A 'new (ab)normal'?: Scrutinising the work-life balance of academics under lockdown

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Abstract

In March 2020 virtually all UK universities were suddenly thrown into an unprecedented and sudden closure of campus and facilities owing to the British Government's Covid-19 pandemic lockdown policies. Further evidence suggests that this exacerbated existing gendered differences. This paper reports on UK academic responses from an international survey examining the work-life balance of academics under Covid-19 lockdown. The aim of the study was to examine the experiences and perceptions of academics, using these to inform how universities can improve the work-life balance of academics during the current and post-lockdown scenarios, as well as in the longer term, given a pandemic-prone future. Rich in qualitative comments, primarily derived from women academics, gendered contrasts in work-life balance appear magnified under conditions of lockdown. Key lessons for HE internationally emerge from the findings.

Keywords: Covid-19, lockdown, academics, work-life balance

Introduction

As cumulative ECDC (2020) data reveals, Britain has suffered one of the worst
mortality rates for Covid-19 globally. At the start of the government-mandated
'lockdown' in March 2020, the repercussions of the pandemic on health, work and
economic forecasts were unknown, albeit open to prediction. Like other areas of public
service and wider industry, the education sector would experience an initial and for
many on-going period of chaos and confusion during lockdown (Universities UK,
2020). The UK Higher Education Institution (HEI) sector was thrust into this
turbulence as university buildings suddenly closed, staff offices were off-limits and
students marooned (Weale, 2020). Classes were suddenly suspended and then shifted
to a range of *ad hoc* online delivery services, which most teaching materials or
academics were not adapted to.

From the UK's fetishisation of corporate processes, managerialism and top-down
control, academia was tipped overnight into a Wild West of rugged, pioneering
individualism as academics were thrown back on their own resources to find ways of
keeping students calmly studying, maintain research deadlines and attend remote, often
erratic meetings. A frenzy of remedial action was undertaken regardless of the new
challenges in the domestic arena where schools and nurseries were closed down and
many vulnerable groups advised to self-isolate, requiring additional commitments of
kinship support.

The motivation for this study was generated through the authors' discussions of our experiences under lockdown. Simultaneously we were immersed in hearing how colleagues reported their experiences in the face of abrupt and drastic change. Yet the reports of academic work-life balances were contrasting. Data from this study serves to interrogate and illuminate these differences.

The aim of our research is to identify relevant lessons for the HE sector, both within and beyond the UK, regarding what can be done to improve the work-life balance of academics in the current lockdown and post-lockdown scenarios, as well as in the longer term, given a pandemic-prone future. The data collated provided valuable insights into how lockdown has affected academics' performance and wellbeing, providing lessons for the planning and shaping of an improved 'new normal' academic environment.

Literature

The Covid-19 phenomenon signified national and global upheaval, from which academia was not immune, with scant research literature on this impact, and towards which this study makes a modest contribution. Early publications on the topic include Savitsky et al. (2020) reporting on managing pandemic anxiety among student nurses in Israel, resonating with our anecdotal experiences of supporting distressed/anxious students during lockdown. Devine et al. (2020: 2), writing from New Zealand, discuss the existential angst arising from the crisis, where illustrative lessons from history are ousted as irrelevant in the intellectual poverty of prevailing bureaucratic technico-

rationalism.

The instinctive sense that lockdown would press a reset button across the world raised both hopes and fears in equal measure on social media. For academics the out-dated trope of leisured, effete academia versus the reality of high-stress, corporate HE did not mean scholarly revelation of historical lessons were more likely to be garnered there, than in any other parts of society. Public sentiment, however, suggests than both consolation and education can be found in turning from 'Covid to Ovid'; where the general appetite for classic literature on plague themes was only exceeded by that for toilet paper, hand sanitiser and dried pasta (Theroux, 2020).

Neoliberalism is the deficient backdrop to HE's current pandemic panic. Here the critiques of O'Neill (2014) and Gill (2009) are useful in viewing contemporary HEI as quintessential exemplars of neo-liberal ideologies and practices by valuing staff who are self-driven, self-regulating automata, ever attentive to complying with new metric-driven performance markers. Accordingly, Holmwood (2014) notes that the stranglehold of corporatisation over UK HE is tighter here than in the US; while Kowaleski (2012) deplores the general rise of neoliberal bureaupathology as a feature of the modern, corporatised university. In turn Erickson et al. (2020: 2) evoke the influence of neoliberalism as sinister, stiflingly oppressive:

> ...a polity whose hard managerialism systematically deconstructs the space through which professional autonomy is exercised. This is achieved via the imposition of targets, performance criteria and homogenised systems for assessing research and teaching performance.

The new managerialism in education as a political ideology harnessed to capitalism is discussed in terms of Ireland but is equally applicable to the UK HE sector (Lynch et al., 2012: 235), being premised on the assumption of worker 'carelessness': being free from domestic care commitments. This partially explains the lack women leaders in HE, where, for example, according to HESA data for the year 2017-18 women compose only 25.5% of all UK professors across subjects (Advance HE, 2020).

Both Morley (2013) and O'Connor (2015) succinctly argue that such figures indicate strong gender bias irrespective of the normativity of socially constructed gendered, personal responsibilities. Most women academics, compared to male colleagues, are concentrated in the lower hierarchical ranks where career progression is constrained (Authors' Own, 2018). The extant research evidence suggests that academic women are more likely to undertake less valorised academic tasks: teaching and administration, as opposed to elite research-focused pathways (Eddy and Ward, 2015; Authors' Own, 2019), garnering greater career rewards.

There has been much talk in the media about a pandemic-generated rise of 'new normals' across societies (Naughton, 2020), which sounds promising, although the fiscal damage wrought to UK HEI also threaten dystopic rather than utopic futures, given a £2.5 billion hole blown in the UK HE budget (Skidmore, 2020) with serious implications for job security. What is apparent is that existing inequalities in HEI in Europe and North America are being exacerbated during the pandemic. This point prompted an article *Times Higher Education* on how women in science with valuable, relevant expertise are being shoved out of the public debate on Covid-19 (Buckee et al., 2020). Moreover, Savigny (2020) provides a timely analysis of how cultural

sexism encourages the favouring of bellicose posturings by UK and US male political leaders waging war on Covid-19; where possibly the cooler voices of women scientists dampens red-blooded rhetoric. In the meantime the current flush of research cash available for pandemic studies is being overwhelmingly scooped up by male academics (Buckee et al., 2020). Fazackerley (2020) also notes acute gendered discrepancies in journal article production with those by women academics dropping sharply during lockdown. Lockdown appears to have exaggerated gender imbalances in HEI (Authors' Own 2018: 7), termed *masculinist* work environments, which Pascal (2012) describes as constituting male models of work conforming to regimes of uninterrupted labour. This relates directly to the notion of the *ideal worker*: a model individual entirely dedicated to their job and freed from all intrusive personal distractions (Ward and Wolf-Wendel, 2016).

The so-called 'work-life balance' issue resolves around perceptions of the compatibility of combining waged-work roles and a fulfilled private life (these may also involve unwaged labour), where this perceived balance consequently colours job satisfaction (Fotinha, 2019). Commenting on the Australian HE sector, Probert (2005), believes it is the personal, gendered life choices of individuals rather than institutional policies and practices that shape academic demographics. Yet work-life balance is a topic of major contention for academics, particularly women (Toffoletti and Starr, 2016), given the 'hurry sickness': the exhaustingly accelerated tempo and production-line ethos of the modern corporate university (Vostal, 2015: 72; Berg and Seeber, 2016). The social construction of time suggests that time is what you make of it but few academics are now permitted to experience academic time as Ylijoki and Mäntylä

(2003)'s describe 'timelessness', a total, happy absorption in the task that renders one oblivious to the passing of time. However, whether one enjoys factory-line production time or a timeless idyll, each position assumes that time will not be punctuated by *feminised* domestic commitments and associated interruptions of time. Accordingly, women in academia are locked into an impossible conundrum:

> Ideal worker norms expect women to approach work as though they do not have children, and intensive mothering norms expect women to parent as if they do not have careers (Ward and Wolf-Wender, 2016: 12).

Academic time flows beyond the conventional parameters of work-home divides, aided by omnipresent computer technology (Nippert-Eng, 1996). It is normal to find academics regularly working late at night and over weekends. It is suggested that this flexibility is helpful to academic parents (Jakubiec 2015); and we are no stranger to that argument, as academic mothers who have each rocked the cradle with one hand while marking and writing up with the other. However, this lockdown period marks challenging new territory for many women academics, where flexibility has given way to flux, old demands have been unmoored from familiar ways of managing them, new demands shriek for immediate attention in a whirlwind of organising the means to master them.

Academia is noted to be a high stress occupation resulting in significant levels of ill health (Morrish, 2019). Yet in a pre-pandemic world a surprising research finding reported that undertaking unpaid overtime reduced individual's work stress rather than increased it (Fotinha, 2019), with the presumption that this permitted more hours to

work through a backlog of tasks otherwise unmanageable within normal contractual hours. Long hours are premised on volunteered time and the space to work in: conceptually, emotionally, logistically and physically. It is hard to conform to such regimes with a small child tugging at one's sleeve, an unhappy teenager to console or a house-bound parent to shop for.

The issue of work-balance, time, tempo and demands has accordingly become a cause célèbre for feminist academics, especially those who are challenging the neoliberal fallback position of laying responsibility for time management on individuals, rather than accepting it as structurally imposed, and therefore open to reform (Berg and Seeber, 2016; Author's Own, 2020; Gill, 2009). This, however, requires will and commitment to change – an ideological paradigm shift, to employ an old cliché, and one that until the lockdown had yet to take place. How academics are thereby experiencing managing work and home commitments under these extraordinary and unique circumstances provides the essential clues to which direction such HE changes should be made.

Methodology and methods

In mid-April, approximately four weeks after most universities had commenced lockdown, the authors launched a pilot survey to collect data on the impact of pandemic lockdown on the work-life balance of academics. The pilot study was initially aimed by email at an institutional network of women academics to which the authors belong. Informal communications within the women's network had already highlighted that some members were struggling with lockdown over-and-above the

immediate work inconveniences of rapidly transferring work operations to the home environment.

A week following the pilot study the survey was distributed to HEI nationally and internationally via twitter and LinkedIn using the following hashtags #academics #Covid19lockdown #NewNormal with mentions to relevant organisations (i.e. @UniversitiesUK, @AdvanceHE, @SRHE73, @ResEngland, @ResearchEurope) with the aim of reaching across the UK and beyond. The survey remained open until 12th June 2020. The survey garnered 216 responses, although this paper focuses on information provided by the 146 UK respondents solely, where their distribution by gender and institution rank is duly presented in Table 1, and by subject area in Table 2.

The survey was designed in Jisc Online Surveys (licence from Bournemouth University's organisation account), with responses exported to MS Excel where answers to close-ended questions were coded before imported into IBM SPSS 26 for statistical analysis. Chi-squared test was used to assess dependency of responses on gender.

Ethical considerations

University research ethics protocols were observed in respect of obtaining ethics approval with regards to data protection, confidentiality and the right to withdrawal. Accordingly, participation in the survey was both entirely voluntary and anonymous. It could be argued that in respect of the initial pilot study the researchers' affiliation to

the informal academic network of women scholars might have influenced participation owing to a sense of collegiality or mutual obligation. However, no coercion of any sort was applied and anonymity ensured that no individual, through act or omission, could be identified.

Limitations

In terms of statistical power an overall response rate of 146 UK responses is limited. The survey, however, was populated by qualitative comments, many being quite detailed, particularly by women academics. This, again, could be explained by prior work relationships with the authors, but this does not account for comments made beyond the institution or from those within it without these collegiate connections.

Findings

In this paper the qualitative data from the survey is privileged for discursive discussion in being unusually rich and where the quantitative element is employed as scaffolding. According the paper has been structured to frame these qualitative findings appropriately.

Who and what are the respondents?

The majority of respondents were women. It is therefore interesting to note the equal numbers of female-male professors responding where there are few women in this role compared to those in more junior ranks (Authors' Own, 2019). A gendered pattern

resumes in reference to far higher number of women occupying lecturers/senior lectureships compared to male colleagues.

[Insert Table 1 here]

In respect of disciplines there were no male respondents occupying the Medical Sciences and Nursing disciplines. The highest concentration of women respondents was found in the Social Sciences and Humanities. Among men there was an even split of male academics in the Natural Sciences and Engineering, and the Social Sciences and Humanities.

[Insert Table 2 here]

The relevance of this distribution among the discipline areas becomes more apparent when we examine the qualitative findings.

The see-saw of work-life balance under lockdown

Both quantitative and qualitative data revealed clear differences in how lockdown was experienced with respect to work-life balance. Intriguingly for some respondents juggling work and home became considerably harder, while for others life had improved considerably under lockdown. Very few participants had found this change to be subject to mild variances of opinion but rather that this was subject to strong perceptions in the qualitative data.

Table 3 indicates these differences in terms of response variables by gender.

[Insert Table 3 here]

A chi-square test of independence showed that there was no significant differences between the proportion of female and male respondents who reported changes in teaching workload ($X^2(2)=1.0751$, p=0.584) or administrative tasks ($X^2(2)=1.5042$, p=0.4714). However, significant differences were found related to desktop research ($X^2(2)=14.1003$, p<0.000), with a larger proportion of women reporting research activity decreased (47% compared to 31% of men) or remained the same (37% compared to 21% of men), while a larger proportion of men report an increase in research activity (48% compared to 16% of women).

Although a higher proportion of female (63%) compared to male (45%) respondents stated that their work-life balance had deteriorated owing to lockdown the result from Chi-square test indicated that the difference is not statistically significant ($X^2(3)=5.696$, p=0.127). Yet women's qualitative comments suggested that there were also marked gender differences in terms of their perceived experiences.

If quantitative data serves to draw our attention to the phenomenon of the ontological 'what' is, it is the qualitative aspects that serves to flesh these out through an epistemological inquiry into the 'why' and 'how' of these findings, and to which we now turn.

The downswing of lockdown

Participants reporting negative experiences in managing waged work/personal

demands fell primarily into two distinct camps.

The camel's back

The first group composed those who stated that their workloads had increased enormously since lockdown, which had eroded their personal time. Excessive work demands were described as relating to the rapid switch to online teaching methods. Professional programmes, and those that required a practical element, such as Nursing seemed subject to greater disruption than academic ones like the humanities and social sciences.

> [I] am working extremely long days (average of 12 to 16 hours) as both a mother and a worker. Support for student nurses and cover for colleagues while off sick has increased and requires a lot of personal emotional resources. [I] am having to deal with a lot of emotions masked as initial anger and frustration and to de-escalate this to support students. Little or no [time] for own research despite deadlines.

Pressures were exacerbated where a 'business-as-usual' departmental approach was being exacted. Such contradictions were manifested in a proliferation of emails, rather than an expected drop in email traffic, together with an urgent move towards placing all meetings online. These strategies relied almost completely on personal resources to access social media such as Zoom or Microsoft Teams, which in turn relied on individual home computer and internet resources, as these two female respondents commented.

> ..It does not compensate for the fact that we are using our internet and so on. I
> have to share my 'office' with my son ... and it has been difficult for both of us
> to manage whilst I have been undertaking tutorials with students and almost
> daily team meetings. I have had to relocate to my bedroom for privacy

This aggrieved response draws attention to how under lockdown HEI saved on costs of running university buildings and funding facilities/equipment, while these costs and the responsibilities for service provision were transferred to individual staff. A clearer example of structural neoliberalism in action could hardly be devised.

Devine et al. (2020: 1) speak of lockdown as a societal 'circuit-breaker', yet in UK HE this was barely apparent, where work demands appeared to proliferate rather than reduce as these account indicates:

> Total email and video-meeting overload and stress. Everything is done by email
> and with huge pressure to respond quickly to prove I am working and not
> slacking off. This may be my own fault / perception but it isn't helped by
> multiple requests from Faculty and Dept for responses within very short
> deadlines.

Lockdown has given rise to new social divisions regarding continuing or adapted waged work, the enforced idleness of paid furlough and actual job losses – with a disastrous national recession (exacerbated by Brexit) on the socio-economic horizon (Inman, 2019). Academics in this regard are comparatively still very fortunate in remaining mostly employed and enjoying an uninterrupted salary, but for respondents

confinement to the home exacerbated a sense of guilt, anxiety and professional

inadequacy (Gill, 2009), as well as fear of the future:

> At the beginning of the outbreak I had health concerns that were stress related
>
> and now seem to be managed. My concerns now focus of how we could work
>
> in a university environment in the foreseeable future and whether I would want
>
> to be in that environment again - feel quite petrified at the prospect.

Attempting to maintain 'business as usual' behaviour under exceptional, disruptive

conditions was viewed as very stressful, particularly if this was viewed as

insufficiently unrecognised institutionally and not duly accommodated.

Motherhood and academia

The larger, second camp of those experiencing work-life hardship under lockdown

were parents of younger children, and were in turn subdivided into two groups: those

with pre-school children and those with school-age children. The quantitative data

showed no significant differences in the proportion of male and female respondents

who live with children age 19 years or younger ($X^2(1)=0.436$, p=0.509) or children

under the age of 5 years ($X^2(1)=0.248$, p=0.618), leading to expectations of childcare

disruptions for most parent respondents.

The outliers here were those academics with other care responsibilities such as teenage

children or adult relatives with mental or physical health problems, including elderly

parents requiring regular care and support.

Significantly all respondents reporting a deterioration of work-life balances owing to childcare, home schooling and other care responsibilities were women. A few women participants stated that their male partners were keyworkers and were therefore unable to share equally in childcare tasks, such as this participant:

> Constantly feeling I am not doing enough work. Knowing I just don't have time to research. Feeling split between feeling I should be paying my young daughter attention but keep having to look at emails and sort admin etc. Dreading marking coming in, as I will spend less time with my daughter while her dad works as a police officer. Feels like I am doing two jobs badly - bad mother - bad academic.

Regardless of keyworker demands, it was women respondents who appeared to struggle balancing domestic responsibilities with academic work owing to shouldering the majority of childcare (Agarwal, 2020).

> My husband and I are now trying to negotiate our full time work schedules around each other. He earns a lot more and works for [ ]so is prioritising his schedule, whilst I am struggling to even manage to attend meetings and live teaching sessions as they clash with his. We have [ ]children, no personal space, and it is very intense.

The demands of childcare also encompassed homeschooling as well, and where the wider impact of social distancing precautions meant that many women had little or no support.

I felt a sense of overwhelm at the beginning. I'm a single parent and had my parents' help plus an au pair. The au pair went home, my parents self-isolated and my kids haven't seen their dad for 6 weeks as he lives so far away. I feel very on my own as a parent and coping with schoolwork and managing my own health (I have asthma) is hard.

Inevitably it was women respondents who reported serious concerns about how such handicaps would affect their current workloads, academic reputations and on-going careers. This was felt to be particularly important in an output-driven work environment when measured against domestically unencumbered colleagues as these two heartfelt comments state:

> ... Due to childcare commitments and worrying about my academic future, due to concerns over student recruitment and the ongoing viability of the university, as well as my own career which I suspect will be negatively affected due to inability to pursue any additional research (and indeed to do all of my core academic duties to the usual standard) to the same quality/quantity as other colleagues at BU and beyond.

> My main worry is that I cannot keep up with my work and am still being compared to colleagues without children. This is normally hard enough but now it just feels impossible, especially with having to negotiate this with my husband's schedule. I don't feel like there has been much recognition of these issues by my line manager and colleagues (e.g. programme leaders). They are

saying we should only do as much as we can but are still expecting lots of hours

of real-time online teaching.

The question of jeopardised career progression for ambitious women stepping back

into 1950s-type drudgery (Ferguson, 2020) represents a serious additional

disadvantage given the existing gendered, career-track bottleneck in HE.

The upside of lockdown

In hindsight the official government policy on lockdown was an arbitrary exercise in

control and contradiction. This survey provides a brief snapshot how lockdown was

affecting academics then, although the pandemic situation is one of fluidity as rising

morbidity and mortality rates are weighed against the damage to the rapidly declining

economic health of the nation, with a desire in certain quarters to return to 'normality'.

The demands of academic work and tempo has again altered, the chaotic end of one

academic year heralds an equally problematic new one, aggravated and handicapped

by erratically changing political decisions regarding lockdown and social distancing

The demise of the commute

For some the novelties of lockdown carried two unexpected bonuses, which, once

again, predominantly affected women academics. An end to the dreaded work

commute, generating 48 comments, and was perceived as one of the biggest benefits of

lockdown, saving both time, expense, energy as well as the ecological environment.

Not having to drive to work and deal with traffic and driving stress. Not driving means gaining 2 more hours of work. Being able to provide a positive balance to my work-home life.

I usually have to commute for 2 hours each day. I have been able to get up later, and have 2 more hours in my day, which means that I have been able to exercise at home and feel healthier.

Gender normative practices came to the fore once more, where in contrast to the difficulties of managing work and small children under lockdown, several women respondents reported positive new experiences under lockdown conditions exonerating them from exhausting routines and providing greater quality of life.

Less commuting time and more time with family as a result of that. The opportunity to think more creatively as a result of being less tired from commuting.

Working from home has been a positive thing for myself and family. I live a long way from campus (3h commute) and the lack of time spend travelling has improved my mental health and made my toddler much happier.

Less time spent travelling to work meant more time with the family for many respondents (whether for better or for worse); and where women's comments on academic work-life balance and childcare greatly outnumbered those from men. Of the two comments offered by male academics on this issue, one mentioned freedom from

the morning school run under lockdown, followed by a delighted comment from another regarding the joys of fatherhood:

> I can spend more time with my young children and see their developments (before I would get a summary from my wife) - I am interrupted by my smiling children rather than students moaning about trivial and insignificant things

This comment underlines the gendered disparities in domestic responsibilities that have been ignored by HEI but which are now unequivocally visible.

From factory floor to cottage industry

Other improvements were reported, as listed by this male respondent:

> 1. The lockdown forced me to create a new workspace at home (in my garden shed). The converted shed is such a useful office that I will continue to use it after the lockdown ends. 2. There have been more family-oriented activities, which is a positive because it has improved all of our relationships.

A sense that new work modes were within personal control challenged the previously taken-for-granted inadequacies of institutional work environments, where the comfort of staff is regularly sacrificed to other considerations. These office deficits could relate to a lack of basic privacy and peace, hygiene, and even room temperatures as this woman noted.

> I am able to vary the temperature of my working environment, which makes a
>
> big difference to a menopausal person - I am much more comfortable than in
>
> the office. I can also access clean toilet facilities, which is sometimes
>
> problematic at the Uni. It is also easier to concentrate than in a shared office
>
> environment.

The question of artificially set temperatures may have been a sole comment in the survey but is likely to relate to a common experience of discomfort among women, so ubiquitous it is assumed to be normal. Research literature reports that standard office temperatures that are centrally controlled have been calibrated solely with male bodies in mind, not the different metabolic rates of female bodies (Criado Perez, 2019).

Perceptions of lockdown highlighted both inequalities among staff as well as questions of wellbeing. Crowded, expensive canteens or inadequate staff 'kitchens' and rushed consumption of fuel-food, gave way to a re-discovery of improved nutrition in the form of time taken to make and eat healthy meals at home, as noted by a female and male respondent respectively:

> More time with loved ones, nutritional health - able to take time in preparing
>
> nutritious healthier food rather than quick instant meals in-between work
>
> breaks.

Being able to work from 6am to 11 or 12 without having to break to come to work. Being able to eat at times with less consideration of the convenience of colleagues.

A neat summary of benefits was provided by the following respondent summing up all the benefits she was currently experiencing under lockdown, factors which intersected with many comparable issues raised by other respondents.

Not having 26 hours of (student) contact time is less pressure. Being able to consider responses to students before typing is less pressure. Not wasting time going into work, not having to source work clothes or having to source food and prepare to take to work. All the costs in time and money of showing up to work in a presentable state.

One of the assumed advantages of working life has often been construed as social interaction with others. However, in this survey while socialising at work was missed by some, more commonly relief was expressed from avoiding unwanted interactions, as comments from three female and one male respondent indicates:

Bit more time to really focus on individual papers - not being interrupted all the time.
I no longer have students and staff members turning up unannounced to my office.

Freedom from bullying colleagues.

I don't have to talk with colleagues. I can spend more time alone.

The professional work context may lead to the construction of supportive networks of like-minded colleagues, but arguably, this occurs not merely from serendipitous friendships but more likely as an intuitive flocking tactics taking the chill off indifferent, even antithetical work cultures and environments. It is evident from research literature that oppressive relationships of dominance and subordination, of command, control and compliance are commonplace experiences in HE (Erickson et al., 2020; Authors' Own, 2020)

Imagining the new normal

A reformation, reclamation or reconstitution of academic life is a rallying call in HE as a response to the perceived pervasive and insidious corporatisation of university life (Holmwood, 2014). The juddering halt of corporate machinery generated by lockdown appeared then to create a sudden and unfamiliar space for academics to start surveying the shape, mass and nature of academic work. However, in seeking to understand whether respondents wished for institutional change within HE, they were firstly asked to rate their level of concern (from 1=not a concern to 5=major concern) concerning the end of lockdown.

[Insert Table 4 here]

Analysis indicates that there was no significant difference between male and female respondents concerning 'catching up with work in general' (U=1462, p=0.621), 'dealing with students' expectations' (U=1253, p=0.168), 'effects on mental health' (U=1261, p=0.130) and 'maintaining/finding work-life balance' (U=1358, p=0.379). The latter received the highest mean ranking (Figure 1) for both male (4.00) and female respondents (4.12).

It became apparent in the qualitative comments that many respondents wanted a change to their institution regime. Diagram 1 indicates the most cited wishes by respondents in imagining a new academic 'normal where, for example, 39 respondents wished to continue working from home, which connects with the welcome commuting respite already discussed.

[Insert Diagram 1 here]

For those for whom lockdown was proving less of a trial and more an adventure of discovery, the new 'normal' was visualised as one of exercising greater individual autonomy and thereby personal empowerment by being able to set one's own work tempo, place and priorities.

> I like having the freedom of working when I want to... so if I want to start my
>
> day at 5pm and work until midnight, I can do that... I've worked in the middle
>
> of the night when I couldn't sleep and really enjoyed it; got so much done!

> Know it's not feasible long terms, but there is a freedom over my day... as long as I show up for teaching at allotted times... the rest of the time I can manage pretty successfully... and I can better fit in exercise and self care, which I was never able to do when I was AT work all the time.

The removal of bureaucratic baggage enabled the pared down essential elements of academic work to be newly appreciated, as noted by this female participant.

> The change in the lack of meeting and bureaucracy has been a real eye-opener. As a programme leader I always knew that too much time was spent in meetings/doing pointless admin, but I really did not realise the full extent. To actually have time to do the important things: preparing teaching, supporting students and undertaking research has been a joy.

Time wasted in 'pointless' and proliferating meetings was also mentioned as a quintessentially unnecessary example of raison d'être administrative burdens, typifying the abnormalities of the former work-as-usual HE world, one that participants across gender stated they were glad to see the back of. To this end, online meetings were surprisingly popular because they were normally short, sharp and focused.

> Online meetings: I wonder why we don't do more of these? They are more focused and more people attend and can engage.

Those who were able to squander less physical, mental and emotional energy in the new work context uncovered forgotten wells of intellectual creativity that were exhilarating for some and a profound relief for others, as these two participants, one female, one male report.

Thinking differently and increased innovatively. More agility and focus and a mindset that anything is possible!

More time to write papers. More time to take care of me and my mental health.

Discussion

The findings from this survey demarcate two particular, overlapping phenomena representing significant inequalities in contemporary UK HE. The first relates to career handicaps affecting women. Slow and unequal progression rates affecting women academics and associated gender pay gaps has been raised by several commentators over time (Authors' Own, 2019, 2018; Morley, 2013; O'Connor, 2015). Nonetheless in the sector robust, remedial action borne from genuine commitment to equality has yet to materialise. Here a number of important lessons for the HE sector arose from the study, with relevance across national boundaries.

Lesson 1. The benefits of working from home

This carries compound benefits to the majority of respondents who wished this to remain an option in the future, halting the corporate creep of place/space/time control,

typified by presenteeism, inadequate office spaces and uncomfortable/unhygienic facilities.

Lesson 2. Addressing inequitable home-working conditions

Nonetheless, working from home inherently raises spectres of negative and inequitable disparities, where, while some will subside, others will persist. Two non-exhaustive examples stand out:

<div style="border:1px dashed; display:inline-block">L SEP</div>

- Reduced pressure in balancing family/work demands through the re-opening of nurseries/schools and residential/nursing homes, plus resumption of domiciliary care provision, day-care and other health/social care services.

- Inadequate home workspace and facilities may continue owing to financial and practical constraints, this may be particularly the case for academics in insecure employment.

Crucially, HEI are required to urgently support and accommodate those requiring suitable, external and safe office spaces and facilities.

Lesson 3. Addressing mixed attitudes towards online teaching

Negative perceptions towards this related to the fast pace of demanded adjustments, sometimes under duress, and exacerbated by inexperience of software/tools along with inadequate personal equipment. Relevant training and the peer sharing of good practice may be beneficial to some staff, provided the existing and exacerbated time

poverty of academics is properly recognised and accommodated. Too often, in our experience, such training is not carried out by those acquainted with advanced pedagogy and who are little acquainted with the complex realities of HE.

Lesson 4. New managerial responses to emerging and established inequities

Providing specific support for those staff most negatively affected by the pandemic, should be prioritised for inequity reduction. The resulting short- and long-term impacts of lockdown on staff productivity, health and wellbeing need to be taken into consideration in appraisals and career progression decisions. This lesson anticipates with and connects to the congruent Universities UK (2020) response. Examples of fresh managerial approaches from our study include the principles of proactive planning, investing heavily in user-friendly technology and creating a culture of trust, which embraces individual initiative and is forgiving of failure. This means decisively moving away from punitive 'cultures of blame' that stifle innovation and punish initiative and risk-taking, which otherwise form precisely the kind of responsive agility required for managing academic life under lockdown.

Lesson 5. Workloads and work-life balance post-lockdown

In addition to addressing emerging inequities, this study indicates academic concern and opposition towards a possible 'return to normal work', particularly because this was accompanied by a fear of greatly increased workloads aimed at covering all the unmet tasks of the crisis-driven, previous academic year, while managing new

demands and uncertainties. Strong caveats oppose a 'business as usual' fallback

mentality or the managerial imposition of burdensome new 'normals' which

unreasonably rely on the self-regulating worker to unfairly shoulder the problems and

failures of HEI.

Lesson learned 6. Improving 'cascaded' communication to students

Social distancing **'chops-and-changes'** to student management in the face of

institutional desperation to maintain student tuition fee incomes and good student

evaluations, generate a high volume of confusing and contradictory messages. Our

findings suggest that these problems are being devolved down the chain of command

to coalface academics, who seem to be spending a disproportionate amount of their

time dealing with student anxieties and queries, often related to issues beyond

individual/departmental control. University Leadership groups need to embrace

corporate accountability in owning and delivering communiqués through the

development of centralised and standardised communications.

Lesson 7. Co-constructing the 'new normal'

Who shapes the 'new normal' could become merely another exercise in hegemonic,

corporate control. Our respondents indicate that they were keen that their established

expertise and new experiential knowledge informed any new institutional 'normal'.

Institutional working groups composed of such individuals, along with university

management and Union representatives could meaningfully co-create this new entity

embedded with effective strategies to reduce emerging and long-standing inequities.

This initiative needs to cultivated from the grassroots up, cutting across career levels,

and strongly affirmative of recognised differences and needs, be they gendered or

other, as illuminated by these emerging research findings.

The unique circumstances of lockdown have magnified formerly less visible gendered

disparities between genders in terms of work-life balance and career opportunities.

Emerging data from other sources indicates that lockdown has accentuated the

handicapping of women academics and the contrasting acceleration of male colleagues.

Findings from this study illuminate some of the reasons why this is the case. Gender

normative beliefs and practices regarding women's subordinated position in terms of

primary roles and responsibilities remain socially hard-wired as enduring, normatively

constructed notions of gender. All academics are evaluated, rewarded or overlooked,

according to institutional standards that fail abjectly to recognise these gendered

differences and are thus deeply unfair (Ward and Wendel, 2016). These standards are

unlikely to be overturned while they support the existing, gendered status quo of

superior and subordinated positionality in HE.

Probert's (2005) argument that inequalities relate to women's personal choices serves

to exonerate HEI from accusations of continuing gender bias disfavouring women's

careers, owing to reinforced, masculinised patterns of work (Pascall, 2012, Eddy and

Ward, 2015). Institutional playing fields blind to significant disadvantages among

players, merely collude with existing power imbalances. Instead institutional reflexivity is needed to understand how private domains can be politically gendered arenas that exacerbate inequalities in the workplace. Such learning is needed to effect any authentic change for gendered social justice in HE.

Conclusion

Our data points to the decided turn towards the bureaupathology of corporatisation inexorably shaping the UK sector (Kowalewski, 2012); and is correlated with increasing mental health problems among academics owing to unprecedented work demands (Morrish, 2019). Work pressures, which additionally focus on abstract metrics and measurements (O'Neill, 2014; Gill, 2009), confirm that a dehumanising instrumentalism is the paramount institutional objective to which the staff are expected to regulate themselves for compliance (Erickson et al., 2020).

Lockdown appeared at times to provide q sharp discontinuation of this mechanism, thrusting individuals into another mode of being, which was experienced by some as re-humanising, emancipatory and rich with creative potential; for others this proved the reverse. Yet shared respondent trepidations of a return to 'business-as-usual act as a timely warning. Just as the natural world began to flourish during this extraordinary time of lockdown, some academics rediscovered their own meaningful and creative equilibrium, which had been submerged under the oppressive weight of neoliberal HE ethos. Yet, many others, particularly academic mothers of young children and those with others with newly unsupported care duties, found this burden greatly increased

under multiple and unshared repercussions of lockdown. As we write, however, nature

is once again cowed by the return of the relentless human world; and in the academy

the old abnormalities and dysfunctions are beginning to reassert themselves.

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Table 1. Number of respondents per position and gender

United Kingdom respondents	Female	Male	Prefer not to say	Grand Total
Associate Professor	4	1		5
Lecturer	29	3	1	33
Other	6			6
Professor/Chair	10	10		20
Reader/Principal Lecturer	16	4	1	21
Research Fellow/PDRA	7	2		9
Senior Lecturer	39	9	1	49
Senior Research Fellow	1			1
(blank)	2			2
Grand Total	**114**	**29**	**3**	**146**

Table 2. Number of respondents per gender and broad discipline area

Broad subject area	Female	Male	Prefer not to say	Total
MEDICAL SCIENCES and NURSING	25			25
NATURAL SCIENCES and ENGINEERING	19	13	1	33
SOCIAL SCIENCES and HUMANITIES	53	13	2	68
OTHER AREAS	13	3		16
(blank)	4			4
Total	114	29	3	146

Table 3. Changes in work-life balance during lockdown per g

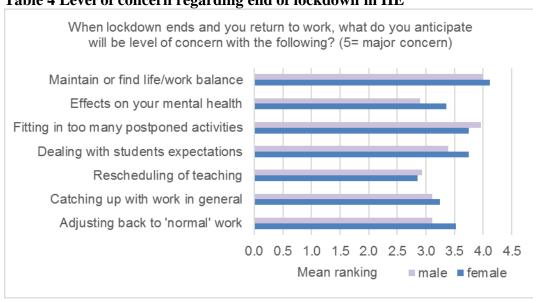|	Female		Male		Total
	Count	%	Count	%	
Got worse	72	63.2	13	44.8	85
Improved	38	33.3	13	44.8	51
Unchanged	3	2.6	3	10.3	6
Other	1	0.9	-	-	1
Total	114		29		143

Table 4 Level of concern regarding end of lockdown in HE

Diagram 1