These case studies and other work funded through the second phase of the Innovation and Transformation Fund show the importance of staff engagement and development in helping higher education institutions improve organisational performance.”

Gwen Wileman, LF Associate, who worked with the universities to develop this series, explained: “The case studies all provide powerful success stories and some real measures of impact on efficiency and effectiveness. However, the challenges of culture and complexity also come through loud and clear and there are many lessons to be learned and shared.”

About the Innovation and Transformation Fund

Acknowledging the central role of leadership in driving change, in 2012, together with Hefce, the Leadership Foundation initiated a £1m, UK-wide Innovation and Transformation Fund (ITF) to progress key themes of the first ‘Diamond Report’ on efficiency in higher education. Nine projects were funded and have now concluded.

Sir Ian Diamond was invited by the Department of Business and Innovation Skills to lead a second phase of this work early in 2014, looking particularly at organisational change and development, the higher education workforce, estates and research assets, open data and evidencing efficiency.

In 2014-15, further joint investment totalling £500,000 is supporting the sharing of existing effective practice particularly in the leadership, management and development of the higher education workforce. A key to the Innovation and Transformation Fund is in unlocking and making best use of good practice. For more information go to: www.lfhe.ac.uk/ITF

About the Leadership Foundation

The Leadership Foundation is a membership organisation that delivers leadership development and consultancy advice to higher education institutions in the UK and around the world. The focus of the Leadership Foundation’s work is to improve the management and leadership skills of existing and future leaders of higher education. The services provided include consultancy, leadership development programmes and events, including a major series of events for governors. This work is supported by a highly regarded research and development programme that underpins the leadership development programmes and stimulates innovation.

The Leadership Foundation has a small team of experienced leadership and organisational development professionals drawn from higher education, other parts of the public sector, and also from the private sector. Much of the Leadership Foundation’s work is delivered in partnership with the higher education sector and other partner organisations. www.lfhe.ac.uk

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