

HELPING STAFF BALANCE WORK AND LIFE

A GUIDE FOR FE MANAGERS AND LEADERS

WRITTEN BY EDUCATION SUPPORT



Introduction

In order to provide the best environment for learners, further education (FE) staff need to work in a healthy workplace. And for most staff, achieving a good quality of life is dependent on striking the right balance between the demands of their role and their responsibilities outside of work.

Worryingly, **more than four in 10 (41.6%) of college staff say their workload is unmanageable.** A report published in June 2022¹ showed that **93% of those working in further education reported that their workload had increased over the past three years**, with **more than three quarters (77%) saying it had increased significantly.**

In this guide for FE leaders and managers we offer advice on how to set the foundations for a workplace that supports a balance between work and life. We also **offer practical tips on maintaining and promoting healthy working practices and boundaries**, including the importance of role modelling as a busy FE leader or manager. You can use and adapt these practical tips and tried-and-tested tools to help bring about meaningful culture change in your own FE organisation.

1. <https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/12905/UCU-workload-survey-2021-data-report/pdf/WorkloadReportJune22.pdf>

Work life balance: why does it matter?

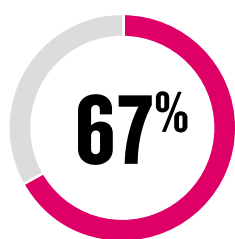
Research from UCU shows that **staff across the United Kingdom are doing the equivalent of at least two days unpaid work every week.**¹ The union is encouraging colleges to use the **Health and Safety Executive Stress Management Indicator Tool**² to quantify staff working conditions in the last six months and to provide a benchmark to measure future improvements.

The main concerns cited by staff were increasing levels of administrative tasks and the pressure to work quickly and very intensively, sometimes under unrealistic time pressures. Staff reported that they **often neglected some tasks because they had too much to do and sometimes felt their deadlines to be unachievable.**

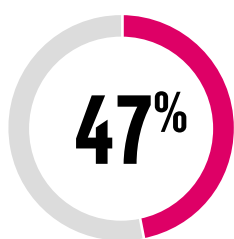
The reality is, poor work life balance is impacting FE staff's personal life – strained relationships, lack of social life and detachment from others. You might even be able to relate to some of these symptoms yourself? Or recognise them in colleagues?

Overwork has become normalised across the whole education sector. Education staff at all levels tend to suffer from stress, with high burnout rates. In the long term, **stress can affect our ability to think clearly and to make effective decisions.** It can trigger our fight or flight responses and can also impact the body, from tightening our muscles and causing tension headaches, to irritable bowel syndrome and raised blood pressure.

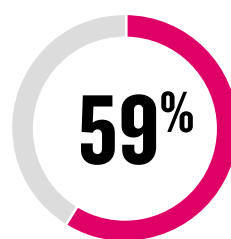
The **2022 Teacher Wellbeing Index** showed that:



of FE and education staff described how their stress levels at work had increased in the last year



reported that they always go to work when they are unwell



were not confident to advise their employers about high levels of work related stress and mental health issues.

1. <https://www.ucu.org.uk/article/12347/University--college-staff-do-two-days-unpaid-work-every-week>

2. <https://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/assets/docs/indicatortool.pdf>

When it's becoming a problem: spotting the signs

The side effects of a poor work-life balance can be serious and lead to burnout. But would you be able to spot the signs in yourself or others?

The main signs are:

- **Exhaustion**
- **Mental detachment from your work**
- **Problems with performance or relationships at work.**

Some people also mention physical symptoms like **disrupted sleep** or **head and stomach aches**. **If suffering from depression, this can also be a precursor to burnout.**

It is really important to be aware of the warning signs. If you do spot them, the good news is that you can recover from burnout.

You can download a PDF graphic on **avoiding burnout** to share with staff. It also features the Education Support helpline, which can be accessed by all education staff struggling with the symptoms of burnout.

Understanding what you can (and can't!) control

It can help to acknowledge that there are many pressures on the FE sector out of your control; this can feel frustrating and make it difficult to know where to start when trying to support those in your organisation.

It's important to recognise that it's not up to you to solve all of the sector's issues. However, you can influence how your organisation interacts with staff, supports their emotional wellbeing and creates a healthy working culture.

Below we offer some practical strategies and techniques you can start implementing straight away, as well as some to consider in the longer term. This is not an exhaustive list – we encourage you to take it away, discuss what may/may not work and add to it as you see fit for your FE setting.

Practical strategies and techniques

Make time

Many FE providers offer counselling or lunchtime activities but these need to be regular and well-co-ordinated. One lecturer pointed out: 'We had a wellbeing week in college with lots of options including massages but it fell at the end of a module when my group were doing assessments and I didn't have time to go to anything.'

Show commitment

Mental health is part of an FE setting's safeguarding responsibilities and you can show a commitment to this by:

- Having a mental health policy written down and regularly reviewed
- Gathering data about staff mental health using surveys that offer consistency, anonymity and are valid and reliable
- Conducting anonymous annual surveys of staff satisfaction
- Ensuring that all staff act on the issues identified
- Looking at the time spent on admin tasks and finding ways to make them less onerous.

Bring staff together regularly

In a Tackling Stress in the Workplace webinar¹, Shelley Asquith of the TUC calls for changes in the workplace so that it is, 'bringing people together to change work so that it stops being a cause of stress and starts being a space where people can access the support that they need.'

1. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b2pit4Fb9Pc&t=1467s>

Look to other FE settings

Weston College won a Beacon Award from the Association of Colleges (AoC) for an initiative to enhance staff mental health, wellbeing and welfare.

They offer:



A dedicated Staff Welfare Officer



A mentor for every new member of staff



An occupational health referral system



Access to an Employee Assistance Programme – learn about Education Support's EAP



In-house sports, healthy eating and general wellbeing sessions



Workshops on low self-esteem, low confidence and smoking cessation



Access to sports facilities and fitness suites, free of charge

Other suggestions from the FE sector include:

“...Have good student support systems in place so that staff are not having to spend time identifying solutions and referrals for their learners.”

“As well as gathering data about workload and wellbeing, organisations and employers could also look to provide on-site stress busters and train staff how to reduce stress levels at work”

“Many FE organisations have prayer and faith facilities but what about a meditation room or a quiet space where staff can go and get away from it all, read a book or just chill? This would be the equivalent of the quiet coach on a train (so phones on silent!).”

Role modelling healthy behaviour

FE staff often work beyond their remit. They can often be the first port of call for learners who are struggling and this creates additional pressures. **Remember that your physical and mental health are priorities too. Don't feel guilty.** Make sure that you are not working late into the evening or going to bed with your head full of worries and concerns. Make sure that you look after yourself and have time out to rest and recuperate.



Tips for role-modelling:

- **Set your own healthy boundaries** - leave the office on time, or if you work from home set an alarm to ensure you don't work beyond your contracted hours. Do not email colleagues out of office hours. Set your own healthy boundaries so that others can follow your lead
- **Communicate your boundaries** and **get comfortable saying 'no'** when needed and re-negotiate realistic deadlines
- **Share your struggles to maintain mental wellness** (but remember, you only need to share what you feel comfortable with sharing!)
- **Encourage staff to take breaks** and holiday time and **take breaks yourself**
- Take the time to **check in on staff who are struggling** and exchange friendly words on a regular basis
- **If you need help, ask for it.** Don't struggle alone and **normalise asking for support** from colleagues, friends, family, or medical professionals.

Further support and resources

- **Research from University of Portsmouth** published in 2022 has identified four pillars of professional expectations for further education managers including; the ability to lead and foster team working relationships, a focus and drive to ensure learners are successful, resilience and the ability to respond to change, and a good understanding of and commitment to the sector
- The Greater Manchester Learning Provider Network (GMLPN) have developed **a self-assessment tool** and membership survey to find out the extent to which Training Providers have policies and procedures, as well as to support employers' and providers' staff who are in position to support trainees and apprentices
- Mind have developed **a set of tips** for everyday living on how to be mentally healthy at work
- AoC has curated **resources** on Mental Health at Work in FE, including a charter and poster.



Education Support is the only UK charity dedicated to supporting the mental health and wellbeing of education staff in schools, colleges and universities. You don't need to be in crisis to talk with qualified counsellors about anything you are experiencing. You can call their **free and confidential** helpline **24/7** on **08000 562 561**. Or check out **[educationsupport.org.uk](https://www.educationsupport.org.uk)** for free resources and tools to help you and your colleagues.

OUR PARTNERS



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THANK YOU

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