

OCTOBER
2023

**Mental health &
wellbeing policies
and practices:**
the lived experiences
of academics in UK
business schools



**BRITISH ACADEMY
OF MANAGEMENT**





PROJECT TEAM



Professor Nelarine Cornelius FBAM,
Queen Mary University of London.
Former Co Vice-Chair for Research & Publications,
British Academy of Management

Dr Anne Clare Gillon,
University of the West of Scotland,
Council Member, British Academy of Management

Dr Chidozie Umeh,
University of York

BACKGROUND

Wellbeing is generally recognised as important within organisations and as a key element of 'good work'. Despite this, there is a lack of information available on the wellbeing challenges that staff experience within organisations generally.

Within higher education, the focus in relation to wellbeing has been primarily on students, with less attention paid to staff. To address this gap, the British Academy of Management (BAM) set up a team to explore wellbeing and mental health within UK business schools. This strategic project aimed to address the following research questions:

1. Are there issues which affect the wellbeing of Business and Management scholars specifically (as opposed to issues which affect all academics)?
2. What are the issues that impact on the wellbeing of Business and Management academics and which of these is most critical?
3. What can institutions and their leaders proactively do to mitigate the impact of issues?

This summary presents the headline findings from this strategic research project.



METHODOLOGY

The findings presented draw on five sources of information.



A rapid review of the evidence about wellbeing in academia



Quantitative and qualitative responses to a pulse survey of 219 employees of business schools.



Analyses of websites from 31 UK universities.



Discussion at a PDW held at the BAM 2022 conference.



Interviews with 20 Senior leaders from UK business schools¹

¹ Senior leaders were interviewed from both pre- and post-92 universities across England, Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland.

HIGHLIGHTS

FOUR MESSAGES CAME THROUGH PARTICULARLY CLEARLY FROM THE PROJECT:

1

Wellbeing challenges are prevalent among business school staff

More than 80% of survey respondents reported that they had suffered from fatigue/exhaustion and/or disturbed sleep patterns. A significant number reported worse symptoms. This supports previous research suggesting that academics across disciplines are growing increasingly vulnerable to mental health problems (Guthrie et al 2017) and that academics report lower wellbeing than the average UK employee (The Council for Work and Health, 2021).

2

These challenges are driven to a large extent by increasing workload, particularly in relation to administrative activities.

A substantial majority of survey respondents perceived that their workload had increased over recent years, particularly in relation to their administrative workload (both over 80%). One respondent suggested that *“There is now no respite in workload. We are perpetually sprinting marathons”*, while another explained *“it is pretty much spinning plates and hoping not to drop one but every year they add more plates”*.

A third response said, *“Workload has increased—more students more admin, new tech, new delivery mechanisms and pretty much teaching three terms and struggling to take annual leave. If you do take leave you end up working at some point”*

Notably, over three-quarters of respondents suggested that these increases had coincided with the change in working arrangements due to the COVID 19 pandemic (77%). In the qualitative responses people mostly suggested that the issues driving poor wellbeing included inequity of workload, a lack of support from administrative staff, and the increased hours of work needed to complete unpaid administration. This supports previous research that has highlighted uncertainties regarding tenure, role clarity, conflict and overload flexibility and autonomy as driving occupational stress (Johnston et al., 2023; Sang et al., 2015).

**3****There is some evidence of good practice in business schools, but generally they are failing to address the root causes of wellbeing problems.**

The research suggested that business schools are taking some steps to address problems with wellbeing and mental health. For example, moves to 'switch off' email at 5pm, regular departmental/town hall meetings, and clarity about support available for stressed/unwell faculty. However, respondents suggested qualitatively that neither the symptoms nor the causes of negative mental health were being addressed, in particular in relation to the issues regarding workload. For example, one respondent suggested *"lip service is paid to wellbeing but the root issue of workload is never addressed"*. There was also some suggestion that line managers did not feel supported by senior managers in relation to addressing wellbeing issues. And yet supportive and flexible line managers are seen as being able to make a huge difference to wellbeing of faculty.

4**Mismatch between perceptions of senior leaders and of front-line faculty in relation to wellbeing efforts**

The survey results suggested that faculty think that senior leaders are not doing enough to address challenges around mental health and wellbeing. However, the senior leaders interviewed perceived that they are blamed for wellbeing problems in their institution and their efforts to address wellbeing are underappreciated. It may be that senior leaders and university HR departments are ill equipped to address these challenges and that there is a mismatch between business school provision and support and what is actually needed. Senior leaders suggested that the workforce as a whole should be accountable for supporting wellbeing.

NEXT STEPS

Wellbeing and mental health in business school academics has been identified as one of BAM's future strategic priorities. We will therefore be seeking to provide guidance and support for business school academics and leaders as part of our 2024-28 strategy.

REFERENCES

- Guthrie, S., Lichten, C. A., Van Belle, J., Ball, S., Knack, A., & Hofman, J. (2017). Understanding mental health in the research environment: A rapid evidence assessment. *Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation*. Available at: https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2022.html
- Johnston, K., Tanwar, J., Pasamar, S., Van Laar, D., & Bamber Jones, A. (2022). Blurring boundaries: work-life balance and unbounded work in academia. The role of flexibility, organisational support and gender. *Labour and Industry*, 32(2), 139-155.
- Sang, K., Powell, A., Finkel, R., & Richards, J. (2015). 'Being an academic is not a 9-5 job': long working hours and the 'ideal worker' in UK academia. *Labour & Industry: a journal of the social and economic relations of work*, 25(3), 235-249.
- The Council for Work and Health (2021) The mental health and wellbeing of UK university employees. Available at: <https://www.councilforworkandhealth.org.uk/blog/the-mental-health-and-wellbeing-of-uk-university-employees>





**BRITISH ACADEMY
OF MANAGEMENT**

British Academy of Management:
www.bam.ac.uk

Published October 2023.
All Rights Reserved.

The British Academy of Management is a
company limited by guarantee, registered in
England & Wales. Company No. 05869337
Charity No. 1117999

Five Kings House
1 Queen Street Place
London
EC4R 1QS
0207 383 7770

*The Leading Community
for Management Scholars*

