

Research briefing: Staff wellbeing and institutional support in the transition to remote working

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Headline findings

A survey of over 1,300 HE staff was carried out by Advance HE between October and December 2020. The aims of the survey were, broadly, to gain a snapshot of staff experiences and needs in the transition to more flexible, and primarily remote, working. The survey was conducted while many restrictions put in place to curb the spread of Covid-19 were still in place, but the majority of schools and some leisure activities were opened, alleviating some of the additional pressure put on parents.

This paper focuses on staff responses to questions about their overall satisfaction with their life, job and work-life balance, the support offered by their institution and further support required, and the links between satisfaction and institutional support. The following headline findings emerged from analysis of these responses.

Overall staff wellbeing

- + Average life satisfaction of staff was above that of students and similar to that of the population, as measured through ONS surveys.
- + The majority of staff members reported high or very high satisfaction with their life (66.8%), their job (68.7%) and their work-life balance (55.3%). However, there remained large numbers of staff who were not satisfied with their life, job, and particularly their work-life balance.
- + Around 1 in 5 staff members (18.0%) reported low life satisfaction, 12.9% reported low job satisfaction, and just under a quarter of staff (23.9%) reported low satisfaction with their work-life balance.
- + Academic staff reported considerably lower satisfaction across all measures compared with professional and support staff, with scores more similar to students than the UK adult population.
- + Disabled staff also reported lower satisfaction with their job and work-life balance than non-disabled staff, although overall life satisfaction was similar for disabled and non-disabled staff.
- + Qualitative analysis revealed specific issues faced by staff with caring responsibilities, and a number of comments were made by staff who experienced mental health concerns, including isolation. Many of these comments related back to increased workloads and a lack of pastoral support offered by their institution.

Support offered by institutions

- + Overall, over half of staff agreed or strongly agreed that their institution had: 'Done all I believe they can/should do to support me at this time', 'made arrangements to support me to stay in touch with other staff', 'made arrangements for skills training to take place online', 'been in contact to check how I am managing', and 'provided support and/or advice to help me continue my work remotely'.
- + Almost a third of staff (29.4%) disagreed or strongly disagreed that their institution had 'done all I believe they can/should do to support me at this time'.
- + 22.5% of staff disagreed or strongly disagreed that their department, faculty, or central university services had 'been in contact to check how I am managing'.

Links between institutional support and staff wellbeing

- + All types of support offered by institutions were associated with increased satisfaction with life, work and work-life balance.
- + The largest differences were for overall life satisfaction, rather than satisfaction with their job or work-life balance
- + The average life satisfaction rating of staff who said they felt their institution had done all they could to support them was very high at 8.4, compared to 5.3 for those who disagreed. Staff who said someone at the institution had checked to see if they were managing had an average life satisfaction score of 8.0, compared to 5.2 for those who did not. And staff who had been provided with support or advice to continue remote working had an average score of 7.7, compared to just 4.9 for those who did not.

What staff said they needed from their intuitions

- + Staff were asked: 'Is there one thing your employer could do or have done differently to help improve your experience of transitioning to remote working?'
- + Encouragingly, around 1 in 5 out of over 1,000 responses were from staff who said there was nothing more their institution could have done, or who had a positive statement about their institution's response.
- + Five main themes emerged from the analysis of responses:
 - 1 **Equipment and practical resources:** Requests for additional IT or home-office equipment, assistance to purchase equipment or more effective systems for the distribution of equipment
 - 2 **Senior leadership actions:** Suggested actions for senior leadership, or critique of senior leadership actions
 - 3 **Workload and capacity:** Comments on the levels of workload and staffing
 - 4 **Checking in:** Requests for more contact, check-ins with colleagues and/or managers, and day-to-day support
 - 5 **Institution-wide communications:** Comments on, or critique of, communications from senior leadership

1 Introduction

On the 23 March 2020, the UK government announced the first nationwide lockdown. This meant that, along with office-based workers across industries, the majority of higher education (HE) staff were instructed to work from home for the foreseeable future. More than a year on, there is now near consensus among researchers and policymakers that the pandemic is exacerbating existing inequalities.

In many ways, the experiences of staff in HE mirror those of the general population. But there have also been unique pressures felt by HE staff. While the country was grappling with measures to control the virus, there has been no lack of work for staff in HE institutions. Institutions still needed to deliver courses to students with, understandably, high expectations. These students often also required enhanced support and guidance, with many students dealing with isolation, worsening mental health, and/or job loss (ONS, 2021a). Existing research projects continued on top of new research into the unfolding impacts of coronavirus and related government policies. All of this needed to be delivered by staff working in new, often unsuitable environments, using new technology, caring for children, those shielding and older people, and with uncertainty about the unfolding situation. Additionally, we cannot overlook the fact that many staff members would have been dealing with bereavement, serious illness, and anxiety during this time.

Staff across UK higher education institutions (HEIs) have risen to the challenge, with universities and research institutes continuing to produce world-class research and deliver teaching for their 2.5 million students. However, such a pressurised and uncertain situation can be highly detrimental to staff wellbeing and life satisfaction. It's important that HEI management are aware of the extent of the impact of the pandemic on their staff's wellbeing. But even more important is an understanding of how institutions can help their staff through this unprecedented situation. Due to the speed of the need to adapt institutional functions, there was no time for a completely coordinated response across institutions (or even across departments in some cases). This has given us a unique opportunity to look at the different approaches institutions have taken to practically and emotionally support their staff and the links between these differences and staff wellbeing.

Advance HE launched a survey for UK HE staff between October and December 2020. Over 1,300 HEI staff responded to the survey, with 1,005 providing detailed and thoughtful responses to the open-ending question included in the survey. Full details of the sampling strategy, characteristics of staff who responded to the survey and overarching analytical strategy are included in the methods section at the end of this report.

The timing of this survey was chosen to build on previous research that had already outlined the extent of the negative impacts of full lockdown on staff (particularly women) in HE (eg WHEN, 2020; Vitae, 2020). These studies were conducted when the most severe restrictions were in place at the beginning of the pandemic. While it's important to understand the impacts of these restrictions, this period was unique and does not reflect the changes many workplaces are considering taking forward. Advance HE's survey was conducted when restrictions were significantly reduced. The majority of staff were still working remotely, but schools were (generally) open again, and there was more

freedom to socialise and spend time outside the home. This timing meant that the pressures of home-schooling children were largely reduced for parents, and working arrangements more closely matched those of a flexible approach to homeworking that could be maintained after the pandemic. This is not to downplay the additional challenges that remained; many children were sent home from school to isolate and many wrap-around childcare facilities remained closed, and we were still living with an unprecedented health crisis. Advance HE saw this as an opportune time to identify areas of positive practice that institutions could take forward, beyond panic-mode planning. Our paper published in February detailed gender differences in experiences of remote working during this period (Aldercotte et al, 2021), and another paper details the situation at Research Institutes in particular (Kitsell et al, 2021).

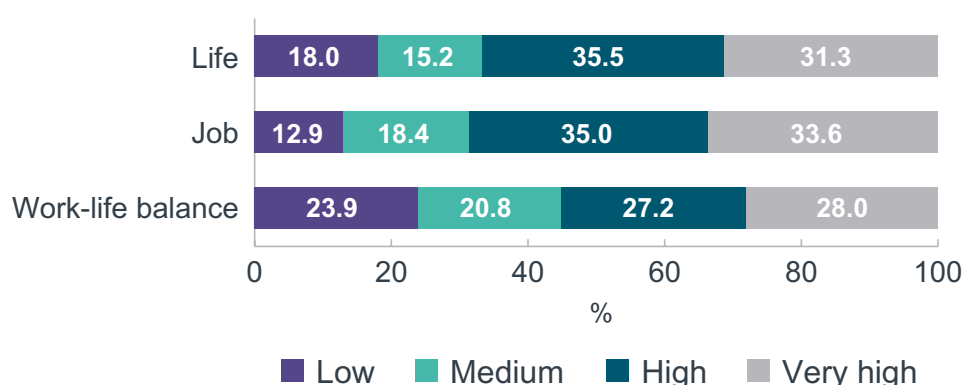
This paper outlines:

- + the overall satisfaction of HE staff with their life, their job and their work-life balance at the time of the survey, including differences by staff equality and identity characteristics
- + the support and resources offered by institutions
- + the relationships between institutional support and staff satisfaction with their life, job and work-life balance
- + insights from the open-ended question about what staff felt their institution could do to better support them in the move to remote working.

2 Staff satisfaction with their life, job and work-life balance while remote working

Staff were asked to rate their satisfaction with their life, job and work-life balance on a scale of 1 to 10 at the time of completing the survey. This question aimed to measure overall life and work satisfaction of staff during this period of the pandemic, and to see whether there were groups of staff experiencing particularly low levels of satisfaction.

Figure 1: Proportions of respondents who reported low, medium, high or very high satisfaction with their life, job and work-life balance.



In the period from the 16-20 December, average life satisfaction was 7.2 among UK adults (ONS, 2021b), a reduction compared to pre-pandemic estimates of 7.6-7.7 (ONS, 2020). Life satisfaction of the survey sample, staff working in UK HEIs, was slightly higher at 7.3 on average. Ratings of 7 to 8 were classified as 'high' and 9 to 10 as 'very high' satisfaction. The majority of staff members reported high or very high satisfaction with their life (66.8%), their job (68.7%) and their work-life balance (55.3%). It is undoubtedly positive that over two-thirds of staff have high wellbeing and are satisfied with their life and job. Put into context, the average life satisfaction of HE students in November 2020 was just 5.2 (ONS, 2021c).

However, there remained a large number of staff who reported low wellbeing: 18.0% reported low life satisfaction, 12.9% reported low job satisfaction, and just under a quarter of staff (23.9%) reported low satisfaction with their work-life balance. This suggests that a targeted approach is necessary to address issues around staff wellbeing; it is not that all staff are experiencing low wellbeing, and overall wellbeing is not low, but a significant minority of staff are experiencing particularly low wellbeing. The lowest scores were seen for ratings of work-life balance, and this is reflected in findings from the qualitative research where many staff discussed increased workloads during the pandemic, and the detrimental impact this was having on their wellbeing.

Figure 2: Average reported satisfaction with life, job and work-life balance by staff contract type

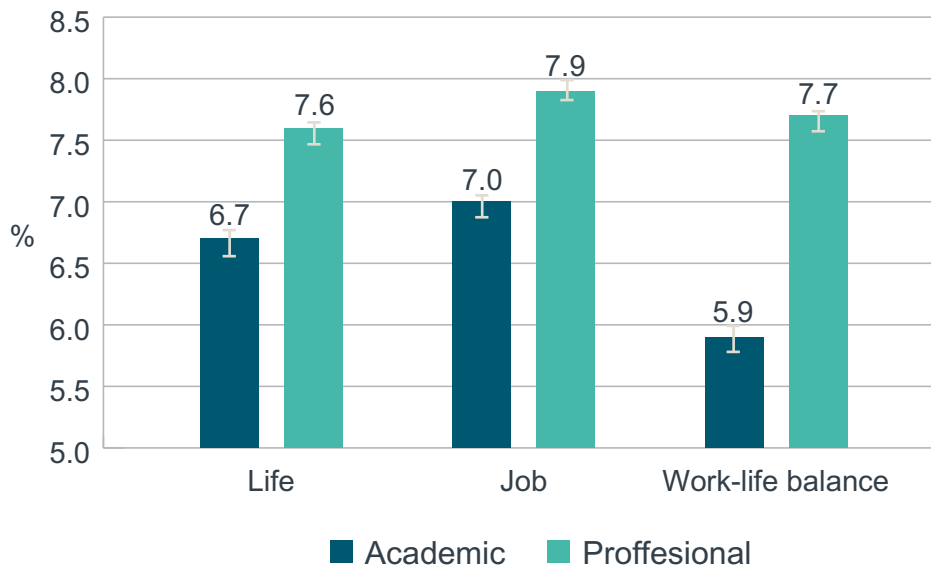
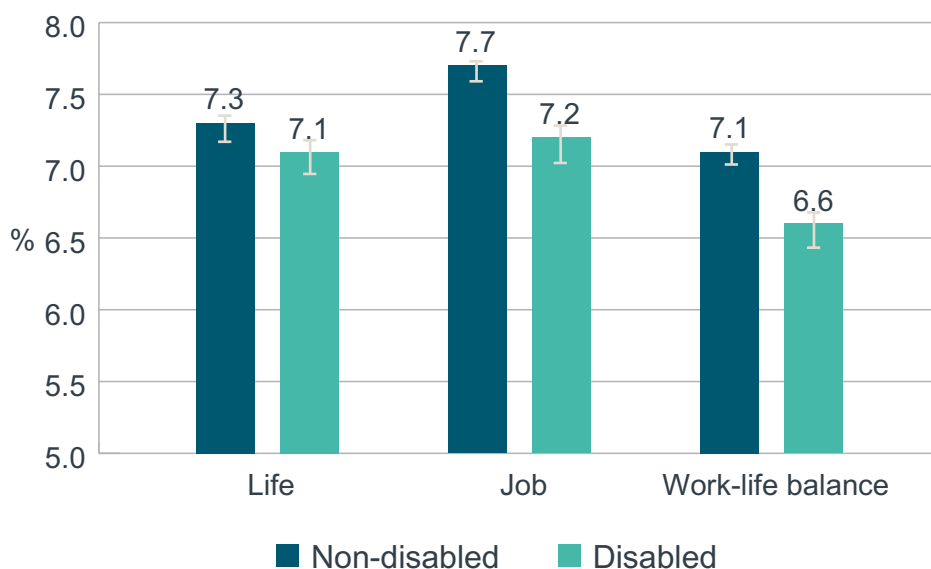


Figure 3: Average reported satisfaction with life, job and work-life balance by staff disability status



The largest differences in reported wellbeing were by staff contract type, between academic and professional support contracts. Academic staff reported considerably lower life satisfaction on average, at 6.7 compared to 7.6. The life satisfaction of academic staff was not only below professional staff, but also considerably lower than the average for UK adults. On average, academic staff also reported lower satisfaction with their job (7.0 compared to 7.9) and work-life balance (5.9 compared to 7.7) compared to their colleagues with professional contracts. The differences are particularly large for satisfaction with work-life balance, and as revealed by the qualitative research, many academic members of staff were struggling with the increased work required to deliver high-quality teaching and marking remotely, on top of usual research demands.

Based on UK-wide research about the differential impacts of the pandemic according to a person's identity characteristics and personal situation¹, we expected to see differences in ratings of satisfaction across different groups of staff members. However, no significant differences were observed by gender, ethnicity, or caring responsibilities (even when comparing women with caring responsibilities to all staff without).

There were differences by disability status²; disabled staff reported lower satisfaction with their job and their work-life balance. The fact that the differences between disabled and non-disabled staff are only present when rating wellbeing related to work, and not life in general, suggest that specific inequalities in the workplace may be driving these differences. The next section details support offered that will be particularly important for disabled staff. 16.8% of staff said they needed access to assistive technology but did not have it. Given that the survey was completed between October and December, this suggests that a large number of staff did not have the required adjustments to carry out their work for six to nine months. This would very likely have had a negative effect on satisfaction with work and differentially impacted disabled staff.

1 Eg IFS Covid-19 resources (ifs.org.uk/inequality/covid-19-and-inequality/)

2 In the survey, disability status was defined using the equality act definition: Under the Equality Act 2010, a person is considered to have a disability "if they have a physical or mental impairment, and the impairment has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on his or her ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities". 'Substantial' is defined by the Act as "more than minor or trivial". An impairment is considered to have a long term effect if:

- it has lasted for at least 12 months
- it is likely to last for at least 12 months
- it is likely to last for the rest of the life of the person.

While there were few significant group differences in wellbeing related to staff members' identity characteristics, qualitative analysis of comments to the open-ended question 'Is there one thing your employer could do or have done differently to help improve your experience of transitioning to remote working?' revealed that combining multiple impairments and different types of caring responsibilities may have masked the unique experiences of some staff. For example, 75 respondents commented on the support for staff mental health and wellbeing:

"I do not feel enough has been done with work load or mental wellbeing. I see colleagues struggling with this almost daily, the lack of clear space for a strategy in day to day activities is worrying to me."

"Some of the promotion of wellbeing strategies feels a bit hollow when staff feel that they must work long hours in order to keep on top of their workload."

"General communication, just 'keeping in touch' as a staff body could have been better. Most staff relied on communication with friends/colleagues. Staff who were furloughed felt particularly isolated and sometimes had no contact from their line manager."

An additional 72 comments were made regarding support specific to issues related to childcare, caring for others and home-schooling:

"I have no trouble working from home, but juggling work with home learning responsibilities has been incredibly demanding. My plans for promotion have been delayed and there is no clarity in when/how I will be able to proceed."

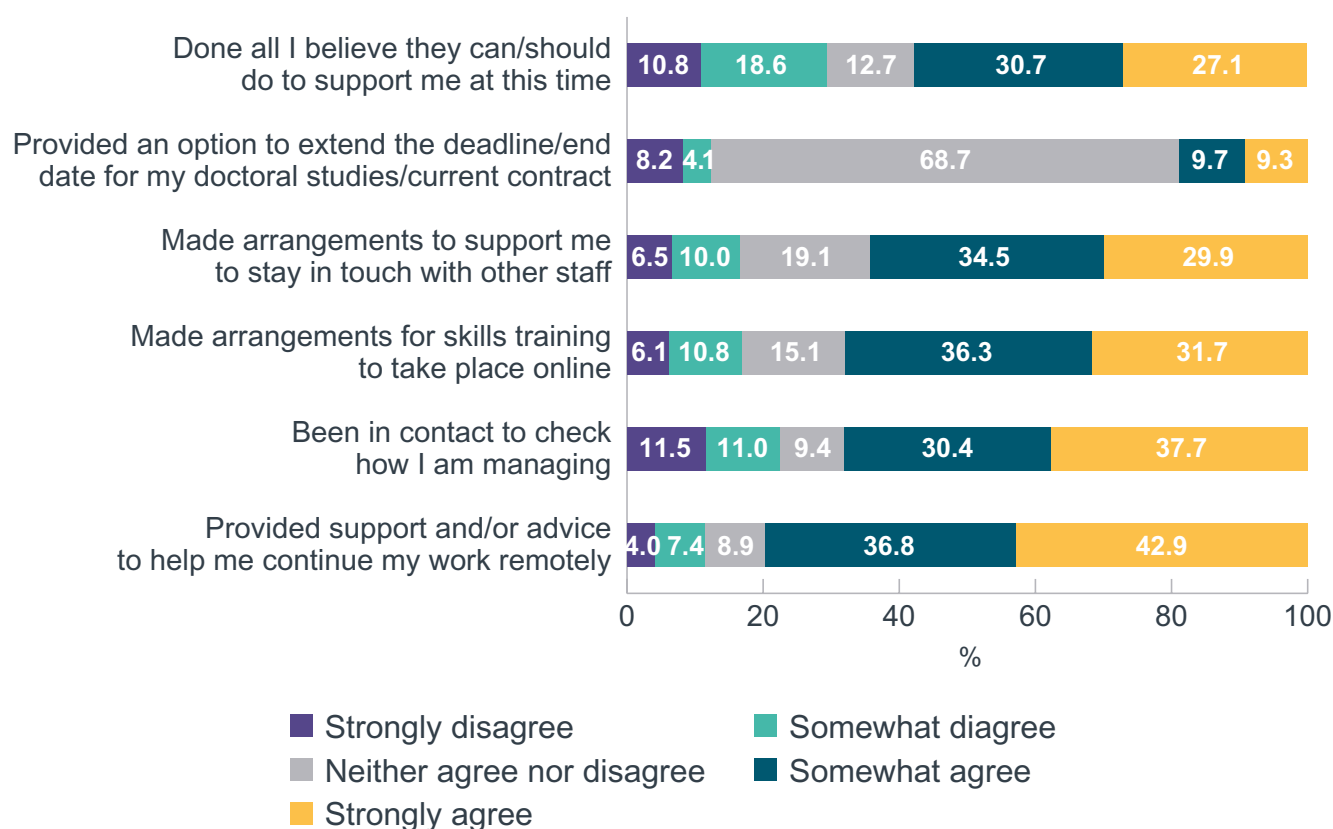
"Better recognition of the challenges of working from home and home schooling at the same time. I did not ask for contingency leave as I was worried how this might be seen and also by the possible reaction of my line manager as I did not think this will be supported. I think my employer should have done more to support us with this, maybe 'asking' all parents in this situation to take some of the contingency leave available and not wait for us to put our hands up. It was a struggle but I was determined to make it work but it was really stressful and difficult."

"Understanding that caring responsibilities also changed due to Covid-19 ie my usually independent elderly parents required a higher level of care due to their own isolation."

3 What support were institutions offering?

Staff were asked a number of questions about the support and resources provided by their institution during the transition to remote working. The levels of support offered are reported by staff and reflect their perceptions rather than concrete policies or actions taken by institutions. In this way, we can only measure relationships between the support that *had worked to reach staff*. For example, it may be institutional policy to offer arrangements for skills training to take place online, but if this is not being carried out *in practice* this will not be shown in the charts below.

Figure 5: My department/faculty/central university services has...



Support was measured through responses to a list of options, shown in Figure 5. Overall, over half of staff either strongly agreed or agreed with the majority of statements. The only exception to this was 'provided an option to extend the deadline/end date for my doctoral studies/current contract' for which the majority of staff (68.7%) said they neither agreed nor disagreed that their institution had.

Despite the number of positive responses, the proportion of staff who responded 'disagree' or 'strongly disagree' to each statement was not insubstantial.

On HEIs overall response to the pandemic and related policies, staff were asked how far they agree or disagree that their institution had 'done all I believe they can/should do to support me at this time'. Over half of staff (57.8%) strongly agreed or agreed with this statement, however, the proportion of staff who disagreed or strongly disagreed (29.4%) was higher than for any other statement. Just under a third of staff felt this institution could, or should, be doing more to support them in their transition to remote working.

A concerning finding was the proportions of staff who said they disagreed or strongly disagreed (22.5%) that their department, faculty or central university services had 'been in contact to check how I am managing'. Checking in on staff is particularly important during this time of increased isolation and risk of depression and anxiety, and would usually be the responsibility of direct line managers. While there is clearly good practice here in many teams, 68% of staff strongly agreed or agreed someone had been in contact to check how they are managing, a large group of staff have 'fallen through the cracks'. Checking in, regular communication and loneliness were also key themes identified in the open-ended questions around what more HEIs could do for staff, detailed in Section 5.

4 The relationship between institutional support and staff wellbeing

All types of support offered by institutions were associated with increased satisfaction with life, work and work-life balance, and all differences were statistically significant. Respondents were split into three groups (strongly agree/agree, neutral and strongly disagree/disagree) for each type of support and then compared for mean differences in their satisfaction ratings. These are presented in Figure 8 along with 95% confidence intervals.

Figure 8: Average life satisfaction by access to different types of support

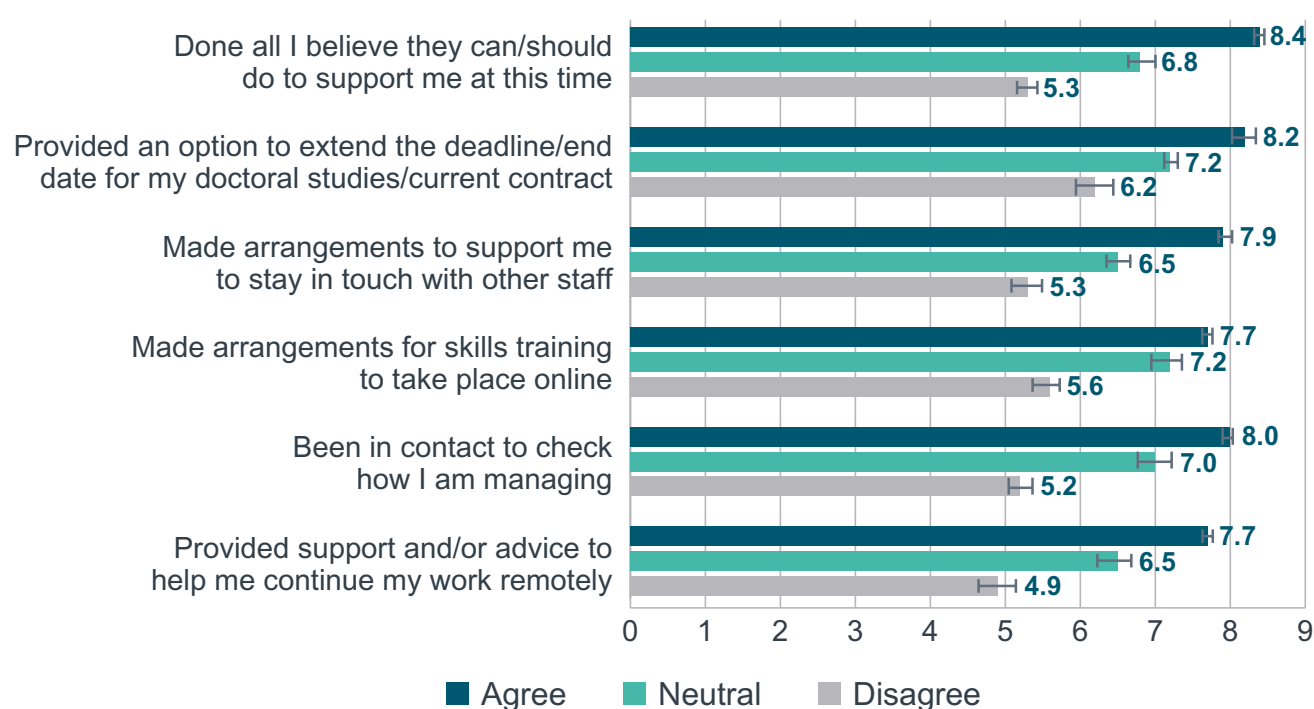


Figure 9: Average job satisfaction by access to different types of support

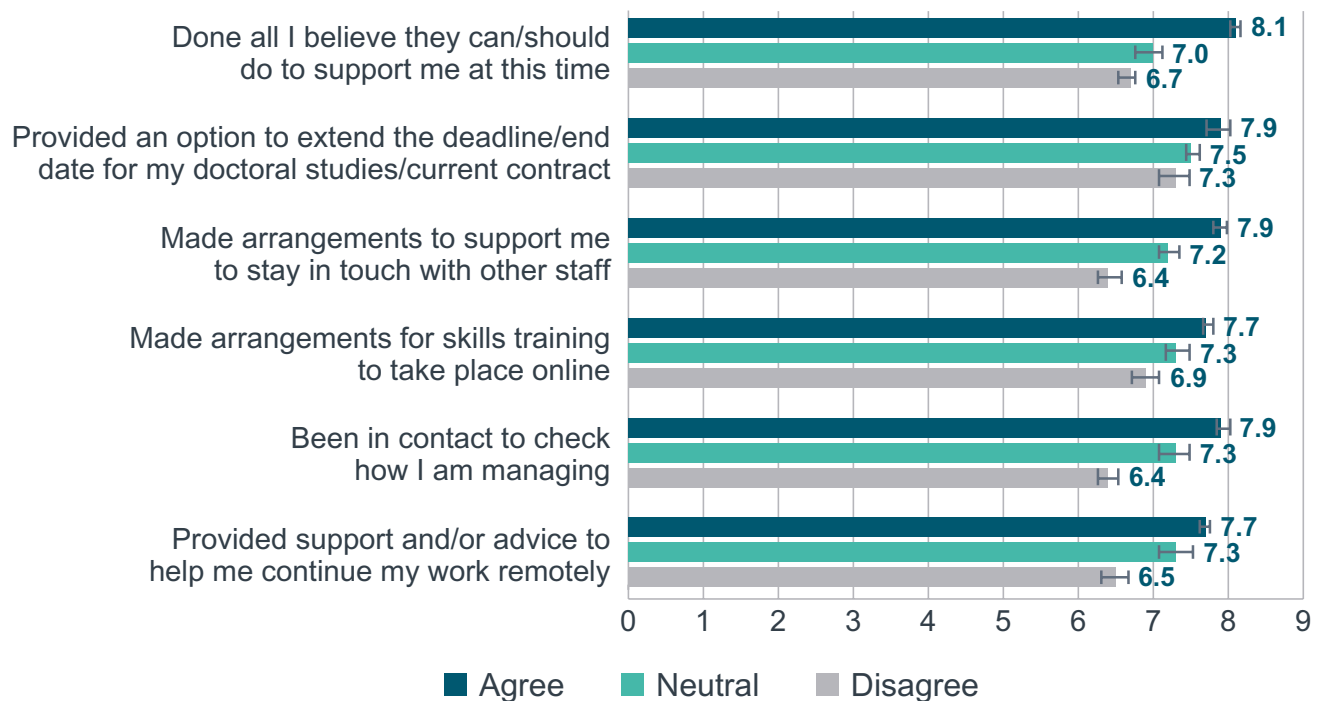
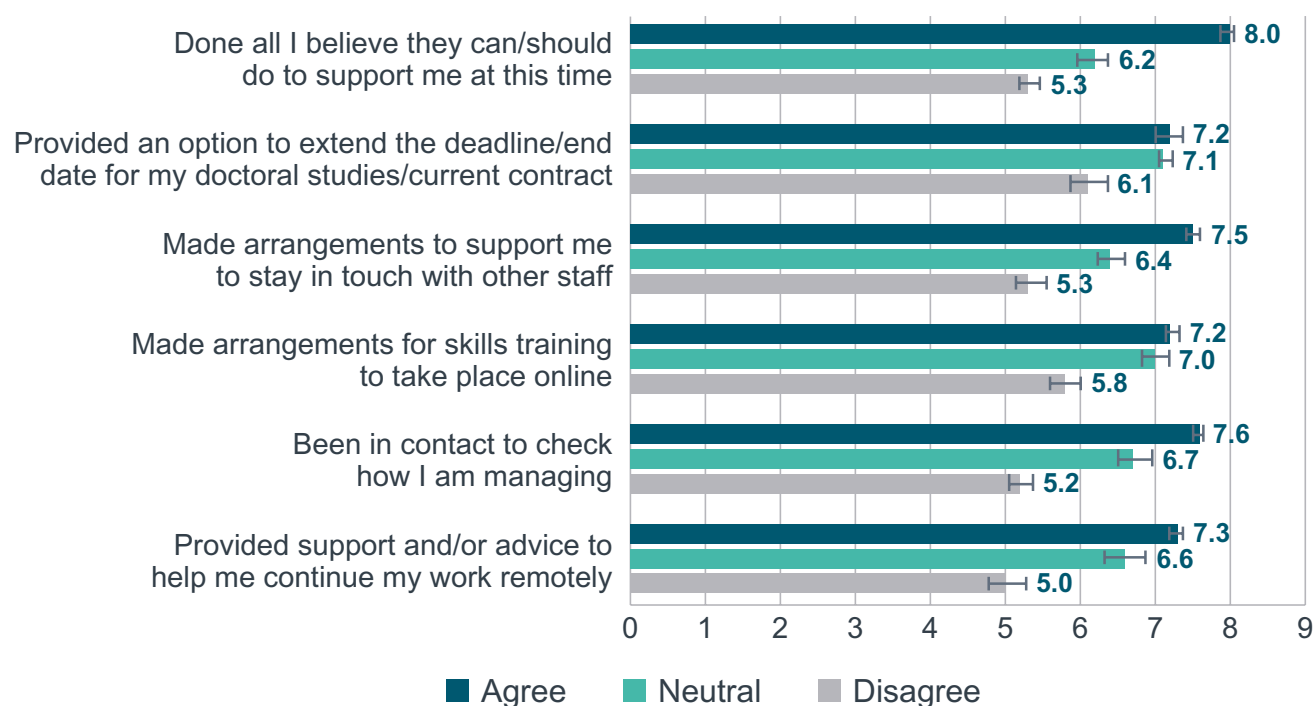


Figure 10: Average satisfaction with work-life balance by access to different types of support



Somewhat surprisingly, the largest differences in scores, between staff who reported that they agreed or disagreed that their institution offered each type of support, were for overall life satisfaction rather than satisfaction with their job or work-life balance. This highlights the importance of a positive working environment to overall wellbeing.

The largest associations between life satisfaction and institutional support were seen for the statements: my institution has... 'Done all I believe they can/ should do to support me at this time'; 'Been in contact to check how I am managing'; and 'Provided support and/or advice to help me continue my work remotely'.

The average life satisfaction rating of staff who said they felt their institution had done all they could to support them was very high at 8.4, compared to 5.3 for those who disagreed. Staff who said someone at the institution had checked to see if they were managing had an average life satisfaction score of 8.0, compared to 5.2 for those who did not. And staff who had been provided with support or advice to continue remote working had an average score of 7.7, compared to just 4.9 for those who did not.

While the associations between institutional support and staff wellbeing were strong and statistically significant, we cannot draw any causal inferences from this finding. It is possible that institutional support led to improved staff wellbeing, but it is also possible that staff with high wellbeing were more optimistic about their situation and more likely to notice or appreciate the hard work of their institution.

5 In their own words: what do staff need from their institution?

Staff were asked directly about actions their institution could take to improve their experiences of remote working, with the question: ‘Is there one thing your employer could do or have done differently to help improve your experience of transitioning to remote working?’

Over 1,000 staff members provided responses to this question, and the majority of responses were considered and detailed. Given the total sample was 1,310, the number of responses to open-ended questions suggest that staff were eager to discuss their experiences, identify potential solutions and offer suggestions. The question was framed to identify potential solutions to issues faced by staff, and while many staff did offer suggestions, many comments simply outlined issues with their institution’s responses, or their immediate team and colleagues, in the rapid move to home-working. Many staff members also detailed more than one action their employer could have done differently or more than one way in which they felt the institution’s response was lacking.

Encouragingly, around one in five responses (201) were from staff who said there was nothing more their institution could have done, or who had a positive statement about their institution’s response. These comments tended to be more concise than for other themes, with many staff members simply commenting ‘no’ or ‘nothing’, however, a number of staff expressed an appreciation of the complexity of the situation and the fast-changing policy context, for example:

“No, I feel very supported and proud of the way our institution has handled everything. Very caring and considerate.”

“It was a difficult time, everyone was doing the best they could. I don’t think the University could have done any more than it did.”

Other staff members referenced their individual situation and preferences, often acknowledging that their experience may not be the same as other staff members, particularly those with caring responsibilities:

“My experience has been fine, probably because I am not a carer. I am not aware of any proactive help offered to carers, but this may be because I do not need to access this support.”

“I don’t think my employer could do more. I feel really supported but I think this is more dependent on individual line managers as there is no institutional wide policy.”

Among staff who did suggest areas from improvement, five main themes emerged, detailed in the table below:

Table 1: Eight most frequent themes identified (N=1,005)

Theme	Frequencies
1 Equipment and practical resources: Requests for additional IT or home-office equipment, assistance to purchase equipment or more effective systems for the distribution of equipment.	358
2 Senior leadership actions: Suggested actions for senior leadership, or critique of senior leadership actions	179
3 Workload and capacity: Comments on the levels of workload and staffing	111
4 Checking in: Requests for more contact, check-ins with colleagues and/or managers, and day-to-day support.	107
5 Institution-wide communications: Comments on, or critique of, communications for senior leadership	97

Less frequent, but common themes also included specific line management issues (often linked the theme 4), suggestions around the move to online teaching and specific recommendations related to remote learning, and comments and suggestions about the number and timing of meetings.

1 Equipment and resources

Comments about the adequacy of supply of equipment and resources for homeworking were by far the most common theme in responses. There was a broad range of needs relating to resources. A large number of comments related to resources essential for remote working, for example, access to a computer or laptop. Others related more to increased comfort and productivity but were not necessarily essential. Common sub-themes included that the supply of equipment was insufficient for work needs, that supply was slow and systems for requesting equipment difficult to navigate, and that staff were unhappy with the amount of equipment they had to purchase themselves:

“My only issue is that there has been no real support offered to purchase equipment we need to enable us to work from home longterm.”

“They should have contributed to costs. They have not contributed, or given the cost of living increase to our salaries. This is insulting considering the costs we are incurring working from home.”

“Had to wait over 6 months to get a University laptop. Was working on very old personal laptop up until this point.”

Along with requests for physical equipment, many staff members wanted support and training in using new systems and programmes:

“Offered online training in how to use software which we need to support home working eg Zoom, Panopto. Not everyone can easily pick that stuff up - I certainly can’t.”

Many of the comments related to (perceived) lack of proactivity of institutions in ensuring staff have the equipment they needed, and a number of staff members specifically requested that the institution be more proactive in carrying out Display Screen Equipment (DSE) assessments:

“Been more proactive about the technology side of things - checking everyone has what they need. They respond when requested but have not been proactive on this front.”

“Done a risk assessment to ensure all equipment is suitable and working from home is unlikely to cause unnecessary damage or conditions e.g. back pain, carpal tunnel syndrome, eye strain etc.”

2 Senior leadership actions

This theme was broader than the previous one, and covers responses that critiqued actions taken by senior leadership in the move to remote working. Because respondents were drawn from different institutions, it may be difficult to draw more general inferences about comments related to specific actions institutions took. For example, some staff members referenced redundancies actioned by senior leadership and the handling of financial difficulties:

“Workloads have increased and work is more intensive yet we did not get our annual pay rise, this is a disappointment and not motivational.”

“Since then, the debts have apparently piled up. In October the University announced staff contracts will be cancelled, staff will be reemployed on lower paid contracts, with a sliding scale of pay cuts from 5-15% being implemented for all staff above the lowest two job grades.”

Many of the comments focused on the speed of action taken by institutions. The majority of staff expressed frustration at how slowly the institution had responded and said they felt their institution should have enacted remote working before it was dictated by official government policy. However, some staff members felt the institution could have been more considered in their approach and taken more time to assess the most beneficial ways of working:

“They could have admitted that we were locking down sooner, rather than deciding on the Friday before official lockdown that it was happening. They need to be more prepared in the future for issues.”

“Be more decisive and act quicker.”

Many of these comments were linked to the next most frequent theme: workload issues. Senior leadership were seen by some staff to have unnecessarily increased workloads through their actions, but also to have been lacking in recognition of the increased work staff were doing:

“Whilst I understand the decision to retain deadlines for issues such as staff annual reviews, there seemed to be little consideration for the people having to provide these meetings to multiple staff.”

“Acknowledge/reward the huge workload increase for teaching staff that online teaching has caused. It would be nice to feel that the huge increase in workload has been recognised.”

“There is a mismatch between the messages coming from the Executive and what individual line managers are saying - deadlines have not changed and this is putting extra pressure on staff.”

Furthermore, while these comments often did not directly reference the quality of communications from senior leadership, there is undoubtedly some overlap between perceptions of decisions made by senior leadership, their actions, and the communication of these decisions and actions. As outlined below in Theme 5, there was a lot of variation in the quality of communications from senior leadership with many staff members expressing dissatisfaction.

Another common comment concerned a perception that senior leadership did not listen to staff ‘on the ground’ before making decisions:

“Listen to concerns raised by staff and treat them with empathy. Recognise that staff are being asked to put themselves at risk. We are more than willing to do this but it would be made easier if we were well supported by our managers.”

3 Workload and capacity

The increase in workload experienced by staff, and a lack of acknowledgement or recognition of the additional time staff were putting in, was another common theme:

“We are working extremely long hours and dealing with serious lack of support to deliver teaching. Research is almost impossible due to this.”

As discussed above, there were strong links between this theme and senior management actions, and also with the themes below of checking in and institution-wide communications. While the reasons for increased workloads was often acknowledged to be outside of the institution’s control, a recurring critique was the lack of acknowledgement and action to help either reduce some demands or support staff who were working longer hours:

“Deprioritised work to ensure everyone’s wellbeing was maintained. Workload has increased as nothing has been taken off the table.”

“Not halt recruitment of new posts. My workload increased two-fold during lockdown and we really needed the extra resource that we were planning to get prior to the pandemic. This all severely impacted my mental and physical health.”

“We were told to look after ourselves and given lots of emails about wellbeing, however, in reality the workload wasn’t adjusted to match this message and we weren’t given the appropriate support.”

There was also some discussion of the lack of acknowledgement of the impact of policies aimed at supporting staff with caring responsibilities on their colleagues:

“Workloads have increased with little recognition of impact on mental health (eg I have been covering for people who were on contingency leave + there has been extra work as result of pandemic).”

Yet others, who had caring responsibilities, discussed the lack of support or flexibility in expectations. This likely reflects the differences in approaches to supporting staff with caring responsibilities across institutions, which would differentially impact staff members with and without caring responsibilities:

“To help staff with caring responsibilities reduce some work commitments / identify essential tasks and prioritise these - through home schooling and now v intensive teaching / student support nothing else is officially ‘taken away’.”

Many of the comments about increased workloads specifically referenced remote teaching, including the expectation to deliver high-quality content in a new format and managing student expectations:

“Acknowledge/reward the huge workload increase for teaching staff that online teaching has caused. It would be nice to feel that the huge increase in workload has been recognised.”

4 Checking in

A particularly striking result from the quantitative analysis was the high proportion of staff (22.5%) who said their employer had not checked in on them to see how they were doing since moving to remote working. While this impacted a minority of staff, checking in should be a minimum expectation and is particularly important given the seriousness and volatility of the situation. Those staff who said they had not been checked in were perhaps those who needed it most; they reported the lowest satisfaction with their life, job and work-life balance.

A lack of direct support and contact also came through as an important theme in the qualitative research. Although some staff complained that they had too many meetings to attend, many more staff said they had no or very little contact with their colleagues.

The qualitative responses gave more nuanced detail to the discrepancy in perceptions of staff contact with their team and managers. While a number reported no contact, others were dissatisfied with the frequency or regularity of contact:

“I would like more sustained support, no one has checked in since early in April to see whether our working from home needs have changed, and I don’t know where to look for further support.”

“Some regular 1-1s from immediate line manager as have to request these so feel am ‘bothering’ them. Team catch ups are about work and cannot discuss private matters here. I feel as a manager they should be regularly ‘checking in’ with all staff in their team from a workload and mental health/wellbeing perspective. Do feel a little left to ‘get on with it’.”

This feeling of ‘being left to get on with it’ was expressed by a number of staff members:

“I feel like we have just been left to get on with it, and we need regular checks on how we are. All we get are emails with links to read, but what’s missing is the personal 1:1 support.”

“Regular catch-ups with line manager/researchers. I feel quite isolated and at times like people wouldn’t notice if I wasn’t working.”

Many staff members made recommendations here that could be easily actioned, for example for line managers to make sure there are regular meetings in place (both 1:1 and with the team), and that senior leadership should have oversight of whether staff are being contacted by their managers:

“Formalising or regularising contact with colleagues, to avoid isolation and silo working.”

Some staff specifically discussed the lack of ‘informal’ contact since the move to remote working, with meetings focused on work and little time to build connections with colleagues:

“The thing that feels ‘lacking’ is the ‘chat’, the ‘corridor conversations’. There seem very few ways of getting that information that you now only get if you’re in the right meetings at the right time. Understanding the broader context is now not spread so easily.”

“More social activities as working from home is very isolating and people miss the day to day office chat.”

Within the large numbers of staff who said they would like more contact and support from their line managers, and a smaller number of managers said they were struggling with the additional pressures they were now under to support staff, with little or no additional support or training themselves. This suggests that in some cases the solution may not be as simple as asking managers to devote more time to their staff's wellbeing. Institutions should seek to gain an understanding of why managers may not be checking in on staff; and if they themselves are not coping with workloads:

"I think generally middle managers find that they are providing a huge amount of support for their direct reports and teams, but don't get the same level of support from their managers. There is an assumption we are all OK and just getting on with things. I think more/additional support for middle managers managing teams to move to remote working, and then training on how to manage team effectively remotely would have been very helpful."

"More specific training to managers having to support teams remotely and checking their well being."

5 Institution-wide communications

A large number of responses were specifically around the clarity, frequency, and transparency of communications from senior leadership. Staff expressed frustration that they were not updated about decisions promptly, and time was not taken to ensure information was relevant to them.

"They could have been better at communicating at the start of lockdown in March 2020 as there were conflicting messages across the institution initially."

"There are many things they could have done better. Communicating an understanding that this was difficult and in an unequal way would have been encouraging."

There was also a feeling from some staff of a disconnect between rhetoric and action from senior leadership.

"We were told to look after ourselves and given lots of emails about wellbeing, however, in reality the workload wasn't adjusted to match this message and we weren't given the appropriate support."

"There is a mismatch between the messages coming from the Executive and what individual line managers are saying - deadlines have not changed and this is putting extra pressure on staff."

Recommendations

Advance HE has a number of tailored recommendations derived from this research and our expertise in working with HEIs. These are designed to promote a supportive environment for staff with an emphasis on equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI). We propose actions institutions can take to ensure the move to more flexible working is done in the most inclusive and productive way. We have split these recommendations into 'quick wins', which include changes that can be introduced immediately, or within the next six months, and 'longer-term recommendations' that will require more time to review and plan based on specific needs of the institution, and may take more than six months to implement.

Many institutions will have implemented some of these recommendations, so we encourage readers to consider their institutions own needs while referring to the recommendations. One thing that came out of the qualitative research was that often institutional policy was not cascading to action through the whole organisation, so readers should pay particular attention to how far policies are effectively actioned within their HEI.

Quick wins

Practical support

- + Offer easy and straightforward access to appropriate office equipment at home, including desks, chairs, additional monitors, keyboards, etc.
- + Embed the use of virtual conferencing facilities for meetings (informal and formal).
- + Consult with staff who have caring responsibilities and disabled staff (including those who use assistive technology or require other reasonable adjustments, have mental health conditions and/or have health conditions that have required them to shield), to ensure that short-term changes to policy and practice will address their specific requirements.
- + For disabled staff, ensure there is continuity in implementing reasonable adjustments both in the office and at home.
- + Consider the equality issues within hybrid, flexible and agile working and the long-term implications for staff. Define what is meant by the terms and how different forms of working can be used can help to provide clarity for all. For example, in the case of hybrid working, does every weekly departmental meeting need to be both in-person and virtual, or could the team aim to have one out of every four meetings in person, with the other three virtual by default?

Pastoral support

- + Provide training for managers and leaders at all levels to support them in effectively managing remote working teams. This should help to ensure good communication, awareness of wellbeing issues and, in turn, staff productivity.
- + Formalise open and frequent conversations between employees and line managers to monitor staff members' wellbeing, including working hours to avoid overworking.
- + Gather information about your staff's wellbeing and support requirements that are specific to your institution. Anonymous feedback mechanisms, (eg pulse surveys) can be a useful tool for identifying issues as they arise. Where possible, include demographic questions to understand the impact on different groups of staff.
- + Where staff/peer networks and groups are in existence, ensure these are appropriately resourced and supported, with the work recognised and rewarded as appropriate.

Communications from senior leadership

- + Establish frequent internal communications (eg weekly/monthly briefing or town hall events) from a range of leaders and managers making clear the range of support available to staff, recognising ongoing concerns and outlining how they are being addressed. Such communications should state the importance of EDI and initiatives to improving inclusivity across the institution.
- + Senior leadership should demonstrate support for flexible working and acknowledge the challenges and opportunities caring responsibilities bring to enable and promote an inclusive culture.

Longer-term recommendations

Practical support

- + Invest in resources to support and enable effective remote working long-term, including responsive IT support.
- + Provide staff (and students, where relevant) with training on how to effectively use new programmes and devices
- + Use communication channels set up in direct response to Covid-19 in the short term (eg working groups, staff networking, virtual meetings, etc), and consider how these could be embedded into the infrastructure.
- + Consult with staff who have caring responsibilities and disabled staff (including those who use assistive technology, have mental health conditions and have health conditions that have required them to shield), to ensure that longer-term changes to policy and practice will address their specific requirements.

- + Consider how physical and virtual environments impact upon collegiality and opportunities for collaboration in light of the shift to increased flexibility and remote working.

Pastoral support

- + Training and resources for managers (as above) should help enable their staff to work flexibly, as well as encouraging open and honest conversations about the needs of the organisation and of the individual.
- + Focus on the strategic priorities of your institution, and then look at how staff are enabled and empowered to support and deliver strategic priorities.
- + Consider starting conversations around how merit is determined and evaluated given the disruption to the work environment caused by Covid-19 and the impact it has had on opportunities for staff to engage in their research, training, committees, conferences and collaboration with colleagues.
- + Consider how to integrate and embed formal Human Resource structures (eg appraisal, induction, return from long term leave, etc) with explicit questions about the impact of Covid-19 to ensure staff are supported, in much the same way that processes are adapted for those returning from eg long-term sick leave or maternity leave. Again, this is an opportunity to adopt broader inclusive practices and principles to be formally embedded throughout research institutes.
- + Staff working within equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) have reported the emotional toll of their work (see, for example, NDAP, 2020). Recognise the emotional toll that some jobs within an institution can have and consider the support available to staff. Many organisations are likely to have Employee Assistance Programmes (EAP) but staff may not feel actively supported if they are simply referred to it. Consider how else they can be supported, for example, check-in following referral to establish if the process was easy if it helped or seek to understand why staff do not use the EAP.

Senior leadership actions and strategy

- + Give particular consideration to groups underrepresented in the organisation, and how engagement with these groups, both internally and externally, could be increased.

Concluding remarks

This paper provides an overview of staff experiences at UK HEIs in the Autumn term 2020. We have identified where there are commonalities in experiences, and highlighted issues that were reported by a large number of staff. Ultimately, this research aims to encourage institutions to reflect on their own practices during the initial transition to remote working, to identify policies and practices they plan to take forward as the country opens up again and to identify areas for improvement going forward. It is important that any changes to staff working arrangements not only avoid detrimental impacts but enhance staff experience and productivity.

As campuses reopen, there are many opportunities for HEIs to improve working conditions for staff. Not only can they seek to ensure that existing inequalities are not exacerbated, but they can also consider the potential to provide a more flexible approach to working which could improve gender and disability equality and support staff with caring responsibilities.

Method

The survey

In total, the survey consisted of 35 items and took approximately 15 minutes to complete. The survey was developed in-house, pulling together items from established questionnaires (eg on work/life satisfaction and other Covid-19 related surveys), our own recommended equality monitoring questions, and knowledge gained from our previous research on gender differences in UK HE staff (eg the 2016 Athena Survey of Science, Engineering and Technology, the Horizon 2020-funded ACT project, and the REC and Athena SWAN good practice database). It is worth noting, that given the purpose of this survey and the initial aim of establishing whether remote working provides positive opportunities for women specifically, we did not collect sensitive personal data that was not going to be used for these immediate purposes. This was to align with the UK GDPR restrictions around having a specific intended use for data relating to respondents' sexual orientation, religion, and trans identity and history. The survey was distributed through a number of wide-reaching avenues including Advance HE's monthly newsletters and mailing lists, Twitter and via the Advance HE website. The majority of respondents (92.1%) completed the survey in the first four weeks of it being available, between 27 October and 24 November 2020; however, the survey was open until 22 December 2020.

The sample

A total of 1,310 members of UK HE staff responded to the survey. Overall, the sample covered 125 UK HEIs. With regards to HEI location, 90.5% of respondents were currently employed at an English HEI (excluding London, which represented 2.2% of the sample). An additional 5.4% and 1.9% of respondents were based in Scotland and Wales, respectively.

The majority of respondents were professional and support staff (61.5%), with the remaining 38.5% of staff being on academic contracts. There was a decent spread across respondents' current roles within their HEI (ie from post-docs to registrars being included), but the majority of the sample (53.6%) was contained within the range of administrative staff/assistant professional staff to lecturers and senior professional/technical staff. Respondent age ranged from 22 to 74 years of age, with the average age of respondents being 45.1 years old (Standard Deviation = 10.1 years). Although representation among staff reporting a disability was six times that reported at the UK HE sector level (29.9% compared with 5.3%) (Advance HE, 2020), there was relatively lower representation among men (18.7% compared with 45.4% at the sector level) and Black, Asian and minority ethnic staff (ie 6.0% compared with 10.3% at the sector level).

As this sample was obtained using various advertising methods, additional sample weights were calculated using respondent gender and ethnicity to improve the sample's representativeness of the UK HE staff population. Respondents who indicated 'Non-binary' or 'Other' for gender were excluded from the calculation of sample weights because numbers were too small. Similarly, weights were calculated using an aggregate of Black, Asian and minority ethnic respondents to mitigate the relatively low response rates among Black staff and those who selected 'other ethnic background'.

Population estimates were obtained from the 2018-19 HESA Staff record. Applying these weights corrected the overrepresentation of white female staff in the raw sample. The final weighted sample included 1,270 respondents, of which 557 (43.8%) were men and 714 (56.2%) were women.

Analysis

The majority of quantitative analysis was conducted using simple descriptive techniques in Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), for example, cross-tabulations and calculations of mean scores across groups. Tests of statistical significance of any differences observed between groups, including chi-squared tests and t-tests were used where appropriate.

The survey received 1,005 open text responses. Approximately one in five (213) responses were manually reviewed using Atlas.ti, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software to identify recurring themes and mark these themes with a 'code'. The ten most frequent themes were identified at this stage (including 'no' or positive statements).

To code the remaining responses, Advance HE used Atlas.ti's auto-coding function. This involved creating a list of search terms/phrases for each theme, searching all responses for instances of these terms/phrases and assigning a code to each response. Atlas.ti uses machine learning technology to capture inflected versions of the search terms/phrases (for example, 'run' as well as 'running' and 'ran') and relevant synonyms. Although the use of auto-coding reduced the need to manually review each response, a researcher was still required to screen all instances identified to determine whether to include or exclude the instance within the code.

Following this stage, all responses without a code (168) were reviewed manually to ensure these final responses were assigned the appropriate code (if any). 16 responses were assigned no code, either because they did not fit into the top 10 themes or the response was unclear. Finally, the number of themes were reduced to five based on the numbers of responses with relevant corresponding codes to each theme.

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