

Teacher Workload in Australia: How does high workload burden the teaching profession?

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Introduction and Context

This presentation and research intervention is based on a selection of empirical work from a collaborative body of research undertaken by an **international scholarly team** across two countries – Australia and Sweden. The research team is **multi-disciplinary**, with expertise across areas including education policy, sociology of professions, employment relations, union strategy, and social impact.

The Research Team has incisively documented the **working hours** and **work activities** of teachers, discerned changes to teachers' work over the last decade, evidenced the impact of reform initiatives upon teachers' work, and revealed the ways in which reforms impinge on teachers' core work activities.

Teacher Workload: Australian Perspective

School teachers are **fundamental to socially democratic societies** and the skilling and preparation of future generations.

A growing body of research has evidenced the **significant and sustained pressures** that school teachers face because of **workload burdens and under-valuing** of the teaching profession.

An analysis of teachers' working hours across six Australian states found **very high working hours** (Gavin et al., 2021). For secondary school teachers, the average hours per week for a classroom teacher was: 55 hours (NSW), 53 hours (Western Australia), 53.2 hours (Victoria), 46.2 hours (Tasmania), 44 hours (Queensland) and 52 hours (South Australia).

The Policy Context of Workload Burdens

Workload burden problem attributed to **recent policy shifts** in school governance and public management defined by school autonomy and decentralisation of responsibilities (Gavin and McGrath-Champ et al., 2017; Gavin and Stacey, 2022; Keddie et al., 2023).

These policy shifts have seen school principals and teachers in local schools experience a reorganisation of work resulting in **greater responsibility around staffing and budgeting** (Gavin and Stacey, 2022).

Teachers have experienced a **devolution-driven work intensification** and greater **pressures to 'evidence' their work** through administrative paperwork and increased datafication. This phenomenon has been described as a 'tsunami' of paperwork in our research (Fitzgerald et al., 2019).

Effect of the Workload Problem

- Very high rates of teacher stress
 - Teachers experience work stress at some of the highest rates in the OECD, with more than 30% of teachers in Australia reporting they experience stress “a lot” in their work (OECD, 2025).
- Teacher shortage problem in Australia and growing rates of attrition from the profession (OECD, 2025)
- Teachers also frustrated when having to ‘triage’ or prioritize the work that gets done in schools (Stacey et al., 2020) → Minimal opportunity to focus on the ‘core work’ of teaching and learning

Other Stressors

- Student behaviour and increasing levels of cognitive and mental health challenges, particularly arising out of the COVID pandemic, are significantly increasing the workload burden of teachers (Wilson et al., 2020).
- Violence in schools directed at teachers and safety concerns have also impacted teachers (Longmuir et al., 2024).
 - For instance, in 2022 it was reported that 24.5% of teachers felt unsafe at their school (Longmuir et al., 2022).
- Greater devolutionary powers in schools around staffing have led to a significant growth in the number of temporary teachers in the profession, particularly over the last two decades, creating a more precarious teacher workforce in Australia (McGrath-Champ et al., 2023; Stacey et al., 2022).

Reducing the Workload Burden: An Intervention

The teachers' union – NSW Teachers' Federation – sought **to influence education policy** to specifically address concerns about teacher workload.

NSWTF partnered with academics at Australian universities to design a survey that would provide an independent empirical evidence base to document the growth in teacher work hours and workload and become a platform for change.

The survey attracted **18,234 responses from teacher union members** providing high-level representation of the concerns of teachers. Strategies to reduce teacher workload were also written into the survey to give teachers voice on how the workload problem should be addressed.

Reducing the Workload Burden: An Intervention

1. Securing of urgent union meetings with the Department of Education
2. Commitment by the Education Minister to take action: “reducing this [administrative] burden is one of my highest priorities”
3. Education Minister established a working party with union representation
4. Cancellation of some compliance reporting requirements for teachers to alleviate workload
5. Research findings informed the NSW Teachers’ Federation establishing an Independent Inquiry into how to better value the teaching profession in NSW
6. Research findings have informed the union’s ‘More Than Thanks’ campaign in bargaining for a new Teachers’ Award

Conclusion

Education is fundamental to the development of **healthy, prosperous and productive economies and societies**. Teachers are central in the delivery of this important work.

Yet, **workload burdens and high working hours are putting strain** on teachers in doing the 'core work' of teaching and learning. Our empirical research has documented in fine detail how the burdens of paperwork, administration and compliance take teachers away from this 'core work'.

Elevating the voices of teachers through research processes and partnerships with key stakeholders (e.g. teacher unions) can provide direct insights into how policies affect teachers lived experiences and provide an opportunity to advocate for change.

Thank you for your attention!

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