

# **The good, the bad, and the ugly: UK(England) and Georgian academics' perceptions of their workload during the times of crisis**

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## **Abstract**

The aim of this paper is to provide an overview of a research inquiry into the impact of COVID-19 on higher education with a focus on academics' perceptions of their workload during the pandemic. The inquiry utilises methodological approach of a qualitative comparative study aligned with interpretivist paradigm. Data were collected via semi-structured interviews from 32 academics working in higher education across the UK (England) and Georgian Universities. The emerged findings highlighted patterns of organisational conflict, examples of good practice as well as areas for improvement associated with the changes to academic workload as a result of COVID-19. The key positive influences of the pandemic on academic workload were found to be: an improved digital literacy which allowed faster design of online courses and more efficient communication; increased flexibility in time management; better work-life balance (in some cases), and more flexibility related to research activities. Negative influences were mostly centered around the challenges related to a rapid move to online teaching and a lack of adequate support. The findings also highlighted cases of inequality and unfairness in work distribution due to poor leadership. Significantly, the most negative comments related to leadership were only present in the UK data, which signals much more substantial impact of neoliberal agendas on higher education in the UK compared to the situation in Georgia. The study also offers a few recommendations that, potentially, can support higher education institutions in exercising a more efficient management of academic workload during the times of organisational crises.

**Keywords:** crisis, higher education, COVID-19, pandemic, academic workload, comparative study.

## **Introduction**

Following the categorisation by the World Health Organisation (WHO) of COVID-19 as a pandemic on 11 February 2020, by April 2020, about half of the world's population was under some form of lockdown, with more than 3.9 billion people in more than 90 countries or territories having restrictions on social contact imposed by their governments. This situation affected almost all businesses and public services, including the higher education sector. Subsequently, the idea behind the study was born, stemming out of the work of a Collaborative Research in Education of Academics from Tbilisi State University (Georgia) and UK (England) Research Group – CREATE. CREATE involves academic researchers from Georgian and UK universities, and its key aim is to develop and promote collaborative research, teaching, and public engagement around the broad theme of social justice both within and beyond the field of education.

## **Methodology**

The aim of this qualitative comparative study is to contribute to existing research into the impact of COVID-19 on higher education with a focus on academics' perceptions of their workload during the earlier stages of the pandemic from January 2020 to late 2022. The study utilises methodological approach of a comparative case study aligned with interpretivist paradigm, where 'compare and contrast' analysis of participants' perceptions from both countries has been carried

out with consideration of the macro context of the pandemic. A purposeful snowball sampling was used to identify a suitable sample of 32 participants (16 from 9 UK (England) universities and 16 from 10 Georgian Universities) to include full-time English-speaking academics, who have been in higher education between 2017 and 2021, and thus, experienced working before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. Data has been generated through semi-structured interviews carried out with all participants. Following inductive thematic analysis, three interrelated themes emerged, which signified the ways in which the participants perceived changes to their workload during the pandemic: (1) Changes to workload as reflected in Work Allocation Models (WAMs) and/or contractual obligations during COVID-19; (2) Key challenges impacting academic workload as a result of COVID-19; (3) Organisational support provided to academics for the purpose of this paper during COVID-19. The three broad themes were then deconstructed and condensed for the purpose of this publication, resulting in the three sub-chapters that follow, with a focus on positive (The Good), negative (The Bad), and extremely detrimental (The Ugly) impact of the pandemic as perceived by the academics from English and Georgian universities. Ethical approval was received prior to the commencement of the fieldwork, according to the ethical regulations for both Georgia and the UK (England) research teams.

## Results

### *The Good*

Whilst many responses focused on the challenging aspects of the pandemic related to academic workload, there was acknowledgement from some that good had come out of the disruption to 'business as usual'. Responses related to beneficial factors comprise of three distinct sub-themes: (1) flexibility and time; (2) improved digital literacy; (3) support.

Participants mentioned one of the most positive impacts of the pandemic on their workload as an increased autonomy in organising their time of work, household chores, and rest. In this respect there was strong correlation between the Georgian and UK respondents, and the data here echoed similar research findings by Yaseen and Joshi [15], although it should be noted that their research deliberately aimed to exclusively identify positive outcomes. A number of the Georgian responses implicitly outlined the rigidity of pre-pandemic working practices, when responses such as '*I was able to spend more time with my family and children*' (26) felt more like a luxury than an expected norm. From a UK perspective (1,13) this flexibility was seen as advantageous to pursuing leisure activities, but this theme of space to pursue exercise and additional hobbies was not particularly evidenced within Georgian responses. The Georgian data located time within the context of travel, commuting and moving around campus (24, 16, 30), whilst one participant was able to combine business and pleasure (24) '*Last year I was able to deliver lectures from a ski resort!*' However, this statement provides a controversial insight into workload as the respondent fulfilled their academic responsibilities whilst supposedly on holiday.

Whilst flexibility appeared as a theme in a large proportion of responses across both locations, participants also perceived positivity through increasing technological capability and pedagogical freedom, citing the pandemic as being responsible for technological upskilling and creativity. Respondents within this theme were considering the positive impact on their workload, as it took them less time to prepare for online teaching. For some participants, technological enhancement was the only acknowledged benefit in relation to workload. Garcia, Paraiso and Laraño [9] argue that such upskilling stems from a deficit in the technological capabilities of faculty members, however the participants from both countries (1, 5, 8 22 25, 43) saw this as a self-development

opportunity relating to more efficient way of working as opposed to something they were lacking or being forced to do. One of the UK respondents particularly saw the positive correlation between improved digital literacy and reduced workload due to the ease of communication (7) *'Personal tutoring was a lot easier, especially for those far away from campus...you could say "Lets jump on a call right now"'*. This was echoed by a Georgian respondent, who stated that (26) *'Communication with students became so much easier'*. This is testament to the professional commitment to the student body, but as other sections of this paper attest, this commitment came at a personal cost to the academic staff members. Beyond pedagogy, alternative communication channels also positively impacted on the workload, reducing time of meetings and examination boards (16, 30), although Filho et al. [8] warn us that, whilst we may celebrate more effective communication tools, we must be cognisant that access to technology is not always equitable and is dependent on location and infrastructure. This flexibility also extended to the procurement of resources, both physical and technological, to enable staff to work effectively from home, which was noted by the respondents from both locations (1, 13, 25, 30). Though support was present in the Georgian context, expectations of institutional support seemed to be much lower, and some respondents appeared to exercise a higher level of self-sufficiency, looking also within the community rather than looking towards university systems and tangible resource: *I supported others [with technology] (26); I used free webinars on YouTube, and Zoom also has some recorded lectures which I used very well (27)*.

Overall, positive impact of COVID-19 on the workload as perceived by the academics from both countries can be summarised as improved work efficiency due to staff development with a focus on new technologies, increased flexibility, and increased levels of support from both colleagues from the departments and technical staff.

### ***The Bad***

The data also revealed adverse impacts of COVID-19 on academic workload, confirming wider research findings that the pandemic negatively affected almost all areas of human life including the education sector ([6], [3]). Among the main challenges the academics encountered during the pandemic, as identified by Rouf and Rashid [14], included 'unavailability of devices, falling interest, poor attendance of learners, less interaction in classes, lack of technological skills and training, financial hardship, unstable internet connections' (p.1). The data from Georgian and UK (England) academics reflected similar themes, indicating the increase of workload due to the need *to give extra hours and classes (27)*, when 100 hours of teaching on the timetables *suddenly became 200 hours because of the preparation for teaching (6)*, making the workload *double in trying to create things (11)*. Both Georgian and UK participants mentioned that *more administrative work has been added (31) with endless surveys and endless data that we had to collect (7)*, increasing the workload even though contractual requirements remained the same (22). Overall, data analysis revealed the following sub-themes in relation to negative impact of the pandemic on the academics' workload: (1) incongruence between actual workload and Work Allocation Models (WAMs); (2) challenges of online delivery; (3) impact on academics' health and well-being).

The key negative point noted by both Georgian and UK (England) respondents was that WAMs no longer reflected the actual work hours: *I exceeded all kinds of limits, instead of 10 hours I had 16 hours (27); working hours... were extended... everything was a bigger workload for me (28); Formally it has not changed, but in practice maybe doubled (22); Sometimes I worked from*

*morning to midnight (30); Compared to the salary they offered they demanded a lot (32). Similarly, UK academics confirmed the increase in workload, while their WAMs remained the same: workload models stayed the same through COVID, they had nothing in there in terms of preparation due to COVID (7); we feel our workload models are 'tweaked' so don't actually resemble much of what we do (16); constantly making sure that everything's OK. Everything works well. And that kind of created more admin work, more time spent (8). These comments confirm the work overload, described by Garcia et al. [9] as 'role weights' (p. 6726), specifically expressing academics' dissatisfaction with the incongruence between the actual workload and their WAMs.*

In relation to the challenges of online delivery, both UK and Georgian participants mentioned that the pandemic forced them to invest a lot of time and effort in learning new platforms and tools for online teaching (18 20 21 26 27 28 29, 32). One of the UK respondents expressed the overall frustration with this aspect of academic work, saying: *So coming to terms with use in technology to the level we had to within days ... that was massive, that was losing sleep over weeks and weeks and weeks... That affected my workload massively (3)*. The participants from both Georgia and the UK also reported on the challenges related to technical difficulties. For example, one of the UK respondents noted: *If I need to upload the presentation, I would wait for like 10pm because my Internet would work faster, when everybody is in bed, and then I could upload and download everything (1)*. Georgian participants also mentioned the speed of the internet in different parts of Georgia (2) as well as other technical issues, such as lack of technical resources, no internet, no computers or mobile 'smart' phones (20, 32).

As for the university support mechanisms, negative perception of technical and logistical support was evident in the comments from both English and Georgian academics, however academics from the UK (England) expressed more extreme views as presented in the next sub-chapter, while Georgian academics commented: *There should have been more support from ministry of education, from university administration and so on, because many people tried to find the resolution of these problems (21); Periodically we had meetings with administration and they could have done their work better (25)*. Some Georgian participants also felt a lack of financial or moral support from the university administration, e.g. just kind of support in terms of financial rewards or just with praise (22, 32): *I understand that it was extreme situation that's why I would not expect my extra workload to be compensated financially but again more moral support could have been provided (22)*;

Greater emphasis on student support and well-being was also identified by the respondents as one of the negative influences of the pandemic in relation to their workload. The data mentions increased use of student support services, indicating a growing awareness of student mental health and well-being (23, 25). The UK respondents also underline the shift in students' demands, which caused a significant increase in their workload (3, 4, 9).

And finally, all respondents touched upon the issues of their well-being and mental health, which deteriorated due to the increased workload during the pandemic. For instance, a few participants mentioned feelings of being isolated: *we would have a very rare communication, networking, exchanging ideas, planning activities (31); You also feel isolated, you feel like you can't ask questions when you meet somebody in corridors, when you are at work (6); I'd suddenly lost contact with the people I work with, my friends and the students that I do my job for. So that was a real big stressor even though I saw them on the screens (10)*. The respondents also mentioned stress related to the negative impact of increased workload on family time: *constant meetings, training workshops during the day and even in the late evening left little time for the family (28*

29). Not being able to see and make contact with elderly parents was mentioned as emotional and stressful for some UK respondents (3, 4, 8, 6, 3), whilst some health issues were also mentioned by the UK academics, such as mental health, deteriorating eyesight, and back pain (12, 16).

Overall, the moderately negative impact of the pandemic as perceived by the academics from both countries could be summarised as an increased workload (overlooked formally) due to the need to learn new technologies and deal with an increased number of students' problems, whilst also trying to cope with personal issues of health and well-being.

### ***The Ugly***

This part of the analysis shifts the locus of theorising away from positive or moderately negative impact of COVID-19 on the academics' roles towards intensely negative perceptions related to how the pandemic affected participants' workload. The most extreme negativity has been displayed in the comments related to teaching and service. A number of studies ([7], [2], [12], [10]) confirm the challenges associated with varied roles of a university lecturer, which cover numerous tasks, such as planning, management, delivery, guidance, evaluation, to name just a few. The academics' responses to the questions related to workload during COVID-19 indicate that the pandemic significantly intensified their workload across all aspects of their teaching and administrative tasks. A few participants commented on the changes to their workload and/or contractual obligations, highlighting lack of equity in workload distribution amongst staff (6, 14, 16, 32), though these comments were predominantly presented in the UK data: *...workload works in a strange way because some hours are counted, and some hours are not supposed to be counted (6); that there was no complete equity amongst staff... And this can lead to sort of arguments sword... It can cause rifts between people (14); If we actually looked at other faculties, that would cause some unrest and people might have to do something about it when we see that there's no equity (16).*

Yet, the most negative comments come from both Georgian and UK participants, reporting that: *...in some universities even salaries were reduced, when the classes were bigger online than in the face-to-face classroom (32); I spent so much time, that sometimes I didn't have time to buy bread, especially during curfew, when all the shops were closed at 8 o'clock. Tough time, it was really tough time (27); The pay doesn't reflect what the hours I'm doing (1); Coming to terms with use in technology within days - that was massive, that was losing sleep over weeks and weeks and weeks (3).* The most radical comment in relation to the changes to workload comes from a UK academic, whose frustration is almost palpable from their perception of the workload model being 'a weapon that the management uses to let you know that whatever you do, you're not good enough' (1). This opinion is supported by similar comments from both UK and Georgian participants, who confirmed that their WAMs were fallacious in terms of realities of their workload: *I had a feeling that work was everywhere (18).* Significantly, these comments bring to the surface the issues of injustice in the decision-making process during the pandemic that was not fair or appropriate in terms of pay, procedures, and distribution of workload. Yet, as argued by Cohen-Charash and Spector [4], procedural justice is one of the most crucial factors influencing employee evaluations of justice at work, as it is based on perceptions of unfairness when the processes seem inappropriate, unethical, and lacking adequate representation of the employees' interests.

Contributing further to the theme of injustice, the most extreme opinions that fall under the category of 'ugly' are related to the institutional pressures and attitudes, as reflected in the participants comments (3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 14, 16) such as: *Our University didn't help us cope with the fear of being exposed to it (COVID), and in fact, there were rules made without taking into*

*account how staff might be feeling about themselves, their family members, and how, emotionally, the situation had affected them.... So rules were created and then we had to bring in the survival strategies. That was quite scary. (3); ... I don't think the university recognised the emotional impact of what we had to do (4); We all pretended that everything is normal and we're carrying on as if this is normal (6).* These comments strongly point at the presence of interpersonal injustice [11] during the pandemic, which deeply affected the teaching workload of academics, who found themselves subjected to learning new technologies without any or very little practical support from their HEIs and a complete disregard of the emotional pressures on the academics and their families associated with the pandemic. As noted by Greenberg and Colquitt [11], treating employees with social sensitivity helps them to accept unfavorable outcomes. Similarly, Mullen and Okimoto [13] also found that interpersonal injustice is the most common type of injustice reported at work as the examples of behaviors that violate codes of conduct or social norms seem to be widespread in the workplace, leading to increased anger and dissatisfaction amongst employees. In addition, data analysis revealed that 56% of the respondents from UK universities expressed extreme dissatisfaction with the organisational management of academic staff during the pandemic and a lack of understanding, support, and appreciation of the additional pressures. In relation to a complete lack of empathy and trust from the management, participants commented:

*(Management) expectation has not changed in terms of workload. No one ever thought about academic staff at all.... So, who takes care of the people? (8); ...pressure from the university as they (management) were tracking us. They were watching that we were doing the work, and the element of trust kind of went and I think that was partly due to SMT (Senior Management Team). These were seen as clients, aren't they? And they're paying money. (14); Really easy for them (management) to think that everything is going to be OK if I make a demand then that demand will be met and then that'll be fine (14); Because of that feeling of being out of control of what can we do there was so much more pressure on us to do more, more, more (16).* These views bring more correlations with the issues of organisational justice, merging its various dimensions within one global justice construct focused on facilitating positive exchange relationships between employees and employers [5].

Nevertheless, the ultimate levels of dissatisfaction, however, exhibit themselves through the participants' perceptions of dictatorial leadership and a complete lack of egalitarianism, which once again, were only found in the UK data: *If you were to actually vocalise some of that, I don't know how well that would go down, and I feel I'm too early in my point in my career to test that water. There is definitely a hierarchical structure in place as to when some comments will be stopped or held back (14); ...the conversation (about workload) was quite quickly shut down because management didn't want to have that conversation; because they would then have to acknowledge how long we spend on our emails within our workload (16); I think we were actually thrown to the wolves (9).* While it is a common knowledge that the neoliberalisation of academia is a global phenomenon, the comparative data here shows that the resulting inequalities and damaging labour conditions are experienced differently by the academics in both countries.

## **Conclusions and recommendations**

The findings of the study highlighted patterns of organisational conflict, examples of good practice as well as areas for improvement associated with the changes to the academic workload as a result of COVID-19.

The data confirmed that the pandemic forced educators to invest a lot of additional time and effort into ensuring that the rapid shift to online delivery had caused minimal damage to the

learning processes. The key positive influences of such a shift on academic workload included: improved digital literacy which allowed faster design of online courses and more efficient communication; increased flexibility in managing work and personal time; better work-life balance (in some cases). Some of the Georgian participants also mentioned reduction of their workload through more flexibility to carry out research and participate in online conferences. A few comments from both Georgian and UK respondents highlighted reduction in time that was previously spent on timetabling and booking rooms as well as the benefits of reaching larger classes of students through online delivery.

Negative influences of the pandemic included a significantly increased workload, which was reported by the respondents from both countries. Key factors in such increase involved: more time spent on learning new technologies and preparation for teaching (both Georgian and UK data); more time spent on dealing with students' queries and complaints (both Georgian and UK data); reduced work productivity due to: stress and anxiety related to health and well-being (mostly UK data); inequality and unfairness in work distribution (UK data only); lack of institutional support (mostly UK data); lack of opportunities to voice concerns due to dictatorial leadership strategies (UK data only).

The fact that such extreme levels of dissatisfaction is only obvious in the UK data is a significant finding of this study, which signals much more substantial impact of neoliberal agendas on higher education in the UK compared to the situation in Georgia. As pointed out by Beattie [1], the assault of neoliberalism on higher education is an ongoing process, affecting all spheres of education globally, however, the data seems to indicate that the laissez-faire governance based on the collegiality of academics of equal status, working together with minimal hierarchy and maximum trust, as seemingly present in Georgian universities, have been replaced in the UK higher education by explicit managerial practices that have a profound negative impact on academic workload due to the policies that prioritise efficiency, market-driven reforms, and cost-cutting measures at the expense of empathy, democracy, and equity.

One of the most significant recommendations stemming from this study is for UK (England) HEIs to urgently review their processes related to the academic workload to ensure equity, fairness, and democratic approach to its distribution. Other general recommendations include for HEIs in both countries:

- To review policies and procedures related to staff health and well-being to include additional information on the support mechanisms that HEIs would provide to staff in times of organisational crisis;
- To continue to reduce academic workload through utilising acquired knowledge and skills related to online delivery (for example, replacing face to face meetings or staff development events by delivery via online platforms);
- To enhance opportunities for staff to regularly update and improve their digital literacies and skills;
- To increase institutional financial investments into technology, equipment, and technical staffing resources to ensure smooth continuation of business in times of crises;

The research team hope that the HEIs' engagement with these recommendations can support universities and their senior leadership teams in exercising more efficient and fair management of academic workload during the times of organisational crises, whilst the perceived benefits related to working during the pandemic could be used for further enhancement of educational establishment in the future.

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