

**SRHE**

*Society for Research  
into Higher Education*

***Dear Diary: Equality Implications for  
Female Academics of Changes to  
Working Practices in Lockdown and  
Beyond.***

**Final Report**

**October 2022**

**Dr Kate Carruthers Thomas  
Birmingham City University**

# Contents

Acknowledgements	3
Executive Summary	4
1.The Research Team	6
2. About the Project	7
3. Research Findings	12
• work/home	
• space/time	
• new/normal?	
• well/being?	
4. The Illustrated Digital Archive	25
5. Discussion	27
6. Recommendations	29
7. Further Research	30
Appendices	31
• Appendix 1: Diary 1 Prompt	
• Appendix II: Diary 2 Prompt	
• Appendix III: Individual Interview Schedule	
• Appendix IV: Revised Project Plan	
• Appendix V: Dissemination To Date	
References	36

Disclaimer: The views expressed in this report are the author's' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Society for Research into Higher Education

## Acknowledgements

I am very grateful to SRHE for their decision to fund this research via a SRHE Research Award 2020 and for their continued backing throughout what became a rather intense and stressful two years. I have been particularly appreciative of Rob Gresham's patient, humane and reliable support.

It has been my privilege to work with 25 female academics across the UK, willing participants in a project which demanded time, energy and emotional labour at a point when all three were in very short supply. I cannot thank them enough and I hope the Illustrated Digital Archive and other project outputs do justice to their experiences of the pandemic and their courage in articulating them so frankly.

I have been fortunate to work with two excellent Research Assistants on this project: Balwant Kaur and Hannah Malpass, both doctoral students at Birmingham City University. I'm grateful for their efficiency, collegiality and commitment. I'm also delighted that Dr Balwant Kaur was awarded her doctorate during the project!

Thank you to my Project Advisory Board, Dr Marjana Johansson, Dr Emily Henderson and Alexandra Standing who offered wise words and support, particularly in relation to data collection. Thank you too, to the project's Critical Friend, Professor Maggie O'Neill who is a wonderful source of inspiration and energy in my pursuit of creative methodologies.

In their *Manifesto for Live Methods* (2012) Les Back and Nirmal Puwar urge sociologists to remain open to cross-disciplinary collaborations involving a 'respectful exchange of intellectual ideas and technical skills and aims' (p11). I cannot think of a better way to describe my collaboration with the web designer (and fellow Sheffield resident) Ben Robertson who worked with me to create the project's Illustrated Digital Archive. Ben brought his expertise and resourcefulness to the project, as well as his sensitivity to its significance. He continues to support the website with skill and generosity.

## Executive Summary

The research project *Dear Diary: Equality Implications for Female Academics of Changes to Working Practices in Lockdown and Beyond* investigated female academics' experiences of working practices, productivity and career progression during the first eighteen months of the COVID-19 pandemic (March 2020-September 2021). It considered the impacts and longer-term implications of these experiences for gender equality in the higher education sector. The project used a hybrid methodology to gather qualitative data via open-format, solicited diary entries and semi-structured individual interview. Data was collected from 25 female academics across the academic career spectrum, employed in 18 UK universities and research centres. Data analysis was underpinned by themes of gender, space and power, as these interrelate and manifest within the spheres of 'work' and 'home'. Participants' diary and interview data is curated and presented online in the project's Illustrated Digital Archive [www.deardiaryresearch.co.uk](http://www.deardiaryresearch.co.uk).

Project findings reveal that the shift of paid, academic labour into the household blurred boundaries between work and home, exacerbating an unevenly distributed burden of care and hidden labour for women and resulting in negative impact on research productivity for most. There were mixed perceptions of university strategies and practices during the pandemic and a disappointment about lack of consultation and a rapid return to previous norms. Some participants found that opportunities to conference and network online brought them a new professional mobility unconstrained by geography and thought this had the potential to be career enhancing. Overall however, participants' expressed concern that the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on female academics' research productivity will become apparent and problematic in future rounds of academic progression and promotion as well as throughout the next REF cycle. In addition, the shifting temporalities of online working, longer hours and disrupted academic timetables in conjunction with the circumstances of the pandemic, resulted in feelings of overwhelm, fatigue and burnout and the research highlights ongoing, embodied harms in terms of physical, mental and emotional wellbeing which will inevitably cast a shadow over capacity to thrive and willingness to continue working.

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in two tangible changes to working practices in HE which are unlikely to be reversed. These are the move towards more flexible working arrangements and the adoption of a wider range of technologies for teaching, workplace communications, conferencing and networking. In theory, both offer benefits to the individual, however in practice and as this research has shown, home working environments vary in suitability; working from home often results in longer working hours and is impacted by gendered social roles within the household which mean women of all ages bear the burden of care.

This research therefore raises urgent concerns about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on career progression prospects for female academics and the potential for exacerbation of longstanding female under-representation in higher grades, particular disciplines and senior management within the sector. This report makes a number of recommendations addressing these concerns, notably systematic tracking, enquiry and reporting on female academics' participation and success in promotion processes and preparation for the next REF. It also proposes the formation of a new SRHE Network focusing on COVID and post-COVID impacts and implications for the sector.

# 1: THE RESEARCH TEAM

## Principal Investigator: Dr Kate Carruthers Thomas

Kate is a Senior Research Fellow at Birmingham City. Her research specialises in gender and contemporary higher education, creative research methodologies and dissemination.

## Research Assistant (August 2021-May 2022): Hannah Malpass

Hannah is a Graduate Research and Teaching Assistant at Birmingham City University, combining working as an academic and her own doctoral research on the relationships between social inequality and wellbeing for young children.

## Research Assistant: (March 2021-August 2021): Dr Balwant Kaur

Balwant worked on the project as a Research Assistant just as she completed her doctorate entitled: *Educational encounters, hybrid identities and spectral traces: contesting the myths of Aston through the accounts of South Asian Muslim women*. She now works as a Research Assistant in the Institute for Education at the University of Derby.

## Critical Friend: Professor Maggie O'Neill,

Maggie is a Professor of Sociology and Criminology at University College Cork. She specialises in feminist research using participatory action research, ethnographic and biographical methods and participatory arts.

## Project Advisory Group

- Dr Marjana Johansson, Senior Lecturer in Organisational Behaviour, Adam Smith Business School, University of Glasgow
- Dr Emily Henderson, Reader, Education Studies, Warwick University
- Alexandra Standing, Lecturer in Contextual Studies, BCU

## 2: ABOUT THE PROJECT

### Research Rationale

Females constitute 54% of all staff in the UK higher education (HE) sector and 46% of academic staff, but make up only 34% of senior management and 27% of the professoriate (0.2% in the case of B.A.M.E females) (Advance HE, 2019). The sector has a gender pay gap of 16.2% (UCEA 2022). Institutional and sector-wide initiatives, including the Athena Swan Charter, continue to struggle with these longstanding gender inequalities, exacerbated by intersectional factors such as ethnicity, class, age and disability.

The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic exposed and exacerbated inequalities in all social spheres. Shortly after the UK went into lockdown in March 2020 and as paid work moved into the household in a way previously unimaginable, evidence began to emerge of a differential impact on men and women. Ascher (2020), Connolly *et al.* (2020) and Ferguson (2020) *inter alia* argue the pressures of working from home, homeschooling, caring and restrictive measures such as shielding and self-isolation, particularly disadvantaged working women. COVID-19 threw inequalities in the HE sector into even sharper relief. Against a backdrop of deeply uncertain times for the sector and the global economy, Kitchener (2020) argued: 'the coronavirus is skewing a playing field that wasn't ever level in the first place'.

---

*The coronavirus is skewing a playing field that wasn't ever level in the first place. (Kitchener, 2020)*

---

The pandemic wrought sudden and profound shifts in academic working practices as course and service provision, research and management pivoted online overnight. Women already working 'the second shift' (Hochschild and Machung 1989) ie: carrying the burden of unpaid and unrecognised labour within the home in addition to performing paid labour outside it, moved onto the 'pandemic shift' including increased care and household responsibilities in challenging circumstances, and for those with school-aged children, homeschooling. A rapidly emerging literature (Boncori 2020; Fazackerly 2020; Kitchener 2020 *inter alia*) documents disadvantages female academics faced in sustaining academic research and writing for publication, among other core practices. Given the value placed on research 'productivity' by the UK's Research Excellence Framework (REF) this presents a potential risk of longer-term damage to academic careers.

This project builds on previous research, *Living and Working in Lockdown: what's gender got to do with it?* (Carruthers Thomas 2020) which investigated experiences of living and working at home during the COVID-19 lockdown (March-June 2020) and the role of gender in shaping those experiences. An online survey attracted 543 responses from academic and professional services staff, of all genders, employed at one UK university. The findings provided data about household arrangements, working environments and working practices and reflected gender inequalities highlighted in a rapidly emerging literature. Female academic staff reported a negative impact on their capacity to conduct research and write for publication during the lockdown. Female staff in both academic and professional services roles were less likely to have access to dedicated working space at home; more likely to take primary or sole responsibility for homeschooling, household tasks and others' care needs, and more likely to report that working from home in lockdown had impacted on their capacity to maintain work-life balance and work/home boundaries.

---

*Female academic staff reported a negative impact on their capacity to conduct research and write for publication during the lockdown. (Carruthers Thomas 2020)*

---

This project, *Dear Diary: Equality Implications for Female Academics of Changes to Working Practices in Lockdown and Beyond* focuses on female academics in UK higher education institutions. It both acknowledges and moves beyond experiences of living and working in lockdown. In investigating immediate and longer-term impacts of recent changes to working practices in HE, it makes visible and urgent implications for the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on female academics' productivity career progression and wellbeing.



## Aims

- to investigate female academics' experiences of working practices, productivity and career progression during and post-COVID lockdown;
- to identify ways in which remote working and other shifts in higher education (HE) practice may have impacted existing gender inequalities in the sector;
- to highlight overarching challenges/actions for the sector (and SRHE) in terms of HE practices and gender equality in the short and longer-term.

## Objectives

- recruit 20-30 female academics at all career stages as research participants;
- combine a solicited diary method with individual semi-structured interviews, to collect data over a six-month period;
- analyse diary and interview data using a feminist geographic perspective on gender, space and power;
- create and publish an Illustrated Digital Archive to widen engagement with the findings across the sector;
- to identify and disseminate implications, challenges for individuals and the sector in terms of in HE practice and gender equality.

## Research Questions

- What were the experiences of female academics at different career stages and with diverse personal characteristics and circumstances during the period March 2020-September 2021?
- Do current working practices reflect any changes resulting from lockdown and the pandemic and what are the implications for career progression and academic identity?
- How can these findings inform activity by the sector (and SRHE) to address continuing challenges to gender equality in HE practices?

## Methodology

The diary, diary-interview method or DDIM (Zimmerman and Weider 1977, Latham 2003a, 2003b, Kenten 2010 *inter alia*) was used to gather qualitative data via open-format, solicited diary entries and a semi-structured individual interview.

*Dear Diary* participants were asked to submit two diary entries: one retrospective, reflecting on experiences of living and working between March 2020 and May 2021 and one contemporaneous, focusing on current practice and experiences. It was suggested that prose responses be around 500 words. The majority of diary entries used prose as a medium. Two participants submitted audio files and one submitted video files. Several included photographs, artwork and poetry with their prose texts.

Between one and six weeks after receipt of the second diary entry, each participant was interviewed by the Principal Investigator via Zoom or Microsoft Teams. Each interview lasted between 45-60 minutes, was semi-structured and revisited diary entries for clarification, contextualisation and reflection. Researcher and participant also discussed emerging themes and potential implications for career progression and gender equality within the sector. Interviews were recorded and transcribed, then transcripts returned to participants for verification.

The use of digital technology as a primary tool mitigated for the ongoing uncertainty surrounding the feasibility of face-to-face research practices during the pandemic.

## Sample

The project was publicised through Twitter, HE professional networks and word of mouth. Over 50 expressions of interest were received from female academics employed at UK universities and research centres and 30 female academics were recruited as research participants via purposive and snowball sampling. Their roles ranged across the academic career spectrum, from PhD student to Professor. Participants' personal and domestic circumstances varied, including those living in heterosexual and lesbian partnerships; with and without children or dependents; those living separately or separated from partners and those living alone. One participant withdrew prior to the first diary submission citing workload issues. Three did not submit the first diary entry and did not respond to enquiries, so were assumed to have withdrawn. A fifth participant did not submit the second diary entry and did not respond to further enquiries, so was assumed to have withdrawn. Full diary and interview data was therefore collected from 25 participants employed at 18 universities and research institutes within the UK.

## Analytical Framework

Data analysis was undertaken with the understanding that participant accounts will be partial, local and heterogeneous: ‘the parallel narratives of the diary and the diary-interview do not sum together to produce a single unified narrative ... but an interrelated mosaic of interpretive snapshots and vignettes of a particular social space and social practices in the making’ (Latham 2003a, p.2005). Analysis was underpinned by themes of gender, space and power, as these interrelate and manifest within the spheres of ‘work’ and ‘home’ and within the concept of power geometry ie: the ways in which different social groups and individuals are positioned in distinct ways in relation to flows and interconnections of power (Massey 2005). Mobilising Massey’s conception of space as ‘social relations shaped by power and inherently temporal ... a confluence and product of histories, relationships ... the sphere in which distinct trajectories coexist’ (ibid: 9), analysis interrogated the distinct positioning of female academics within a sector in flux, highlighting the operation of gender as a geography of power within the university and the sector.

---

*space as social relations shaped by power and inherently temporal ... a confluence and product of histories, relationships ... the sphere in which distinct trajectories coexist (Massey, 2005:9)*

---

In practice, this analytical approach involved reading the spatial and the temporal within diary and interview data and considering how ways in which space is accessed and time taken up, reflect gendered and power relationships within the spheres of work, academia and home.

## Project Plan: Progress and Extensions

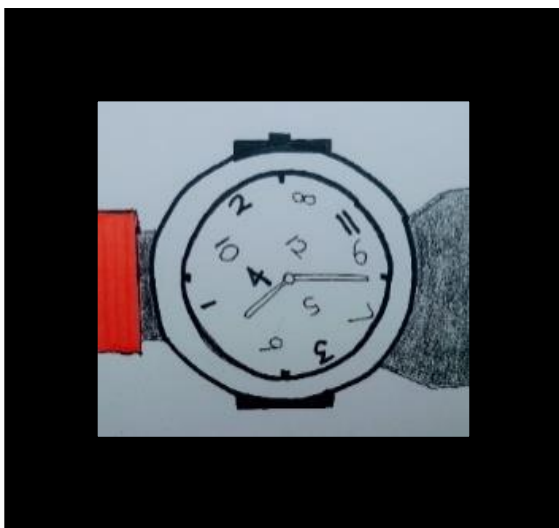
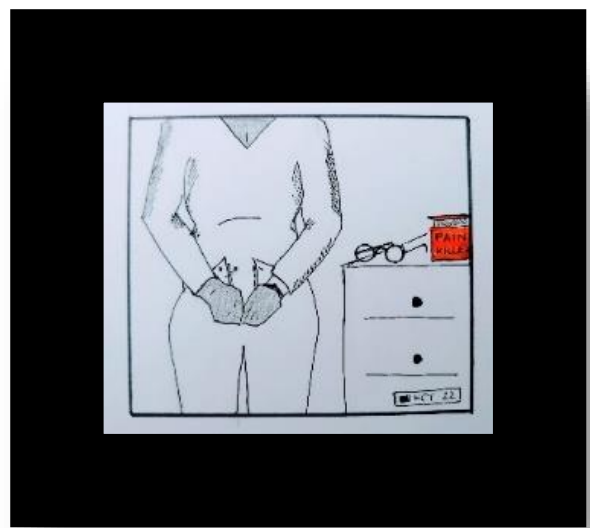
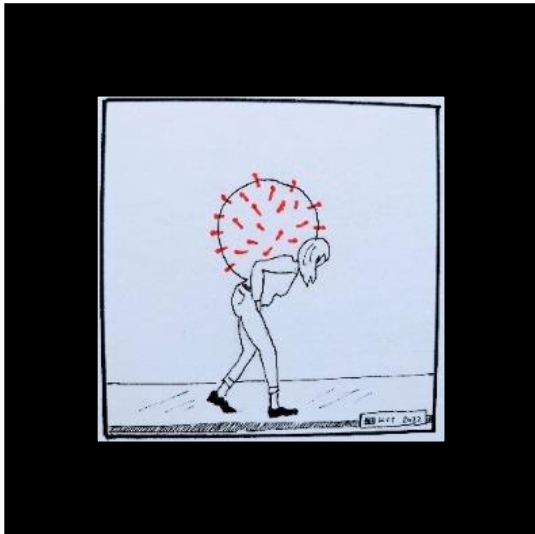
The 12 month project plan (see Appendix 1) included a five-month period for data collection (May-September 2021) and a five-month period for the creation of a major project output, the Illustrated Digital Archive. The project ran to schedule from March – October 2021. The Principal Investigator then experienced a major bereavement and a four-month extension was requested and approved. The project end date was moved from February to June 2022. The revised milestones, including the launch of the Illustrated Digital Archive were all met. The continuing restrictions of the COVID-19 pandemic impacted dissemination activities within the project schedule, leading to budget underspend in this area. A request to extend the expenditure deadline to 31 December 2022, for dissemination purposes only, was agreed by SRHE.

### 3: RESEARCH FINDINGS

---

*What were the experiences of female academics at different career stages and with diverse personal characteristics and circumstances during the period March 2020-September 2021? Do current working practices reflect any changes resulting from lockdown and the pandemic?*

---



## work/home



In March 2020, paid work moved into the household in a way previously unimaginable. Ascher 2020; Connolly 2020 and Ferguson 2020 *inter alia* argue that the pressures of working from home, homeschooling, caring and restrictive measures such as shielding and self-isolation, particularly disadvantaged working women already working the ‘second shift’ (Hochschild and Machung 1989) ie: carrying the burden of unpaid and unrecognised labour within the home in addition to performing paid labour outside it. The pandemic set the stage for a battle between academic work as ‘a highly specialized envelope of space-time into which the intrusion of other activities and interests is unwanted and limited’ and the ‘temporally and spatially ... porous’ sphere of home’ (Massey 1996: 120). Participants’ accounts point to discourses and relationships of power which shaped experiences of spheres and spaces of work and home and how these were reinforced or disrupted by the pandemic.

Diary and interview data covered aspects of:

- **adapting to working from home full-time**
- **the pivot to working online**
- **homeschooling**
- **carrying the burden of care within the household**
- **hidden labour including pastoral care**
- **the impact on research productivity and career**
- **the benefits of technology and digital spaces.**

I turned my fancy shed at the bottom of the garden into an office. Technology and storage space was a nightmare. I felt as though my personal space had been obliterated in the name of work. That didn't help with creating any downtime. (Participant #20)

With the move to remote working, it takes a lot more effort to design teaching that is suitable for an online setting. It also takes a lot more effort to be a good colleague, to turn up, to engage in things, to ask questions at events, to just create a sense of collegiality. (Participant #14)

There was this presumption, the closed door, the separate room, the fact that his work involves more kind of calls and interaction, meetings, and that kind of thing. Whereas mine might be writing. Also the invisible labour, the worrying about the home schooling and what to cook for tea and all of that and all the multiple tasks that I think women do. (Participant #2)

I look at all the publications about learning and teaching in the COVID emergency and think "Well if you had time to write about it, you weren't helping people with it at the time". When it comes to promotions and people's careers, how far will that be valued versus writing and publications? Who will get the academic prestige? (Participant #21)

I have really flown, in terms of my reputation. I found there were more opportunities available than in the pre-Zoom world. (Participant #19)

## work/home: key findings

- the shift of paid labour into the domestic/household space **blurred boundaries** between work and home spatially, temporally and in terms of roles and identities;
- **working environments** and conditions varied widely;
- the **pivot to online** course delivery and management was time-consuming and tiring;
- the pandemic impacted on an already unevenly distributed **burden of care** within the household, not only for those with younger children;
- participants experienced an increase in demand for **pastoral care** from their students;
- most participants experienced negative impacts on **research productivity**;
- some participants experienced enhanced career opportunities in **digital spaces**.

## space/time



As the COVID-19 pandemic metamorphosed from a singular crisis event to a continuing phenomenon, participants' diary entries recounted the disruption and repurposing of space and time; on the way groups and individuals occupy space or have access to it and on the mediation of relationships both professional and personal across and within spaces. DDIM facilitated this recording of 'an ever-changing present' (Elliott, 1997) reflecting space as fluid, always under construction (Massey, 2005). Individually and collectively, the data contribute to a sense of multiple pandemic temporalities, as COVID-19 collided with individual lives, lifestyles and events.

Diary and interview data covered aspects of

- **working spaces at home**
- **therapeutic spaces including the outdoors**
- **shifting temporalities: time stretching, time lost**
- **living through different phases of the pandemic**



With the absence of the corridor conversations, it's felt quite lonely. Not that I've done anything other than be in meetings! What I don't do is walk away from those meeting saying to somebody oh my god or well done for speaking up - all of that camaraderie that goes with walking down the corridor, walking back to your office with somebody where you put the world to rights. (Participant #4)

Because there's no journey to make and I do wake up really early, I can be at my desk at 5am. The trouble is you feel guilty if you're not still there at 5 o'clock at the other end of the day. Sometimes I've actually been sitting here for 12 hours. I haven't had a proper lunchtime because what am I going to do at lunchtime? (Participant #5)

As the pandemic progressed, I spent a lot of time imagining I was back in Japan. I was blown away by the people, the food the history and the culture. (So, everything then!) It cheered me up to be able to think of happier times when faced with increasing uncertainty in the present. The mental move to Japan and my Kimono project was welcome relief. (Participant #26)

What has struck me is how much more I am fitting into a week compared to what I used to do. I'm just doing more and I have been for months. (Participant #19)

The first one? It was the glorious weather and although there was gnawing dread, at the same time it was an opportunity to recalibrate. A lockdown in winter is a very different kettle of fish and I found that really difficult. (Participant #13)

## space/time key findings

- household space was **disrupted and repurposed** to accommodate working from home and homeschooling;
- there were **inequalities** within households as to the way space was accessed and occupied;
- increased workloads meant **longer working hours** and a blurring and rupturing of work/life boundaries;
- established **rhythms and temporalities** were disrupted, time was experienced as stretched, squeezed, lost; for some it 'stopped';
- data reveal multiple **pandemic temporalities**: first and second lockdowns, seasons passing, different phases of homeschooling, new academic years, ending of relationships, bereavements ...

## new/normal?



The theme of 'new/normal' concerns questions of university strategies during the pandemic, the challenges of returning to work and hybrid working and longer-term implications for working practices. The continuing phenomenon of COVID-19 made considerable demands on senior management at the mercy of competing agendas and relentless cycles of academic years, enrolments, REF, NSS .... The result, according to many of the participant accounts, has been an uncomfortable combination of agility, caution and hard-headedness.

Diary and interview data covered aspects of:

- **spiralling workloads and unrealistic expectations**
- **corporate messaging around 'well-being'**
- **support and kindness**
- **anxieties about returning to campus**
- **benefits and challenges of hybrid working**
- **the silver linings of the pandemic**
- **the passing of 'teaching moments'**

The workload is still at height-of-lockdown levels: we are still required to keep a full range of plans live at any one time, we are still working with students who are both on site and overseas and in different time zones. (Participant #13)

The more you do and the more capable you are, the more they will expect and the more they will stretch you. These things became so clear and sharp during the pandemic . All this caring about our mental health – although I think individuals care, I don't think the actual system does. (Participant #9)

In July 2021 what is making me feel anxious is the looming new academic year. In my head I'm desperate to be back on campus, but when I think of the logistics of getting up and out by 7am to catch the train – how did I do it before? Do I need to do that now? Where will I find the time for the commute? (Participant #11)

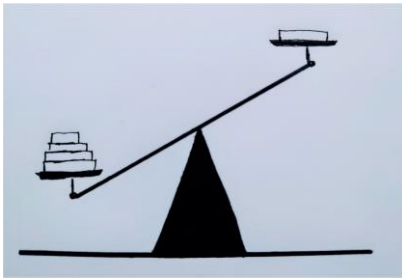
Things are changing and supposedly returning to normal. I'm not sure that's why we should be aiming for. It feels like we've gone from ultra-careful to carefree in the blink of an eye. (Participant #26)

It's a juggle of a day – at home then dashing in for a couple of face-to-face meetings. Campus meetings feel strange – less focused and direct. There are the oddities – chatting to someone in person but then dashing to our respective offices to join a call with a third person. (Participant #21)

## new/normal? key findings

- the prospect of '**the return**' caused anxiety for many participants; anxieties revisited as further lockdowns created repeated returns and adjustments to working practices;
- there were mixed perceptions of **university strategies** and practices during the pandemic. Most felt their institutions had managed a very challenging situation well to start with, but too soon reverted to standard expectations in extraordinary circumstances;
- **silver linings** were identified including greater flexibility, no commuting and family interactions;
- there were perceptions of a lack of consultation by institutions about how to move on from the pandemic; of '**institutional forgetting**', and disappointment about a rushed return to 'old' ways.

## well/being?



The research revealed impacts of the pandemic on participants' physical, mental and emotional wellbeing. This is a national issue (Sport England 2021; Dinic 2021) and its manifestation among university students (Blackall and Mistlin 2021; House of Commons 2020, *inter alia*) has been documented. Participants were frank – often painfully so – about the ways in which lockdown, remote working, homeschooling, additional care responsibilities and workloads had resulted in ill-health, anxiety and fatigue in the short and longer term. Their accounts bear witness to the origins of what may well be a coming storm, as Morrish intimates:

***The post-pandemic academy will be staffed and managed by people who are exhausted and emotionally drained. If we don't want universities to be full of victims and victimisers, it is time for an audit of emotional labour and to ensure this is reciprocal and focussed on the needs, feelings and intentions of all involved in the very human chains of relations that are inherent to higher education contexts.***

(Morrish, 2021)

The experience of living and working through the pandemic led some participants to consider alternative ways of living and working, for example: retiring earlier, focusing on passions not income and being more assertive about their needs.

Diary and interview data covered aspects of:

- **physical wellbeing**
- **emotional and mental wellbeing**
- **levels of fatigue**
- **consideration of alternatives**

Looking back at the last year, the thing that has really given is time to do the running, cycling and being outdoors that I really value and find so vital in keeping happy and peaceful in myself. My Strava charts essentially flatlined in 2020. When exercise was recorded it was usually the only time I'd made it out of my chair that day. (Participant #21)

At the beginning of the pandemic I found it really hard to concentrate on my work. I found myself overwhelmed by the enormity of what was happening and worried intensely about my family. I also worried about losing my job due to the impact of the lockdowns on the University. Finding the headspace to write and conduct research was enormously challenging. (Participant #5)

I'm in these four walls all the time. I have a very similar diet every day. I have similar patterns and routines. I get social stimulation largely through this screen. I have a distinct feeling of being slightly dumber as a result? A sort of flat feeling. That has taken a toll on my productivity and ability to move forward on a day-to-day basis. (Participant #18)

I felt very disempowered by the decision-making process. Ultimately, I think it has affected the way I think about the university. I feel much more of a lone wolf. Disengaged is the word I've used to describe how I feel, I just feel completely disengaged from the institution now. Very engaged with students still, but much more single-minded. (Participant #20)

I feel as though I am on my knees now in terms of how tired I am and how unproductive I have become. This is an accumulated fatigue of constantly working and being online. The two, combined with no break or change of scenery is really, really hard. (Participant #6)

## well/being?: key findings

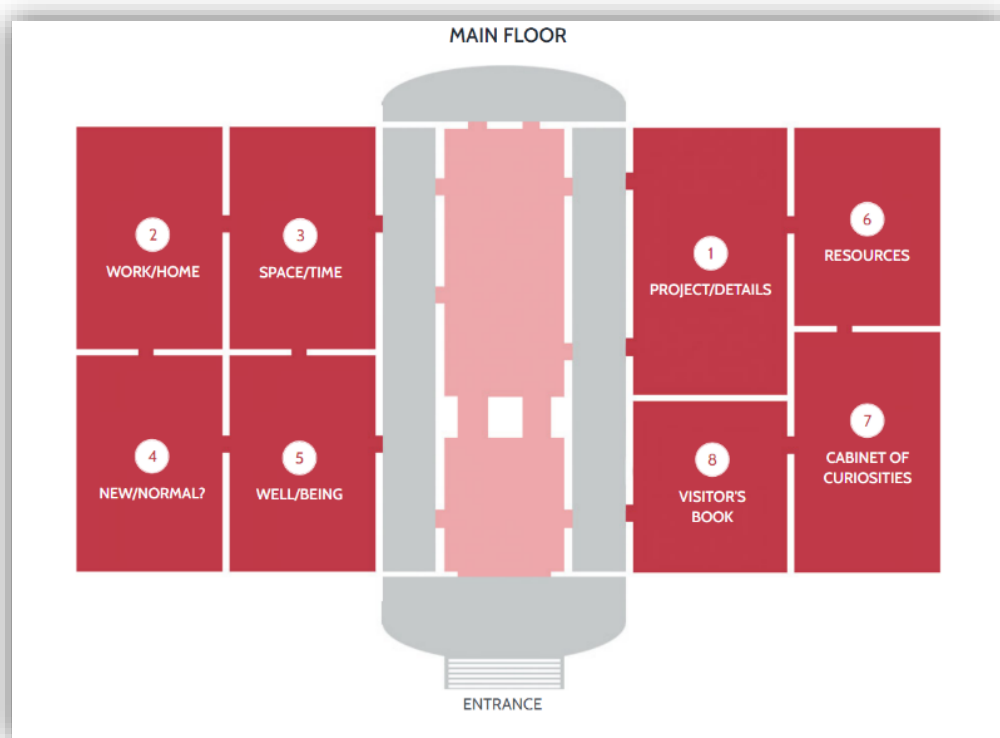
- participants experienced a dichotomy between spiralling **workloads** and corporate messaging to look after **well-being**;
- there is longitudinal evidence of **embodied harms**: muscular-skeletal issues, a need for stronger glasses, weight gain, stress, depression and anxiety;
- the altered temporalities of online working - longer hours and extended academic years resulted in feelings of **overwhelm, fatigue and burnout**;
- some participants were actively considering **alternatives** (career development, mode of working, retirement) and new priorities (wellbeing, family, location).



## 4. THE ILLUSTRATED DIGITAL ARCHIVE

Data from 25 participants' diary entries and interview transcripts have been curated, illustrated and presented in an Illustrated Digital Archive ([www.deardiaryresearch.co.uk](http://www.deardiaryresearch.co.uk)). The archive is housed on an open access, interactive web platform designed and developed in collaboration with professional web designer, Ben Robertson ([www.benrobertson.co.uk](http://www.benrobertson.co.uk)).

The design imitates a physical archive or exhibition space corresponding with the spatial emphasis of the project's analytical framework. The homepage features a floorplan assisting navigation through a series of spaces or 'galleries' reflecting the overarching themes: work/home, space/time, new/normal?, well/being?. Each gallery maps and exhibits a set of contextualised and conceptualised archives.



<https://www.deardiaryresearch.co.uk/>

This means of interpreting and revisualising data is intended both to widen engagement and impact and to enable visitors to engage with these data in multiple, interconnected ways. The Illustrated Digital Archive can also be seen as a form of critical cartography, which, as Back and Puwar advocate, offers “the potential to think and experience the world beyond our private traps”, developing “a sociological imagination that moves between personal anxieties to large, impersonal social conditions” (2012).

The Illustrated Digital Archive was launched on 1 June 2022.

- between 1 - 10 June 2022, there were **1414** page views.
- in the 30 day period 7 June – 7 July 2022 there were a further 532 page views of which:
  - **65%** are new and **35%** are returning visitors;
  - **42%** have accessed the site via mobile, **58%** via desktop.
  - the majority of viewers are **UK-based**,
  - viewers are also based in Ireland,Finland, Austria, Netherlands, US, Canada and Australia.

Google Analytics 07/07/22

The IDA has also featured in an Australian blog [The \(research\) supervisor's friend](#) as an example of non-linear research dissemination.

The archive material will be utilised as a writing and discussion prompt in forthcoming dissemination events at the Universities of Durham, York, Cardiff, Heriot Watt , the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine and University College Cork.

## 5. DISCUSSION

### Implications for gender equality in the higher education sector

This research generated rich, qualitative data relating to the experiences of 25 female academics at different career stages and with diverse personal characteristics and circumstances, during the period March 2020-September 2021. It has contributed to an enhanced understanding of gendered experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic. The project's [Illustrated Digital Archive](#) is an accessible and lasting record of these experiences, building on and offering new evidence to, an emerging literature.

---

*What are the implications for female academics' career progression and academic identity? How can these findings inform activity by the sector (and SRHE) to address continuing challenges to gender equality in HE practices?*

---

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in two tangible changes to working practices in HE which are unlikely to be reversed. These are the move towards more flexible working arrangements and the adoption of a wider range of technologies for teaching, workplace communications, conferencing and networking. In theory, both offer benefits to the individual. Increased flexibility in working arrangements offers the potential for greater control and autonomy over the division of work and home life and less time and money spent commuting. The use of technologies for a wider spectrum of academic activity has the potential to enhance professional mobility across digital space. Both could potentially contribute to increased gender equity within the sector.

However, in practice and as this research has shown, home working environments vary in suitability; working from home often results in longer working hours and is impacted by gendered social roles within the household which mean women of all ages bear the burden of care. The sectoral approach to flexible working cannot be one-size-fits-all. To be equitably implemented, flexible working arrangements must be cogniscent of structural inequalities and accommodate a wide range of circumstances. This includes those who do not have conducive working environments at home, are digitally disadvantaged and/or for whom the workplace is a place of relative safety, as well as those for who it is most efficient.

This research has also articulated a less tangible, less visible aspect of the COVID-19 pandemic, one more easily dismissed in 'better' times. This is that female academics,

whatever their personal circumstances, carried an unequal burden of care and performed hidden labour within spheres of work and home. The latter encompassed caring responsibilities for others of all ages; household management; pastoral care of students and maintaining support and collegiality among colleagues. This resulted, for many, in a negative impact on their research productivity, a deficit which will become apparent within the next REF cycle. This is significant because research publications and funding are the currency of academic careers; careers in which females are already under-represented across disciplines and senior grades. Equally significantly this research has highlighted ongoing, embodied harms in terms of physical, mental and emotional wellbeing which will inevitably cast a shadow over future career progression, capacity to thrive and willingness to continue working.

This research raises urgent concerns about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on career progression prospects for female academics and the potential for exacerbation of longstanding female under-representation in higher grades, particular disciplines and senior management within the sector. Those in senior positions are urged to acknowledge and act upon these overarching gendered impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic in order to mitigate the exacerbation of long-standing gender inequalities in the sector.

## 6. RECOMMENDATIONS

### for the sector

- From 2022, instigate systematic tracking, in-depth enquiry and reporting on:
  - female academics' participation and success in academic progression /promotion;
  - the representation of female academics' outputs in preparation for and submission the next REF (2022-2027);
  - rates of premature withdrawal from the academic labour force of female academics through early retirement, reduced hours and/or wellbeing concerns.

### for SRHE

- formation of a new SRHE network focusing on COVID and post-COVID impacts and implications for the sector, offering a forum for research and discussion;
- maintain hybridity options for SRHE, network and conference events to maximise accessibility;

## 7. FURTHER RESEARCH

The findings of this project point to the need to conduct further research in at least four areas:

- I. longitudinal study of female academics' participation and success in academic progression in the post-COVID period, using pre-pandemic data many UK institutions will have collected as part of Athena Swan Action Plans as a baseline.
- II. longer-term impacts on research funding applications, research outputs and impact case studies which institutions will use in their REF2028 submission and on institutional interventions to mitigate these impacts.
- III. changes to the demographic of the UK academic workforce due to early retirement and changed modes of working (eg: full-time to part-time) and the effect this may have on the gender profile of the UK HE workforce and the representation of females in more senior roles.
- IV. The identification of key benefits of digital and professional mobilities during the pandemic in relation to expertise, reputation and networking and to what extent any career enhancement continues as working methods move to a more hybrid 'norm'.

# APPENDICES

## Appendix I

### Diary 1: Prompt



## PART 1

Dear Participants

You are invited to submit **Part 1** by **31 May 2021**. This piece should be **retrospective and reflective**; an account of any aspect of your experience of living and working during the COVID-19 pandemic to date (March 2020- May 2021).

In thinking back over what has been a long period of changing and challenging circumstances, you might wish to consult your own diary/calendar, messages, social media, photographs or playlists from this period. Perhaps specific dates or events played an important role for you? You can write in detail about one element or experience or widely about many. You might wish to consider any of the following:

working practices	household arrangements	time and space
remote working	homeschooling	social/third spaces
workspaces	care	the local/national/global
workplace support	relationships	life online/offline
institutional policies	wellbeing	managing time

For **text** pieces, a 500 word minimum is suggested. There is no upper word limit. You can include **visuals** (photographs, artwork), **audio** or **video** files – either accompanying text or as a primary medium. Feel free to experiment – or not! There is no ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ way to create this piece.

Submit to [kate.thomas@bcu.ac.uk](mailto:kate.thomas@bcu.ac.uk) with subject heading: *Dear Diary Part 1 + your initials*  
eg: *Dear Diary Part 1 KCT*. Receipt will be acknowledged.

## Appendix II

### Diary 2: Prompt



## PART 2

Dear Participants

You are invited to submit **Part 2** by **31 July 2021**. This piece should provide a **contemporary** account of your working practices. You might choose to

- identify a specific day or days on which you will create your entry/ies.
- base your account on a theme or themes – perhaps something arising from Part 1?
- use A Day in the Life of ... format

As with Part 1, there is no right or wrong way to create your diary entry. For **text** pieces, a 500 word minimum is suggested but there is no upper word limit. You can include **visuals** (photographs, artwork), **audio** or **video** files – either accompanying text or as a primary medium. You may wish to reflect on any of the following:

remote working	homeschooling
workspaces	care
workplace support	relationships
institutional policies/COVID-care	health and wellbeing
career development/promotion	life online/offline
research, writing, publication	time and space
new skills/habits	social third spaces

Please submit your entry to [balwant.kaur@mail.bcu.ac.uk](mailto:balwant.kaur@mail.bcu.ac.uk) by 31 July 2021, with the subject heading: *Dear Diary Part 2 + your initials* eg: *Dear Diary Part 2 BK*. Receipt will be acknowledged.

If you have any questions about this prompt, please don't hesitate to get in touch.



## Appendix III

-----

### Individual Interview Schedule

1. Thank you very much for submitting your two diary entries I'd like to ask a couple of things about that experience for you before I move on to the actual content of the entries.
  - a. Firstly, how did you find the experience of writing the diary entries? (emotional impact, distance, time)
  - b. Secondly, how did you find approaching the entries from different perspectives (retrospective, contemporaneous)? Were there any key differences?

2. Now I'd like to ask about some aspects you covered in your first diary entry. In it you wrote about xxxx. Can you tell me more about this?

In your second diary entry, you wrote about xxxxx. Can you tell me more about this?

3. Looking back, overall, how if at all, would you say the pandemic has impacted your
  - a. physical/mental wellbeing
  - b. research/writing for publication
  - c. career progression
  - d. identity as an academic
4. What kind of strategies/policies – if any - has your employer put in place in response to the ongoing pandemic? How have these affected you – un/helpful?
5. It's the intention of this research to consider ways in which remote working and other shifts in HE practices because of COVID-19 have impacted existing gender equalities in the sector. Do you have any specific experience or comments relating to this issue?
6. It's also the intention of this research to consider the key challenges for the HE sector in terms of gender equality and working practices in the longer term? Do you have any reflections/comments on this?
7. I've completed all my questions, is there anything you'd like to add?



## Appendix V

### Dissemination To Date

DATE	TITLE	LOCATION	TYPE
June 2022	<i>COVID-19: impact on and implications for gender equality in HE</i>	Department of Sociology/HESI, University of Durham	
June 2022	<i>Illustrated Digital Archive</i>		Open Access Website
December 2021	<i>Diaries of the Pandemic?</i>	SRHE Annual Conference 2021	Conference Paper/Presentation
November 2021	<i>Beyond the Trap of the Now: Using a Digital Archive to engage with both present and future</i>	Sociological Review Magazine	Guest Blog
9 July 2021	<i>COVID-19: An Unequal Impact conference</i>	Birmingham City University, UK	Conference Paper/Presentation
June 2021	<i>Collecting Diary Data</i>	SAGE Methodspace	Blog

## REFERENCES

- Advance HE (2019) *Equality in higher education: statistical report 2020*. [online]. Available from <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/equality-higher-education-statistical-report-2020> [Accessed 2 July 2022].
- Ascher, D. (2020). 'Coronavirus: 'Mums do most childcare and chores in lockdown' BBC News, 27 May [online]. Available from <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-52808930> Accessed 4 July 2022].
- Back, L. and Puwar, N. (2012). A Manifesto for Live Methods: Provocations and Capacities. *The Sociological Review* 60 (1) 6-17.
- Blackall, M. and Mistlin, A. (2021). 'Broken and defeated': UK university students on the impact of Covid rules. *The Guardian*. 11 January.
- Boncori, I. (2020) The Never-ending Shift: A feminist reflection on living and organizing academic lives during the coronavirus pandemic. *Feminist Frontiers. Gender, Work and Organisation*. 15 April. [online]. Available from <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/gwao.12451> [Accessed 4 July 2022].
- Carruthers Thomas, K. (2020). *Living and working in lockdown. What's gender got to do with it?* Research Report. Birmingham City University.
- Connolly, K., Kassam, A., Willsher, K. and Carroll, R. (2020). 'We are losers in this crisis': research finds lockdowns reinforcing gender inequality. Campaign groups warn women across Europe risk being pushed back into traditional roles', *The Guardian* 29 May, [online]. Available from <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/may/29/we-are-losers-in-this-crisis-research-finds-lockdowns-reinforcing-gender-inequality> [Accessed 4 July 2022].
- Dinic, M. (2021). *The impact of coronavirus on mental health and relationships*. YouGov. [online] Available from <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/lifestyle/articles-reports/2021/02/04/impact-coronavirus-mental-health-and-relationships> [Accessed 4 July 2020].
- Donegan, M. (2020). 'This pandemic threatens to undo what generations of feminists have fought for', *The Guardian*, 21 May, [online]. Available from <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/may/21/this-pandemic-threatens-to-undo-what-generations-of-feminists-have-fought-for> [Accessed 4 July 2022].
- Elliott, H. (1997). The Use of Diaries in Sociological Research on Health Experience. *Sociological Research Online*, 2:2. [online]. Available from <http://socresonline.org.uk/2/2/7.html> [Accessed 2 July 2022].
- Fazackerly, A. (2020). 'Women's research plummets during lockdown but articles from men increase', *The Guardian* 12 May, [online]. Available from <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2020/may/12/womens-research-plummets-during-lockdown-but-articles-from-men-increase> [Accessed 4 July 2022].
- Ferguson, D. (2020). 'I feel like a 1950s housewife: how lockdown has exposed the gender divide', *The Observer*, 3 May, [online]. Available from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/may/03/i-feel-like-a-1950s-housewife-how-lockdown-has-exposed-the-gender-divide> [Accessed 4 July 2022].
- Hill, G. (2022) *Supporting a doctoral candidate to work out of the box*. Blog. The Research Supervisor's Friend. 10 June. [online] Available from <https://supervisorsfriend.wordpress.com/2022/06/10/supporting-a-doctoral-candidate-to-work-out-of-the-box/> [Accessed 14 July 2022].

Hochschild, A. and Machung, A. (1989). *The Second Shift: Working Families and the Revolution at Home*. New York: Penguin Books.

House of Commons (2020). Petitions Committee *The impact of COVID-19 on university students*. Second Report of Session 2019-21. [online] Available from <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/1851/documents/18140/default/> [Accessed 4 July 2022].

Kenten, C. (2010). Narrating Oneself: Reflections on the Use of Solicited Diaries with Diary Interview. FQS 11(2), Art. 16. [online]. Available from <https://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/1314> [Accessed 4 July 2022].

Kitchener, C. (2020). 'Women academics seem to be submitting fewer papers during coronavirus. 'Never seen anything like it,' says one editor', *The Lily* 24 April, [online]. Available from <https://www.thelily.com/women-academics-seem-to-be-submitting-fewer-papers-during-coronavirus-never-seen-anything-like-it-says-one-editor/> [Accessed 22 February 2022].

Latham, A. (2003a). Research, Performance and Doing Human Geography: Some Reflections on the Diary-Photograph, Diary-Interview Method. *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space* 35(11) 1993-2017.

Latham A, (2003b). ``Researching and writing *everyday accounts of the city: an introduction to the diary-photo diary-interview method*", in *Picturing the Visual Landscape: Visual Methods and the Sociological Imagination* Eds C Knowles, P Sweetman (Routledge, London) pp 1699 – 1724.

Massey, D. (1996) *Space, Place and Gender*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Massey, D. (2005) *For Space*. London: Sage Publications.

Morrish, L. (2021). *Emotional Labour in the Post-Pandemic University*. Blog. 31 October. [online]. Available from <https://postpandemicuniversity.net/2021/10/31/emotional-labour-in-the-post-pandemic-academy/> [Accessed 12 April 2022].

Sport England (2021). *The impact of coronavirus on activity levels revealed*. 29 April. [online]. Available from <https://www.sportengland.org/news/impact-coronavirus-activity-levels-revealed> [Accessed 12 April 2022].

UCEA (Universities & Colleges Employers Association) *Examining the pay gap in HE*. [online]. Available from <https://www.ucea.ac.uk/library/infographics/gender-pay/> [Accessed 3 July 2022].

Zimmerman, D. and Wieder, D., (1977). The diary: diary interview method. *Urban Life* 5 479-498.