

385 Casting a long shadow: COVID-19 and UK female academics' research productivity.

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Research Domains

Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

Abstract

This paper reports on research findings into female academics' experiences of grant application and writing for publication during the COVID-19 pandemic. The paper draws on diary and interview research data collected during 2021 from 28 female academics across the career spectrum in 18 UK universities. Findings show that the pandemic exacerbated a troubled relationship between 'research' and 'teaching', pushing research time even further to the periphery. While for some participants the circumstances of the pandemic had positive impacts on networking and research opportunities, most experienced competing workloads, care and service responsibilities and fatigue as detrimental to their capacity to write grant applications and academic publications. Because any reduction in research productivity presents a potential risk to longer-term career success, the paper argues for a reckoning of damage done and determined policy development to mitigate the impacts.

Full paper

This paper reports on research findings into UK female academics' experiences of grant application and writing for publication during the COVID-19 pandemic. Findings reveal that participants navigated these demands in contexts of competing workloads, care and service responsibilities, precarity and fatigue over an extended period. As part of the symposium's wider exploration of ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated existing inequalities in the higher education (HE) sector, this paper argues for a reckoning of damage done to female academics' research productivity. This is a concern because the value placed on research income generation and peer-reviewed publications for academic status means that any reduction in research productivity presents a potential risk of longer-term career damage.

UK research funding is a complex arena in which UK academics must compete to further their research careers. It is a mixed economy, comprising competitive, performance-based funding from the UK government, grants from a wide range of charitable and commercial bodies, participation in international research programmes and small-scale institutional support. It is a far from level playing field. Not only is the sector characterised by 'entrenched institutional hierarchies' (Papatsiba & Cohen, 2019, p. 189) between 'research intensive' and 'teaching intensive' institutions, but gender and ethnic differences in grant awards are stubborn and stark. For example, 70% of recipients of UKRI research council Principal Investigator (PI) awards across all disciplines in 2020/2021 were male; 81% were White (UKRI, 2021).

Survey research conducted in a post-1992 UK university towards the end of the first lockdown (Carruthers Thomas, 2020) provided early evidence that the pandemic's shift of paid labour into the home was impacting female academics' research productivity more than their male peers. Findings showed female staff were more likely than male colleagues to take primary or sole responsibility for homeschooling, household tasks and others' care needs and less likely to have access to dedicated working space at home. Female academics with care responsibilities for children or elders were more likely than male colleagues to report that working from home had impacted upon their capacity to write grant applications or for publications and to sustain research projects.

Building on these findings, the author conducted qualitative research with 28 female academics, occupying roles across the career spectrum at 18 UK universities between March 2020 – September 2021 (Carruthers Thomas 2022). A diary, diary-interview method (DDIM) (Zimmerman & Wieder 1977) was used to investigate experiences of working from home, changes to working practices and longer-term career implications. The presentation of this paper will draw on these data to illustrate and support its claims.

Findings show that the pandemic exacerbated a troubled relationship between 'research' and 'teaching'. The lionising of the 'student experience' and the increased importance of external research funding to corporate budgets and reputations created tensions within individual academic workloads. The pivot to online delivery in March 2020 required time be devoted to adapting teaching materials and approaches. Workload allocation models redirected time towards teaching and student support, pushing research to the periphery. Participants noted that they, rather than male colleagues, shouldered the burden of students' increased demands for pastoral care. Homeschooling, household and/or care responsibilities were added to the challenges of navigating funding and publication deadlines around teaching or management duties. Several participants were encouraged to respond to the rash of quick turnaround, COVID-specific grants. Yet without 'process time ... as much time as needed ... embedded in the inherent logic of research activity' (Ylijoki, 2015, p.95) and in the face of the pandemic's physical and psychological challenges, most participants struggled to generate new ideas and write for publication.

It is important not to overlook narratives of new opportunities created by the pandemic's forced break with established processes. The hypermobility of virtual academic spaces enhanced accessibility for those with caring responsibilities and/or limited mobility. New networks forged via the rapid expansion of digital communication technologies brought unexpected career benefits for a minority. Yet most anxiously noted the career implications of decreased research activity - annual performance targets missed in the short-term; having 'nothing in the pipeline' in the longer-term.

Let's not lose the opportunity of the crisis to 'incite actions and bring contradictions to light' (Ahmann, 2018, p.144). Early preparations for the UK's Research Excellence Framework 2028 offers a window of opportunity to acknowledge that the burden of care carried by many female academics during the pandemic was largely incompatible with research productivity. This in turn could lead to policy development to mitigate gendered – and raced – impacts of the pandemic on research productivity.

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