

## TEACHER WORKLOAD AND INTENSIFYING DEMANDS

RACHEL WILSON ET AL

*Rachel Wilson et al. provide insights into teachers' work through research, including interviews, workshops and questionnaires....*

It won't be news to teachers, or anyone with family or friends who are teachers, that teachers work long hours under heavy and intensifying demands. However, some facts and figures speak loudly and help effect policy shifts to address the work challenges facing teachers in schools and related professional shortages.

Our research group focuses on teachers' work. In this summary, we show how we collaborated with the NSW Teachers Federation to give teachers a voice about their workload through research, including a series of interviews, workshops and questionnaires.

We highlight here three important points. First, the almost universally high work hours of teachers across Australia which threaten our education system and democracy. Second, teachers report that workload has intensified in recent years, with a 'tsunami' of paperwork. A third, and important, point is that teachers are using strategies like triaging, to deal with rising and competing demands, and this has important implications for how teachers' workload may impact upon students.

### UNSURPRISING NEWS - TEACHERS HAVE A HEAVY (AND HEAVIER!) WORKLOAD

We reviewed Australian surveys of teachers' work and workload across five states, covering a total sample of 48,741 Australian public-school teachers (Gavin et al., 2021). The surveys were conducted between 2014 and 2019 and all were 'pre-COVID', yet they show independently assessed, but consistently high, work hours (See Table 1). These statistics put Australian teachers in the 'very high' workload category, and many spend substantial 'out-of-school' hours working.

Although rising teacher workload, and teacher shortages, are a concern internationally, we also know, from international surveys, that Australian teachers work longer hours than the OECD average— almost 20% more (OECD, 2019).

**TABLE 1: TEACHERS' WORK HOURS FROM FIVE STATE SURVEYS**

	Total average hours per week (Primary, FT)	Total average hours per week (Secondary, FT)	Hours within total undertaking work activities at home or on the weekend
NSW	55	55	11
WA	53	53	10
Vic	52.8	53.2	11.5 hours for primary teachers. 13 hours for secondary
Tas	45.8	46.2	90% of primary teachers work 5 hours. 70% of secondary teachers work 3 hours
Qld	44	44	Teachers report spending between 1 and 7 hours 'outside rostered duty time', including weekends, each week

Source: State surveys (Gavin et al., 2021)

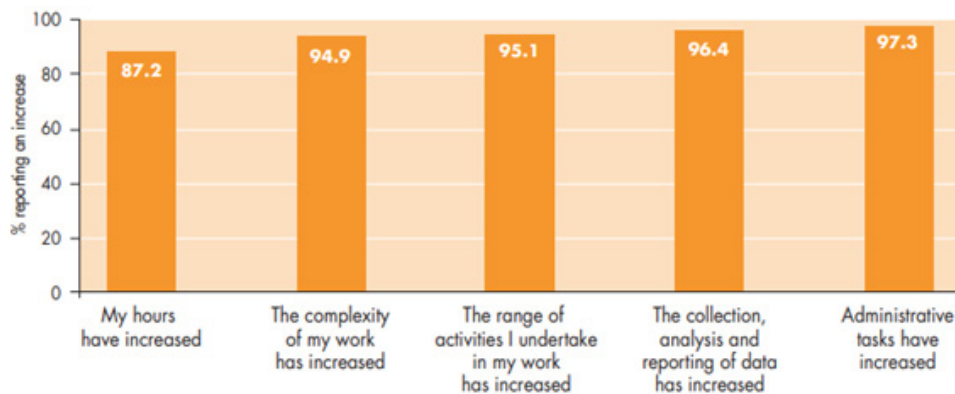
Significantly, the data in Table 1 are also consistent with three earlier government 'Staff in Australia's Schools' surveys showing teachers had high and increasing work hours. These were conducted by the Australian Federal Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations—carried out over 2006, 2010, and 2013—and show that the average total hours worked increased slightly for both primary and secondary teachers over these periods (McKenzie et al., 2014). International OECD data also shows growing work hours, with the average working week for Australian teachers having increased by 2.1 hours between 2014 and 2018 (OECD, 2019).

This clear increase in teachers' work intensified still

further during COVID, when many teachers became stretched to breaking point, as we highlighted in a further publication (Wilson et al., 2020).

### A TSUNAMI OF PAPERWORK AND DATA

The now well-documented high, and increasing, workload of teachers has coincided with new government policies, increasing accountability and devolved responsibility for student outcomes and school performance to the school level. These policies brought heavy demands, data and paperwork. See the resounding voice of teachers on how this happened in Figure 1.



**Figure 1: Teachers' report on changes in their work 2013 to 2018**  
(McGrath-Champ et al., 2018)

Teachers described how this intensification felt via in-depth, qualitative research interviews. As early as 2015, teachers described experiencing an increased and unmanageable workload, manifest especially in piles of paperwork. As one teacher put it:

*“the pile just grows and grows and grows and then, so then you start a new pile ... I've got a pile on this side of my desk and then when that pile started to get too big there's a new pile on that side. And now there's a pile growing on my computer table as well. And it's all of this paperwork that I have to get through.”*

These 'piles' of increasing administrative, technological and data-based requirements were reported in increasing levels alongside so-called 'autonomy' initiatives which many teachers pointed out occurred when the central education department support services were cut. The tsunami of new administrative work was felt acutely in public schools because it occurred alongside diminished support, and increasing demands, as schools became more and more segregated, residualising some

public schools catering to an ever-wider range and depth of student need.

### TEACHERS NOW DO TRIAGE

Importantly, the intensification of teachers' work, primarily driven by increasing compliance, paperwork and datafication, has also decreased the proportion of time that teachers have available to focus on matters perceived as more core to the job of teaching.

Our survey data reveal that teachers—by and large— still retain their primary focus on matters directly related to working with students in teaching and learning. In other

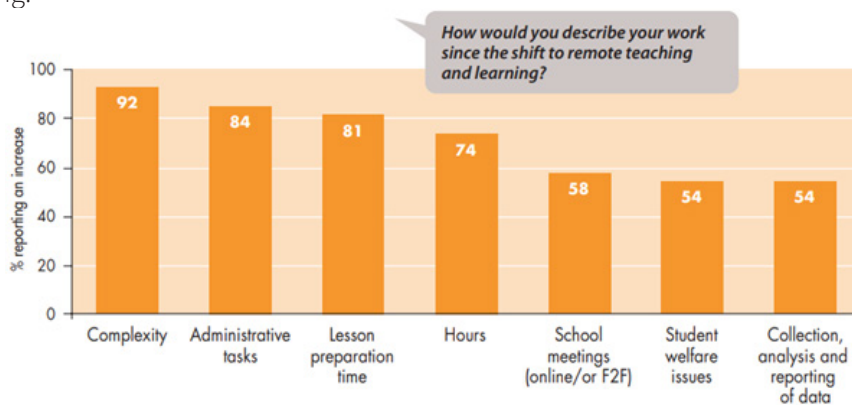
words, they have taken the work intensification burden upon their own shoulders, working faster, for longer hours, and in out-of-school hours, to protect the time they spend with students and retain professional integrity.

One of the strategies teachers are now compelled to use to protect their core work is triage. About two-thirds of participants in our interview study (Stacey et al., 2022) reported that because of expansion of demands, some tasks could not be completed satisfactorily; for these teachers, the impossibility of completing their work “properly” meant that decisions had to be made regarding “what to let go”. Just as in the emergency room where nurses triage, prioritising the most pressing, time-critical and needy cases, many teachers are having to prioritise particular aspects of their work.

As one participant described it, data collection and accountability requirements meant they were “too busy proving that I'm doing what I should be doing”. Another related how they “have to tell students ‘I'm sorry, I can't talk now, I've got to go to a meeting’, and that's not fair

to my students. I'm paid to teach; I'm not paid to run off to meetings”.

As noted above, teachers' work intensified still further during COVID-19 with complexity of work and administrative tasks being particularly demanding, as shown in Figure 2, which is drawn from a publication reporting on a separate workload survey we conducted (Wilson et al., 2020). Although lesson preparation time also increased, teachers asked for support through alleviating the administrative burden, not through having others undertake lesson planning.



*Figure 2: Increases in work demands after the shift to remote teaching and learning due to COVID in 2020 (Wilson et al., 2020).*

The research data on teachers' work, from a range of sources, including international and government reports, as well as from independent academic researchers like our team, clearly shows increasing demands on teachers that threaten important teaching work with students and educational productivity. In addition, teachers in our studies attributed these new demands largely to government policies, as we highlight in Stacey et al. (2023). If trends persist these will have knock-on effects to the economy, and egalitarian and democratic values.

## **FIXING THE EVOLVING TEACHER WORKLOAD PROBLEM**

COVID-19 pushed many teachers toward the brink, and since then a range of factors have conspired, producing national and international teacher shortages which are at once both a response to, and exacerbate, increasing teacher workload. Although recent policy shifts are attempting to address these matters, ongoing analysis will be required to ensure that teachers are effectively supported in the valuable work they do.

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