Same storm, different boats
Working lives and Lockdown at Loughborough

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October 2020

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Centre for Research
in Social Policy

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Acknowledgements

1 INTRODUCTION

Late March 2020 saw the closure of Loughborough campuses to the majority of students and staff due to the lockdown that came in response to the global pandemic. Since then the situation has been fluid with government guidelines changing frequently. Throughout, the University has worked hard to ensure a safe return to campus for all and the resumption of in-person teaching where appropriate and possible.

This project was commissioned to enhance the institution's, and the sector's, understanding of the breadth and depth of the many different impacts of Covid-19. It explored how Research Teaching and Enterprise (RTE) and Specialist and Supporting Academic (SSA) staff were affected by lockdown, in particular in terms of their research, teaching and enterprise activities, contextualised by their individual circumstances. The aim of the research was to gather as diverse a range of experiences as possible, including both positive and negative effects, and for these to be used to inform the University's thinking about how best to move forward. The project was designed, conducted and completed between June and October 2020. Recruitment and data collection began in early July, ending on 10 August.

The findings from the study are intended to help those in management positions within the University better understand the challenges staff may face, how best to support transitions between home and campus working and how to mediate potentially negative consequences of this period in both the shorter and longer term.

1.1 Context

There have been a variety of articles, desk-based research and surveys examining potential implications of Covid-19 for the HE sector. A number of opinion pieces and desk-based studies have focused on the impact of the pandemic on inequalities within academia, for example: several have highlighted concerns over the disproportionate negative impact of caring responsibilities on academic mothers (Staniscuaski *et al.*, 2020; Minello, 2020); others have looked at how pre-existing inequalities experienced by women in academia with regard to promotion opportunities, particularly those that face intersectional disparity of opportunity, have been exacerbated during this period (Malisch et al., 2020). One study found the majority of Australian Universities have not yet provided clear and useful guidelines for academic staff managing work alongside caring responsibilities, and have treated these responsibilities as essentially a 'private' matter (Nash and Churchill, 2020). Throughout the lockdown period and beyond, media coverage and daily briefings also emphasised the disproportionate impact of Covid-19 on those from a Black, Asian or Minority Ethnic background (Booth, 2020).

The impact of Covid-19 on the mental health and wellbeing for staff and students has been highlighted in further studies. The Student Mental Health Research Network (SMaRteN) and Vitae carried out a survey of UK doctoral students and early career researchers to find out about the impact of the lockdown on their working lives. The findings revealed that more than three quarters have had difficulty carrying out their research and around 4 in 5 were showing some level of mental distress although this was lower for those who felt that their

institution had provided clear guidelines about how their university would support changes to working arrangements (SMaRteN, 2020). Sahu (2020) identified some strategies through which to support students and staff experiencing mental health issues by prioritising health and safety; offering counselling; providing sufficient pastoral care for international students; and investing in staff training for the shift to online teaching delivery (Sahu, 2020). Academics at the University of Derby have written about their experiences of using daily online 'huddles' via MS Teams during the lockdown to promote connectivity and cohesion with their colleagues which they have perceived as having a positive impact on staff wellbeing (Kotero et al., 2020).

Other studies emerging at this time have been concerned with the response of institutions to the shift to online delivery and long-term change within the sector. A survey of UK academics found that those at institutions already investing heavily in delivering learning, teaching and assessment online felt more prepared and confident in the shift to online delivery, but that the demands on staff particularly in terms of pastoral care towards students could lead to them 'forfeiting their rights to a work-life balance' (Watermeyer et al., 2020). Another discussed how the shift to delivering teaching online could establish a better approach to disseminating research and how the pandemic has been a catalyst for speeding up the inevitable globalisation of HE provision (Tesar, 2020). Several studies have examined the implications for universities, especially in financial terms, of a decline in international students, concluding that a lot of universities have been over reliant on them as a source of income and suggesting institutions could use this as an opportunity to invest further in their online offering for continued delivery in the future (Thatcher et al., 2020).

This project adds to this growing body of research in related areas, including the recent Loughborough University wellbeing survey, but differs from the majority, in that it focuses on participants' own accounts of their lived experiences of how their working lives have been affected by lockdown.

2   RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHOD

2.1   Approach

At a time when people were often struggling to meet multiple demands on their time both professionally and personally it was crucial that participation in this project was entirely voluntary. It was important that the initial approach should be framed in such a way as to encourage staff to engage constructively and to make it clear that the aims of the study were not linked in any way to monitoring of current and recent productivity or performance. The aim was to foreground staff mental health and well-being – and to position this as a compassionate approach to understanding the Loughborough experience and what the institution can do to support its staff over the coming months and years.

2.2   Methodology

A key factor in designing this research was that data collection needed to be as flexible as possible, minimising any burden on participants. We were acutely aware that staff were already working hard to adapt to changing circumstances, as well as often juggling other obligations and commitments. Under normal circumstances, we would have conducted one to one semi-structured interviews. However, this was clearly not possible given the restrictions and constraints resulting from Covid-19. At CRSP we had already been exploring alternative ways of conducting fieldwork particularly through online interviews and colleagues from the Global Minimum Income Standard Network in Mexico and Singapore shared their experiences of conducting focus groups via Zoom, which helped to shape our strategy.

Online interviews afford researchers the opportunity to build rapport with respondents, as in in-person interactions. However, fieldwork of this kind still depends on interviewer and interviewee finding a mutually convenient time, free of other commitments, interruptions and distractions, none of which was straightforward during lockdown.

As a pragmatic solution, we invited people to take part in an 'auto-interview'. This was explained to participants as a hybrid of video diary and online interview. Participants recorded a video of their responses to a set of open-ended questions provided in advance, rather than having a conversation with a researcher.

Through extensive consultation with colleagues across the University, MS Teams emerged as the platform that would be reasonably familiar to participants because of its adoption as the University-preferred platform for online interactions. One function of MS Teams is the ability to record video and/or audio of these interactions. Those who had already delivered online teaching were likely to be reasonably confident about recording themselves, and this was another reason for using this means of data collection. On completion the recordings are immediately available and only visible to the invited attendees. Once a meeting has been arranged and the invitation accepted, it is possible for either or both attendees to rejoin the original meeting, long after its allocated time slot. This meant that participants

were able to record their video at any point after an initial meeting, without having to co-ordinate with the research team.

All those who responded to the calls for participants were sent a link to an online questionnaire to obtain information about key characteristics, e.g. job grade, School, age bracket, household composition, number and types of caring responsibilities etc. This was collected to inform the team about the sample composition. As a qualitative study, we were not looking for a statistically representative sample, but wanted to be able to identify information about who had taken part. This information was used part way through the data collection process to try and broaden the sample in terms of which Schools and what range of job grades were represented. We attempted to boost the number of Black, Asian, Minority Ethnic and LGBT+ participants, reaching out via existing staff networks, with limited success.

At this initial stage participants were also emailed a project information sheet and invited to arrange a ten minute briefing via MS Teams with one of the researchers to answer any questions and explain next steps. This briefing meeting proved useful not only in being able to offer additional information, but also in ensuring that people were comfortable with using the platform. As well as resolving any technical issues in advance it enabled participants to meet and talk to a member of the research team, which made them more confident in taking part and facilitated an element of rapport building. Although the 'auto-interview' meant participants were effectively interviewing themselves by answering the questions provided, this approach appeared reasonably effective in making people feel that they were talking to a real person – often introducing themselves at the start of the video as if they were talking to the researcher – rather than making a solo recording. Two people contributed audio-only recordings, and one participant did not wish to make a recording but opted to send responses via email, which were also included in the dataset.

Following the briefing meeting, recruits to the study were sent an electronic consent form to complete and return and a brief topic guide, comprising five open-ended questions, each with a few prompts in order to give an idea of the aspects of their experience central to the research. Participants could choose whether to read the questions beforehand or respond to them spontaneously when they made their recording. Some chose to prepare, reflecting and making notes in advance, others did not. Neither approach seemed to affect the resulting video, with all participants appearing engaged and often candid about their experiences. The nature of the 'auto interview' also meant that they had control over which questions they answered, in what order and in what depth.

Videos were viewed by the researchers and stored in a folder only accessible to the research team. The data was thematically analysed exploring differences and similarities in experiences, situations and contexts. This report aims to reflect that diversity and commonality in the effects of the lockdown on people's working lives, offering examples of good practice and identifying areas that it would be useful to focus on in the period beyond lockdown.

2.3   Recruitment

Participants were recruited through an 'opt-in' process, meaning that staff volunteered to take part rather than being expected to take part unless they deliberately withdrew. A limitation of this approach is that the sample is self-selecting, which risks missing those who feel unable to engage, and those who may be particularly at risk of negative consequences of the pandemic. However, it would not have been appropriate to approach recruitment in a more targeted way as that could risk people feeling that they had been singled out, included or excluded unfairly.

The invitation to take part went to staff groups across campus via various networks and individuals, such as ADRs and staff leading Equality, Diversity and Inclusion activities. Brief presentations were made to attendees at formal and informal meetings, e.g. Maia Network, Athena SWAN, and information posted on the University and staff news pages on the website, signposting them to the research team. The data collection period, originally set for July 2020, was extended into early August to allow late respondents and those who had been on annual leave to take part.

2.4   Sample size and characteristics

The aim was to obtain a dataset of 30 interviews. Of the 65 staff who came forward to enquire about participation, 20 did not complete the process. By the end of the data collection period, there were 42 videos, two audio recordings and one email submission, all of which were included in the final analysis.

The majority (62%) of participants were women, and participants were on Grades 6-9. Grade 8 staff made up 40% of the sample, whilst 24% were Grade 7, 20% Grade 6 and 16% Grade 9. The least senior staff (Grade 6) were predominantly women; the majority of the most senior staff (Grade 9) were men. Most of the sample (84%) were in either the 36-45 or 46-55 age groups (42% each), with the remaining 16% being in the over 56 or under 35 age categories. The majority of participants were white (either British, Irish or Other) with the remaining 11% of participants being from a Black, Asian or Minority Ethnic background. Staff from Social Sciences and Humanities comprised 24% of the sample, with 20% from Design and Creative Arts, 18% from Sport, Exercise and Health Sciences, 11% from Mechanical, Electrical and Manufacturing Engineering, with a smaller representation (10% or less) from others including Architecture, Building and Civil Engineering, Aeronautical, Automotive, Chemical and Materials Engineering, Science and Loughborough London. Whilst 31% of those that took part had no caring responsibilities, 38% were caring for children of primary school age or younger, 13% had children of secondary school age and 7% had children with additional needs, such as autism or dyslexia. 11% of the sample had no childcare responsibilities but were providing physical or emotional care for parents, partners or friends. Of those that took part in the research 13% self-reported having a disability.

2.5   Data management and ethics

Video recordings were automatically uploaded to MS Stream on completion and then downloaded and stored in a secure folder. Consent forms were collected and stored securely in a separate folder. These folders were accessible only to the research team. The online recruitment questionnaires were collated by the project administrator and anonymised and participants were allocated a unique number. The consent form explained that participation was entirely voluntary and withdrawal from the study was possible at any point.

2.6   Project Advisory Group

The research team was supported by a small Project Advisory Group (PAG). Members of the PAG were consulted at key stages in the project, kept informed of progress and developments via emails and regular online meetings and invited to comment on the draft report.

3   FINDINGS

3.1   Situation and working environment

Almost all participants had been exclusively working from home since the closure of campus on 20 March, although by the end of the data collection period (10 August 2020) some were beginning to return to campus to work in their own offices.

For those working principally or exclusively at home, working conditions varied in terms of space and suitability. Some had a separate home office or study, particularly those who worked from home on a regular or semi-regular basis. Others were having to improvise in cramped conditions at the kitchen or dining table, at makeshift workstations in bedrooms, or moving from room to room in the house depending on what else was happening. Sharing space was a frequent challenge for those who lived with a partner and/or children. In households with two working adults people had to make compromises and negotiate access to space, particularly when both needed privacy in order to attend meetings, deliver teaching or hold online conversations with students or colleagues. Finding a quiet space to work or participate in meetings could also be difficult not only because of who else was in the house but also because of external factors – some people mentioned 'noisy neighbours' who seemed to be using the lockdown period to carry out extensive DIY projects. Appearing professional in online meetings could be 'an impossible ask' when there were young children in the household and no way of separating work space from home space.

Those with children often had additional constraints. Some staff with very young children were able to rely on a partner to take on or share care so that they were still able to focus on work. For others this was less straightforward, particularly for single parents and those whose partners were absent or whose work was given priority within the household. Those who had previously relied on informal support from their own parents or older family members to help with childcare often found that this was no longer available as a resource, because of restrictions on travel and mixing between households, and concerns about the need to shield older and more vulnerable relatives.

Parents with school aged children between 4 and 14 had done their best to provide or support home schooling, mostly finding that this required their almost constant presence and frequent attention. The school summer holidays had offered a welcome respite from either attempting to home school or the guilt of admitting that they weren't able to maintain it. Parents with children with additional needs and/or behavioural, developmental or learning difficulties found that it was extremely difficult to meet their child's needs as well as working. Parents of children of 15 years and older did not report experiencing the same level of difficulties with finding space or time to work, saying that their children were more self-sufficient, although in these cases the household resources could become stretched in terms of the number of available devices and the bandwidth of home internet.

Some participants had other caring responsibilities, providing emotional and practical support for relatives, friends, neighbours and sometimes colleagues. Many had elderly parents that they were supporting remotely by phone and visiting occasionally, although

some lived with or nearby older relatives and were continuing to shield them, bringing additional duties and anxieties.

Some international staff had had to make difficult decisions about where to spend lockdown, either in the UK or with family in other countries. For some this decision was taken out of their hands with sudden flight cancellations and travel disruptions. In a few cases this meant separation from partners and children, or conversely, having to look after children while working with little or no support.

In contrast, those who lived alone tended to be more likely to report having adequate space and being able to work without interruption. However, they too were not immune from the effects of the pandemic, and could experience isolation and struggle with motivation when separated from social contact and the chance to interact with their colleagues for a long period.

Overall, accounts varied with most people identifying both positive and negative aspects of working from home. For some it was a less balanced picture, either favouring being able to continue working from home and seeing it as offering greater flexibility, or being keen to return to a more formal and structured work setting, with a clear delineation between work and domestic life.

3.2   Communication, culture and collegiality

Feedback was almost entirely positive about central communications from the University, particularly in the early part of lockdown, when most participants felt that messages had been clear and timely. Opinions varied about the level of clarity as lockdown continued, with several people saying that there had been different messages within Schools and units to those that were being issued centrally. Some participants thought that their Schools had communicated well, while others were less positive. Participants identified issues with communications going to students, particularly where staff had to field queries about information that they had not seen, and had to ask students to send them the text they were referring to so they could respond appropriately. Although some staff felt reassured and supported in requiring flexibility around their workloads, others talked about 'mixed messages'. They appreciated the compassionate tone of emails from central University management – 'do what you can do' and 'be kind to yourself' – but said this message was at odds with the reality of having to meet inflexible, and sometimes very tight, deadlines without any ability to defer, delegate or share the workload. This was particularly mentioned in relation to exam marking.

Many participants talked about efforts that had been made to help staff groups feel connected, but views on the usefulness and the desirability of these varied. While some (especially newer staff) found whole School coffee mornings potentially awkward as they didn't know who would be there and were unlikely to know many people, others had benefited from meeting colleagues they would not normally have encountered during their normal working patterns. Some participants mentioned more informal social gatherings such as quizzes and these were seen as a good way to get to know their colleagues better, fostering team spirit. For some, conversations about how to support each other's teaching

practically in the case of future difficulties such as illness or school closure, together with recognition and appreciation among colleagues for everything everyone was doing had improved collegiality. The sense of connection was particularly felt by staff who routinely worked remotely for practical or logistical reasons. Being in a very small minority of people who worked from home for most of the time had, under normal circumstances, made some people feel isolated and even ostracised. As working from home became the norm, those barriers disappeared and they felt more included and less likely to be viewed as 'never here'.

The working culture of Loughborough became apparent through the way people talked about their working hours and high expectations of themselves. Many were attempting to meet or were exceeding the number of hours they worked pre-lockdown, often while still trying to look after others and educate their children. Parents of younger children often talked about working late into the evening once the children had gone to bed and the house was quiet. Some with few or no caring responsibilities reported being able to be extremely productive, without interruptions to their work caused by routine meetings, visits from colleagues or questions from students, but even those who were surprised and pleased that they had found time to tackle publications, projects or grant applications that they hadn't previously had time for, wondered if this level of effort was sustainable over a longer period and were acutely aware that there was a great deal of teaching preparation they would have to do before next term.

3.3   Technology

Participants described a mix of experiences about their technology use and working conditions at home. There were some reports of having to use older or faulty laptops, difficulty with poor internet connections and having to share IT equipment with others in their household, which could be especially difficult when home schooling children. Others were better equipped, either because they worked from home regularly or because they had been able to bring items home from their office. A few individuals mentioned being able to quickly resolve technical issues, such as needing a replacement laptop or charging lead with assistance from IT services. Others felt there was a lack of support offered in relation to IT equipment and had either made do with what they had or purchased specific items themselves. There were also reports of teething problems with several software applications including Adobe Connect, Jabber and particularly Panopto, described variously as 'not particularly easy' and 'a bit clunky', with several participants commenting on the many hours it took to record a single lecture. While most had adapted to MS Teams quite quickly, the initial lack of clarity about which platforms should be used and how best to use them had caused confusion and frustration.

Some discussed the steep learning curve they had experienced in shifting their working lives online. A lot of participants engaged with online teaching very early on in lockdown, having to get up to speed quickly to deliver their remaining modules. Some were already familiar with online delivery. Those not teaching in semester two reported some apprehension about how they would make the transition to blended delivery and there was a widespread feeling that the more detailed guidance now being provided via CAP would have been welcome earlier on. However, there were several examples of colleagues relishing the

challenge of sharing ideas and devising innovative approaches to provide the best online learning environment possible.

Many of the participants reflected on the positive aspects of online working, with increased efficiency being a significant factor, as well as the ability to meet with a wider range of colleagues from across Campus more easily than previously because there was no need to put aside time to walk from one end of the University to the other. Others said they missed the connectivity of in-person interactions and the opportunities for informal conversations and the spontaneity of 'corridor conversations', although it was also highlighted that online meetings offer greater accessibility and inclusivity for those with hearing impairments. Better communication with students, and with colleagues at other institutions/organisations or in other countries was highlighted by a number of participants. This particularly related to one-to-one meetings with PhD students, as arranging online meetings could be more productive than the usual informal drop-in sessions. However, it was also noted that having online meetings with international students who had returned to their home countries could be more challenging than regular in-person contact due to being in different time zones and some having limited access to IT applications.

Some reported initially feeling stilted or self-conscious while pre-recording lectures, or attending online meetings, especially if they were relatively new to their team, and many participants discussed the fatigue resulting from 'living life on a screen'. This was particularly acute when attending a lot of back to back meetings, which required a great deal of concentration and focus. This was exacerbated by not having to physically move from one appointment to another, which would normally provide a short break in between. For some this went on 'day after day, for hours on end', to the extent that what time they had available to work was spent on calls, meaning that productivity in other areas diminished. There were however examples of effective practice such as: innovative research seminars that facilitated closer connections between colleagues and encouraged them to share their work in new ways; international meetings that enabled greater engagement as more individuals attended than would have been possible in-person; and online events where it was noted that the use of technology actually led to improved delivery and better outcomes for students and staff. Some commented on the fact that it was far easier and more affordable to attend external events and international conferences online, being able to 'dip in and out' of them and fit them around other commitments, rather than having to take the time away from the office to attend them. The positive environmental benefits of reduction in staff travel were also commented on.

3.4   Health and wellbeing of staff

The shift to full-time home working allowed some people more time to spend on leisure pursuits and developing new skills. For those living with anxiety and depression, the conditions of lockdown exacerbated these pre-existing mental health issues, and led to some feeling the negative effects of social isolation. For others, anxiety emerged due to the pressures of their current or future workload and particularly concerns over whether new teaching demands would be feasible in practice. The media coverage focusing on the disproportionate impact of Covid-19 on those from a Black, Asian or Minority Ethnic background, alongside the events surrounding the death of George Floyd, also had a

detrimental impact on the mental health of those in the study from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic communities. Individuals from the Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic communities felt particularly vulnerable, with events highlighting how people are treated in broader society, and the additional time to reflect during lockdown heightened this sense of unease. However, there were reports of positives emerging from this time, with more conversations about race and constructive approaches to tackle racism from across the University, along with messages of support from colleagues and the Black Asian and Minority Ethnic network.

There were also longer-term concerns around comparisons with those who were perceived to have had a more productive lockdown experience, and the possible impacts on their own PDRs and future promotion prospects. On a related theme several participants talked about struggling to cope and feeling that their colleagues were managing much better than they were. Others discussed their anxiety about job security and whether the voluntary severance currently on offer would change into compulsory redundancies over time. More practical reservations concerned the return to campus and teaching students in-person who may have travelled from other countries or not be following social distancing outside of the classroom. This was particularly worrying for those with underlying health conditions. It was also highlighted that those with hearing impairments may struggle to lip read if everyone is wearing face coverings.

In terms of physical health, there were some reports of back pain or repetitive strain injury due to unsuitable working conditions, where some people's homes were unable to accommodate ergonomically suitable workstations. However, lots of people discussed the benefits of full time home working and felt, at least initially, that they gained time due to no longer having to commute (although often this was now spent working, increasing the length and intensity of the working day), whilst others were able to take advantage of a more flexible working day to run errands, exercise at lunch time, attend appointments or just decide to start the day earlier or later, whilst still completing a full day of work. For others the lack of clear division between work and home life meant that it often felt difficult to switch off and with heavier workloads some people reported working significantly longer hours, regularly having to work evening and weekends to keep on top of work and other responsibilities. International staff or those with family living in other countries reported concerns around being isolated and described 'feeling trapped' given the uncertainty of when they might be able to go home or see family again.

Personal relationships and their impact on individual emotional health was another area that participants talked about as having been hugely affected by lockdown. Sharing space and constantly having to negotiate over work and childcare priorities could put relationships under significant strain. There was a lot of talk of guilt, particularly for parents, when trying to juggle childcare or home-schooling demands alongside their usual, or often increased, workload. Spending additional time with family members, most notably children, was seen on the whole as a positive and lots of parents talked about getting time that they never would have had together without lockdown. A few parents with children with additional needs talked about the valuable insight they had gained from being more hands on with their child's day to day learning which could have a significant long-term positive impact on how they support and advocate for their child's educational needs. But additional time with

children was also described by some parents as a 'double-edged sword' and that despite relishing extra family time it was difficult having no separation from those in their household. The Employee Assistance Program was referred to both positively (that the counselling provided had been useful) and negatively, with the service being described as 'outsourcing too far' and implying that the University does not want to hear directly about the issues facing staff.

There were a number of reports of people embracing the additional time at home to develop healthier lifestyles and habits, particularly encouraged by the government's early lockdown guidance that people could take one-hour of outdoor exercise each day. Participants talked about setting aside time each day to go outside and/or take exercise, which many continued to do once lockdown restrictions began to ease. Others described how they were now able to plan and cook healthier meals than usual due to their additional time at home, and several participants talked about growing their own fruit or vegetables as a way to both keep active and enhance their diets. Those who had a garden recognised it as a real asset whilst those without one talked about struggling with feeling isolated or cooped up, particularly at the start of lockdown.

3.5   Research, Teaching and Enterprise

3.5.1   Research
The effects of lockdown on participants' ability to continue or complete research depended on both practical and personal factors.

Practical factors
Some research funders had been relatively supportive and flexible, but others less so, putting the onus on grant holders to meet short deadlines to deliver justification for 'no cost' extensions that would therefore not bring additional funding. This caused additional stress, especially where this was the case for several projects simultaneously. Some participants found that funding had been stopped or delayed, with grants that had been awarded now having funding delayed until next year. Some had had to postpone taking up an internally or externally funded fellowship which they felt was likely to have an effect on their careers.

Where data collection had been completed, or was near completion, staff were likely to fare better in that they could make progress analysing the material they had so far. Some studies relied on secondary data analysis, which could also continue, and some participants said that they had been able to adapt their approach in order to complete planned fieldwork, for example by moving face-to-face interviews online. However, this was not always straightforward, with one participant reflecting that they were spending a lot of time working out *how* to do things differently instead of spending time actually doing them.

For some people, the nature of their research meant that they were able to work remotely fairly straightforwardly, for example if it mostly involved data modelling or other computational techniques. However, for others, being in a specific location and interacting directly with subjects in different settings was crucial. Lack of access to fieldwork, data and project sites had halted some studies, as had restrictions on using laboratories, archives and

equipment on campus and elsewhere. Project work had had to be halted because of travel restrictions, both within and outside the UK. New products created as part of staff or student research could not be tested by potential users, and a freeze on University budgets meant that orders for research equipment were cancelled and recruiting RAs for existing projects was problematic. Collaborations with external organisations were being maintained as far as possible, but this could involve working in several time zones, meaning more evening and early morning work in addition to normal working hours. While staff reliant on access to laboratories were positive about how the University had enabled them to return, there were still significant problems and delays because it was much more difficult to get maintenance or repair work done and harder to co-ordinate with technicians so that work could continue because of occupancy levels.

Personal factors

University communications regarding the need for staff to focus on teaching-related activities had meant changes to priorities and workloads, which in some cases left time for little else. For some, the summer months were usually when they were most able to focus on research, but this had been overtaken by the need to spend time preparing new teaching materials. Even in cases where research activity was not adversely affected by external factors, those trying to manage caring responsibilities and work found that research was often a casualty in the daily triage of urgent tasks, with one participant describing their research activity as 'grinding to a halt'. Working with young children in the house often meant that it was impossible to spend the concentrated periods of time necessary for reading, writing and analysis crucial to conducting research. These tasks would have to be sidelined or attempted in the evenings when the children were in bed. Some expressed struggling with motivation, focus and energy levels as feelings of isolation, anxiety and\or the exacerbation of pre-existing mental health issues took their toll during lockdown. This was particularly referred to in the context of writing articles and proposals. Some participants mentioned feeling that they were at work or 'on call' all the time, with one person reflecting 'there's no weekday and weekend any more for me'.

In contrast, some of those who had a 'light teaching load' (mostly senior staff), and relatively few or no caring responsibilities, or a partner who shouldered the majority of them, had found this a very productive period. Having long periods of uninterrupted time had enabled them to write and submit academic journal articles for publication, collaborate with colleagues in other institutions who were in a similar position and work on grant applications. One participant was looking forward to 'reaping the benefits of all the hard work' after a very productive spell working on Covid-related research, thinking it good to capitalise on the situation. Conversely, some people reported feeling extremely pressurised because most of the calls for research in this area had very tight deadlines, which caused greater anxiety.

Staff were not only concerned for themselves, but also for PhD students they were supervising and Post-Doctoral Researchers they were managing. For some, continuing to support PhD students was the main or only research task they were able to undertake, and there were positive accounts of these relationships improving because of the ease and frequency of online communication. There was anxiety regarding PhD students failing to complete because of Covid, and questions about whether or not the context would be taken

into account when an individual's performance as a supervisor was being assessed in the future.

3.5.2 Teaching

Participants' perceptions of the impact of lockdown on pedagogical activities depended in large part on their teaching load at that point in the academic year. Some people had completed most or all of their teaching pre-lockdown, and if they had few or no caring responsibilities this meant that they had more time for other activities, such as writing articles or grant applications. Others were using this time to develop new materials for blended delivery for the following semester, although some expressed anxiety that they would be 'behind the curve' and inexperienced compared to those colleagues who had already had to master new technology in order to provide teaching and learning during lockdown.

For those who had teaching responsibilities in semester two, the move from in-person to online teaching was described as 'abrupt' with some feeling that they were left to 'muddle along', learning by trial and error. It was suggested that more support with this would have been helpful, while acknowledging that the rapidly changing situation would inevitably have made this difficult.

The situation had proved challenging for most, although some felt better prepared for this and adapted more easily than others, especially if they were familiar with online platforms, for example because of using these in their work with international colleagues. Although some were able to use previously recorded material to provide online lectures, others did not have this resource or did not feel that it was of sufficient quality and had worked hard to devise updated or entirely new content.

Communication with students was key during this period, with many reporting that 'interactions multiplied', with a significant increase in email exchanges and online meetings with students having to replace contact that would previously have taken place in labs, tutorials and lectures. Staff had to devote time and resources to supporting students and provide reassurance about current and future studies. This was sometimes made more difficult because central communications to students had not always been shared with staff in advance, leaving them to field questions resulting from information they had not been aware of.

As with staff, students appeared to be adapting to the new circumstances with varying degrees of success. Some students remained engaged, attending online lectures and one to one sessions and producing work to a high standard. Some participants reported it being easier to maintain contact and build relationships with PhD students than previously, whereas others were disappointed with the perceived lack of student engagement, particularly when lecturers had made extensive efforts to make teaching as interactive and engaging as possible.

The extensive changes to the format of some modules, assessments and exams required by the constraints of lockdown had created a great deal of work. In addition to this, the workload of exam marking had proved extremely onerous for many, particularly as this

came with exacting and inflexible deadlines which were not necessarily compatible with childcare or other domestic responsibilities. Even those staff who felt their managers had been sympathetic said that they were told that there was no leeway and they were aware that other colleagues were similarly hard pressed so there was no one else to do the work. This message was at odds with central messaging around the importance of taking care of one's mental health and prioritising their caring responsibilities where necessary.

Some participants expressed sadness that the academic year had ended without any of the usual celebratory events, such as end of year shows and degree ceremonies. Almost all participants said that they preferred teaching in-person, and while some were comfortable with digital alternatives or open to engaging with the technology, others said that teaching online 'is not as good, nor is it good pedagogically to watch lots of recorded lectures'. However, for some the anxiety relating to having to deliver in-person teaching and the potential risk of infection was of greater concern and, for those who were especially vulnerable, online teaching offered a welcome alternative.

3.5.3   Enterprise

Of the three categories of activity (research, teaching and enterprise), this was the least discussed. Among those who did talk about enterprise, several people described this aspect of their work as having 'slowed down', 'stalled' or being 'on the back burner', while others said that it had stopped altogether because of having to prioritise teaching, or because of lockdown-related constraints on travel and public events. In some cases this had meant cancellation of long-planned major exhibitions or conferences, often at short notice, which had been extremely demoralising. For some, networking had still been possible, and even facilitated by being able to attend events online rather than having to travel internationally, however there were some missed opportunities that only in-person meetings would have offered. Some people were affected by the situation their collaborators found themselves in – for example those working with partners in industry or the NHS said that funding had been postponed or withdrawn and they were not confident that they would be able to continue with the projects that they had planned. However, others were able to continue with a range of enterprise activities; maintaining networks, conducting outreach activities online, submitting patent applications and collaborating with national and international partners despite the pandemic.

4   LEARNING POINTS

The study enabled staff to reflect on and evaluate how well this period had gone and what might be useful to take into account going forward. This section summarises key elements of the research to inform thinking about how best to respond to further periods of lockdown or partial lockdown, and how to address concerns about the future.

4.1   Looking back

There was widespread recognition that the University was having to make decisions quickly to deal with an unprecedented situation, and an acknowledgement that everyone was doing their best in difficult circumstances.

- The swift and decisive response to lockdown in terms of the closure of Campus was welcomed, although some staff would have benefitted from more time to make plans, take equipment home etc.
- The confusion at the beginning of lockdown as different IT platforms and packages for meetings, teaching etc. were recommended, adopted and discarded was frustrating and time consuming. The University needs to keep abreast of latest IT developments that facilitate online meetings and teaching. People appreciated that training was being offered over the summer but felt that it would have been better to have had this earlier.
- Some staff would have liked more practical support, e.g. help to replace personal laptops that were adequate for occasional homeworking but not for the demands of full-time working from home, financial recompense for providing their own supplies and equipment.
- Flexible working is a good thing that has benefits for work-life balance, mental and physical well-being, morale and productivity. Many people appreciated being able to work when it suited them best and having a more fluid schedule so that they could fit time with family members, exercise and pursuing their own interests around that. In addition, those already predominantly working from home felt more included and connected to their colleagues as they were no longer viewed as 'never here'.
- Choice is important. Having options about how (and where) they work and interact with their colleagues means that it is easier for people to feel integrated, e.g. being able to opt into smaller informal meetings or larger School-wide coffee mornings, depending on what suits them best.
- Staff appreciated being trusted to manage their time. Where this proved difficult because of conflicting demands, support was vital in counteracting people feeling overwhelmed or isolated.

4.2   Looking ahead – short term

Anxieties and concerns about the new academic year.
- Teaching workload, especially in combination with research, enterprise and administrative expectations.
- Health and safety – mixing with students in-person, especially for those who are particularly vulnerable, or shielding someone who is vulnerable.
- Practical difficulties, including how to lip read through face masks.
- The effect of external factors, e.g. sudden school closures, needing to self-isolate, etc., particularly on teaching responsibilities.
- The prospect of redundancies, which increased anxiety while decreasing some people's willingness or ability to ask for help.

4.3   Looking ahead – medium term

Uncertainty about the future.
- Concerns about what the rest of the academic year will look like, in particular around exams and assessments.
- Predicted negative effects on staff health and well-being if pressures remain at this level, which was identified as being 'unsustainable'.
- How staff can meet the University's expectations with more students, more work and reduced resources owing to redundancies and the freeze on expenditure and Bought in Teaching (BIT).

4.4   Looking ahead – longer term

- Opportunity costs and benefits – those with an increased number of publications and grant applications resulting from this period are more likely to have further opportunities (funding, promotion and progression). Those who have not been able to maintain these activities, or been unable to pursue them at all could potentially end up disadvantaged and feeling undervalued.
- The effects of this period and the pandemic itself may have an impact for several years on people's physical and mental health, and their personal and professional lives.

5   CAVEATS AND LIMITATIONS

The findings presented here give illustrative insights into a variety of experiences of both positive and negative effects of lockdown on participants' working lives but cannot offer an exhaustive or comprehensive account. This was a small-scale qualitative study, and therefore did not aim to recruit a statistically representative sample. Consequently, the findings are not generalisable across the RTE/SSA staff group, nor more widely to University staff as a whole. The sample was self-selecting and included staff from eight of the nine Schools; there were low numbers of participants from several of these and no participants from the School of Business and Economics, so it can only provide a partial picture at best. Everyone's experience is different and there is no substitute for taking the time to have sensitive and thoughtful conversations with colleagues to discover their unique situation and how they have been affected.

6   CONCLUSIONS

In analysing the 45 contributions made by participants it became clear that staff remain extremely dedicated and determined to do their best for colleagues and students, no matter how challenging their individual situations. Despite this, there is widespread anxiety about how they are coping compared to colleagues and peers, and how much longer they will be able to go on coping if pressures remain at the level they were when the study was conducted. People talked about a conflict between expectations and messaging – that for many, high expectations of productivity across research, teaching and enterprise remained the same, despite radically and frequently changing circumstances.

Everyone who participated was facing uncertainty with determination. Participants often commented on how important they felt the study was, not just for the University but as individuals as it had offered a valuable opportunity and space to reflect and to share their experiences. There was clearly a desire to see the findings used constructively to inform inevitably difficult times ahead.

With this in mind, the recommendations following this section, which arise from the analysis of the data, include conducting further work to include other job families within the University and a repeat study to revisit participants in the future to see how they have weathered the Covid-19 storm.

7   RECOMMENDATIONS

- Recognise that people's situations are often not static and be responsive and flexible to changes in their working patterns and capacity over time.
- Acknowledge that different groups have been affected in different ways and that some will require additional support and understanding. In particular:
    - Staff with significant caring responsibilities - especially those with younger children or family members with additional needs.
    - Staff from Black, Asian or Minority Ethnic backgrounds– emerging data suggest that Covid-19 has disproportionately impacted those in Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic communities.
- Recognise the contribution of staff who have spent the summer prioritising work to optimise the student experience both in learning and Campus safety for the next academic year.
- Take into account additional workloads and time pressures caused by changes in teaching delivery, reductions in staff numbers and the absence of assistance from BIT.
- Match top level communications with actions throughout the institution– e.g. the message to prioritise teaching activities was clear but more local guidance at School level was needed on how to re-balance activities, as well as specific and practical guidance on what could become lower priorities.
- Share student-facing communications with academic, School administrative and support staff so that they are better able to respond to student queries and concerns relating to these.
- Re-assess the PDR process, ensuring that the implications of the lockdown such as differences in ability to do research, publish and apply for grants, will be taken into consideration. This is particularly important for the academic year 2020-2021 but also for subsequent years to help limit the negative impact on people's future prospects.
- Increase choice and flexibility to allow people to work in ways that suit them best. This could mean extending flexible working patterns to encompass both working hours and working location, including options to attend meetings remotely in the longer term, while acknowledging that for some staff being able to work on campus is preferable.
- Regularly update central in-house knowledge of software and platforms and provide ongoing and supplementary training on any new software regularly so all staff can keep up to date (extending the CAP offer).
- Identify colleagues using innovative approaches to interactive technology, especially in teaching, and develop networks for sharing ideas to ensure that knowledge is harnessed to deliver effective practice.
- Formalise or review the scheme that enables staff to access IT and communications equipment for home working and publicise this to all staff so that those who need new equipment can access it straightforwardly.
- Replicate this research with other staff groups (e.g. Professional Services, Facilities Management, Security etc.) who will have been affected in different ways by changes in the operation of the University over this period.
- Repeat the research at strategic points, e.g. after the first semester, or at the end of the academic year in 2021 to reflect on experiences and evaluate strategies and initiatives that have been put in place in the interim.

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