

# An Exploration of the Causes and Consequences of Work-related Stress for Staff in Education during the COVID-19 Pandemic and Implications for Human Resources Management

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## Abstract

There is an extensive literature on the causes and consequences of prolonged work-related stress, drawing on research from a broad range of occupations. The COVID-19 pandemic, and the resulting changes to working practices, created a host of new challenges for staff and managers in education. The requirement to deliver remote learning to students during periods of lockdown added a previously unforeseen level of challenge to teachers and lecturers. Rapid adaptation to new technologies and new ways of working was required at a time when many staff were already feeling overworked and – as a result of the lockdown restrictions – increasingly isolated. This small-scale research project draws on both primary and secondary data on a small group of employees who have faced stress or were experiencing stress at work, how they approached the situation and the support they received from their HR departments to help them cope. The findings indicate that during workplace stress for these staff was related to heavy workload and unrealistic management expectations. New working practices introduced during the COVID-19 pandemic appear to have exacerbated these stresses for many of those working in education, with implications for employee wellbeing and health, morale, absence, staff turnover, and the need for referrals to occupational health or counselling services.

Keywords: work-related stress, occupational health, counselling, public sector, Human Resources management, COVID-19 pandemic

## Introduction

Stress has a key role in organisational performance, particularly in the UK where it is noted that workload is the primary cause of stress (Cigna Corporation, 2018) and most employees leave their jobs due to workload-related stress (Smail, 2018). Stress is a key factor in work-life balance (Mullins, 2020). Furthermore, stress is closely connected with worker performance at work, which in turn is related to the workload, priorities, deadlines and targets that staff are expected to meet. The consequences of stress include sickness, absence and detrimental impacts on the

mental health of employees, which can require occupational health or counselling referrals. Without effective Human Resources management strategies in place to deal with workplace stress, this can lead to increased staff turnover within the organisation. As such, managing stress is a key challenge for all HR departments.

Stress can result from internal and external work pressures (Cranwell-Ward & Abbey, 2005). Stress occurs when an individual has perceived disequilibrium between pressure and their ability to manage the resources at their disposal – including other staff for those in management roles. Workload can impact both positively and negatively on employees. It can incentivise staff to work harder to meet targets and deadlines, but on the negative, stress occurs when workload demands surpass the ability of individuals to cope with those demands. In this instance, stress can seriously impact on the health and mental health of staff (Cartwright & Cooper, 2011).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, changes in working conditions such as working from home, increased workload, lack of socialisation, and isolation due to lockdown rules, resulted in more work-related stress – providing an important case for research into the subject. A previous paper presented in March 2021, focused on stress in relation to students and the support available to them. This paper shifts the focus onto staff working in higher education, the work-related stresses on them during the pandemic, and the role of HR professionals (including referrals to occupational health or counselling) in helping staff to deal with these new stresses. It will share qualitative insights from participants in a focused piece of research that examined the impact on their jobs, health, and the support received from HR.

The key objectives of this paper are to:

- Explore the nature of the work-related stress these employees faced during the COVID-19 pandemic
- Analyse the challenges of stress in relation to the role of HRM
- Evaluate the impact of work-related stress on staff retention
- Share comments from employees about their experiences with stress and the support they received to help them cope with their stress

## Literature on work-related stress

Management of employee stress at work is one of the key responsibilities of HR and some of the employees that face stress at work are referred to either occupational health or counselling services. Therefore, it is vital to explore the challenges of stress-related cases at work and the role of HR in supporting employees to manage their stress levels. In the preceding paper that focused on stress in relation to students in higher education, some key causes of stress, such as heavy workload and pressures of meeting deadlines (Achinewhu-Nworgu, 2021) were noted. As stated by Khalique et al. (2018), employees' stress can also arise due to workload and family, relations with line managers, and lack of cooperation with colleagues. When we talk about stress, we need to understand the workplace context, what causes stress to arise, and then

look at the strategic role of HR in supporting staff who are experiencing stress at work – e.g., through referrals of employees to either occupational health or counselling.

According to the Health & Safety Executive (2022), stress is the adverse reaction that people have when they perceive that they are no longer able to cope with the demands placed on them to do things. Stress can manifest in different ways for employees due to the demands of workload that may be contrary to employee expectations, interests, skills and knowledge in meeting the demands of the job requirements (Soegoto & Narimawati, 2017). Workload is the most common cause of stress. This became more pronounced during the pandemic as changes in working practices led to employee isolation from their routine office work and working from home. Other causes of stress result from work-life balance, the nature of the job, organisational conflict, and poor relationship with line managers and colleagues (Mullins, 2020). In addition, hierarchy, organisational changes and structure (Parry & Tyson, 2013) can lead to work-related stress.

The current pandemic provides an opportunity to study the stress that is caused due to embracing a sudden change in work practices (Achinewhu-Nworgu, 2021). Stress can manifest in different ways. Poor management of tasks and employees, office design, recognition or denial, role conflict and inequality in pay could have big implications on higher education employees' performance as well as the students (Tetrick & Winslow, 2015). When employee performance is affected due to stress, it can also have adverse effect on organisational performance and worker retention. The current pandemic has brought stress on employees as they embrace the changes in their working conditions and practices. The ability to cope with the demands of an online delivery for staff, isolation from their normal routine office work, lack of communication and loss of face-to-face interactions has caused stress for many staff (Achinewhu-Nworgu, 2021).

This paper will share the perceptions of employees on work-related stress during the pandemic and how they coped with it, whether it affected their attendance, and whether they were referred to occupational health or any counselling services to help them cope with stress. This research will share the experience of staff on their current stress levels in trying to embrace the challenges of changes in work practices and the supporting role of HR in helping them cope with the stress that they experienced – and the implications for their retention and work performance.

### *Challenges of work-related stress*

Work-related stress presents HR departments, organisations, and the economy as a whole, with considerable challenges. HR has a key role to play in referring employees to either occupational health or for counselling depending on the nature and degrees of stress experienced by the employees to help them cope better with stress. Work related stress has rapidly increased with the current pandemic as the workload has increased, working in isolation and with changing expectations of employers. It is noted in research and data that stress related issues have been

estimated to cost UK employers around £370 million as well as the cost to the entire society, estimated at about £3.75 billion, and stress-related cases are on the increase due to the current pandemic.

The costs of work-related stress are a long-standing problem. Figures from the Trade Union Congress (Gentle, 2004) estimated work-related stress to cost the UK economy about £7 billion a year in sick pay, lost production and NHS costs. This is in line with other countries. Factors contributing to work-related stress include working hours and heavy workload, poor relationships with line managers, racism experienced at work, and reduced job security (Palmer et al., 2004). These can be seen to be increased by the advent of modern technologies including email communication, with employers requiring tasks to be done faster and more efficiently. Meanwhile, reduced staff numbers have led to increased stress at work that further impacts on employee health and wellbeing.

Palmer et al. (2004) identify six hazards of stress related issues: demands, which includes exposure to issues such as workload; work patterns and work environment; the complexity of work; shift work; unrealistic deadlines; and how much say and involvement the person has in the way they do their work. The role of HR managers, occupational health and counselling services become relevant to supporting staff to have a clear understanding of the main issues involved with workplace stress, prevention and management. Preventing stress is a measure to reduce employee absenteeism, promote employee well-being, health and organisational effectiveness.

Stress affects employee concentration in accomplishing tasks effectively hence leading to errors that can in effect result in conflicts among employees and managers that can result in poor organisational performance based on employee errors (Talib et al., 2019). Stress is common in the teaching profession and it is an ongoing experience that teachers face on daily basis in accomplishing the job roles, trying to teach long hours, mark course work to meet deadlines for moderation, submit marks, release results for award of degrees. The start of each new semester can be daunting and exhausting for teachers. The question here remains in finding out the role of HR in supporting staff and teachers cope with stress-related issues, challenges, and wellbeing at work. Are those affected with stress referred to either occupational health or counselling to help them cope with their stress related issues?

### *Implications for Human Resources management*

The Health and Wellbeing at Work Survey (CIPD, 2021) shows that most organisations' HR departments are doing their best to manage stress related issues and challenges. However, despite the effort in managing stress-related issues at work, there is still a large increase in the rate of stress at work in education and other service industries. As the survey points out, the rise in stress-related cases is linked with overwhelming workload, cultural differences, leadership and management styles and changes in organisational structure which are the major causes of stress that require HR intervention. Other research has related causes of

stress with organisational factors such as strict working conditions, unfair discrimination, and the lack of available career development opportunities (Shukla & Gary, 2013). It is therefore important for HR to intervene to assist staff to cope with work related stress and, if possible, refer affected staff to either occupational health for assessment of fitness to work or counselling geared to understanding of how to deal with work-related stress.

### *Options for addressing work-related stress*

There are several options HR can use to assist staff with work-related stress. An important aspect in tackling workplace stress is related to measures that HR can use to support employees to understand how to deal with their stress levels and what causes it. The training role of HR can help develop employee skills to cope with the challenges of stress and also to understand the requirements of their jobs from the outset, including sufficient and appropriate induction provided by HR. The absence of good quality training and development of employees can trigger stress among employees as they struggle to cope with continuous demanding tasks and expectations (Ajayi, 2018).

Job design, rotation, enrichment and job analysis as part of HR roles can help reduce employee stress at work as most employees prefer flexibility and non-monotonous jobs. According to Landy and Conte (cited by Hargrove et al., 2016), job analysis and designs are important functions of HR in managing stress as it helps to ensure that employees are given realistic and achievable workloads.

Wireko-Gyebi and Oheneba (2014) affirm that job role is one of the factors that can cause work-related stress, in which the role of HR is important to help support employees. Effective recruitment is also noted in the literature as another way in which HR can help to reduce work-related stress (Miller & Cardy, 2000), by hiring applicants with the best fit for the roles they will be undertaking (Hargrove et al., 2016). Effective communication is also noted in the literature as important; the absence of this can lead to confusion and uncertainty (Cooper et al., 2012). A further important role of HR is to ensure clarity of job roles, and to facilitate timely and precise information to all employees with two-way communications with positive feedback – all of which can help reduce pressure on employees (Seaward, 2019).

If these HR functions are not being carried out effectively, organisations are likely to face a high incidence of stress among employees. The starting point for this research was to give voice to a group of employees who have, directly or indirectly, experienced stress at work – and to then explore the extent to which HR professionals have helped them to cope with stress. This will include looking at whether these staff have ever had referrals to either occupational health or counselling services. Consideration of the specific contributions of these interventions is the gap in the literature that informed the current extended research on work-related stress management in UK higher education.

## Methodology

To understand the nature, issues and challenges of employee work-related stress, we have considered both a qualitative and quantitative research approach. We faced particular challenges in recruiting participants for this research. This is partly due to the confidentiality and sensitivity of the topic of study, as people find it difficult to discuss their stress-related issues on their health and wellbeing. Moreover, at the time of the research, COVID-19 measures restricted the opportunities for face-to-face contact in conducting research.

However, the existing literature provides a wealth of secondary data that can be combined with primary data using interviews with participants who volunteered to be interviewed online for this research. The researchers acknowledge that tackling stress in specific workplaces requires a full stress related assessment by qualified professionals to determine the nature and degree of work-related stress (Palmer et al., 2004). This should be supported by a process that involves employees, such as setting up a working party to help identify stress and how the organisation and its HR can support employees. The approach employed in data collection has relied more on qualitative data. Responses were gathered from respondents who volunteered to be interviewed using online facilities such as zoom interviews and a dedicated WhatsApp group. In addition, the nature of the research required reassurance to staff in protecting their identity and confidentiality which limits the scope of intended work to carry out data collection in a large quantity. However, the approaches employed in collecting data yielded ample useful data to compare with the prior literature. These will be used to make suggestions for HR management practices that can better support staff in managing work-related stress.

## Findings from the research

The findings from the research draw on both quantitative and qualitative methods. The secondary data took account of journal articles, books and the work of other researchers to have depth of knowledge and understanding of other work-related stress issues, challenges, and areas of focus. The primary data collection has provided data to compare and contrast with the existing literature, to inform conclusions on the role of HR and areas for improvement. The primary research targeted 20 employees for this study, with 15 staff from a higher education institution based in London, UK, eventually taking part. All the 15 participants were asked the same questions. A selection of the most relevant comments is reported in this section.

### *Have you ever experienced work-related stress and why do you think that it was related to stress?*

Stress is something that most employees do not want to talk about because of the confidentiality and also the impact if you mention your employers. However, one

participant admitted that he has experienced stress in his previous job, which was the reason for changing to his current job. It was related to poor management of staff as due to appointment of a new director who was said to have made the working conditions for staff unbearable. Heavy workload, unexpected and unrealistic targets and set deadlines were mentioned. The Supervisor was described as never listening to staff, simply putting pressure on them to do what was being asked. Symptoms of stress described as worrying about work and waking up at midnight thinking about work. The feeling began with dizzy spells, unhappy mood and eventually led to a breakdown. It was an awful feeling, he said, and he reported being relieved being out of it having moved to another job. (FY)

*Did the experience affect your work performance and how?*

Stress is one of the major things that affect most people's job performance. In the case of SB, it affected his immune system, causing loss of appetite and mood swings, leading him to hating his work place, but he persevered. On many occasions, he said he vomited when going to work and never wanted to see the place. SB went to work doing less due to weakness and feeling low. He never mentioned these feelings to anyone, but a few friends knew that he was under stress. It is a horrible feeling for anyone and should not happen to anyone, he said. (SB)

*What were the feelings experienced and how long did it take to relate them to stress?*

Not quite sure how it all started, maybe coping to meet demanding workload, targets, constant lesson observations and inspection demands. As a Lecturer, you are like machine and the Covid pandemic has not helped but rather increased the workload. It was a feeling of loneliness, resentment; isolation working from home in most cases and poor management of staff with no appreciation of their hard work, few promotion opportunities for women, some managers recruiting their friends and relatives in top available positions. This may have triggered off the stress as BB observed these things happening in a job that she dedicates time and effort supporting colleagues and students. The stress has not gone and BB can't tell anyone how she feels. Although she feels she should report it, she is in doubt and has lost trust on what anyone can do to support. She was not sure of whom to share her feelings and stress related to workload. It is better to keep moving with it, she asked. Not sure whose responsibility it is to support the staff here. (BB)

*How did you see the supporting role of HR in helping you cope or address the stress faced at work?*

PS commented that she had experienced stress once in a previous university, which was related to workload and leadership. It went on for over three months and she later went off sick for six months for work-related stress. She couldn't go into details, but admitted being referred to occupational health for support. Counselling was suggested but she did not need it. The important thing noted in the case was

that employees are always losing out in stress-related cases she said, it affects their health and wellbeing, leading to staff leaving their jobs in some cases. The role of HR is needed at all times to assist staff to cope with work-related stress. (PS)

*What more do you think HR, occupational health and counselling services could do to support employees reduce stress levels at work?*

Some of the participants have stated that there are several ways that employers and HR can use to help employees cope with their stress-related issues and challenges. The first is to avoid anything that can lead to stress at work, reduce workload, spot poor attendance when employees are regularly phoning off sick. Other suggestions were referrals to professional bodies such as occupational health advisers, counselling for mental health conditions that can cause stress, offer training and development to gain the skills and knowledge for employees and managers to manage stress, supporting them in the current dynamic work environment to motivate and boost morale and providing them with counselling specifically to help manage their stress levels. They also said that the ultimate responsibility for the issue lies with line managers and HR to spot and understand the process of stress levels in the workplace and have measures in place to minimise and deal with stress at work (Tucker et al., 2013). Work policies, rules and regulations that can trigger stress at work should be fairly implemented to provide a conducive working environment, including the ability of HR to identify areas of work-related stress and causes (Ahmed et al., 2015) to apply appropriate measures for remedy or reduce work-related stress at work.

## Summary and next steps for research

One of the key things that emerged from the research was that the COVID-19 pandemic has increased all the teacher's workloads from the participant's comments on their workload. The move to remote teaching and learning during the pandemic resulted in all the teachers interviewed trying to meet unrealistic deadlines, juggling being a teacher and coping with administrative workload of teaching and learning, meeting set marking and moderation targets and, in most cases, covering classes for absent colleagues. These have all increased teachers' workload and added to work-related stress. Not all instances of work-related stress were reported and so did not lead to staff receiving the support of HR or getting referrals to occupational health or counselling to help cope with the stress they faced at work. The research also highlights how heavy workload, long hours due to taking extra work home, poor management of employees, and less support from HR have resulted in employees feeling stressed at work.

This work will now continue onto a third stage, involving a larger sample, to find out what staff in other higher education institutions report on their stress levels, to see whether they share similar experiences.

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