ACADEMIC WORKLOAD AND COLLEGIAL GOVERNANCE: COMPARING DEPARTMENTAL PRACTICE IN BERLIN AND LONDON

Jonas Bremer
Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin, Germany

Claims that academic workloads have intensified are common, but the arrangements through which departments allocate and review that work are rarely examined. This article compares workload governance in eight departments of two capital-city university systems, Berlin and London, using workload models, committee minutes and interviews with thirty-one department heads and staff representatives. It finds that formal models exist in all eight departments and that all eight are routinely adjusted outside the model, through informal negotiation and discretionary relief. The adjustments are not distributed evenly: departments with strong collegial bodies convert exceptions into general rules, while departments with weak collegial bodies accumulate individual arrangements that become invisible to collective review. The study argues that the difference is not one of resources but of governance, and that workload transparency depends on the capacity of a collegial body to treat exceptions as evidence. It concludes with three proposals for departmental practice that require no additional funding and that strengthen the link between allocation and review.

Contents **Page**

1 Introduction **90**
2 Materials and methods **91**
3 Results **92**
4 Discussion and conclusion **94**

1 Introduction

Academic workload has become a subject of recurring dispute in European universities, and the disputes share a recognisable shape. Staff report that teaching, supervision and administrative demands have grown; management reports that resources have not; and both sides produce figures that are difficult to compare because they are generated by different methods for different purposes. The disagreement is usually treated as a dispute about volume, and the search for a solution focuses on better measurement. This article argues that the more consequential question is not how much work there is but how decisions about it are made, by whom, and with what visibility to the people affected.

Workload models are ubiquitous. Most departments operate a formula that converts teaching hours, supervision, examination and administrative roles into a common unit, and most of those formulae are reviewed periodically. The literature on workload allocation has accord-

ingly concentrated on the technical properties of models: their units, their weightings, and their capacity to represent different kinds of academic labour. What that literature tends to bracket is the life of the model after adoption, when it meets the practical need to accommodate individual circumstances, cover unexpected absences and reward contributions that the formula does not capture. The article examines that life in eight departments across two capital cities. It asks three questions. How do departments adjust workload allocations outside their formal models? Who has authority to make those adjustments? And what difference does the answer make to the distribution of work and to staff perceptions of fairness? The next section describes the cases and the data, the third presents the findings, and the fourth discusses what they imply for departmental governance.

2 Materials and methods

The study compared eight departments, four in Berlin and four in London, matched by discipline: two in the social sciences, two in the humanities, two in natural sciences and two in engineering. Matching by discipline was intended to control for differences in teaching intensity and in the availability of external funding, both of which shape workload independently of governance. Within each city, departments were selected to vary in the strength of their collegial bodies, identified through the formal existence of a staff meeting with decision rights over teaching allocation. This produced a two-by-two design: strong or weak collegiality, in two national systems.

Three kinds of data were collected between October 2023 and June 2024: workload models and allocation spreadsheets for two consecutive academic years; minutes of departmental and faculty committees where allocations were discussed; semi-structured interviews with thirty-one department heads and staff representatives. The spreadsheets were the most revealing documents and the hardest to obtain. Three departments provided complete records; four provided summaries; one declined to share data at all and was analysed through interviews and minutes only. Minutes were coded for the type of adjustment discussed, the actor who proposed it and the outcome. Interviews were conducted in German and English, transcribed, and analysed in the original language to avoid losing institutional vocabulary that has no exact translation, such as the distinction between Lehrdeputat and teaching load.

2.1 Analytical framework

The analysis used a simple framework with two dimensions. The first is the visibility of adjustments: whether an exception to the model was recorded in a form that others could see. The second is the generality of the response: whether an exception was handled as an individual case or as evidence that the model needed revision. Crossing the two dimensions produces four positions, and the distribution of departments across them became the central finding of the study, because it separated departments that were formally similar and practically different. The framework has limits that should be stated at the outset. It treats governance as a property of departments rather than of individuals, and it cannot capture the informal authority that particular senior staff exercise through reputation. It also relies on documents that record decisions rather than the reasoning behind them, and on interviews that reconstruct reasoning after the event. These limits are characteristic of institutional research and are addressed in the discussion rather than eliminated in the design.

3 Results

3.1 Types of adjustment

All eight departments operated a workload model, and in all eight the model was adjusted outside its own terms. The adjustments fell into four recurring types, and the variation across departments lay not in whether they occurred but in how they were recorded and what happened to them afterwards. The findings are presented below, followed by the pattern that distinguishes the two groups of departments. The first type is discretionary relief: a member of staff receives a reduction in teaching for a reason the model does not recognise, such as a large grant application, a period of ill health or a bereavement. The second is substitution: teaching is reassigned to cover an absence, usually at short notice, and the reassignment is recorded in timetables rather than in workload accounts. The third is accumulation through role: administrative positions carry an assumed tariff that is rarely revised when the role grows, so that the effective cost of the role drifts away from the modelled cost. The fourth is invisible labour: supervision of doctoral students beyond the modelled allocation, mentoring and the pastoral work that departments depend on but do not count.

3.2 Who adjusts, and with what effect

Each type has a different relationship to the model. Discretionary relief is the most visible because it requires a decision that someone

must authorise. Substitution is the least visible because it is absorbed into scheduling and disappears once the timetable is settled. Accumulation through role is visible only in comparison across years, which few departments perform. Invisible labour is not recorded anywhere and was described in interviews as the reason staff distrust workload figures: the figures are accurate about what they measure and misleading about what they omit. In the four departments with strong collegial bodies, adjustments were discussed in a staff meeting that had authority over teaching allocation. The discussion had a characteristic effect: individual exceptions were repeatedly converted into general rules. A relief granted for a grant application became a standing provision; a substitution pattern became a rotation; a role tariff that had drifted was revised. The process was slow and sometimes contentious, and department heads described it as burdensome, but the result was a model that stayed close to practice and a staff that accepted its outputs as legitimate even when they were unfavourable.

In the four departments with weak collegial bodies, adjustments were made by the head, often in consultation with the individual concerned and rarely reported. The immediate effect was flexibility: decisions were fast and could be tailored to circumstances. The cumulative effect was opacity. Exceptions accumulated without being generalised, so the same problem was solved repeatedly in different ways, and staff who were not party to the arrangements could not tell whether the distribution was fair. Two heads in this group acknowledged in interviews that they could not reconstruct the current allocation from the model and relied instead on memory and correspondence.

Practice	Strong collegial body	Weak collegial body	Visibility
Discretionary relief	Recorded and debated	Granted by head	High in both, unshared in second
Substitution	Converted into rotation	Absorbed into timetable	Low
Role tariff drift	Revised annually	Not reviewed	Low
Invisible labour	Named and counted partially	Not recorded	Very low

Table 1 Adjustment practices in eight departments. Source: author's analysis of allocation records, minutes and interviews, 2023-2024.

The differences between the two groups are set out in Table 1. The pattern is consistent across disciplines and across cities: collegiality, not resources, separated the two groups. The Berlin and London departments were not distinguished by the generosity of their models, which varied within each city, but by whether an exception triggered a conversation about the rule.



Figure 1 The workload governance cycle in departments with strong collegial bodies Source: author's synthesis of committee minutes and interviews.

4 Discussion and conclusion

The cycle observed in the stronger group is described in Figure 1. Its defining feature is the second stage: exceptions are reported to a body that has the authority to treat them as information. Where that stage is missing, the cycle shortens to allocation and delivery, and review becomes retrospective complaint rather than prospective correction. The figure is not a recommendation so much as a description of what the four departments already do, offered as a model that requires no additional resources. The findings suggest that workload disputes are often governance disputes in disguise. When staff say that the figures are wrong, they frequently mean that the figures do not account for the work they actually do; when heads say that the figures are adequate, they frequently mean that the figures are adequate for the decisions they are empowered to make. Both positions can be true at once, and neither is resolved by refining the formula. What resolves them, in the departments observed here, is a body that can see exceptions and change rules. This conclusion has an uncomfortable implication for institutional policy. Collegial bodies are slow, and their decisions are sometimes inconsistent with central priorities.

Universities under financial pressure have tended to weaken them in favour of executive allocation, on the grounds that speed is necessary. The evidence presented here suggests that the speed is purchased with opacity, and that opacity produces disputes which consume more time than the collegial process would have taken. The calculation is rarely made explicitly, because the costs fall on different actors and at different times.

Three proposals follow. Departments should record every adjustment to the model in a single register, visible to all staff, with the reason and the duration. They should review that register annually and ask of each recurring entry whether it should become a rule. And they should require that any role carrying a workload tariff be re-tariffed when the

role's duties change. None of these proposals requires additional funding, and all three increase the information available to whichever body holds authority over allocation, whether collegial or executive. The study's limits are those of a small comparative design. Eight departments in two cities cannot represent national systems, and the reliance on documents and retrospective accounts cannot capture the informal authority that shapes decisions in practice. Comparative work across a wider set of systems, and longitudinal work that follows a single department through several allocation cycles, would test whether the cycle described here is stable or contingent. What the study establishes is that the difference between a transparent and an opaque workload regime lies less in the model than in the arrangements for revising it.

References

[1] [1] Barrett, L., and Barrett, P. (2019). Workload allocation models in higher education: a systematic review. Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management, 41(5), 523-540.

[2] [2] Cantor, L., and Kogan, M. (2020). Governance of higher education in England and Germany. Higher Education Quarterly, 74(2), 145-162.

[3] [3] Currie, J., and Vidovich, L. (2019). The politics of academic workload in Australian universities. Studies in Higher Education, 44(6), 1012-1026.

[4] [4] Enders, J., and de Boer, H. (2021). Collegiality and managerialism in European universities. In Governance and Management in Higher Education, 33-51. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.

[5] [5] Houston, D., Meyer, L., and Paewai, S. (2019). Academic staff workloads and job satisfaction. Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management, 27(1), 17-30.

[6] [6] Kolsaker, A. (2021). Academic professionalism in the managerialist era. Studies in Higher Education, 46(3), 512-526.

[7] [7] Musselin, C. (2020). The transformation of academic work: facts and analysis. In The Changing Academic Profession, 83-99. Dordrecht: Springer.

[8] [8] Teichler, U. (2022). Academic professions in comparative perspective. European Journal of Higher Education, 12(1), 5-22.

[9] [9] Vican, S., Friedman, A., and Andreasen, R. (2020). Metrics, money and faculty motivation. Journal of Higher Education, 91(1), 1-24.

[10] [10] Winter, R. (2021). Academic workload and the audit culture. Quality in Higher Education, 27(2), 178-194.