

Executive Summary

The three-wave DUCU Wellbeing Survey presents a consistent and concerning picture of staff wellbeing. Across the full samples, life satisfaction, general health and mental wellbeing were all lower at both follow-up surveys than at baseline (Autumn 2025). There was little evidence of recovery between Pulse 1 (Winter 2026) and Pulse 2 (Spring 2026), suggesting that the deterioration observed at the first follow-up was not temporary. A total of 84 staff completed the baseline survey, 45 people completed the first Pulse survey, and 43 completed Pulse 2. All survey reports can be accessed via the [Open Science Framework](#).

From baseline to Pulse 2:

- mean life satisfaction decreased from 5.44 to 4.65, a small-to-moderate difference, $d = -0.40$, $p = .037$;
- mean general health decreased from 3.35 to 2.93, $d = -0.44$, $p = .023$;
- mean mental wellbeing decreased from 2.60 to 2.35, $d = -0.41$, $p = .035$.

Qualitative responses indicate an alarming risk of harm to staff. One participant reported that “[t]alk of death being a welcome release appears to now be an acceptable topic in the office”; concerns about suicide were also explicitly raised.

In the quantitative data, differences between Pulse 1 and Pulse 2 were small and not statistically significant; in practical terms, wellbeing remained at the lower level recorded during Pulse 1 rather than improving. Work-related strain also remained widespread: at Pulse 2, 84% of respondents frequently worried about work, 81% reported difficulty unwinding, 77% felt too tired to function effectively outside work and 72% experienced high pressure from deadlines. Burnout indicators were similarly elevated: 84% reported waking up tired, 86% frequently felt cynical about work and 79% reported reduced enthusiasm. Positive engagement remained especially limited, with 88% reporting low energy from work and 76% reporting low enjoyment. Twenty baseline respondents were matched to Pulse 1, 20 to Pulse 2, and only 12 participated in all three waves. Among those matched between baseline and Pulse 2, average life satisfaction decreased by 1.15 points, general health by 0.65 points and mental wellbeing by 0.40 points. These represented moderate-to-large within-person changes and were statistically significant. 70% experienced a decline in life satisfaction and 75% experienced a decline in mental wellbeing.

Respondents described sustained workload pressure, understaffing, uncertainty, isolation, difficulty taking leave and an inability to recover properly outside work. Several comments suggested that the pressures were experienced not only as excessive workload, but also as a lack

of organisational support, recognition and control. The comments therefore point to structural and relational working conditions rather than isolated difficulties affecting a small number of individuals. Overall, the evidence indicates that poor wellbeing and high work-related strain have persisted across the survey period. The principal practical finding is not a further dramatic deterioration between the two pulse surveys, but the absence of meaningful recovery from the decline recorded after baseline. The results support continued attention to workload, staffing, recovery time, communication, organisational support and staff involvement in decisions affecting their work.

Background

The DUCU Wellbeing Survey was established to monitor staff wellbeing over time and to understand how experiences of work are associated with health, wellbeing and engagement. Following the baseline survey, two pulse surveys were conducted to assess whether staff wellbeing had changed over time and to provide an updated picture of staff experiences. Across the three survey waves, 84 staff completed the baseline survey, 45 completed Pulse 1, and 43 completed Pulse 2. The report therefore combines repeated cross-sectional analyses, which compare the overall profile of respondents at each survey wave, with longitudinal analyses of individuals who participated at more than one time point. Twenty respondents could be linked between the baseline survey and each pulse survey, while 12 respondents completed all three waves, allowing a limited assessment of individual change over time. The report examines changes in three key indicators of wellbeing (life satisfaction, self-rated general health, and mental wellbeing) together with measures of work-related stress, burnout and work engagement. Quantitative findings are complemented by qualitative comments from Pulse 2 respondents, providing additional context about the experiences underlying the survey results.

Wellbeing at Follow-Up

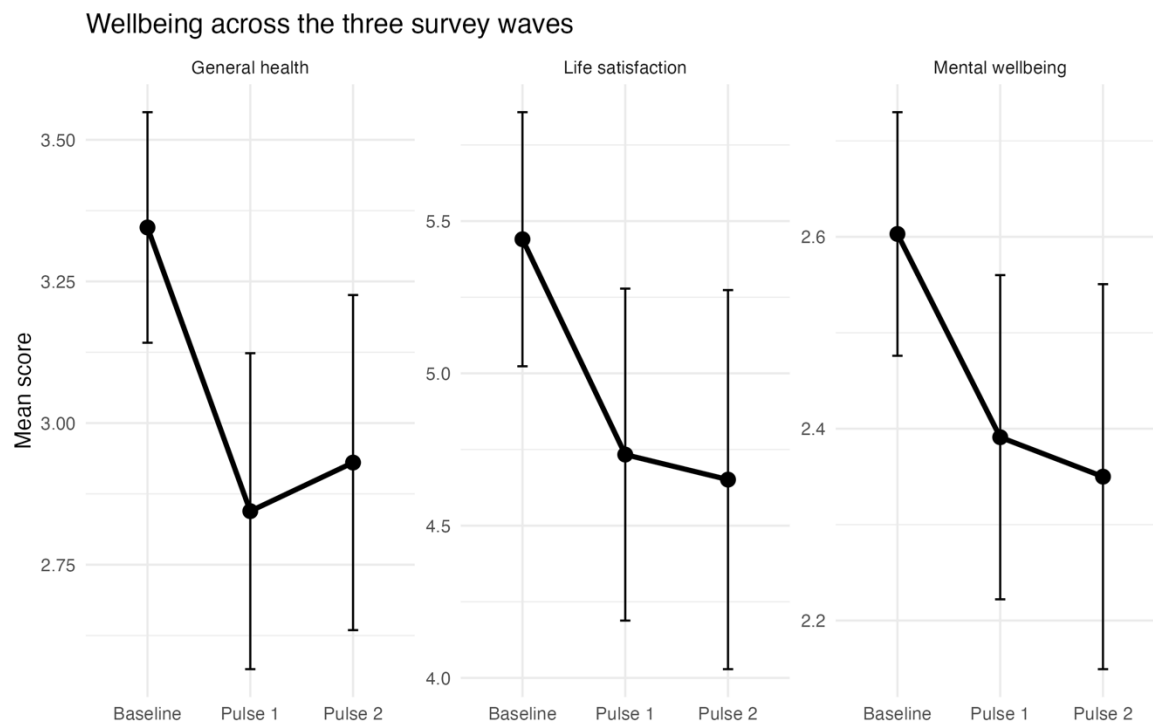
Mean levels of wellbeing remained lower at both follow-up surveys than at baseline across all three indicators, indicating that the decline observed after the initial survey was maintained throughout the study period. Although there was little evidence of further deterioration between Pulse 1 and Pulse 2, there was also no evidence of recovery, suggesting that staff wellbeing remained consistently below baseline levels.

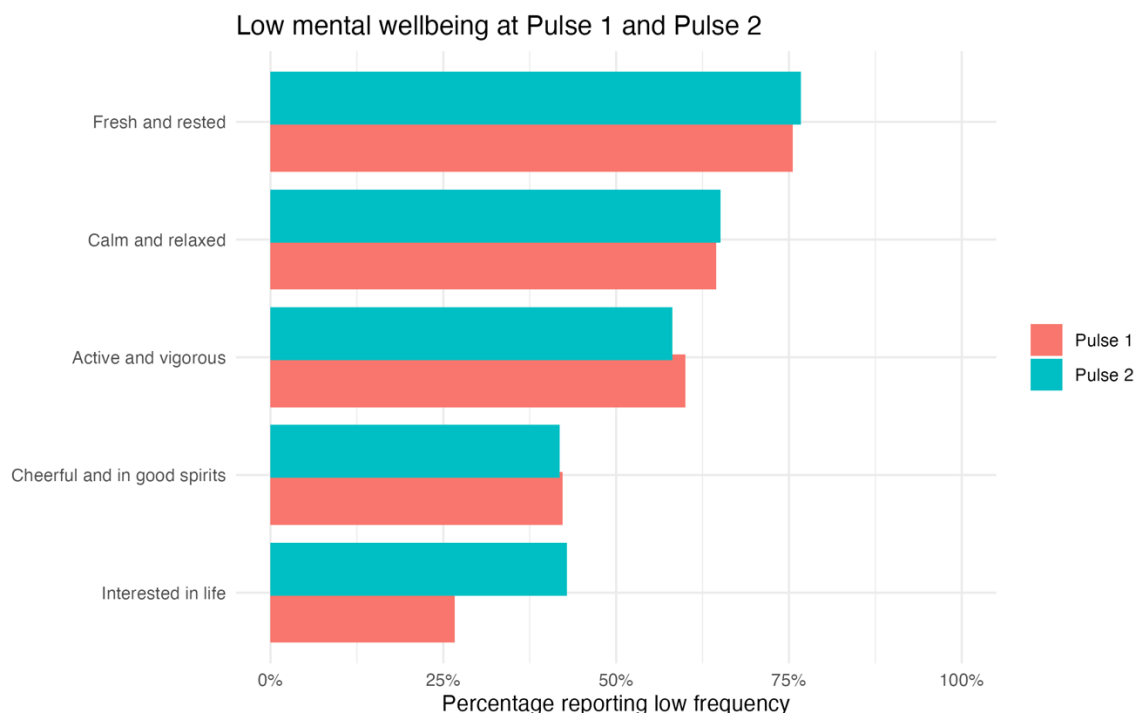
Compared with the baseline survey:

- Life satisfaction decreased from 5.44 at baseline to 4.73 at Pulse 1 ($d = -0.35$, $p = .042$) and remained similarly low at 4.65 at Pulse 2 ($d = -0.40$, $p = .037$).
- General health decreased from 3.35 at baseline to 2.84 at Pulse 1 ($d = -0.56$, $p = .005$) and 2.93 at Pulse 2 ($d = -0.44$, $p = .023$).

- Mental wellbeing (WHO-5) decreased from 2.60 at baseline to 2.39 at Pulse 1 ($d = -0.36$, $p = .047$) and 2.35 at Pulse 2 ($d = -0.41$, $p = .035$).

These findings suggest that the primary change in wellbeing occurred between the baseline survey and the first pulse survey. By the time of the second follow-up, wellbeing had neither recovered nor deteriorated substantially further. Instead, life satisfaction, general health and mental wellbeing all remained consistently below baseline levels, indicating that the reduction in wellbeing observed earlier in the academic year has persisted over time.



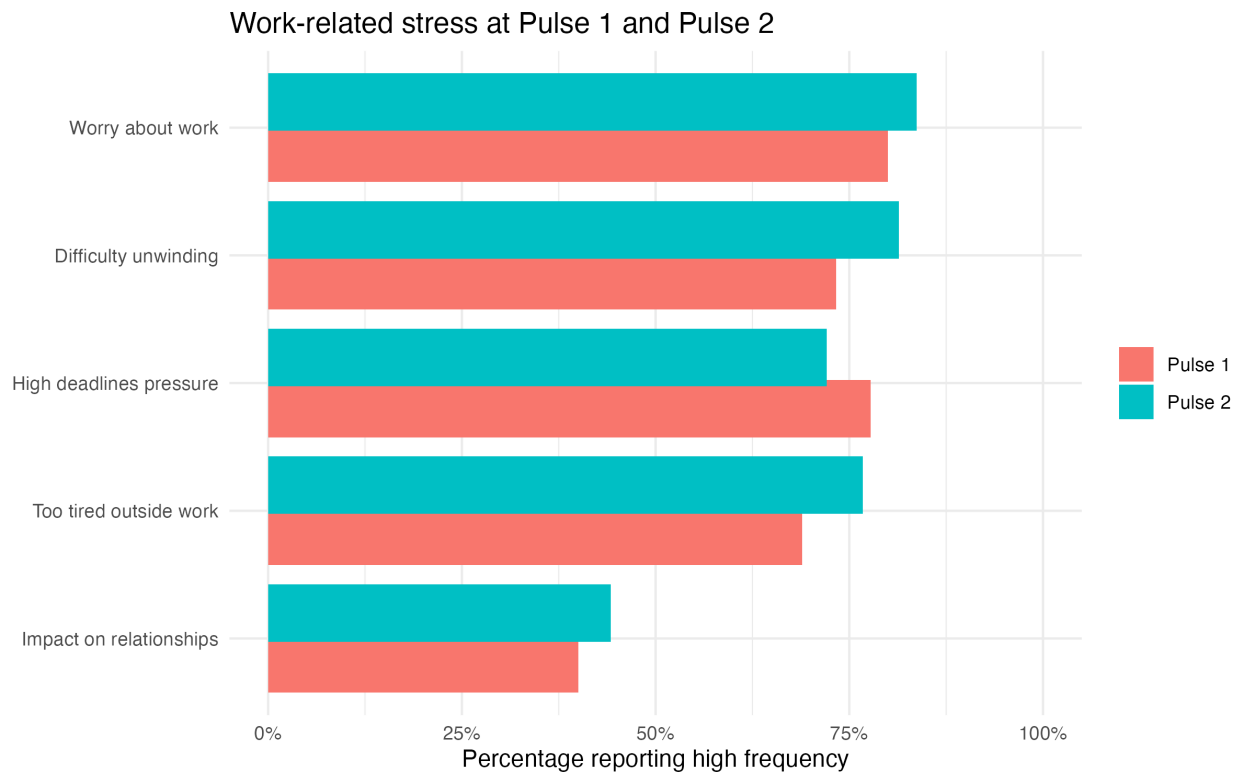


Wellbeing and Work-Related Factors

The pattern of work-related experiences was consistent across the two pulse surveys. Levels of stress and burnout remained high, while positive work engagement remained low. Across almost all indicators, differences between Pulse 1 and Pulse 2 were small, suggesting that the substantial work-related strain reported at the first follow-up had persisted rather than improved.

Work-related stress

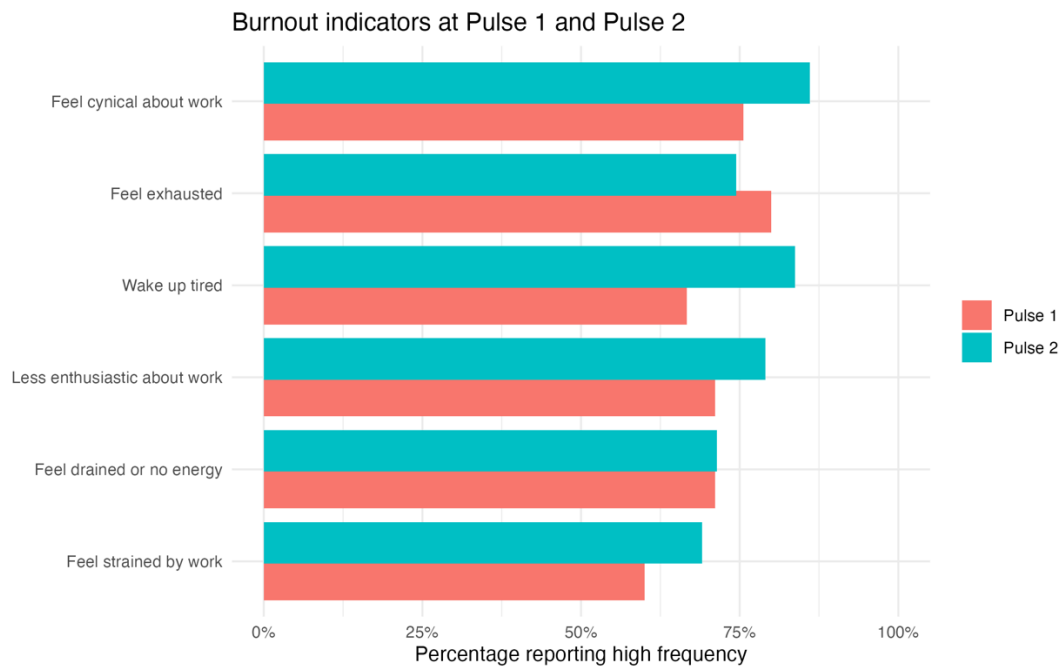
High levels of work-related stress continued to be reported at Pulse 2. Most respondents indicated that they frequently worried about work (84%), found it difficult to unwind after work (81%), felt too tired to function effectively outside work (77%), and experienced frequent pressure from deadlines (72%). Around two in five respondents (42%) also reported that work-related stress was negatively affecting their personal relationships.



Compared with Pulse 1, these proportions changed little. Worry about work increased slightly (80% to 84%), as did difficulty unwinding (73% to 81%) and feeling too tired outside work (69% to 77%), while reports of pressure from deadlines decreased modestly (78% to 72%). Overall, the findings indicate that work-related stress remained widespread across both follow-up surveys.

Burnout

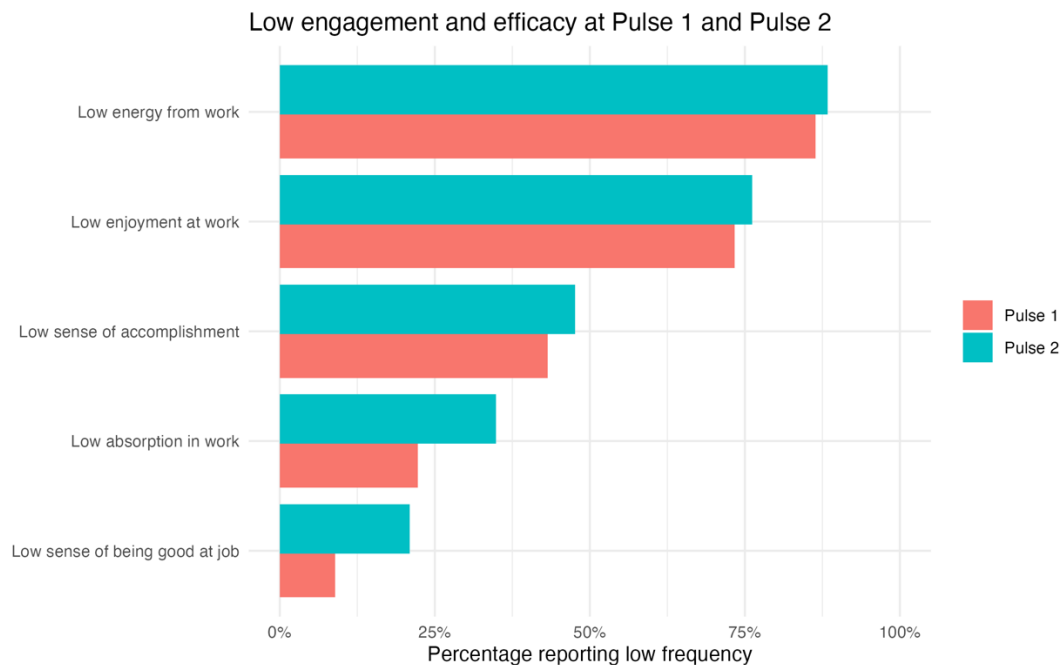
Indicators of burnout also remained consistently elevated. At Pulse 2, 84% of respondents reported regularly waking up feeling tired, 86% frequently felt cynical about their work, 79% reported reduced enthusiasm for work and approximately three-quarters continued to report feeling emotionally exhausted or drained by their work. Although some individual items showed small increases or decreases between Pulse 1 and Pulse 2, the overall profile changed very little. The consistently high prevalence of exhaustion, cynicism and reduced enthusiasm suggests that burnout remained a prominent feature of staff experience throughout the follow-up period.



Work engagement

Positive work engagement remained limited across both pulse surveys. At Pulse 2, 88% of respondents reported rarely feeling energised by their work, 76% reported low enjoyment, 47% reported a low sense of accomplishment, 35% reported low absorption in their work, and 21% reported a low sense of being good at their job.

The greatest difficulties continued to relate to the energetic and emotional aspects of engagement rather than perceptions of competence. While most respondents still believed they performed their jobs effectively, substantially fewer reported that work was enjoyable or energising. This pattern changed little between the two pulse surveys, highlighting that positive engagement remained consistently low despite the absence of further deterioration.



Change Over Time

Although the repeated cross-sectional analyses provide the clearest picture of wellbeing across the organisation, a subset of respondents completed the survey on more than one occasion, allowing individual changes over time to be examined. Twenty respondents could be matched between the baseline survey and Pulse 1, 20 between baseline and Pulse 2, and 12 completed all three survey waves. Overall, the longitudinal analyses broadly supported the repeated cross-sectional findings. Respondents who could be linked across surveys were more likely to experience declines in wellbeing than improvements, particularly between the baseline survey and Pulse 2. Between baseline and Pulse 2, average scores changed as follows:

- Life satisfaction decreased by 1.15 points, representing a moderate-to-large within-person effect ($d = -0.55$, $p = .025$).
- General health decreased by 0.65 points, representing a moderate within-person effect ($d = -0.63$, $p = .012$).
- Mental wellbeing (WHO-5) decreased by 0.40 points, representing a large within-person effect ($d = -0.72$, $p = .004$).

Most respondents experienced either no change or a decline in wellbeing over time, with relatively few showing sustained improvement. Between baseline and Pulse 2:

- 70% experienced lower life satisfaction, compared with 20% who improved and 10% whose scores remained unchanged.

- 75% experienced lower mental wellbeing, while 15% improved and 10% showed no change.

Among the 12 respondents who completed all three surveys, the overall pattern was similar. Individual trajectories varied, but there was little indication of consistent recovery between Pulse 1 and Pulse 2. Instead, changes tended either to occur early in the survey period and then remain relatively stable, or to fluctuate around the lower levels of wellbeing observed after baseline.

Taken together, the longitudinal findings confirm the conclusions from the repeated cross-sectional analyses. Although the matched sample was small and the results should therefore be interpreted with appropriate caution, they suggest that the reductions in wellbeing observed in the repeated cross-sectional analyses were also evident within individuals. For many staff who participated repeatedly, wellbeing declined following the baseline survey and showed little evidence of recovery over the subsequent follow-up period.

Qualitative Results

Respondents were invited to comment on their recent working conditions at both Pulse 1 and Pulse 2. The comments provide a rich account of the experiences underlying the quantitative findings and reveal a remarkably consistent picture across both surveys. Respondents frequently described excessive workload, persistent uncertainty, exhaustion, and a growing sense that current working conditions were becoming unsustainable. While experiences varied, many comments suggested that the pressures identified following the baseline survey had not eased over time.

The dominant theme was the cumulative impact of increasing workload alongside reduced staffing. Many respondents described working well beyond their contracted hours, struggling to keep up with demands, and finding it increasingly difficult to recover outside work.

"I feel overwhelmed by my work and struggle to keep on top of it. I work really long hrs at work and at home and often wake up during the night worrying about my work. I am constantly exhausted." (Pulse 2)

"The semester so far has been awfully stressing and the stress keeps increasing. I'm working too many hours... workload is leaving less and less space to test things and to plan ahead, with the risk of making mistakes increasing and appearing to be just a matter of time" (Pulse 1)

Several respondents linked these pressures directly to organisational restructuring, staff departures and ongoing uncertainty. Rather than viewing these as temporary challenges, comments suggested that uncertainty had become a chronic feature of working life.

"Things are just in status-quo but I feel my physical and mental health on a constant decline. I'm completely isolated in my role and have no support so it's just a case of waiting for the guillotine. There are no jobs going at the moment so it seems there's no escape." (Pulse 2)

"I just feel a constant weight around my neck, it's like waiting for the guillotine to fall." (Pulse 1)

Many comments reflected a broader sense of emotional and physical exhaustion. Respondents described increasing anxiety, burnout, and a feeling that they no longer had sufficient time or energy to recover between periods of work.

"I have personally noticed a decline in my mental health, specifically an increase in anxiety and panic levels... staff are stretched far too thin... This is a completely unsustainable way of working and living. Staff are suffering and it genuinely feels that all we are able to do is turn a blind eye because there is no viable, effective solution at this stage." (Pulse 2)

"I am in a state of burnout and have been since at least June 2025. On antidepressants... I have been considering time off for extended sick leave for a while now but do not feel able to take this due to the limited resources and landing my colleagues with even more work." (Pulse 1)

Some respondents described particularly severe impacts on their physical health and wellbeing.

"Recently diagnosed with [a chronic health condition]... I was bed bound for two months because of work making my existing conditions worse." (Pulse 1)

"I was signed off for 3 weeks because of work stress... returning to work felt like returning to the front line." (Pulse 2)

While most respondents described sustained stress, exhaustion and frustration, a small number of comments indicated much more severe psychological distress. They demonstrate that, for some individuals, workplace pressures were experienced as having profound consequences for mental health.

"Working here currently is a rollercoaster of emotion. My relationship with my employer feels like that of an abused partner. I am in tears about once a week and having suicidal thoughts when driving to work. I feel crushed and am losing my professional confidence." (Pulse 1)

"I genuinely fear for colleagues, that one of us may end up seriously ill if not commit suicide, because of the attitude of line managers." (Pulse 1)

"There is so little direction and yet massive expectations... Talk of death being a welcome release appears to now be an acceptable topic in the office." (Pulse 2)

Respondents frequently attributed these experiences to broader organisational conditions rather than to workload alone. Comments referred to a perceived lack of communication, limited staff involvement in decision-making, ongoing restructuring, and declining confidence in senior leadership.

"The last 18 months have been a steady drip of negative experiences... Every time they hold an 'information' session this becomes more depressing... they continually serve up the same empty platitudes." (Pulse 2)

"Things are getting worse. On the ground, you can really feel that all the support and goodwill from colleagues is gone—nobody has the time or headspace to support others. Individually, we're all hanging by a thread." (Pulse 2)

"There really is very little joy working here now. My immediate colleagues are wonderful, and DUCU are a guiding light. But I need a new career." (Pulse 2)

"The university is in a death spiral due to continued mismanagement, and we are powerless to stop it. It is not difficult to see the toll this is taking on colleagues. Students also notice it." (Pulse 2)

Despite the strength of these criticisms, respondents frequently distinguished between their commitment to colleagues, students and their profession and their frustration with the organisational environment. Many described supportive immediate teams and valued relationships with colleagues, while expressing concern that goodwill, resilience and morale were being progressively eroded by sustained workload pressures, uncertainty and repeated organisational change. Thus, across both pulse surveys, respondents consistently described excessive workload, inadequate staffing, prolonged uncertainty, limited opportunities for recovery and a perceived lack of organisational support. Importantly, the comments suggest that the impact of these pressures extends well beyond ordinary workplace stress. For some staff, they were associated with serious deterioration in physical and mental health, including burnout, prolonged sickness absence and thoughts of suicide. Taken together with the quantitative findings, the qualitative evidence indicates that the challenges identified in this report reflect persistent structural and organisational issues rather than isolated individual experiences.

Summary

The findings from the three-wave DUCU Wellbeing Survey indicate that poor staff wellbeing has become a persistent feature of the working environment rather than a short-term response to organisational change. Across 7 months (i.e., two follow-up surveys), life satisfaction, general health and mental wellbeing all remained below baseline levels, while high levels of stress, burnout and low work engagement continued to be reported. Although there was little evidence of further deterioration between the two pulse surveys, there was equally little evidence of recovery. Therefore, the findings suggest that the decline in wellbeing observed after the baseline survey has become entrenched.

Respondents consistently described excessive workload, inadequate staffing, prolonged uncertainty and limited opportunities for recovery. Many comments reflected exhaustion and frustration, but a number also described serious deterioration in physical and mental health, including burnout, prolonged sickness absence and suicidal thoughts. These accounts illustrate that, for some staff, the impact of current working conditions extends far beyond ordinary occupational stress and is being experienced as a significant threat to health and wellbeing. The consistency of the findings across three survey waves, together with the convergence of the quantitative and qualitative evidence, suggests that these concerns are neither isolated nor transient. Rather, they point to chronic organisational pressures that are affecting a substantial proportion of staff over a prolonged period. Continued exposure to these conditions carries risks not only for individual health and wellbeing, but also for staff retention, organisational

effectiveness, the capacity to support colleagues and students, and the long-term sustainability of the University's workforce.

The findings indicate a need for sustained organisational action rather than short-term wellbeing initiatives alone. Addressing workload, staffing capacity, organisational uncertainty, communication, managerial support and opportunities for genuine recovery is likely to be essential if staff wellbeing is to improve. The persistence, severity and consistency of these findings suggest that sufficient action is no longer simply understanding the problem, but preventing prolonged occupational distress from becoming further embedded within the organisation. Without meaningful organisational action, the risks extend beyond individual wellbeing to staff retention, organisational effectiveness, and the University's ability to deliver its core teaching and research mission.