

COVID-19 and Workplace Equity

Context

As the COVID-19 crisis hit the response of university management has had immediate and significant impacts for the equitable workloads of academic staff.

As campuses were closed and courses migrated to online teaching, an enormous amount of labour was required to ensure that remote delivery was successful. Although some universities suspended classes for a week, or commenced the teaching year later, in order to enable staff to prepare, many did not.

In addition, staff found themselves doing significantly more affective labour to provide added pastoral care to anxious students, not to mention supporting other colleagues, including early career researchers and casual staff, at a time of great uncertainty and precarity. They further found themselves having to organize and equip home offices for the online delivery of teaching and services. While these pressures were experienced by all academics, migrating to a home working environment has had particular consequences for those with family and caring responsibilities.

Workload Inequity

Those with family and caring responsibilities are under particular workload stress as these responsibilities are having significant impacts on their work productivity and ability to meet targets around teaching and research. Even the very act of teaching or meeting via Zoom becomes close to impossible to perform effectively when one is looking after children or others needing care. The needs of children or elderly parents are not predictable or regular and therefore cannot be neatly scheduled to 'fit around' full-time work hours. It is therefore unreasonable to expect university staff to organise a full work day around such care responsibilities.

This unprecedented situation places staff in an extremely difficult position where they are required to simultaneously undertake the roles of carer and worker. It is simply not appropriate to prioritise work at the expense of the well-being of children, or parents, to whom one has a legal and moral responsibility.

Early and mid-career researchers in particular—among whom are the majority of those performing care work at home—are facing the added burden and uncertainty of having their research development and thus their careers stalled, as their teaching and administrative workloads spiral out of control. As for current postgraduate research students and recent higher-degree graduates, who often work as casual academics, they are now facing not only blocks to their own research trajectory but a probable loss of the casual teaching income on which they had been relying.

If research is not supported—at the very least through the provision of time to perform it—then both student learning outcomes and university reputations will suffer in the longer term, as the next generation of researchers is hampered in its capacity to produce high quality outcomes.

University management's statements about supporting 'flexible work' and encouraging 'self-care' ring hollow when staff are overloaded with even greater work performance expectations at a time when their family responsibilities have increased dramatically. The superficial language of flexibility that some universities have adopted and promote at this time is not reassuring. Instead such language has the opposite effect, creating additional pressure for staff.

Likewise, while access to recreation and carer's leave can be useful in some contexts, use of leave is not an adequate response to the unique, structural challenges posed by the COVID-19 situation without a concomitant adjustment of expectations around productivity and outputs.

As a sector that regularly markets and celebrates its achievements in advancing gender equity in research and career development, through, among other things, promoting flexible work practices to enhance employee well-being, we call on all universities to demonstrate genuine leadership in supporting university staff during this global pandemic.

We offer a number of practical suggestions to meaningfully support academic staff with family responsibilities during the COVID-19 crisis and in its aftermath:

1. Replacement of the language of 'working flexibly' with messaging that acknowledges the added pressure on staff, particularly those with caring responsibilities. This will mean adjusting expectations of productivity to realistically reflect what is possible under the circumstances. For instance, instituting a 25-hour week (pro-rata for part-time staff) that is considered a full working week for pay and performance assessment purposes may be a reasonable way forward.
2. An immediate suspension of performance management and evaluation exercises for all staff in 2020, and a revision of targets in teaching, research and administration for 2021 and 2022.
3. Revision of publication expectations for future applications for study leave and for promotion, as per 'performance relative to opportunity' guidelines.
4. In 2020, provision of teaching support for academics in need, especially those with high teaching loads and with carer responsibilities, in the form of, for example, marking assistance, sessional relief for class teaching, or the option to run fewer online classes for a unit.
5. Provision of a loading for all casual academics who have been delivering online teaching in 2020, in order to both recompense their added work and provide financial support for the unexpected added cost of running a home office (including internet costs).
6. In 2021, provision of a time loading to academics for all teaching and teaching-related tasks such that the expectations of a 'full' teaching load are lowered, providing staff with time to re-establish their research.

7. Consideration of the possibility of lengthening the midyear winter recess period, with a later start to second semester..

University staff have admirably responded to the call to move teaching online, to deal with an increase in student queries, and to adapt all administrative processes. We ask that university managements respond to the need to recognise these additional demands, addressing these workload concerns.