

Workload model equity assessment for a first year student advisor within an inaugural health foundation year

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This paper reflects upon the topic “systematising the provisions for the enhancement of students’ first year experience and embedding these in policy”, by asking, is the effort of implementation by those at the coal face (e.g., first year student advisors) sufficiently valued in practical terms by tertiary institutes? The duties of a first year student advisor (FYA) servicing 250 students within a health faculty’s inaugural foundation year are detailed over a 12 month period, with total service hours accumulating to 114 hours. For these 114 hours, points are awarded to the FYA in accordance with the faculty’s workload model which allocates points for various academic duties within annual staff performance reviews. Comparison with points awarded for other academic duties and consideration of some general attitudes of academic staff highlight that, while many levels of university acknowledge the importance of and support FYA-type roles, work to raise the awareness of duties undertaken within these roles must continue.

Introduction

Like most progressive universities, Griffith University is committed to enhancing the first year student experience and recognises the importance of the first year student advisor (FYA) role within enhancement strategies (Griffith University, 2006a; Krause et al., 2005; York, 2006). This paper reflects upon and quantifies the duties of a FYA within a 12 month period (April 2006 to April 2007) leading up to and including the commencement of an inaugural foundation year within Griffith University’s Health Faculty, known as Griffith Health (GH).

Raising the awareness of work undertaken within FYA-type roles at all academic levels is important for: building a sense of job worth, the development of fair workload assessment models, promotion equity and motivating staff to continue delivering high quality systematic support that enhances the first year student experience. For annual academic staff performance reviews, GH adopts a detailed workload model that allocates points for all academic duties that fall within the three major categories of Teaching, Research and Service. Thus, quantification of FYA duties in terms of hours spent allows for a workload model points comparison with other standard academic duties. Through this comparison, this paper aims to assess the equity of FYA points allocation and subsequently comment on whether recognition of the FYA role in practice is equitable, should be improved, or is over-stated.

Griffith Health Workload Model

The points allocated by GH's workload model, used for annual staff performance reviews, in the categories of Teaching, Research and Service are given in Table 1 for selected academic duties. Each Faculty within Griffith University is directed to develop its own workload model under guidelines set down by Griffith University's staff performance review policy (Griffith University, 2006b). The GH workload model was implemented for the first time in 2006 and, as such, future refinement can be expected.

Table 1. Points allocated for various academic duties within Griffith Health's workload model

Academic Duty	Points Allocated	Academic Duty	Points Allocated
Teaching		Service	
Subject Convenor (non-clinical) >500 students	40	First Year Advisor	40*
Delivering 30 hours of lectures to > 500 students	30	Program Convenor	30
Primary supervision of honours student	20	Conduct major conference	20
		Member of journal editorial board	10
		Member of major university committee	5
Research			
Successful grant < \$20k to ≥ 500k	50 to 200		
Journal publication [#]	50		
Conference full paper publication [#]	20		
Grant submitted	20		
Primary supervision of PhD student	20		
Conference abstract publication [#]	5		

[#]Peer reviewed

*\$2500 teaching relief also awarded (school matching encouraged) by Dean of Learning and Teaching

Quantification of First Year Advisor Duties

FYA roles at Griffith University have become increasingly formalised in recent years (Griffith University, 2006a; Lizzio, 2006). The case study to be presented details the duties of a FYA within the School of Physiotherapy and Exercise Science (PES) of GH, which also includes the Schools of Dentistry and Oral Health, Medical Science, and Pharmacy within its Foundation Year (inaugurated in 2007). Approximately 650 students are enrolled within GH's Foundation Year with 250 of these students enrolled within PES.

Although the FYAs of the various GH schools have developed school-specific first year student orientation and engagement strategies (Simeoni, 2006), these strategies were formulated in an environment of inter-school collaboration and under the leadership of the Dean of Learning and Teaching for Health (Buys, 2006), to ensure a commonality of strategic goals. Hence, the following PES case study is expected to be philosophically typical for FYAs within all GH schools taking part in the new 2007 Foundation Year. However, it should also be recognised that, while this philosophical typicality exists, FYA time demands will vary between schools due, for example, to different school enrolment numbers, the depth to which various programs such as mentoring are implemented, and the specific orientation and engagement activities managed.

FYA duties and corresponding hours spent for the PES FYA for the period April 2006 to 2007 are given in Table A1 (see Appendix A), along with explanatory notes on duties undertaken where required.

Discussion

Tables 1 and A1 reveal that over the specified 12 month period, the PES FYA performed 114 hours of FYA-related duties for which 40 points are awarded under the GH workload assessment model. These data equate to a point allocation rate (PAR) of 0.38 points/hour. Before a PAR comparison with other academic duties is presented, it should be noted that the GH workload model is a newly established model and continual work in progress for which staff feedback is encouraged (see Appendix B for the Griffith University policy on workload review⁴). Indeed, the author's own experience reveals that the GH workload model has so far been reasonably well received within PES. Hence, the PAR comparison to follow is intended as a positive means of refining such workload models and raising the awareness of FYA-type roles, if shown quantitatively to be undervalued.

While the PARs for several academic duties within the GH workload model are found to be comparable to that of the FYA, the PARs of some other standard academic duties reveal an apparent undervaluing of the FYA role with some "worst examples" given in Table 2.

Table 2. Approximated point allocation rates (PARs) for various academic duties within Griffith Health’s workload model with percentage difference from the First Year Advisor PAR also shown

Academic Duty	Point Allocation Rate (% difference) (points/hour)
First Year Advisor	0.35
Primary supervision of honours student	0.38 (9)
Delivering 36 hours of lectures to > 500 students	0.50 (43)
Member of major university committee	0.50 (43)
Grant application submitted	0.50 (43)
Subject Convenor (non-clinical) >500 students	0.77 (120)

It should be recognised that conversion of absolute points into a PAR is an approximate process and in some respects based on one’s own experience. For example, in Table 2 it is assumed that: for a given number of hours lecturing an equal number of hours is spent updating lecture notes (i.e., that lecture notes are continually improved rather than the same notes being presented year after year); submission of a grant application of reasonable quality requires 40 hours of work; committee work outside of contact meeting time is minimal; honours supervision requires 2 hours per week during regular semester weeks; and 4 hours per week is spent convening (not lecturing) a non-clinical subject with a student enrolment greater than 500 (the latter including subject outline preparation, sessional teaching staff management and exam co-ordination responsibilities). It should also be noted that, due to the wide variation that exists in the time required to convene various GH programs, no attempt is made to compare the PAR rate of the FYA with that of program convenorship (in absolute terms, the respective comparison is 40 points compared to 30 points which is likely to be equitable in some cases but not in others).

There is no doubt that Griffith University highly regards the FYA role (Griffith University, 2006a; Lizzio, 2006) and strong support from the Dean of Learning and Teaching for Health (e.g., see Buys, 2006 and Table 2 footnote) has had a significant positive impact on role formalisation, recognition and resource availability, in turn enhancing GH FYA drive and effectiveness. Acknowledging the above and that the academic duties presented in Table 2 represent “worst” comparison examples for which PAR determination contains inherent variation, Table 2 nonetheless suggests that the FYA role is slightly undervalued by the workload model for the PES case study. Thus, refinement of the GH workload model in regard to FYA total points allocation should be considered. The findings also demonstrate that in terms of total hours spent, the FYA role is comparable to the combined convening and lecturing of a large-enrolment subject. Thus, an attempt to take on all three tasks whilst maintaining research productivity presents a challenge to all FYAs that should be recognised within workload models.

It is timely then to reflect upon a 2006 PES School meeting where the GH workload model was presented for the first time and one academic staff member made comment re the supposedly easy points on offer for the FYA role. The FYA naturally defended the FYA points allocation. However, the staff member making the potentially depreciating comment was not, nor should be, criticised. The comment simply reveals a lack of awareness of the FYA role and of the role's importance (not surprising given the research-focussed mindset and culture that has dominated, until recent times, most tertiary institutions), hence emphasising the importance of raising and promoting such awareness amongst peers. Additionally, many anecdotal examples can be cited where FYAs ask (and in some cases are warned) if all of the effort will "stack up" against research when it comes to promotion opportunities and job recognition in general. Endorsement at all university levels of findings such as those presented will contribute to the enhancement of peer recognition of FYA-type roles and the minimisation of adverse recognition examples like those cited. An advocate such as a Dean of Learning and Teaching is considered essential to augment this message.

The presented data also represent a guide for universities who are in the process of constructing similar workload assessment models. Of course, any application of these data must take into account the variations between one's own orientation and engagement strategies and those strategies detailed in Appendix A. Indeed, some will have more advanced strategies that would equate to a higher FYA PAR than that determined for the PES case study presented.

Conclusion

The PAR for a FYA within an inaugural health foundation year was determined to be similar to the PARs of several academic duties. However, comparison with some other standard academic duties indicated a slight undervaluing of the FYA role within the workload model under investigation. The finding thus provides a basis for workload model refinement, which is encouraged by the institute under scrutiny. Additionally, the finding raises awareness of the work performed within FYA-type roles and provides a basis for comparison for other tertiary institutions developing their own workload models and orientation and engagement strategies.

References

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Appendix A: First Year Advisor duties

Table A1 details the duties of the PES FYA over the specified period.

Table A1. First Year Advisor duties and corresponding hours spent for the period April 2006 to 2007

FYA duty description	Hours
Procedure formalisation	
• Development of orientation and engagement strategy document	10
• Development of mentor information/policy document	5
Mentor program	
• Mentor recruitment via email; responding to expressions of interest; distribution of information/policy document	2
• Mentor training workshop including organising speakers and bookings (room and catering)	4
• Liaising with mentors (e.g., re involvement in on-going orientation events)	1
Orientation week	
• Running School's formal orientation session	3
• Updating School's orientation booklet with School Administration Officer; organising program/presenters with School Administration Officer	3
• Purchasing and delivering of soft drinks	2.5
• Free School T-shirts: design; taking delivery; setting up distribution	7
• Writing orientation quiz; organising orientation quiz and prize	2
• Contribution to and distribution of Foundation Year Information Flyer	0.5
Barbeque	
• Purchasing, delivering and arranging storage for all drinks, sausages, salad and bread	4
• Booking and collecting barbeques from student guild	1.5
• Setting up, co-ordinating, cooking at, and cleaning up barbeque	4.5
Bush walk to O'Rielly's national park	
• E-mail and in-person promotion to students	0.5
• Bus booking and payment processing	1
• Organising liaising with Griffith University bushwalking club	2
• Actual bush walk including travel time	10
Tours of 2nd and 3rd year laboratories	
• E-mail and in-person promotion to students	0.5
• Organising staff involvement	1.5
• Actual tours	1

National rugby league game attendance (as spectators)	
• E-mail promotion to students; obtaining information on ticket costs and subsidisation possibilities; bulk purchasing of tickets	5
• Actual game	
FYA-related meetings	
• Meetings/workshops with other FYAs and Dean of Teaching and Learning for Health (includes travel time between three campuses)	14
• Community of Practice (Mentoring)	3
• Student retention-related Griffith University symposiums aimed at enhancing the first year student experience	5
• Celebrating teaching seminar series attendance	4
• “Making employment happen” planning meeting for a foundation year common time session aimed directly at gaining work experience and ways to enhance practical skills and employability	1
Student advising and support	
• In-person meetings (open door policy)	9
• Responding to general email enquiries and emailing students identified as being “at risk” through early non-attendance	6

Appendix B: Griffith Health workload model review policy

Griffith University procedural information on workload review (Griffith University, 2006b) is given below:

- a) In the first instance, a staff member or staff members should raise any concerns regarding their workload, workload allocation or the distribution of work between the different academic areas with their Head of School. Options and strategies to vary workload can be discussed and where agreed implemented and monitored.
- b) Where, following efforts to resolve concerns as outlined in (a) above, if the staff member still has concerns about their workload, workload allocation or the distribution of work between the different academic areas they or, where nominated by the staff member, their representative may seek a review of their workload.
- c) The staff member and/or, where nominated by the staff member, their representative will raise the concerns regarding workload with the Dean specifying steps already undertaken with the Head of School and explaining what concerns still remains. The Faculty Dean in the case of a multi Faculty Group or Dean Academic in the case of a single Faculty Group will review the concerns, consulting with all parties and having regard to the principles and standards previously described in this document, the implications for the staff member of the allocated work and their preferences in this regard. The relevant Dean will make a determination and advise the staff member and/or, where nominated by the staff member the representative in writing, setting out reasons for the decision with reference to these Guidelines and the annual notional hours test of reasonableness. The relevant Dean will take action as deemed appropriate. To ensure that no staff member of School is disadvantaged, this review by the relevant Dean should take no longer than five working days.
- d) Should the staff member and/or where nominated by the staff member, their representative still not believe the concern has been satisfactorily dealt with it can be pursued using the University's individual grievance resolution procedure. For the purposes of an academic workload review the terms of reference will include an assessment of the workload having regard to these Guidelines. Again in the interests of the staff member and the School, the individual grievance resolution procedure should be completed within five working days.
- e) The University Staff Consultative Committee may raise concerns about the workload situation in a particular School/Department or Faculty and request an investigation be undertaken where agreed appropriate. The results of any such audit or investigation will be reported back to the Staff Consultative Committee.