

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (Included Submissions)

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Who Cares? Opportunities and Challenges Posed by Agile Working Practices for Carers in Transformative Times

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Research Domain: Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

Abstract: Caring responsibilities are widespread and increased in the Covid-19 pandemic. Adoption of agile working practices has been fast-tracked, potentially creating opportunities for Higher Education (HE) institutions to enable carer-friendly working practices. We undertook discussion groups, a survey and focus groups with staff at Oxford Brookes University throughout 2020 and 2021 (ongoing). It emerges caring is prevalent (52%), and that distinct benefits and challenges are created by agile working for HE staff with caring responsibilities.

The aims of this work are to increase the visibility of the 'hidden cost' of caring and to facilitate institutional policy development. We hope to achieve this by providing insight and guidance for managers, institutions and policy makers about the benefits and challenges of agile working practices for staff with caring responsibilities. In doing so, we aim to add to the 'care-focused feminism' discourse and enable progression, fulfilment, and sustainability of carers' careers.

Paper:

Background:

Understanding the lives of Higher Education (HE) staff with caring responsibilities is fundamental to workforce planning and sector sustainability. Fifty-two percent of staff report having caring responsibilities (Oxford Brookes Athena Swan Survey, 2021), often consisting of concurrent aspects relating to young children and older adults. Development of effective working regimes for HE staff with caring responsibilities has implications for post-Covid educational, social and economic recovery. The lack of visibility associated with caring roles and the associated hidden costs for individuals is broadly acknowledged (Moreau, 2019). Agile working may present an opportunity to aid employees in managing the dual roles. Survey data suggests agile working may improve flexibility options for staff with caring roles (Athena Swan Survey, Oxford Brookes University, 2021). Definitions vary, but broadly agile working creates flexibility in working patterns and locations to allow employees to perform

their role effectively (with the guidance of their employer).

Aims:

1. To identify if, and in what ways, agile working helps staff deliver their professional role and fulfil their caring responsibilities
2. To produce good practice guidance for policy makers

Method:

Informal discussion groups were carried out with professional services and academic staff at Oxford Brookes University to engage with staff with caring responsibilities. This was a 'listening exercise' to understand the key benefits and challenges experienced by HE staff in relation to Covid-19 pandemic lockdowns. Two groups were conducted with 10 attendees on two occasions in August 2020. Staff represented a range of departments, roles and levels. A Health and Life Sciences (HLS) faculty wide Athena Swan survey was conducted in May 2021. We included caring specific questions in this survey to gather further insight into staff experience regarding caring perspectives, and the associated institutional policy and departmental support. The final phase will consist of follow up focus groups examining expectations, aspirations, and realities of agile working in post-covid times with managers and HE staff.

Results:

Discussion groups - August 2020
Positive views on the opportunity to work flexibly were that it made caring easier and more fluid. However, for some this also presented a significant challenge, the lack of separation between these dual roles making life more stressful. This was a particularly strong narrative in relation to academic staff. Also highlighted, was the need for a culture which genuinely accepts flexible working arrangements and provides appropriate infrastructure (particularly Information Technology).

Athena Swan survey - June 2021
The HLS faculty wide survey was completed by 102 members of staff (81% female) from all departments, 75% were academic staff, although a range of roles were represented.

Over 50% of respondents classified themselves as having caring responsibilities, of these, almost half reported concurrent caring roles. Most frequently, staff reported caring for children of different ages and older adults. Nearly two thirds of respondents agreed that flexible working arrangements as a result of Covid-19 helped them to manage their caring responsibilities. However, 45% of respondents also felt that their combined work and caring responsibilities over the last 12-months were unsustainable.

Future work - September 2021
Future work will seek to:

1. Explore expectations of 'caring', 'agile working'
2. Understand who self-identifies as a carer

3. Identify the realities of agile working for carers and seek suggestions of improvements
4. Produce and disseminate insights on agile working and create good practice guidance (to inform institutional policy)

Discussion / Implications

Our work is underpinned by The Women's Higher Education Network's Survey (Chalmers, 2020), which highlights how women who self-identify as belonging to dual career households are predominantly responsible for caring related duties. Our work adds to the 'care-focused feminism' and 'ethics of care' paradigms, which outline how society should value caregivers and give recognition in public and private spheres (Held, 2007). Prevalence of caring is high in the HE sector, by raising awareness of caring roles and its gendered implication, we will provide insight and increase visibility of this widespread challenge. HE institutions should be leading change in the recognition and enablement of carers' careers. The findings will aim to inform change in HE policies and create good practice principles around agile working for carers. Although it is clear there is the potential for agile working practices to better support staff with caring responsibilities, it is as yet unclear if the temporary agile working enforced by lockdowns will be formally adopted in the HEI sector. This presentation hopes to generate further discussion and help to inform the opportunities to shape the future of Higher Education within a post Covid context of recovery. (746 words)

References:

Held, V., 2007. The ethics of care. New York: Oxford University Press.

Chalmers, I. (2006). Sharing the Caring. Women's Higher Education Network. Viewed 08/03/2021 <<https://www.whenequality.org/research>>.

Moreau, M., (2019). Generating cultural change for a more inclusive HE sector: students and staff with caring responsibilities. Advance HE. Viewed 05 June 2021 <<https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/news-and-views/generating-cultural-change-more-inclusive-he-sector-students-and-staff-caring>>.