



Higher Education Policy Institute

# Pressure Vessels II: An update on mental health among higher education staff in the UK

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## Summary

- Analysis of 17 universities reveals a continued rise in staff access to counselling and occupational health referrals since *Pressure Vessels* was published in 2019.
- From 2016 to 2018, there was an increase of 16% in counselling at the 14 universities for which comparable time series data were obtained.<sup>1</sup>
- Over the same period of time, there was a rise of 19% in occupational health referrals at the 16 universities for which comparable time series data were obtained.<sup>2</sup>
- From 2009/10 to the end of 2017/18, at those five universities reporting complete data, there was a rise of 172% in staff access to counselling.
- At all 17 universities, there has been a rise in staff access to counselling of 155% in recent years. The highest increases were at the University of Bath (500%), the University of Kent (325%) and Keele University (203%).
- At the 10 universities with data for 2009 to 2018, occupational health referrals rose by 170%. The largest occupational health referral increases were at Kent (500%), De Montfort (392%) and Bristol (334%), although there was a fall of 75% at Bath.
- For counselling and occupational health, the figures reflect gender differentiation, with women more highly represented.
- There is also a pattern corresponding to contract type: for occupational health data, we find the largest proportion of individuals being referred are professional services staff.
- While greater use of support services may sometimes reflect improved access, the analysis provides strong support for our claims about the declining mental health of university staff.

## 1. Introduction and context

### *Pressure Vessels*

The HEPI Occasional Paper, *Pressure Vessels*, by Liz Morrish (2019) analysed data obtained from Freedom of Information enquiries of 74 higher education institutions (HEIs) in the UK which employed more than 2,000 staff.<sup>3</sup>

The Freedom of Information requests sought information relating to the number of university employees accessing counselling services and referred to occupational health (some in-house services and some via Employee Assistance Programmes), to gain insight into trends from 2009/10 to 2015/16.

There had previously been significant media coverage about the rising rates of poor mental health among students, but this was the first detailed analysis of the situation for higher education staff, whose working environment and mental health have been comparatively neglected.

The *Pressure Vessels* report focused primarily on academic staff. We now wish to draw attention towards a generalised problem for all staff and, in particular, for professional services staff.

Professional services staff are often marginalised in discussions about the higher education workforce, despite the significant roles they play. They are also more likely to be vulnerable to restructuring and redundancy.

### *The study*

The data in *Pressure Vessels* were obtained by Freedom of Information requests from 74 institutions for the period from 2009/10 to 2015/16. This Policy Note concentrates on a smaller selection of universities. Working with a smaller dataset provides the opportunity for deeper analysis.

The latest Freedom of Information requests were raised from June to August 2019 and focused on 17 universities. These sought to elicit comparable information, notably staff numbers accessing counselling and referrals to occupational health for the 2016/17 and 2017/18 academic years.

The 17 universities in question met a number of criteria for selection. Most of them provided meaningful data on both access to counselling and occupational health referrals, so trends and correlations between them can be mapped.<sup>4</sup>

Although more use of such services can sometimes reflect welcome improved access to support, the analysis provides strong support for our claims about the declining mental health of university staff.

While comprehensiveness of counselling and occupational health data is the lead consideration, some institutions were of particular interest because of sudden or sustained increases in referrals to occupational health and counselling. In *Pressure Vessels*, for example, this was seen to be the case at the University of Kent and Warwick University. The latter institution dismissed the report as 'four years out of date'.<sup>5</sup>

So, there is a clear need to provide an update to show what has happened since the 2015/16 academic year and to answer charges regarding unreliable data.

## 2. Beyond *Pressure Vessels* – an update

The analysis we present has been verified up to late February 2020. Institutions were asked to provide the number of staff using or accessing counselling services, and to categorise this

information by gender and contract type for 2016/17 and 2017/18.

In addition, they were asked to provide the number of referrals of staff to occupational health for both of those years, categorised by type of referral (management referral, self-referral and other kinds of referral), as well as providing figures by year for gender and contract type.<sup>6</sup>

*Pressure Vessels* had requested data for 2016/17 and, in this second investigation, we repeated our request for data for that year. Some institutions had reported 2016/17 data but others had not, and it provided an opportunity to check consistency and accuracy of the reported data.<sup>7</sup>

#### *Counselling trends, 2009/10 to 2017/18*

Within the new approach, we have data for counselling referrals for all 17 universities for at least five years, and in some cases longer. Across the entire sample, universities supplied sufficient data to be able to analyse trends across four or more years (with the exception of Nottingham Trent University, where the data covers two calendar years, 2017 and 2018).

- Five of the universities were able to provide data for all nine years from 2009/10 to 2017/18. The average rise in staff access to counselling for this period was 172% across these five universities.
- In respect of the 13 universities where we have data for 2016 to 2018 inclusive, allowing us to see trends for a later period than the one in *Pressure Vessels*, there was an increase of 16% from 2016/17 to 2017/18.
- Of the 15 universities that have provided data for a full 2017/18 academic or 2018 calendar year, as well as data from the previous year, there has been a rise from one year to the next of 22% in staff access to counselling.

Among all 17 universities, we find some very large individual increases in referral rates across the nine-year period and the data are shown in the table below.

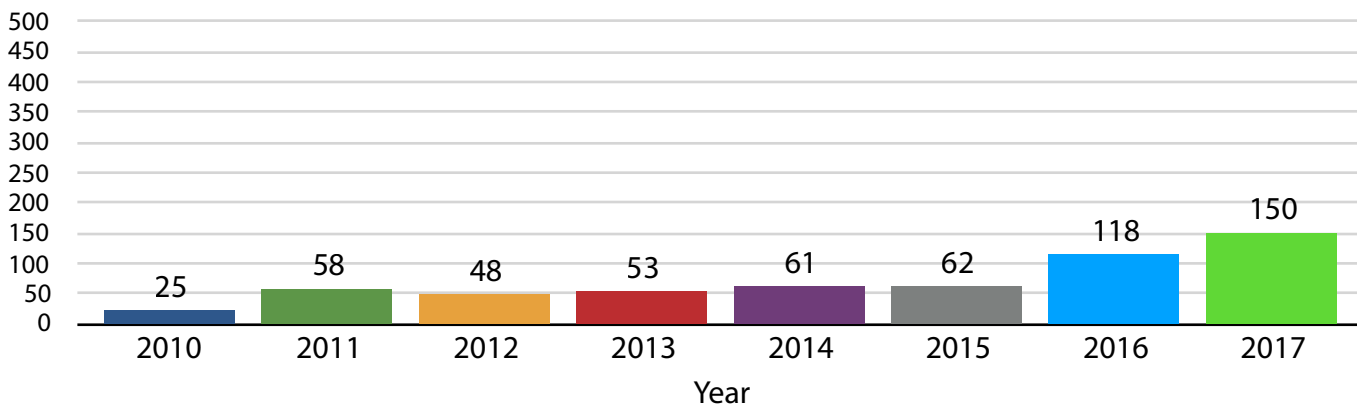
#### *Rise in access to counselling referrals (%)*

<b>Institution</b>	<b>Years</b>	<b>Increase</b>
<b>University of Bath</b>	2010/11 to 2017/18	500
<b>University of Kent</b>	2009/10 to 2017/18	325
<b>Keele University</b>	2010/11 to 2017/18	203
<b>University of Reading</b>	2012/13 to 2017/18	185
<b>University of Bristol</b>	2009/10 to 2016/17	179
<b>University of Warwick</b>	2009/10 to 2017/18	171
<b>Newcastle University</b>	2009/10 to 2017/18	160
<b>De Montfort University</b>	2011/12 to 2017/18	144
<b>University of Durham</b>	2012/13 to 2017/18	136
<b>University of Exeter</b>	2012 to 2018 (calendar years)	127
<b>University of Hull</b>	2009/10 to 2017/18	109
<b>University of Surrey</b>	2012/13 to 2017/18	97
<b>University of Dundee</b>	2009/10 to 2017/18	94
<b>Cardiff University</b>	2009/10 to 2016/17	77
<b>University of Cambridge</b>	2014/15 to 2017/18	62
<b>University of Portsmouth</b>	2009 to 2018 (calendar years)	33
<b>Nottingham Trent University</b>	2017 to 2018 (calendar years)	29

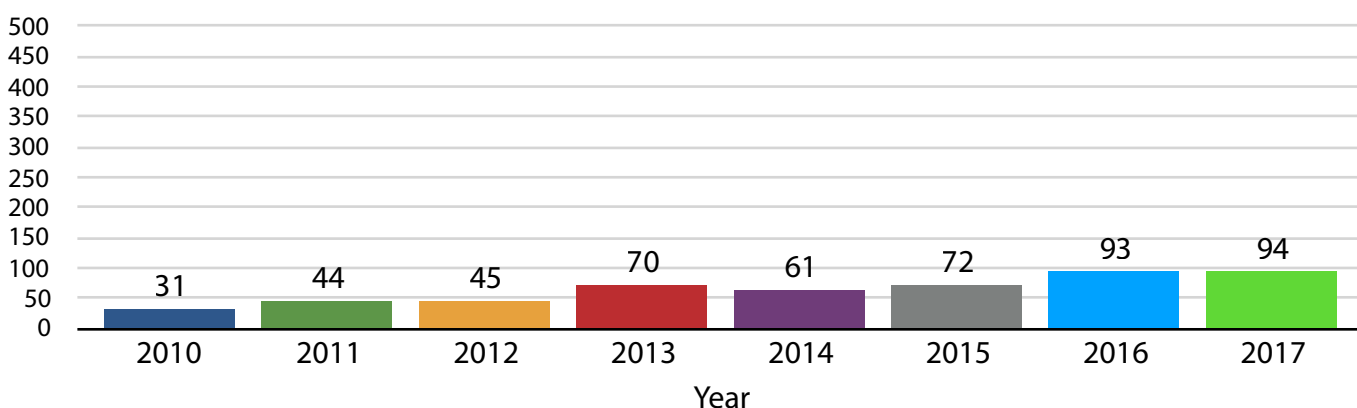
Some of the biggest rises were previously identified in *Pressure Vessels* and are confirmed here.

We provide illustrations in respect of the Universities of Bath, Keele, Newcastle and Warwick.<sup>8</sup>

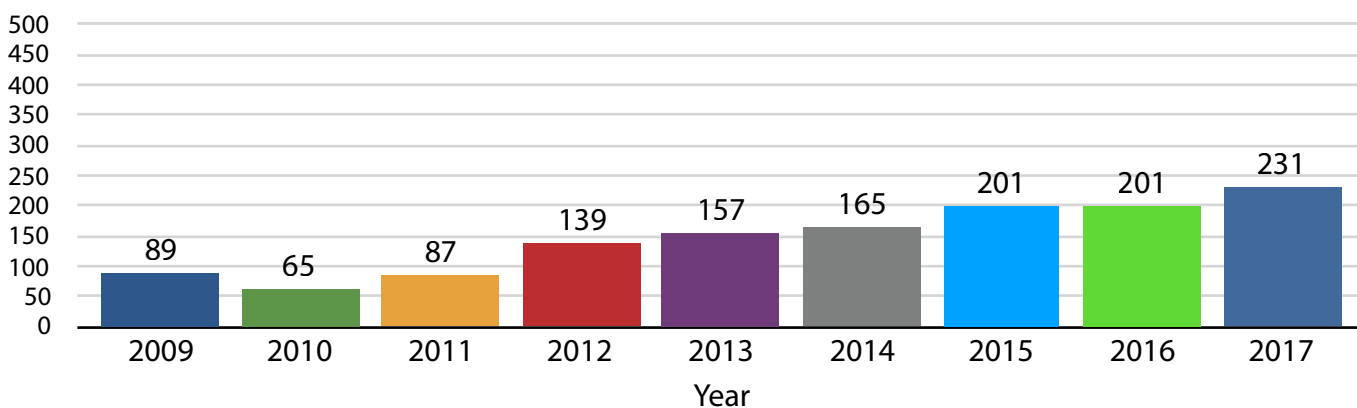
### The University of Bath - Staff numbers accessing counselling



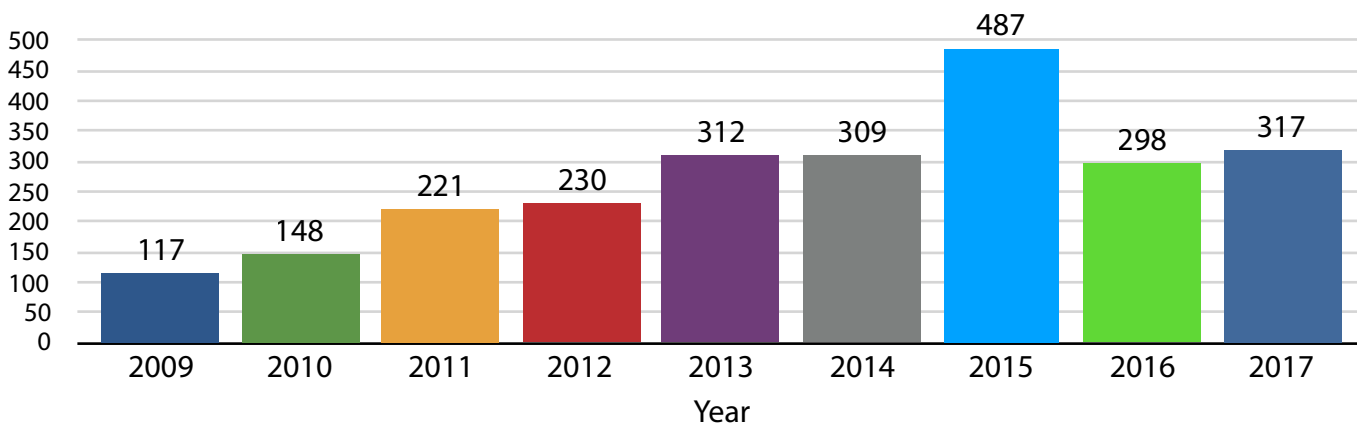
### Keele University - Staff numbers accessing counselling



### Newcastle University - Staff numbers accessing counselling



### The University of Warwick - Staff numbers accessing counselling

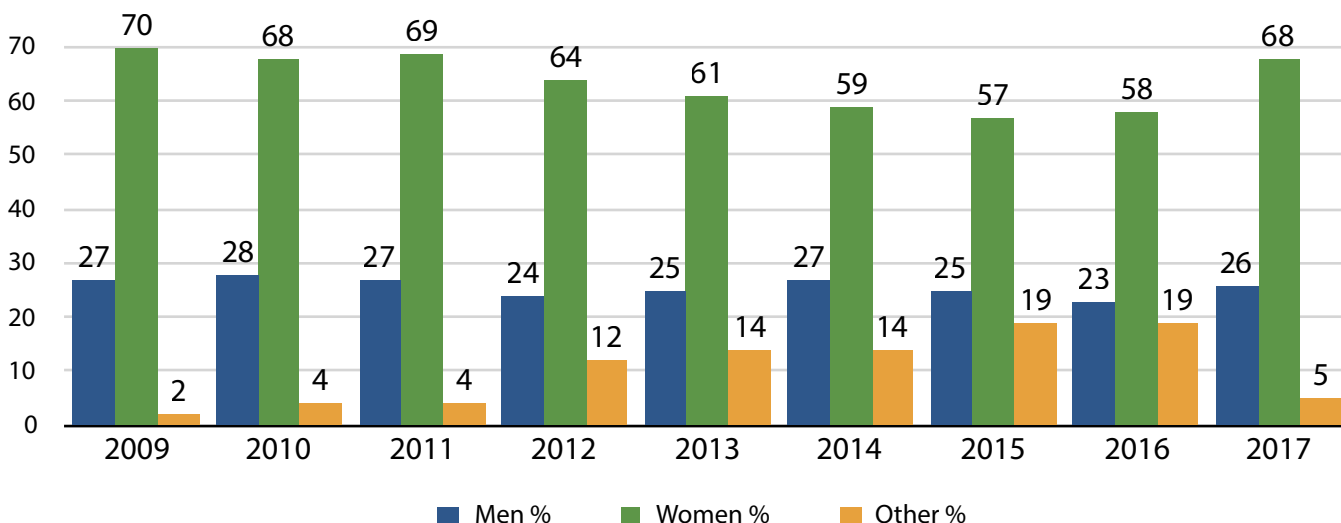


## Counselling trends – gender

Women are more likely than men to access staff counselling. The graph shows the percentage of the total numbers accessing counselling who are female, male and a category we have labelled as ‘Other’.

We must offer a note of caution here. Firstly, only a small proportion of Employee Assistance Programmes operating for higher education institutions collect or report data on gender, and so collection of this information has been sporadic. ‘Other’ has been used where institutions have indicated that some staff did not declare their gender, preferred not to say or declared specific identities, such as transgender.

### Percentage of those accessing counselling by gender



### Occupational health referrals, 2009/10 to 2017/18

The figures in the new investigation reveal a continued upward trajectory in access to occupational health services, with an aggregate increase in referrals of 19% since *Pressure Vessels* in the 16 institutions for which we have comparable data.

As with *Pressure Vessels*, institutions appear to be able to report a fuller picture of occupational health referrals from 2009 than for counselling.

Ten universities presented complete data from 2009 to the end of the 2017/18 academic year (and in three cases, the end of the 2018 calendar year). Here, we find an average percentage rise in occupational health referrals of 173%.

There are some institutions which have rises that are significantly greater than average.

- The University of Kent has experienced a rise of 500% in staff referrals to occupational health, Keele University has experienced a rise of 460% and De Montfort University has experienced a rise of 392%.
- The University of Bristol, which has recently acknowledged the need to improve student welfare after some high-profile problems, has seen an increase in staff referrals to occupational health of 334%.
- One university, Bath, presents a material *decline* in occupational health referrals of 75%.

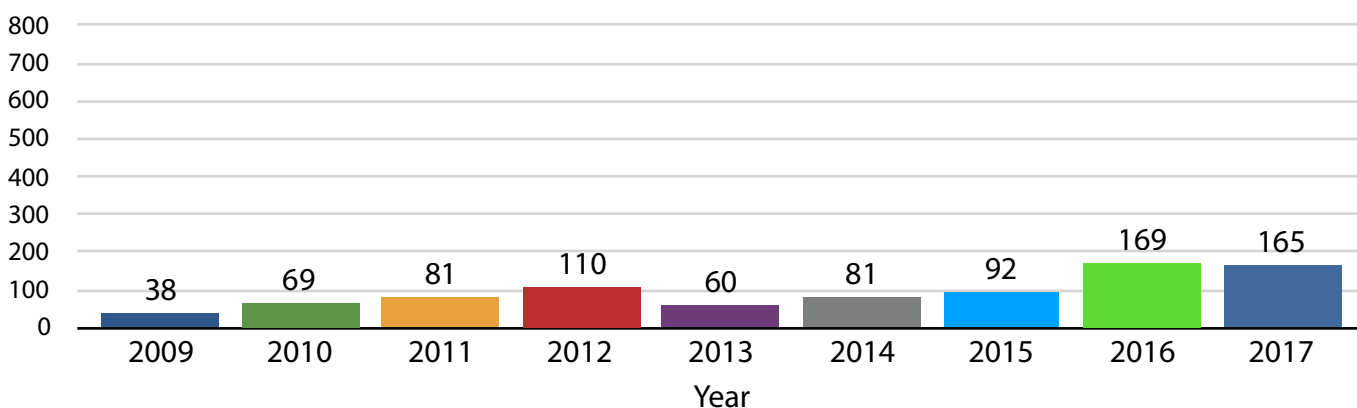
The table below shows that, while there are some modest rises in referrals, the overall upward trajectory is large and raises important questions regarding managerial responsibility for remediation of work-related stress.

Rise in access to occupational health referrals (%)

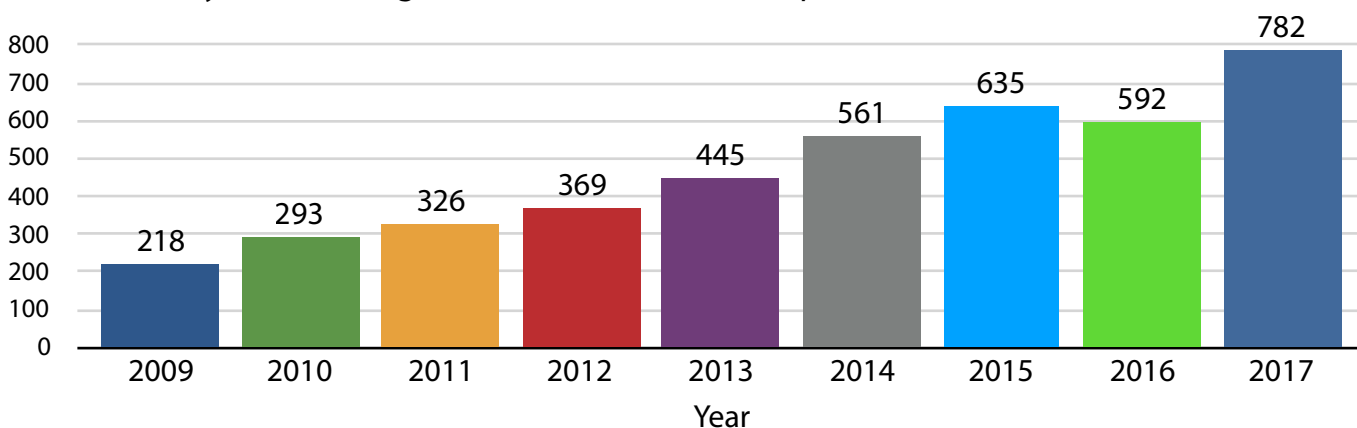
Institution	Years	Increase
University of Kent	2009/10-2017/18	500
Keele University	2011/12-2017/18	460
De Montfort University	2009-2018 (calendar year)	392
University of Bristol	2009/10-2017/18	334
University of Cambridge	2009/10-2017/18	259
University of Durham	2009-2017	150
Cardiff University	2014/15-2017/18	130
Nottingham Trent University	2011/12-2015/16	80
University of Reading	2011-2017	66
University of Portsmouth	2009-2018 (calendar years)	64
University of Hull	2009/10-2017/18	53
University of Warwick	2010-2018 (calendar years)	52
University of Surrey	2009-2017	41
University of Exeter	2014/15-2017/18	36
Newcastle University	2009/10-2017/18	10
University of Dundee	2013/14-2017/18	-1
University of Bath	2009/10-2017/18	-75

Again, some of the most worrying rises which were previously identified in *Pressure Vessels* are confirmed here and we provide illustrations in respect of Bristol, Cambridge, De Montfort, Durham, Keele and Kent.<sup>9</sup>

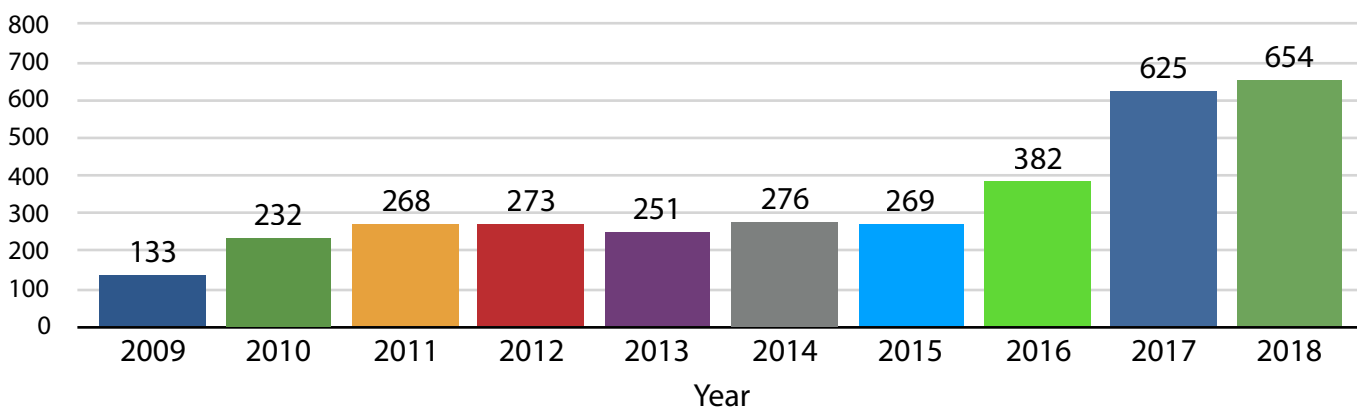
The University of Bristol - Referrals of staff to occupational health



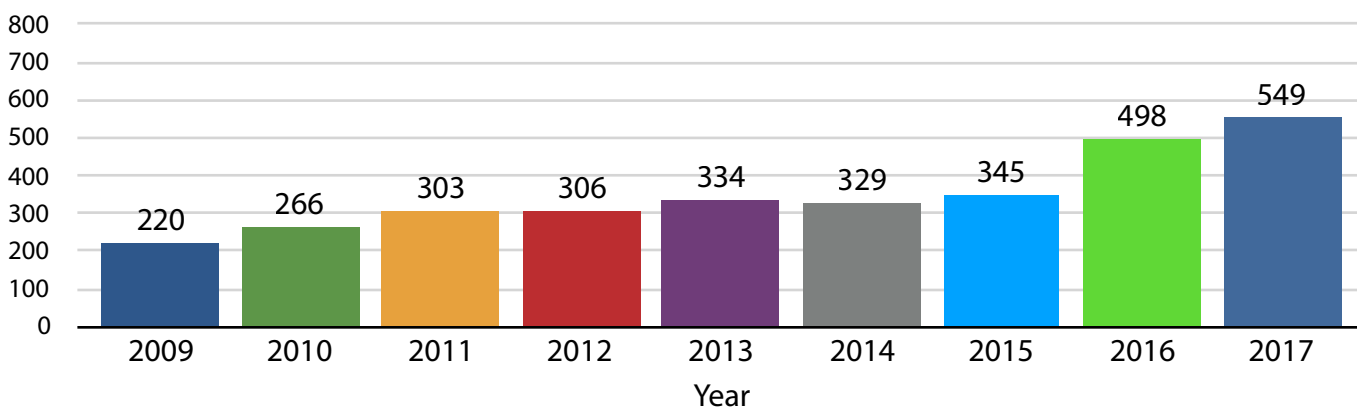
The University of Cambridge - Referrals of staff to occupational health



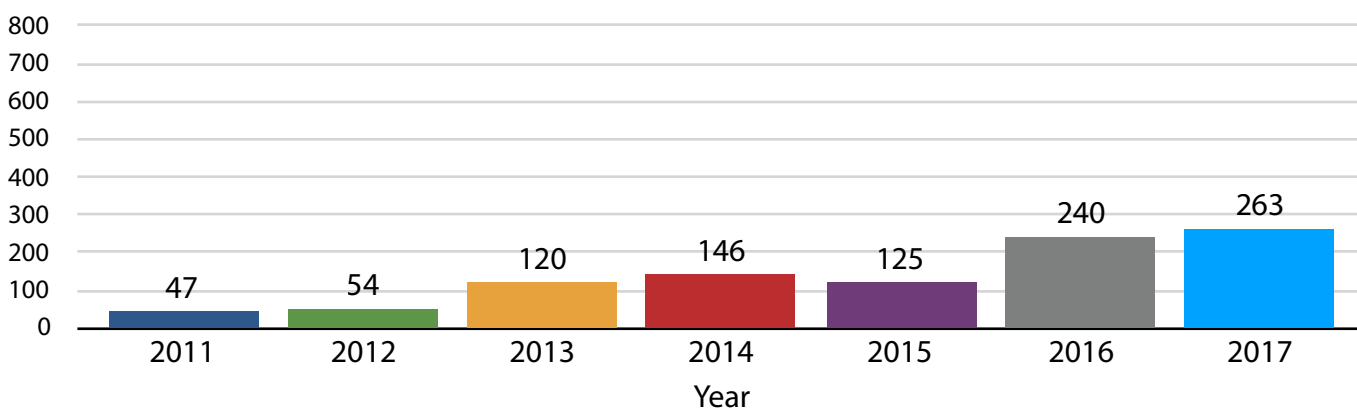
### De Montfort University - Referrals of staff to occupational health



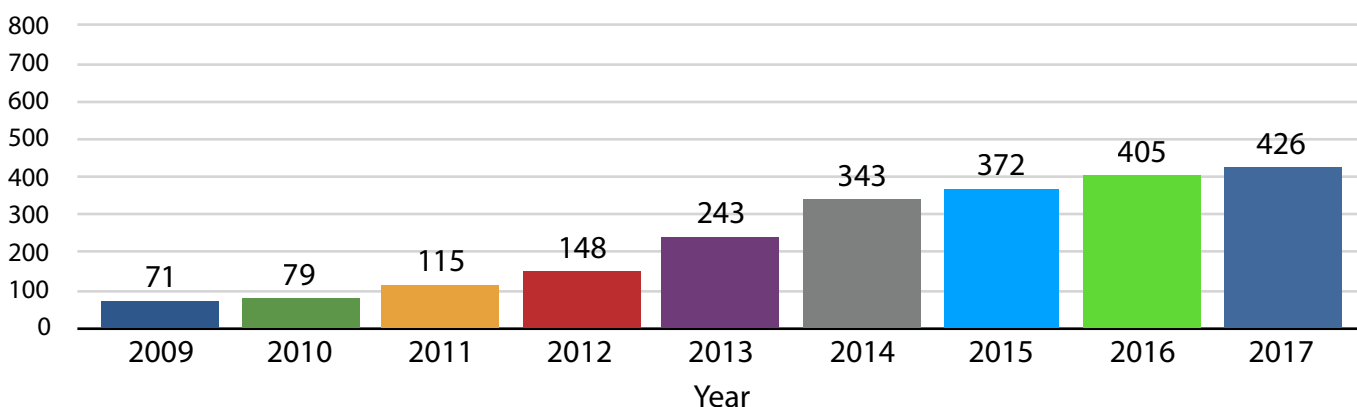
### The University of Durham - Referrals of staff to occupational health



### Keele University - Referrals of staff to occupational health



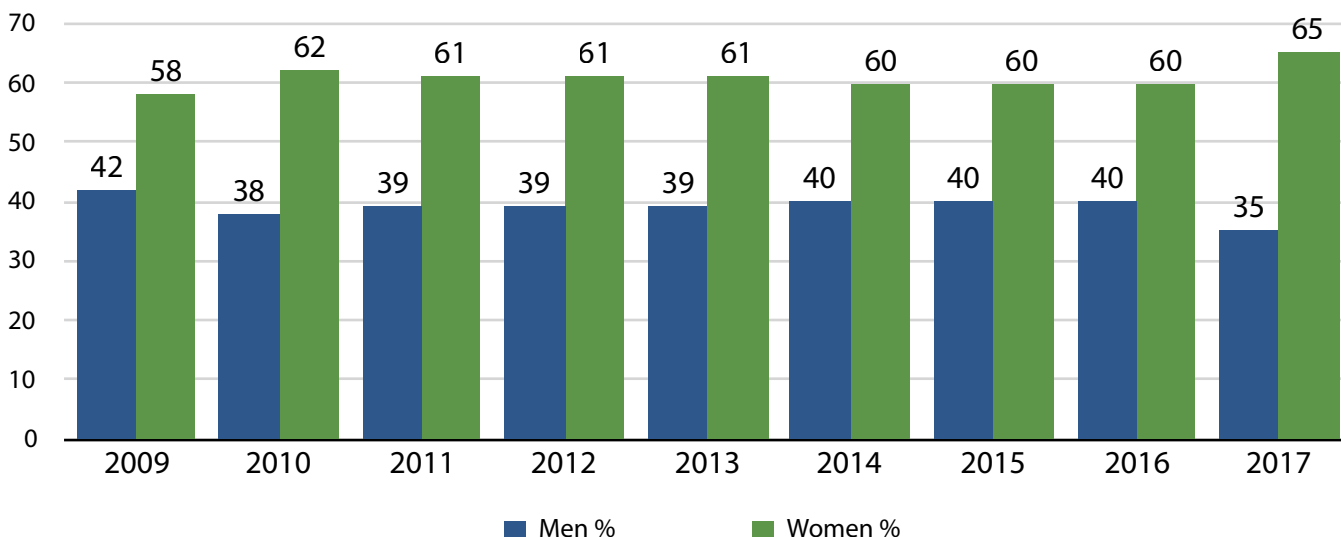
### The University of Kent - Referrals of staff to occupational health



### Occupational health trends: gender and contract type

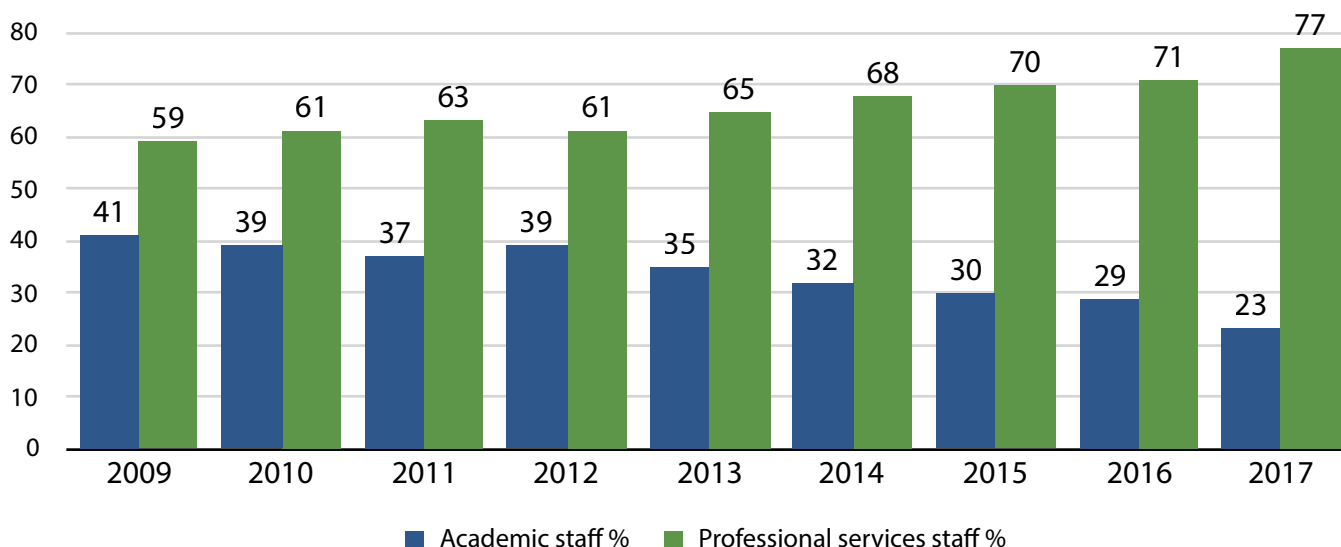
As with access to counselling, occupational health referrals display a clearly gendered pattern. Where figures for gender were provided from 2009 to 2017, women accounted for 60% of those accessing occupational health, despite making up 55% of the higher education workforce.

#### Percentage of those accessing occupational health by gender



In addition, we also see that professional services staff make up a significant proportion of all occupational health referrals. Since professional services staff are predominantly female, we might expect to find a strong intersection between the populations according to gender and contract type. Between 2009 to 2017, of occupational health referrals where contract type was declared on Freedom of Information data, 65% were professional services staff. It is also important to note that professional services staff make up 51% of all higher education staff and, judging by their rate of referral to occupational health, we may conclude that they are disproportionately impacted by workplace stress.<sup>10</sup>

#### Percentage of those accessing occupational health by contract type





### 3. Conclusion

Across the new sample, where comprehensive data is provided from 2009/10 to 2017/18, the average rise in staff accessing counselling for this period is 172%.

In the last reported year of the data, there was a rise of 22% in staff accessing counselling from the previous year at the 15 universities providing comparable data.

Women are more likely than men to access staff counselling even after taking into account the fact that there are more female university staff than male university staff.

From 2009 to the end of the 2017/18 academic year (and in three cases, the end of the 2018 calendar year), we find an average rise in staff accessing occupational health of 173% across the 10 universities with comparable data. Women are again over-represented as are professional services staff.

It is hard to avoid the conclusion reached by Erickson et al that the morale and mental health of higher education employees in the UK have been damaged by 'the woeful state of management and governance in the UK HE sector'.<sup>11</sup> We can recognise that managers are also subject to a high risk of workplace stress and they must frequently respond to changing demands from government as well as trying to meet the needs of their staff. However, it seems management teams are rarely held to the same standards of accountability as other staff.

Erickson et al asked 5,888 academics to evaluate the senior management teams of 78 universities in a satisfaction survey similar in scope to the *National Student Survey*. The mean score across the sector for university staff satisfied with their senior management was 11%. The highest-scoring institution scored 37% and the lowest 0%. The issues identified as driving dissatisfaction resonate with the conclusions in *Pressure Vessels*:

*The seven major themes were the dominance and brutality of metrics; excessive workload; governance, accountability and HE 'fantasy football'; perpetual change and the loss of institutional memory; vanity projects; the silenced academic; and work as a mental health hazard.*<sup>12</sup>

The findings of a study by Siobhan Wray and Gail Kinman also lend support to the conclusions of *Pressure Vessels* that workloads, additional demands, and incursions into the control that academics have traditionally maintained over their work, have all contributed to an increasingly stressful and unsafe working environment.<sup>13</sup> Their report has usefully applied the Health and Safety Executive's management standards indicator to measure and compare levels of psychological hazard. The findings quantify the perceptions of academics that their working environments have quite rapidly deteriorated into a situation where urgent action is required, and indeed mandated, by the Health and Safety Executive.

These conditions are clearly replicated in the higher education systems of other countries. In the Netherlands, universities will shortly find their structural overtime becoming the subject of monitoring by the Labour Inspectorate. Work by Ingrid Robeyns found that academics are loyal employees with a strong work ethic, which makes them easy to exploit. Her study found that academics were routinely working 10 to 15 hours of overtime weekly.<sup>14</sup>

Some institutions have rejected complaints about poor morale even when confronted with the evidence.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, when academics complain about stress at work, or additional demands which have emerged from increasing the marketisation of higher education, they have been reassured by management that they still have the privilege of a large degree of control over their work lives.

However, Wray and Kinman's report demonstrates this assumption has descended into myth. We do not need to look far for evidence that academics' autonomy has been severely curtailed in recent years. The *Times Higher* reports that Teesside University recently notified staff that they should not work from home for more than one or two days per semester and that permission must be officially requested from management.<sup>16</sup> There appears to be no obvious institutional gain from such a ruling.

It should also be borne in mind that staff who come from countries outside of the EU are subject to even more stringent surveillance of their workplace attendance.<sup>17</sup>

Surveillance, pace of change, precarity, threats of redundancies and decreased autonomy are a recipe for widespread mental illness throughout the sector. *Pressure Vessels* also detailed how imposition of new workload allocation models has led to an increase in workload demands, while ensuring that many tasks are undercounted in terms of hours or are rendered invisible. Management by metrics (papers published, Research Excellence Framework 'star' ratings, citations, journal impact factors, grant monies earned, teaching, *National Student Survey* scores and so on), often dignified with the term 'performance management', also guarantees the working environment is punishing and stressful.

We note as well the frequent absence in most universities of meaningful structures of shared governance, which have been replaced by the charade of frequent 'consultation' exercises. Little wonder that a sense of autonomy or control has evaporated in recent years as performance management and metric surveillance have extended their reach.

Staff complaints about work-related pressure can only be ignored until the sickness mounts to a critical point. This was the case recently when Abertay University suspended recruitment to its two-year degrees after staff complained of additional workload pressures.<sup>18</sup> This is an institution which has recently undergone wide-scale reforms in teaching and learning, while at the same time making redundancies.<sup>19</sup>

A sector in turmoil is resulting in damage to the profession caused by what a recent study by Priaulx and Davies calls 'a revolving door' of staff turnover.<sup>20</sup> Their figures suggest that almost one-fifth of the workforce (full-time equivalent staff, not including atypical staff) leave their institutions each year.

Worryingly, this does not appear to be of concern to the Universities and Colleges Employers Association (UCEA), which offers contrasting figures in their *Higher Education Workforce Report 2019*.<sup>21</sup> This states that the median total employee turnover rate for academic staff on open-ended contracts in 2017/18 was just 8%. It notes that rates at pre-1992 institutions are slightly lower, and rates at post-1992 institutions are slightly higher. UCEA goes on to state that these median figures are 'well below wider UK averages for staff in similar organisations':

*Employee turnover in the sector remains low relative to external benchmarks and has fallen since the 2017 survey. Across all UK HEIs, HESA data show a median resignation rate of 7.6% in 2017–18, based on all staff employed on open-ended contracts and total turnover was 11.8%. Rates of turnover at Pre-1992 HEIs are slightly lower. The median resignation rate in the wider economy was 12.9% in 2018 according to an XpertHR survey of 349 private and public sector organisations with median total turnover standing at 18.8%.<sup>22</sup>*

Priaulx and Davies' findings highlight a problem with accuracy in the UCEA method of calculating academic staff turnover but also its benchmarking. UCEA excludes all staff on fixed-term contracts and calculates staff turnover on the basis of open-ended contracts only but benchmarks their figures against sectors which include the very employee populations UCEA excludes. Priaulx and Davies call this method of calculating turnover 'a tool of strategic ignorance'. They offer revised figures to include fixed-term staff, who when employed on teaching contracts also count towards the 'student staff ratio', and these show higher and fluctuating rates of staff turnover across the sector. In 2016/17, the average staff turnover rate across the sector was 17% (16% median). A closer look, however, highlights this problem within specific higher education institutions. For example, the turnover figures for 2017/18 highlight that 27% of the London School of Economics's academic staff 'left' the organisation across 12 months.

If the sector as a whole cannot be open about the scale of the mental health crisis, the evident causes, the gendered effects, the contribution of casualisation and the resulting loss of staff through turnover, we are placing careers and the future of research at risk. As we, hopefully, emerge from the global Covid-19 pandemic, higher education will face a series of challenges which will no doubt be both financial and organisational. The only certainty is that the mental health of the vast majority of its workforce will have been adversely affected. There will be an increased demand for support services, for sustainable workloads and for a reduction of routine accountability exercises like the Teaching Excellence Framework and the Research Excellence Framework.<sup>23</sup>

The previous Minister for Science, Research and Innovation, Chris Skidmore, appealed for sustainable career pathways in academia and research.<sup>24</sup> It was encouraging, but it is now time for his successors to follow this recognition with action to ensure that all of us who care about higher education move to address them.

#### **4. Recommendations**

*Pressure Vessels* made a number of recommendations, including: more realistic workload allocations; more responsible use of metrics; better performance management policies; and a commitment by universities to sustainable careers.

But those involved in the planning and management of universities now need to go further by:

- recognising workplace stress in academia is increasing and referrals to counselling and occupational health should be consistently and accurately documented;
- recognising stress can be caused by structural problems, such as overwork, insecurity, uncertainty, excessive surveillance and decreased autonomy - these must be addressed sector-wide and cannot be remedied by 'wellness' programmes;
- holding themselves accountable for ensuring that current high levels of workplace stress are diminished, and that known stressors within institutional control are immediately reduced to the Health and Safety Executive's acceptable levels; and enhancing the sustainability of academic careers, with a focus on reducing stress and burnout and enhancing the intrinsic reward of work in universities.

Above all, institutions should reciprocate the dedication of university staff with a commitment not to exploit that loyalty. Workload allocations and targets should be manageable within contractual hours.

## Endnotes

- 1 Based on 14 HEIs (note that three others provided insufficient data or problematic data to be able to calculate this).
- 2 Based on 16 HEIs (note that Nottingham Trent provided insufficient data for *Pressure Vessels* to calculate this).
- 3 Liz Morrish, *Pressure Vessels: The epidemic of poor mental health among higher education staff*, HEPI Occasional Paper 20, 2019 <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/HEPI-Pressure-Vessels-Occasional-Paper-20.pdf>
- 4 With many of the institutions in *Pressure Vessels*, we had one entire data category missing (either counselling or occupational health or both).
- 5 This is incorrect, however. The Freedom of Information request was raised in 2017, and Warwick provided data on Counselling for the 2009/10 to 2015/16 academic years. They could have chosen to provide information for 2016/17 as some others did. When *Pressure Vessels* was published, we were still in the 2018/19 academic year so complete figures could not be provided for that year.
- 6 Not all 'other referrals' have been included in the figures for the analysis. Some institutions declared that occupational health performs services such as health screening for new staff, or vaccinations for particular groups of staff, which were excluded where they could be identified in order to focus on management referrals and, where applicable, self-referrals.
- 7 Some universities provided different figures for the same year: some institutions providing the 2016/17 data for a second time reported figures which were significantly lower than had been reported in response to the earlier request. Any methodological concerns are highlighted in the Appendices online.
- 8 See the online Infogram appendices provided by the Bumpy Landing Project for visualisations of all 17 HEIs. Appendix 1: <https://infogram.com/probe-appendix-1-cardiff-de-montfort-keele-newcastle-nottingham-trent-bath-bristol-and-cambridge-1hmr6gzg7dlz2nl>  
Appendix 2: <https://infogram.com/probe-appendix-2-dundee-exeter-hull-kent-portsmouth-reading-surrey-warwick-and-durham-1h9j6qkd8y1v6gz?live>
- 9 See endnote 8.
- 10 <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/news/23-01-2020/sb256-higher-education-staff-statistics>
- 11 Mark Erickson, Paul Hanna and Carl Walker, 'The UK higher education senior management survey: a stactivist response to managerialist governance', *Studies in Higher Education*, 2020 DOI: 0.1080/03075079.2020.1712693
- 12 See endnote 10.
- 13 Siobhan Wray and Gail Kinman, 'The risks associated with academic work: An analysis of trends (2008–2014)', Paper presented at the *Society for Research in Higher Education Conference*, December 2019, Newport
- 14 Delta: Journalistic platform TU Delft, 2020. Overworked academics are taking their concerns to the Labour Inspectorate <https://www.delta.tudelft.nl/article/overworked-academics-are-taking-their-concerns-labour-inspectorate>
- 15 Sally Weale, 'Higher education staff suffer "epidemic" of poor mental health', *Guardian*, 23 May 2019 <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2019/may/23/higher-education-staff-suffer-epidemic-of-poor-mental-health>
- 16 Anna McKie, 'Teesside says staff must apply for permission to work off-campus', *Times Higher Education*, 11 December 2019 <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/teesside-says-staff-must-apply-permission-work-campus>
- 17 Ellie Bothwell, 'Foreign staff call for clarity over Birmingham attendance policy', *Times Higher Education*, 29 January 2019 <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/foreign-staff-call-clarity-over-birmingham-attendance-policy>
- 18 Anna McKie, 'Abertay "pauses" shorter degrees as staff complain of "pressure"', *Times Higher Education*, 30 December 2019 <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/abertay-pauses-accelerated-degrees-staff-complain-pressure>
- 19 Alastair Robertson, *Developing a new whole institutional approach to teaching and learning enhancement*, Higher Education Academy, 2016 [https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/sites/default/files/downloads/developing\\_a\\_new\\_whole\\_institutional\\_approach\\_to\\_teaching\\_and\\_learning\\_enhancement\\_-\\_abertay\\_university.pdf](https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/sites/default/files/downloads/developing_a_new_whole_institutional_approach_to_teaching_and_learning_enhancement_-_abertay_university.pdf) Stefan Morris, 'Up to 20 jobs could be axed at Abertay University in cost-cutting move', *The Courier*, 17 May 2019 <https://www.thecourier.co.uk/fp/news/local/dundee/893952/up-to-20-jobs-could-be-axed-at-abertay-university-in-cost-cutting-move/>
- 20 Nicky Priaux and Gail Davies, 'UCEA's strategic ignorance of staff turnover in universities', USSbriefs 88, 2019 <https://medium.com/ussbriefs/uceas-strategic-ignorance-of-staff-turnover-in-uk-universities-8acbeba9e2fc>
- 21 UCEA, *Higher Education Workforce Report 2019* <https://www.ucea.ac.uk/library/publications/he-workforce-report-2019/>
- 22 UCEA, *Higher Education Workforce Report*, 2019, p.18
- 23 Dorothy Bishop, 'Now is a good time to ditch the REF and TEF', *Times Higher Education*, 24 March 2020 <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/blog/now-good-time-uk-ditch-ref-and-tef>
- 24 @CSkidmoreUK Tweet, 20 January 2020 <https://twitter.com/CSkidmoreUK/status/1219322009735389185?s=20>



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