It's been like working two full-time jobs: the impact of the pandemic on University of Reading staff with childcare responsibilities

Survey conducted by Vicky Collins, Gunter Kuhnle and Ellen McManus-Fry
on behalf of the University of Reading Parent and Family Network,
June 2021

This report has been produced by the University of Reading *Parent and Family Network* in response to reports by its members of their experience during the pandemic. It is independent of any official University staff surveys or other initiatives and focused specifically on the impact of staff with childcare responsibilities.

The survey was open to all University of Reading staff with childcare responsibilities. In order to preserve anonymity, we did not collect information on grade or seniority, and only very limited information on job role and demographic factors. It was not possible to target the survey specifically to this group as further information on staff with childcare responsibilities was not available. It is therefore possible, yet unlikely, that staff without childcare responsibilities participated in the survey.

Participation in this survey was entirely voluntary and the report is entirely based on the responses received. It therefore reflects the perception of participants which are by their nature subjective and potentially biased. For example, the impact on research activity reflects the individual experiences and perceptions of this group of respondents and is therefore not representative of the institution's research output as a whole.

In line with other publications by the University of Reading, for example the "Lockdown COVID report" July 2020, the term "University" in this report refers to the "University of Reading" as employer and not individual people or groups of people.

Prior to publication, the report was presented to UEB for comments and suggestions. These have been taken into consideration in the final version. Conversations with UEB to discuss possible actions arising from the report and its recommendations are ongoing.

We would like to thank all participants for their time and providing valuable information. We would also like to thank Dr Allán Laville, the University of Reading Staff Disability Network and the University of Sheffield's Parents Network for support and advice on how to conduct this survey, and the members of the Parent and Family Network. Finally, we would like to thank Deputy VC Professor Parveen Yaqoob and PVC Professor Domink Zaum.

Parent & Family Network

The Parent and Family Network is one of the recognised staff diversity networks at the University of Reading. It was set up in Autumn 2019 by two colleagues who recognised the importance of peer support and informal information networks when they returned to work following maternity leave. It is intended to be a source of information-sharing and support for any colleagues who are parents or have any other form of caring responsibility for children or young people. The Network is currently run by two co-chairs and a steering group of 6 colleagues from across the University, who contribute their time on a voluntary basis alongside their regular University contracts. The Network runs events including informal coffee mornings and events with invited speakers, and has an active Teams group where members can connect with each other and discuss relevant topics.

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Recommendations

We received comments from 397 participants, approximately 10% of the University workforce[*]. The survey was initiated, planned and executed by members of the University's Parent and Family (P&F) Network without dedicated financial support by the University. It is important to note that the pandemic has not ended and neither has its impact on colleagues with childcare responsibilities. Short term nursery closures and self-isolation remain ongoing problems for many. In addition, the legacy of the stress, exhaustion and unfulfilled targets experienced by working parents and carers will continue throughout the remainder of this academic year and beyond. The University has an opportunity to improve its support for colleagues in those situations now; to mitigate the ongoing impact felt by colleagues; and to learn how to be a better employer for working parents going forwards.

The University should recognise and make use of the P&F Network as a way to consult with working parents on situations, policies or changes which may disproportionately impact colleagues with childcare responsibilities. We suggest that these recommendations are revisited in six months to assess if appropriate and meaningful action has been taken by the University.

Workload
- Identification of non-essential tasks/processes/deadlines which could be postponed or extended in times of exceptional workload or staff pressure.
- Contingency planning for absences by making processes more robust and avoiding reliance of single staff members
- Workload could have been eased by allowing PhD researchers and colleagues from areas of the University where workload had decreased to support other colleagues through marking/teaching, administrative support etc. This would also have benefits for the person picking up the work by allowing them to gain additional experience and/or learn about other areas of the University. Improvements to the secondment policy and shadowing schemes may help with this in the future.

Communication
- Better streamlining of communication alongside RUSU to balance student requirements and expectations with staff requirements and wellbeing.
- Consideration of timing of communications. Sending important emails on Friday afternoons or outside core hours which require a response or result in student queries, or scheduling all-staff talks during half-term holidays makes it difficult for working parents to engage with the information.
- More careful consideration of language used to ensure that messages such as 'do your best' are not interpreted as criticisms and do not add to stress felt by staff.
- More explicit acknowledgement of the difficulties experienced by staff with childcare responsibilities during situations like the pandemic.
- More timely monitoring of the impact that both internal and external factors have on colleagues with childcare responsibilities.
- Clearer messaging needed around probation and promotion and the specific allowances which would be given for the impact of the pandemic.

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[*] To compare with commissioned UoR surveys around the same period: The UoR Race Equality Survey October 2020 had a response rate of 11%, the COVID 19 Lockdown Survey July 2020 had a response rate of 52% and the recent 2021 Staff Survey had a response rate 33%. All of these were publicised and endorsed widely at different levels to encourage participation.

- The Parent and Family Network steering group are a body which the University could consult on draft communication regarding parent and carer policies and we would encourage this collaboration.
- Improve awareness of localised practices and networks of support for working parents across the University and learn from existing good practices e.g. the support given to colleagues in the School of Mathematical, Physical and Computational Sciences (SMPCS).

Nursery

- The University needs to work better with RUSU in the administration of the nursery as it is a vital resource for many staff and its delayed opening compared to other local nurseries caused problems for colleagues who use it.

Leave

- Many staff with childcare responsibilities have had to use annual leave to manage childcare during the pandemic and therefore have less time to take for the rest of the year. This means that these colleagues have less opportunity to take a break than colleagues who may have used very little of their annual leave due to the circumstances of the pandemic. Managers should be aware of the continuing potential for staff to 'burn out' and should offer practical support and understanding as and where possible.
- It should be recognised that colleagues who have had to deal with childcare whilst working at home may continue to experience an increased workload for some time to come. We therefore recommend continuing allowances for extended deadlines, postponement of non-essential tasks, reallocation of work to other colleagues with capacity etc.
- We recommend reducing or eliminating the one-year continuous service required of employees to be eligible for unpaid parental leave whilst the pandemic is ongoing.

Findings

- Many respondents felt that while the University's response to the pandemic was largely sympathetic, it was lacking practical support and largely ignored the challenges parents faced, as demonstrated by the fact that this survey was not initiated by the University itself and that no efforts had been made to assess the impact felt by working parents prior to this survey. Many felt that workload of staff could have been reduced by postponing non-essential administrative tasks.
- Two groups of respondents were particularly impacted by the pandemic: families where either children or parents had disabilities, chronic illness or additional needs, and single parents.
- Staff generally welcomed the ability for flexible working and reported that most managers were supportive, but the lack of central guidance resulted in considerable variability in the support given. This was particularly noticeable for decisions about furlough.
- Staff generally reported increased stress, fatigue, anxiety, worry and depression, and an exacerbation of existing issues due to the increased workload of having to combine full-time childcare with their usual work. This was made worse by the loss of control, loneliness, the lack of social contact and witnessing the impact of school and nursery closures on children's own mental health.
- Many staff were worried that they let down the University, their colleagues and their families.
- Academic staff were worried about their career prospects, as they had to sacrifice most of their research activities. This particularly impacted early career researchers who worried about falling behind colleagues without childcare responsibilities.

Background

For almost a year from 20th March 2020 through to 8th March 2021 in person teaching or childcare provision in nurseries, schools, and colleges in England was severely disrupted. In response to the COVID- 19 pandemic, schools remained open only for a restricted group of key workers' children and the most vulnerable. The shift to remote learning for primary and secondary school pupils and substantially altered childcare[1] arrangements has had significant impacts on working families, affecting over a third of working households[2]. The situation has been amplified for parent carers of children with complex health needs, with a majority reporting worsening emotional and mental health for both their children and themselves.[3]

Clear trends are emerging on the effects on work-life balance and how childcare was delivered. Parents who were able to work from home through national lockdowns were more likely to work in the morning and at night[1]. A large proportion of developmental childcare was delivered in the afternoon. The time men and women spent on developmental childcare (such as reading to children) was more equal[1]. Fathers in two parent households have taken on a greater share of responsibilities than before the crisis[4]. However, gender differences were evident in the increased amount of non-developmental childcare women provided, especially in households with children aged under five (Figure 1)[1]. In terms of dividing responsibilities for paid work, in two parent households mothers were more likely than fathers to be: spending their work hours simultaneously trying to care for children, experiencing interruptions to focused time; to have reduced their paid hours, lost their job or become furloughed.[4] Time spent on 'self-care' *i.e.* sleep and other activities has also been forfeited to accommodate increased childcare responsibilities (Figure 2).[5]

The sharp reduction in time that mothers and fathers employed in the higher education sector were able to dedicate to paid work risks lasting harm to their careers. In a global survey of a range of academics in various disciplines, all respondents with children reported less time for research hours compared to pre pandemic.[5] Men with children reported a greater loss of research time than men without children.[5] Female academics, especially those with younger children (< 7 years old), were significantly disproportionally affected compared to the experience of men in equivalent positions, both with or without children, and women without children.[5,6] Discipline-
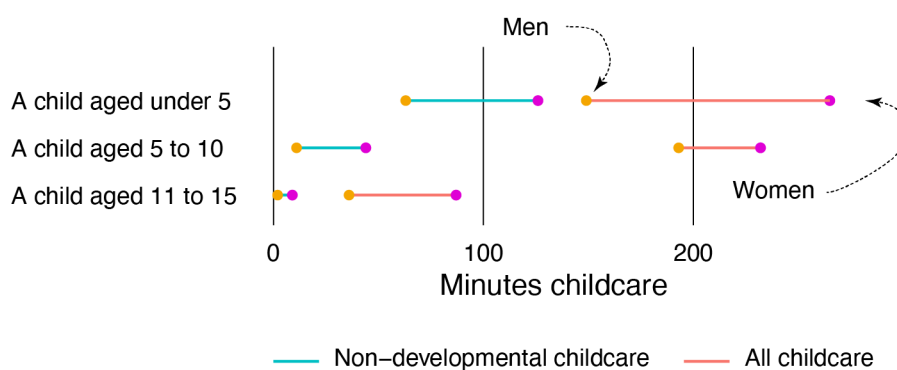

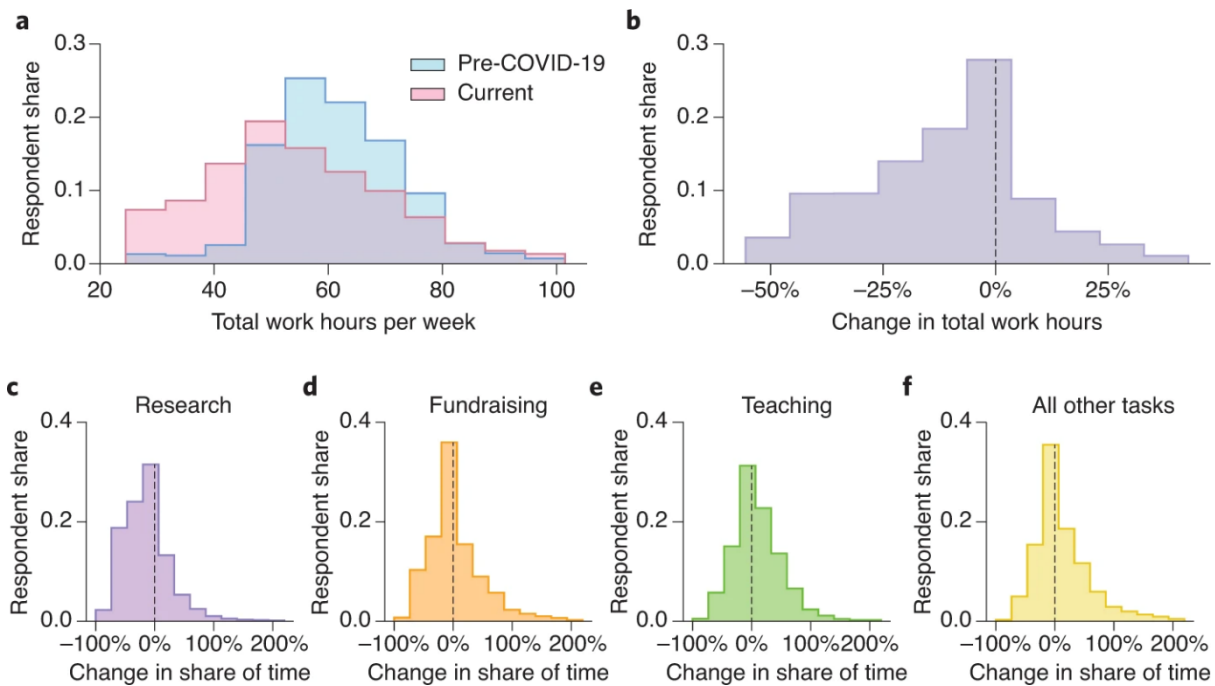Figure 1: Daily time spent on childcare during lockdown – Office of National Statistics, 2020

Figure 2: Distribution of total spent on work pre-pandemic and at the time of the survey. Figure from Myers et al., Nature Human Behaviour 4:880–883 (2020). *

specific research reveals the varied effect on academics in different fields of science, with a greater disparity in research time lost for bench sciences.[6] The job performance of HE staff who do not undertake research or teach has also been negatively impacted. Both male and female professional services staff with childcare responsibilities feel that the lockdown has impacted their careers for up to 2 years, with pay increases and promotions jeopardized. Engaging simultaneously in childcare and paid work activities for a sustained period of the year has led to mothers, in particular, experiencing an inability to focus, a resulting loss of confidence and concerns for their professional reputation.[7]

The level of research and enquiry has led to recommendations for both Higher Education institutions and individuals. In the absence of sector-wide data on UK HE staff with parental or caring responsibilities, institutions are urged to educate themselves on their workforce by collecting data within the organisation.[7] A consideration of short to medium term changes to promotion and appraisal processes to account for the impacts is posited, as well as rethinking broader success criteria as opposed to 'working hours'.[7] The society of *European Women in Mathematics* advocates proactive measures to support those in temporary contracts, particularly women with dependents. These include policies such as rebalancing lost research time with a release from or reductions to teaching, the extension of contracts, flexibility in deadlines, and educating appraisal committees on the impact of the crisis. These recommendations seek to emphasise that 'the accomplishment of parents during the pandemic- for both the workplace and the home- should be recognized, not penalized.' [8]

With the onset of the national lockdowns, the overall short-term response by many universities in England was to request staff to endeavour to undertake as much of their normal workload as possible around parental responsibilities. Individuals were encouraged to seek, through dialogue with line managers, flexible working arrangements which allowed them to fulfil their working hours.[9] The ethos of 'do as much as you can' has been interpreted in both, a positive way *i.e.* staff are reassured if they were unable to do more, but conversely this has also been viewed negatively *i.e.* do as much as possible.

Where these arrangements meant that staff were unable to fulfil their working hours, parents/carers were required to use different types of leave *e.g.* domestic emergency leave, holiday,

additionally purchased holiday, and unpaid leave, although central guidance on this varies from institution to institution. In recognition of the limits of universities in using the full scope of the government furlough scheme, some institutions enhanced paid domestic emergency leave entitlement[9] *e.g.* from four days to two weeks to support staff through the peak of school and childcare setting closures.[10] Staff at UoR with increased parental responsibilities were encouraged to explore adjustments to their hours including the possibility of working weekends or evenings, temporarily reducing hours, using annual leave or requesting parental leave (unpaid)[11], although specific guidance centrally was limited. Alongside communication on measures available to parents during this time, institutions generally conveyed their understanding of the profound burden that the closure of educational settings and children's remote learning placed on staff. In addition, University of Reading employees with children at the campus nursery experienced pressure with the late reopening of facilities compared to similar provision elsewhere.

"I have had to prioritize teaching above research as teaching workload had tripled since we need to teach both online, offline, prepare digital material and support much more struggling students. **As a mother I had much more household work and childcare than my partner, even though we shared the childcare, however as a mother and woman I always have more household work than my partner**, maintaining the normal everyday life, and with my child at home without further child company it was extremely hard to provide meaningful play/learning and socializing activities (the latter on did not exist in our case); altogether these will and already had severely impacted my promotion chances at the University."

Updated guidance by the Department of Education on 8th January 2021 confirmed that higher education staff in England, required to deliver or support teaching or research, were considered 'critical workers' for the purposes of access to education.[12] Eligibility to attend school for face- to- face teaching was monitored at a local level though, with some schools operating a stricter criteria and deadlines for placements than others given resources. The designated critical worker status meant that some colleagues who requested school places gained access, but not all. Initiatives in the HE sector to support staff directly with developmental childcare have been limited. A notable exception is an innovation by the University of Sunderland in which trainee student teachers provided online schooling to isolating children of staff. The scheme meant that students developed their teaching skills, whilst at the same time supporting the University's working parents.[13]

During the year of lockdown, staff parent and carer networks across the university sector have risen to the challenge in supporting colleagues by providing spaces to share experiences, resources, and bringing together experts to inform on aspects of children's wellbeing, education, as well as parental flexible working options. In addition, some networks have taken a closer look at the experiences of UK HE parents and carers during the pandemic through surveys. The University of Sheffield Parents Network[14] carried out monthly surveys to gauge levels of concern around immediate and future challenges. A university funded project by the *Mothers-and-Mothers-to-be Support Network* (MAMS) at Durham University[15] has sought to understand how mothers in HE with children aged 18 or under have experienced the pandemic, and its impact on their health, wellbeing, and career. Intersectional factors such as ethnicity and disability, which put many women at an additional disadvantage, were also considered. This survey received 2888 responses from HE colleagues across the UK. Discussion with members of the recently formed HE Parent and Carer Network Chairs discussion list suggests that, apart from the two examples mentioned above, there has been very little work carried out, either by institutions or by staff networks, to investigate the impact of the pandemic on staff with caring responsibilities.

Given the level of research and enquiry, and a relative gap at institutional level of explicitly monitoring and assessing the impact of the pandemic on those with caring responsibilities, which constitute a significant proportion of the workforce, we applied in December 2020 for internal (D & I inclusion initiative) funding to investigate colleagues' experiences. Although the application was unsuccessful, the initiative was pursued by the original fund application team of Gunter Kuhnle and Vicky Collins and subsequently implemented through the Parent and Family Network. Funding was offered from the central D&I budget in the form of additional funds available to the Parent and Family Network, but upon reviewing the initial plans for activities around the survey (e.g. focus groups, employing students in the analysis of the data) it was decided that it was possible to proceed without this funding. In terms of university level surveys, the UoR Covid-19 Lockdown Survey of July[16] 2020 explored staff experiences of the initial period regarding communication and support from the University and their specific School or department within it. Questions 14-21 of the survey focus on home working experiences. The ability to be able work away from work (Q20) or work effectively during lockdown (Q21) received the lowest levels of agreement of the survey results with the staff group most affected those of 36-45 years, possibly due to this being a parental age group. Aside from this only one question in the survey asked about childcare (Q15) in relation to the ability to limit the impact of distractions at home (partner/children/pets). As none of the questions focused directly on the experience of staff with childcare responsibilities[†], there was a need for a survey focused on finding out how colleagues had managed with childcare commitments in terms of their working arrangements, and their perceived impact on their wellbeing, workload, job security, and career. We also sought their reflections on institutional levels of support, and how the Network could support the university and colleagues in the future. The development and piloting of the survey, as well as the initial data analysis of results, have been carried out voluntarily using in house time and expertise, and independently of the central university. The aim is to better understand how well or poorly staff were supported and protected from the impact of increased caring responsibilities throughout the year.

References

[1] ONS.2020. Parenting in lockdown: Coronavirus and the effects on work-life balance. *Definition of childcare as including developmental (e.g. reading to children) non-developmental (e.g. washing, feeding, dressing)and supervisory childcare*

[2] ONS.2020. *Coronavirus and employment for parents in the UK - Office for National Statistics (ons.gov.uk) Definition of working household: Over a third of working households (36 per cent) are households with dependent children under the age of 16.*

[3] Disabled Children's Partnership.2020. #LeftinLockdown-Parent carers' experienced of lockdown. Survey of 4, 000 families of disabled children. The majority = 70-80% of respondents

[4] Institute for Fiscal Studies.2020.Parents, especially mothers, paying heavy price for lockdown. *Report finds that fathers on average spend twice as many hours on childcare compared to 2014-15.*

[5] Deryugina T, Shurchkov O., and Stearns J. 2021. Covid-19 Disruptions Disproportionately Affect Female Academics. NBER Working Paper 28360, National Bureau of Economic Research, Cambridge, MA. *Younger child= presence in the household of a children under 7 years old*

[6] Myers, Kyle R., Wei Yang Tham, Yian Yin, Nina Cohodes, Jerry G. Thursby, Marie C. Thursby, Peter Schiffer, Joseph T. Walsh, Karim R. Lakhani, and Dashun Wang. 2020. "Unequal Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Scientists." Nature Human Behaviour 4 (9): 880-883.

[7] WHEN: 2020.Sharing the caring: UK Higher Education Professional Services parents, work and family life during 2020 lockdown. Women's Higher Education Network

[8] European Women in Mathematics.2020. An Open Letter from the EWM

[9] University of Southampton. 2021. Coronavirus (Covid-19)-HR Guidance

[10] University of Exeter. 2021. Coronavirus HR Support

[11] University of Reading. 2021. Covid-19 FAQ: Guidance for Managers. *Section: How can I support an employee with childcare concerns?*

[12] University and College Union. 2021. Critical Worker status in higher education in England: Guidance for members and branches

[13] North East England Chamber of Commerce.2020. Pioneering scheme for University staff juggling work with isolating children

[14] The University of Sheffield Parents Network

[15] Durham University Mothers and Mothers-to-be Support (MAMS) Network

[16] The University of Reading COVID- 19 Lockdown Staff Survey July 2020 RAG Report- Sub Group Analysis

[†] The UoR Staff Survey 2021 asked how colleagues felt about returning to campus as well as support given to them during the Pandemic. No questions addressed childcare responsibilities whilst working.

Results

Survey participants

The survey[‡] was open from 22 February to 26 March 2021 and asked all staff for their experiences throughout the pandemic. It was tested in a pilot study with members of the Family and Parent Network and available both in electronic and paper form. In total, the survey received 397 answers (10% of all staff at the University of Reading workforce, Figure 3). Compared with the University of Reading workforce, academic staff (45% in survey *vs* 27% in workforce) and women (72% in survey *vs* 60% in workforce) were over-represented. Most participants (90%) have not taken maternity, paternity or adoption leave. Most answers were obtained in the first weeks of the survey. However, as the survey covered the entire period since the beginning of the pandemic in March 2020, it is unlikely that this had a significant impact.

Female
Male
Other

Academic (Research)
Academic (Teaching & Research)
Academic (Teaching)
Other
Professional Services (non−student facing)
Professional Services (student facing)

Full Time − Fixed Term
Full Time − Permanent
Other
Part Time − Fixed Term
Part Time − Permanent

Figure 3: Characteristics of 397 participants of the survey. Each square represents approximately 4 participants.

[‡] See Appendix for questions.
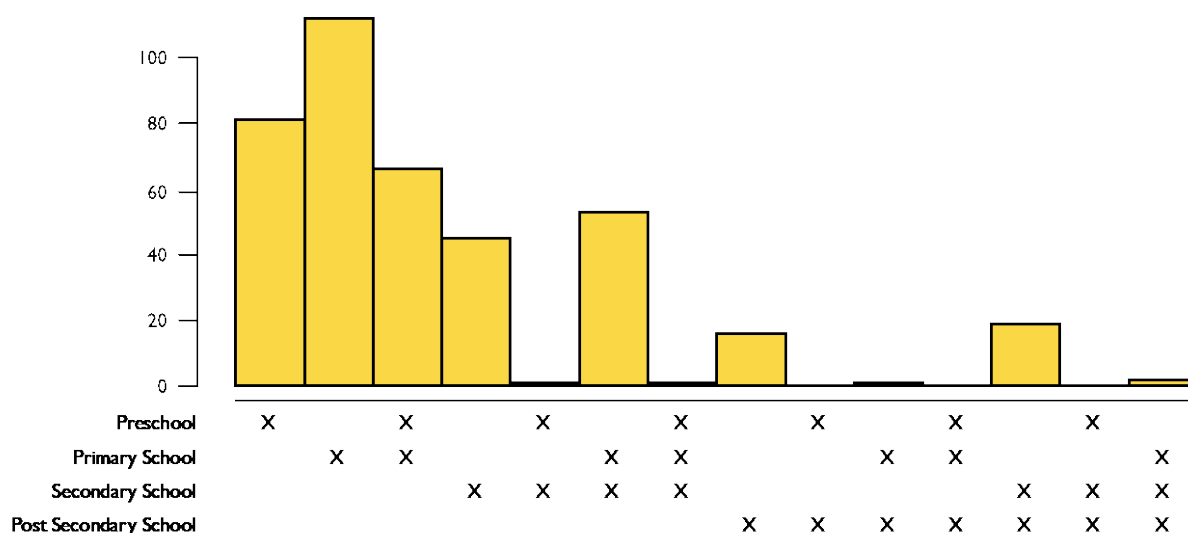
Childcare responsibilities

Figure 4: Caring responsibilities among survey participants.

Most participants had caring responsibilities for children in primary school and younger (Figure 4), and more than 80% could share the responsibility with a partner or within a childcare bubble. Two groups of respondents were particularly impacted: those with children with special educational needs (SEN) or where children or parents had a chronic illness or disability, and single parents (see anonymised selection of comments below). Respondents also frequently mentioned the impact of redundancies and job insecurity of partners on domestic arrangements. A further aspect raised was the reduced childcare support, *e.g.* from grandparents and other relatives, and the separation from relatives abroad.

Partner works in NHS, so kept working throughout the pandemic while I had to look after our child.

Our children's school required completion of daily todo lists, requiring several hours of supervision per day. We both have full-time jobs and in the end had to give up. There was just no way.

Partner is a key worker and therefore has limited time to support me.

My partner was away with work a lot during the first lockdown, so I had to manage our young children mostly on my own.

As a woman, my husband's employer expects me to do more of the childcare – even though he disagrees.

The past year has been truly terrible. [...] With children at home no allowance was made for looking after children.

I'm a single parent, so while I share custody, the childcare and homeschooling are completely my responsibility.

Husband refuses to take any responsibility.

Figure 5:   Anonymised selection of comments regarding child-care arrangements and the ability to share with partners or family.

Families with SEND

Almost 10% of respondents reported that they cared for children with disabilities or additional needs (SEND). The vast majority of these individuals (33/37, 89%) stated that their wellbeing had been impacted, a significantly higher percentage compared to the wider survey results. Several respondents mentioned the sometimes severe negative impact that lockdowns and school closures had on their children's mental health and existing conditions, and the associated impact that this had on their own mental health as carers. Comments frequently mentioned the increased stress and anxiety of having to manage their children's emotional and behavioural needs and the extra pressure of home schooling children with additional educational needs.

"We came close to breakdown of the family due to behavioural and mental health challenges that we were unequipped to support them with. I failed my child during this period as I couldn't be everything they needed."

"My daughter had breakdowns three times during lockdowns. All her stressed and disturbed behaviour upset me and brought me to the edge of collapse."

A smaller number (13) reported that either they or their partner had a disability, chronic illness or mental health issue. In some cases, this meant that the staff member was a carer for their partner or other relative, as well as having responsibilities for childcare. Several comments referenced the effect that the loss of normal sources of help and support had on daily life and the negative impact of the pressures of lockdown on existing mental health problems.

Maternity, paternity and adoption leave

Nineteen of the responses to the survey came from colleagues who had been on maternity, paternity or adoption leave during the period in question. Several of these highlighted the additional difficulties in returning to work during this time, particularly due to the difficulty of finding nursery spaces for children and the problem of returning to a new way of working (*i.e.* working from home) with which their colleagues were already familiar. Colleagues on maternity leave stated that having older children at home due to nursery/school closures whilst they were on leave compromised their ability to recover from birth and to prepare to restart work. These colleagues are likely to have already been impacted by social isolation through the closure of baby groups and classes and the absence of wider support networks during their maternity/paternity/adoption leave. Comments around the support and communication received during the period of leave and also upon returning to work indicated a large degree of variability across the University, with some being well-supported and kept up to date by their managers and others noting little or no support upon their return. Concerns about the impossibility of fulfilling their workload in the circumstances also impacted decisions about when to return to work. In the specific case of adoption leave, managers' lack of awareness about the adoption process and the timescales involved increased the stress experienced by colleagues undertaking the process.

"I had zero support after I came back from maternity leave, I had no idea how to work effectively from home, when the rest of my team were used to it."

"I am permanently in childcare mode...and feel like I have lost my personal identity and ability to be good at my job"

Furlough and leave

There has been overwhelming agreement that line managers were very supportive, but often lacked guidance. For example, it was not clear whether furlough for childcare purposes was available and it appears that different functions dealt with requests differently. Only 10% of respondents reported that they asked for furlough – and only half of these requests were granted – but the comments suggest that there was considerably more interest in furlough and more staff did enquire. In general, the furlough policy was seen as not very clear as some requests were granted when others were not, and some staff were furloughed without discussion.

Most participants (61%) had an informal flexible arrangement and only 10% asked for a formal flexible working arrangement. There was a consensus that this flexibility was very helpful to deal with childcare responsibilities during the pandemic. There was however a general concern of letting colleagues down by working less and also of being perceived as being not as fast and productive. More than 68% of participants took annual leave to manage childcare responsibilities, but only very few took unpaid leave or emergency leave and some had these requests refused, notably those with less than one year of service. Participants have reported considerable inconsistency, with some being offered flexible arrangements and leave, whereas others reporting that such requests were refused. In some instances, this appears to have been based on gender stereotypes, *i.e.* that flexible arrangements were more important for mothers than fathers.

"I don't think that needing to take annual leave (paid or unpaid) to manage care responsibilities counts as support at all by the university."

"My School's 'best effort basis' was extremely reassuring, but nonetheless I constantly felt overwhelmed by workload and family obligations and with no clear barrier between them, ended up failing at both."

The "*do your best*" message was seen in very different ways: in a reassuring way (*i.e. do not worry if you cannot do more*) and in a threatening way (*i.e. you must do as much as you possibly can*). In general, staff struggled with workload and had to work around childcare (*e.g.* by working during the evening or night). This was exacerbated by lunchtime meetings, communications sent to students before staff (resulting in worried emails by students) and communications which required responses or resulted in further queries from students sent in the evening or late on Fridays.

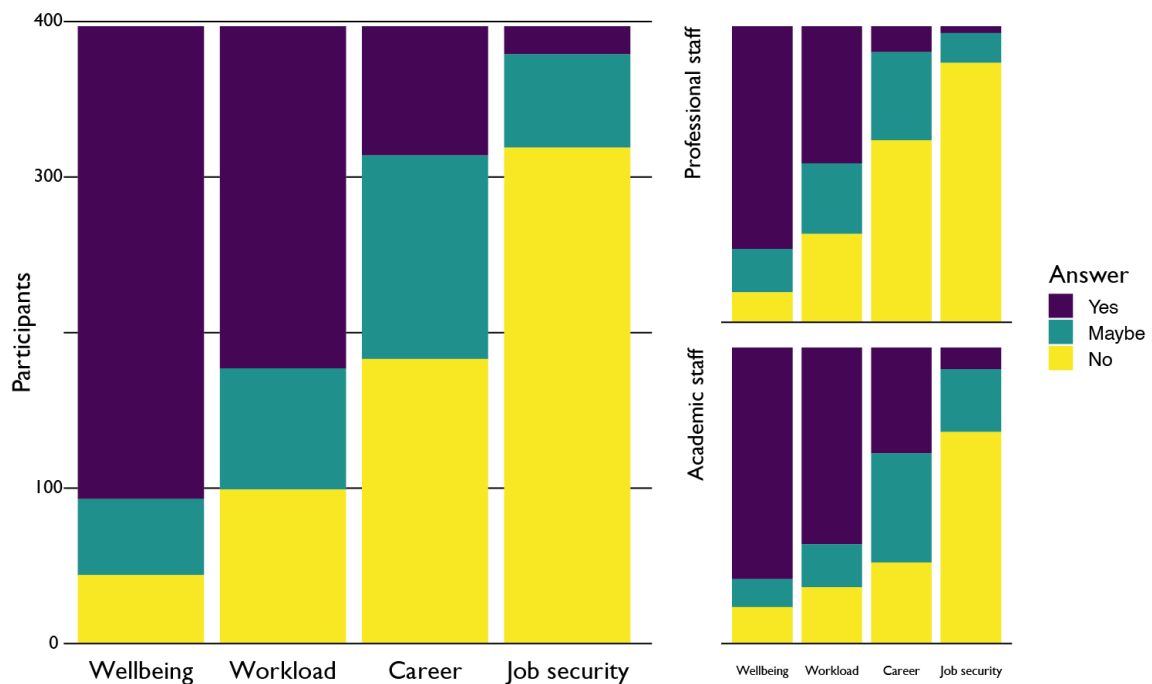## Impact on wellbeing, workload, career and job security

Figure 6: Self-reported impact of the pandemic on wellbeing, workload, career and job security.

The lockdown affected wellbeing for most (77%) respondents. 55% of respondents reported that the lockdown affected their ability to fulfil their workload, 21% expected an impact on their career progression, and 5% expected that it would affect their job security (Figure 6).

There were a number of differences in the perceived impact of the pandemic – most notably between academic and professional services staff. However, there were a number of confounding factors, *e.g.* women were more likely to work in professional services and have a part-time contract, making direct comparisons difficult. We have therefore explored these differences further using a logistic regression model to adjust for various factors. Following these adjustments, we found the following:

- Women were more likely than men to report an adverse report on wellbeing (three-fold) and career (two-fold) than men[§].
- Academic staff were four-times more likely to report an adverse effect on career prospects and two-times more likely to report an impact on job security than professional staff.
- Permanent staff were almost three-times more likely to report an adverse impact on wellbeing than those on fixed term contracts, but staff on fixed term contracts were twice as likely to be concerned about their job security.

Wellbeing

Staff generally reported increased mental health issues, in particular increased stress, fatigue, anxiety, worry and depression, and an exacerbation of existing issues. While many staff enjoyed spending more time with their children, this came at a very high cost for their own mental health. In addition to concerns about

“Little to no break, time for myself. I feel burnt out but reluctant to take annual leave as work is busy and there is also no respite from daily responsibilities as we have no childcare support currently.”

[§] This analysis excluded participants who had responded "other" as the number of participants was too small.

workload, there were feelings of loneliness and a lack of social contact. This was made worse by witnessing the impact of school and nursery closures on children's own mental health. The loss of control over their own life was very worrying for many. A further concern for staff in student-facing roles was having to deal with students with mental health issues with little support from the University apart from signposted support.

"The workload never diminishes as I pop in and out of my work to meet the needs of my children. I feel torn having to juggle different roles at the same time throughout the day."

A common concern was a feeling of inadequacy: not being a good parent and/or colleague, not providing proper childcare or proper work and letting down children, family, colleagues and the University. Staff tried to compensate for this by working early mornings, evenings and nights, resulting in a complete loss of separation between work and personal life and very little time for personal exercise or self-care.

The considerably increased workload was raised by many as affecting their mental health: this

"It's like working two full time jobs."

included preparing teaching for both online and offline, but also tight deadlines for post-exam extenuating circumstances for students and timetabling. Many staff also felt that they had to support colleagues who were clearly in need of more help; this affected in particular those with formal or informal line management responsibilities. Staff felt that the increased workload was not always acknowledged by the University, and there was no relaxation of rules (*e.g.* the 15-day turnaround time for marking).

"My anxiety/stress levels are elevated, my ability to be the parent I want to be hugely diminished."

The ongoing discussion about large scale redundancies and forced changes to the contract also affected mental wellbeing.
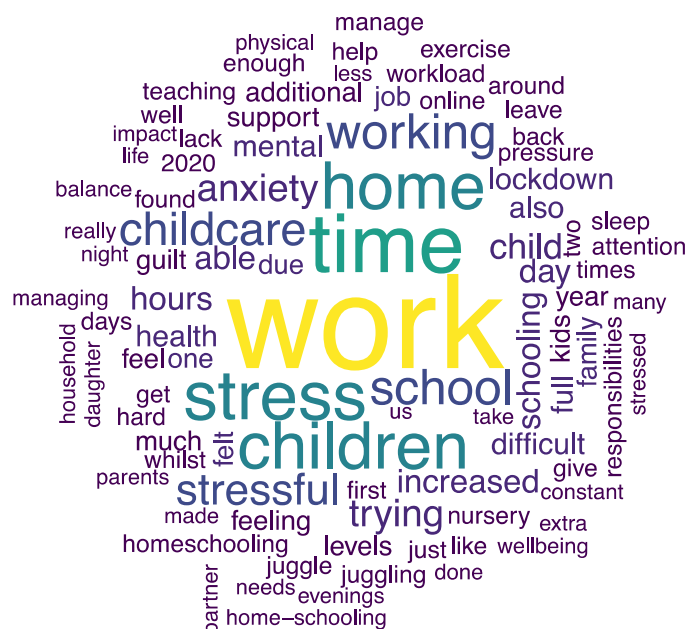

Figure 7: Word cloud of comments regarding staff wellbeing

Workload

There was a consensus among most that they had to sacrifice wellbeing, family, relationships and career to make sure they fulfilled their workload. Most staff were able to fulfil their workload by working longer around their childcare responsibilities. While some achieved higher efficiency, for most it meant considerably longer hours, as work with children around was not as efficient and there were much fewer long, uninterrupted periods of time for complicated tasks. Many staff reported working late at night or during the weekend. However, for some respondents, children had a positive influence and helped to manage workload, and children who could occupy themselves had only little impact on performance.

"I have accepted that I can't do everything, and adjusted expectations accordingly."

The *fit work around other responsibilities* message was seen as critical as it did not take into consideration that for some there was not sufficient time to do so and there was no attempt to reduce workload. Some respondents felt that they let down the University in comparison to colleagues without children who increased their productivity.

"I have been able to fulfil my workload by working evenings and weekends."

Many academic respondents reported that their workload was already high before lockdown, and this became worse due to additional responsibilities. They focused on teaching and essential administrative tasks, and childcare responsibilities meant that there was no time available for activities such as writing papers, developing funding applications and new ideas. The blended approach in autumn term meant considerably more preparation and for some the development of a new curriculum, which increased workload and impacted on staff wellbeing. There was also increased workload for Academic Tutors as students often needed more support.

The lockdown in spring term affected many academics as a lot of contact-intensive teaching was moved to spring term. The lack of continuous uninterrupted time affected research and research related activities such as grant applications, publications and preparing research projects. This is likely to impact future research, but also career opportunities for years to come.

"Not enough hours in the day to attend to kids' need, work full time and sleep."

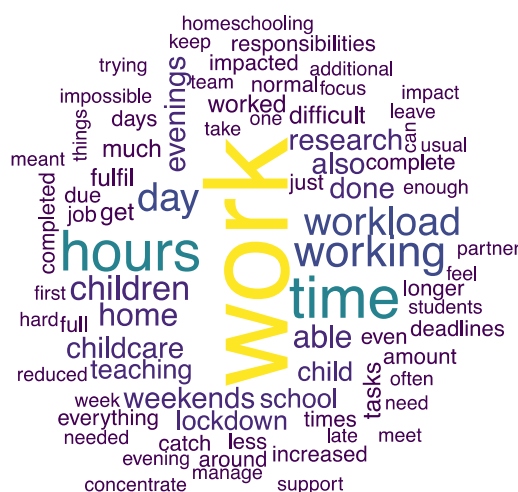Line managers were in a difficult position as they had the same issues as others but had to support other staff.

Figure 8: Word cloud of comments regarding staff workload

Career prospects

There was a general concern that staff with children were seen as less productive and that colleagues without children were valued more. There were also concerns that managers without children did not understand the situations of staff with childcare responsibilities. Staff felt that the flurry of activity in the past year made them feel excluded as they were unable to keep up with emails, meetings and other events and therefore seen as less productive.

"When my contract is coming to an end, I will compete for positions with people who don't have children and can currently use the time to be extra-efficient. I don't think that I will stand a fair chance and expect my career success to be compromised."

"I can't keep up with my profession, changes in the field and the day-to-day workload. I feel my colleagues have loads of CPD opportunities that I cannot take part in because I just do not have time."

There was a clear difference between staff groups, and it was mainly academic staff that felt an adverse impact on career prospects. In contrast, professional staff felt that their career development prospects were limited before the pandemic, and thus there was little impact.

Academics on Teaching and Research contracts generally felt that they had to focus on teaching and administrative tasks, in line with the general advice to de-prioritise research. Thus, most sacrificed research, scholarship and career development (*e.g.* attending conferences, applying for grants or contributing to publications) and their research activities were essentially dormant for the last year. There was also insufficient time for CPD or to keep on top of the research area, as well as insufficient "headspace" to develop new projects. This is likely to have a longer-term impact on research progression. This particularly affected staff on fixed-term contracts as they were unable to pursue their research goals which in some instances affected their employment at the University as they did not meet expectations due to parenting responsibilities.

There was considerable concern about the impact this has on career progression and promotion. Many reported that they did not have sufficient time to apply for promotion, while others were unsure how promotion criteria had changed to reflect the impact of

"I think it has actually proved that I am good at multi-tasking!"

the pandemic. A further concern was the competition with staff on research-intensive contracts and those without childcare responsibilities, as they were often able to progress with their research with long-term career benefits.

Academic staff on teaching-intensive contracts were considerably more positive and praised the way the University moved everything online – but there were also concerns about inability to progress.

Professional services staff commented that the last year resulted in a loss of confidence and a reluctance to apply for new jobs with more responsibilities in case there was another lockdown. Like academic staff, many staff in professional services also missed out on CPD and other opportunities for career progression.

Figure 9: Word cloud comparing comments made by professional and academic staff

Job security

Staff on fixed-term contracts, especially post-docs (PDRAs), and those whose positions relied on external funding were concerned about their job security. There were particular concerns that a perceived or actual lack of productivity and the "burden" of having children would have a negative impact on job reviews and extensions of contracts. Some staff reported that their underperformance during the pandemic resulted in contracts not being extended. The lack of official guidance on probation criteria also caused concerns as staff were unclear about what was expected of them.

"Given colleagues in same role do not have childcare responsibilities I worry I am seen as a problem/burden."

Permanent staff were not so concerned about immediate job security. However, while one comment praised the University's handling of job security, the handling of Phase 1 and Phase 2 caused considerable concerns: staff were worried about the threat of redundancies, forced changes to T&C and pay cuts, but also about future redundancies as a consequence of restructuring in Phase 2.

"Fear of redundancies which keep being mentioned."
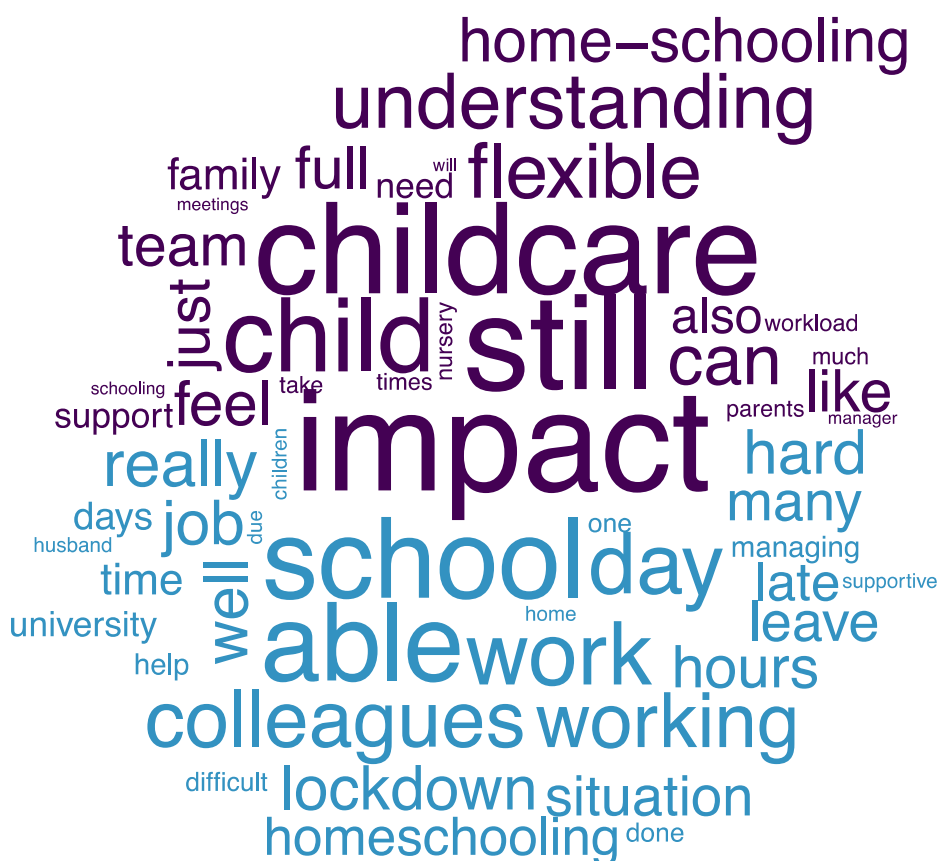
Figure 10: Word cloud comparing comments of staff on fixed-term and permanent contracts.

Managing childcare and home-schooling

Two main factors helped staff to manage the past year: the ability to be more flexible and accept the limitations imposed by the pandemic, and the support and understanding from colleagues and managers. There were many positive comments about the support by HR to confirm keyworker status and the support of the University to obtain additional UKRI funding. Staff also found some benefits of working from home, as it allowed more flexibility and more time with family, but in general found working

"Childcare and work are two full time jobs. Neither of them can be done satisfactorily when you share your time between the two."

from home exhausting. However, there were quite a number of critical comments. Post-docs (PDRAs) and early-career researchers (ECRs) were concerned that their specific needs were largely ignored, as they require publications and networking to progress their career. A long pause will therefore impact their long-term career

"Providing Flexible work times will not add more hours [...] to do both full time childcare and full-time job. [...] No option for workload modelling or remodelling has been offered."

prospects, especially as they are disadvantaged when competing with others.

The perceived or actual support from managers and leadership varied considerably: there was a lot of praise for understanding and supporting managers, but also considerable criticism. Managers appear to have interpreted guidance in different ways, from rather flexible

"Barely managing! However, having a network of parents that are going through the same thing is helpful when one needs to vent!"

to extremely strict, and some staff have for example been accused of underperformance with likely consequences for future career prospects. Also of note were comments that referred to gender stereotypes regarding the responsibilities of childcare.

"I have had to prioritise different things at different times and feel angry that I have not been able to support my children as well as I would have liked during the periods of home-schooling due to conflicting work pressures."

Increased workload was also a common theme, and many staff commented on already high workload pre-pandemic. As workload increased during the pandemic, this contributed to stress and anxiety among staff, and in particular the feeling of

letting colleagues down. It was also questioned why the University did not pause non-essential projects.

There were different approaches to dealing with childcare responsibilities. Staff used annual leave (see also section on Leave and Furlough), childcare bubbles and nannies to help with childcare, and a frequent complaint was that furlough for childcare was not possible or not offered. The interruption of meetings by children was a common problem, and staff dealt with this differently: from accepting that this is unavoidable to forcing children to stay out of the room. While most colleagues did accept this, it appears that not all were as accommodating to this new situation.
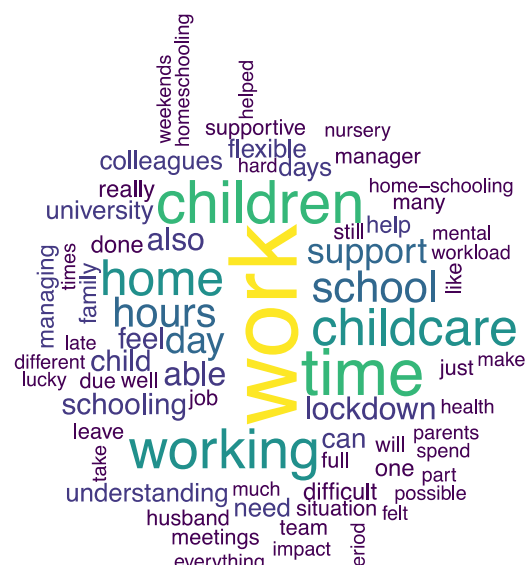

Figure 11: Word cloud of comments regarding other aspects of childcare and home schooling

Local and University-wide support

Most participants felt that local support – within Schools and Functions – to be better than the support provided by the University in general. Indeed, many respondents felt that the University largely ignored the challenges parents faced, demonstrated by the fact that this survey was conducted very late in the pandemic without support from the University. There were comparisons with other Universities that provided more pro-active support for parents. Many staff commented on the inconsistency of the support offered and the lack of clear guidance. They also felt that the many statements of support from the University were not reflected in any changes to reduce workload, for example by reducing non-essential tasks. Locally, many staff found managers and colleagues very understanding and supportive, offering flexibility where required. Staff also found social activities such as morning exercises or coffee mornings very helpful.

"Everyone is kind and supportive, but my workload is exactly the same as it was."
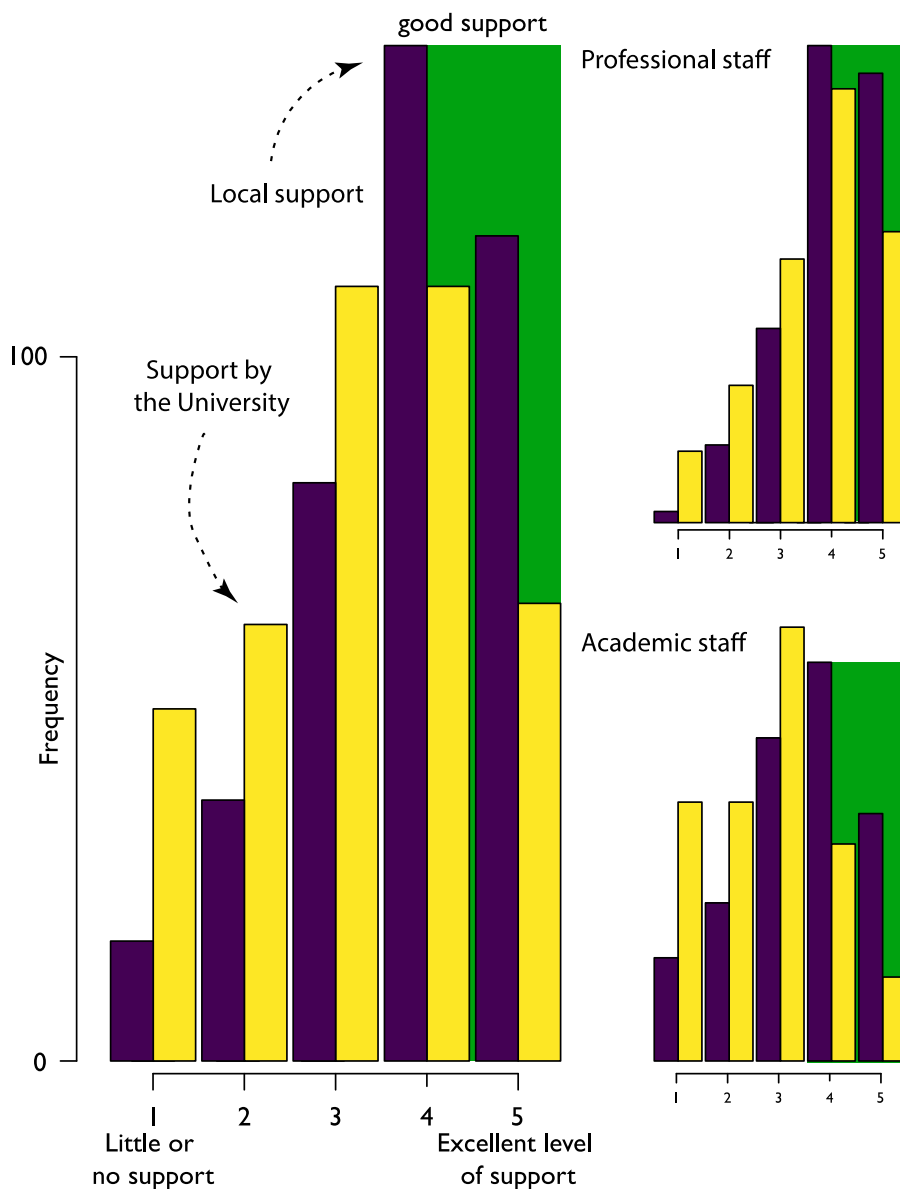
Figure 12:   Support provided locally and by the University. The shaded area represents answer that indicated participants felt supported.

"My line manager was very understanding and the message from my Head of School was also one of 'please try your best but remember to look after yourself'. The emails from the university centre were maybe a little more formal in their wording and very lengthy so it felt like they took a lot of my already very limited time to read."

In line with the comments received, 65% of participants felt locally supported[**] by their Department, School or Function, but only 44% felt supported by the University. This is also shown by the average score, which was significantly higher for local (3.8) than central (3.2) support (Figure 12). There is a very notable difference between academic and professional services staff, with only 25% of academics feeling supported by the University in contrast to 61% of professional services staff – with scores of 2.7 from academics and 3.6 from professional services. This difference is less pronounced for local support, with 36% of academics feeling supported by the University compared to 63% of professional services and scores of 3.4 from academics and 4.1 from professional services staff. Further analysis, using regression models, confirmed that these differences persisted even after adjustment for gender and contract type. These differences were also very noticeable in the comments received.

"I have been extremely satisfied with the attitudes of my manager and the vast majority of colleagues I come into contact with. My role means I have a lot of contact with different teams, and I know how much work has gone on behind the scenes to ease the situation for as many colleagues as possible. I feel the pandemic has shown that the University genuinely cares about staff welfare, right from the very top."

Academic staff

Most academic staff felt supported by their Schools and Departments, although this was variable and depended a lot on individuals, as there appeared to be no clear guidance. The support by the University was seen much more critically. Many considered the communication to be very vague and inconsistent, offering not much more than kind words but no actual help. In general, staff found the University to be understanding but not very pro-active. There has been no consistent policy to pro-actively look after staff, for example by regular check-ins, and the delayed opening of the campus nursery was identified as impacting working parents. However, staff did welcome the provision of PPE and the testing centre, the prioritisation of research leave for parents with young children and provision of parental leave.

"The focus is entirely on students and staff have been ignored."

Continuously increasing workload was a common theme among academic staff. While workload was high for many pre-pandemic, this became worse for staff with childcare responsibilities during the pandemic. It was recognised that this is a problem that goes beyond the current situation, but that there have been very few attempts by the University to recognise or address this. Indeed, the main concern raised was that there was no attempt to reduce workload, and initiatives to do so were met with resistance by the University (examples cited were the refusal to consider workload as

"There has been very little recognition/accommodation by the university of staff with caring responsibilities. The fact that we are only now being asked about equality and childcare issues is evident of this, whereas in other universities looking after staff well-being in the pandemic has been a central concern."

[**] In line with other surveys such as the NSS, a score of 4 and 5 is interpreted as "supported".

possible reason for exemption from the 15-day turnaround target for feedback or the refusal to renew contracts for teaching fellows). Several new policies increased workload for staff in many ways, this included CIP (Circumstances Impact Process as alternative to the Extenuating Circumstances process) and safety net but also the move to blended learning. For example, making it easier for students to retake assignments meant that staff had to create (and mark) multiple assignments, which had to be adapted to accommodate virtual conditions. Many felt that the University prioritised students over staff and made a lot of promises to students while failing to work with RUSU to manage expectations.

"I welcome the very recent University policy on prioritising research leave for parents with young children to mitigate for Covid-19 related impacts on research – if implemented, this will be the best thing that has happened!"

"The deadlines for information have been impossibly short on many occasions. Last minute decisions have knock on effects on staff."

Staff with management responsibilities commented that they had little support to support their staff, and especially those in teaching management roles commented frequent changes in policies increased workload – without any support or concomitant reduction of other tasks. Long delays in communicating with students – as communication had to be approved by legal services – added to stress and workload.

Many felt that the discussion about redundancies, wage cuts and forced contract changes had a considerable impact on their wellbeing and caused stress. Some staff did not ask for help as they were worried it might affect their future career.

Professional services staff

"The uncertainty over pay cuts and freezes was very unhelpful and added a lot of stress."

Similar to academic staff, professional services staff felt generally well supported by their managers, although they also felt there was a lack of guidance and some inconsistency. As for academic staff, while flexible working did help to manage childcare responsibility, it did not reduce workload and there was no re-prioritisation of work.

"Our team have daily exercise classes in the mornings plus a coffee morning break now and again."

In general, professional services staff found the University much more supportive than academic staff, which aligns with the overall response to the COVID-19 lockdown survey conducted in July 2020 – in particular the communications by the Vice Chancellor were highlighted, and that his leadership inspired others. The additional days off were highly valued and some respondents felt that the University genuinely cared and did all it could to support staff, for example by reducing workload. The support by HR regarding the key-worker role was also commended.

However, not all respondents felt supported by the University and many felt that there were not enough actions to address the impact of the pandemic and the special circumstances of staff with childcare responsibilities. It was felt that the University was slow in picking up on the issues affecting parents and focused more on performance than wellbeing. There were also concerns about redundancies

"Understanding of difficulty by manager but no action to alleviate or help. In fact, additional workload given to support students, means more work but no understanding that more support internally was needed."

and pay-cuts. It was noted that academic colleagues did not always appreciate that professional services staff also had caring responsibilities and were affected by the pandemic.

Professional staff commented a lot about furlough and that there was no consistent approach, in particular, as regards furlough for childcare reasons. While some staff were actively offered to go on furlough, others were not. In some instances, requests to go on furlough were refused, while others were furloughed without discussions.

What support would have been helpful?

Staff appreciated that there were constraints to what the University could offer, and that prioritising staff with children over other staff would have been unfair. However, staff would have welcomed a more proactive communication by the University and line managers, including a regular 'checking in' on individuals. This would have helped to spot problems early, offer support where necessary, and identify those at risk. Many staff were reluctant to ask for help, either because they worried about their career or because they did not want to be a burden.

"Reconsiderations of workload. I don't necessarily mean asking other colleagues to take on the work of carers, but taking a hard look at which work is the most critical in the University's current situation (which I appreciate is vulnerable) and being willing to consider cutting back on some areas that could wait."

"Having clear guidance, expectations but also levels of understanding/empathy/sympathy from the university and ensuring that was cascaded down through functions consistently would have gone a long way to helping parents feel supported."

Staff would have liked clearer communication and guidance from the University, for example a clear statement on expectations which would have helped to manage their workload – and the workload of their team – better. The same applied to the University policies regarding furlough, especially furlough for childcare, and different types of leave (parental leave, emergency leave etc.). It would have been helpful to provide clear guidance on what kind of support was available and communicate this proactively to staff and line-managers. This would have ensured that all staff had the same information – it appears that information given to staff varied widely. For new staff or staff returning from maternity leave clear information would have been desirable.

Many comments focused on workload and how decisions by the University during the pandemic increased workload unnecessarily. Workload was already high before the pandemic, and there was no contingency planning for emergencies and very little spare capacity. A consensus was that it would have been good to postpone non-essential tasks and initiatives and focus on those that were essential and business critical. One suggestion was that new initiatives and policies should require an "impact assessment", and all policies should be assessed on whether they are inclusive and support families. The impact of the relationship between the University and students on workload was also mentioned. Delayed and often ambiguous communication with students caused considerable anxiety among them, which resulted in increased workload for staff as they had to provide additional support and reassurance. This was often made more difficult by staff not being allowed to provide students with all relevant information, for example regarding exams or face to face teaching. Promises made to students should take staff workload into consideration and additional resources should be provided where necessary.

Figure 13: Word cloud of comments regarding helpful support

"Actively work to reduce the non-essential tasks like staff allocation surveys, peer reviews of teaching and so on. Do they really need to happen right now, in this crisis?"

Staff would have welcomed a more proactive approach to wellbeing and support beyond highlighting resources and websites. Other Universities have provided direct information and support to staff with childcare responsibilities. Moving forward, the University should explore how it can support staff with children and childcare responsibilities better. Many comments highlighted a need for more empathy, sympathy and understanding across all staff and a better visibility of the University leadership among staff outside of the formal staff meetings. A better support for working from home – *e.g.* providing equipment or support for broadband upgrade was also mentioned, as not all staff were equipped for working from home, especially when having to home school at the same time. There was the suggestion of a buddy system where staff could be paired up to deal with workload better.

Finally, a formal recognition of the situation and its impact on staff (*e.g.* regarding probation and promotion) would be helpful, especially for PDRAs and ECRs whose career might have been affected for several years. For those on fixed-term contracts, there were suggestions to offer a grace period to find new positions.

"Quicker action over prioritisation of current project work & the acceptance not everything gets done. I have colleagues who in lockdown 1 & 2 were managing childcare and multiple projects. We are not invincible."

What do you think the Parent and Family Network can do to help the University and colleagues in the future?

Represent these views and share the outcomes in a timely way so that they can make a difference. Thank you for the survey.

The survey also invited comments on things that respondents thought the Parent and Family Network could do to help the University and colleagues in the future. 20% of the 172 responses to this question expressed a desire for the Network to advocate for and lobby on behalf of working parents, particularly around the topic of flexible working. The importance of the Network being a voice of working parents and raising awareness of the challenges they face (both during the pandemic and in normal times) among managers, senior leadership and colleagues was also frequently mentioned (15%).

This survey is great, done sooner it could have helped the network to advocate on behalf of parents earlier in the process. More widely advertised/promoted support groups for parents struggling.

Some of the responses flagged specific areas where respondents suggested the Network could do more. Several of these highlighted particular groups of parents and carers who could be better supported through the activities and resources provided by the Network, including returners from maternity/paternity/adoption leave, parents of children with disabilities or special needs, adoptive parents, parents of older children, and carers for elderly or disabled relatives. All of these groups (with the exception of carers who currently fall outside of the Network's remit) already have dedicated channels in the Network's Teams group and future events and initiatives are planned to improve the proactive support and visibility of those particular groups within the Network. Other suggestions included a mentoring or peer support programme within the Network, which is another initiative we hope to put into place in the future.

Another topic within the responses was the potential for the Network to expand its collaborative work with other groups within the University. This included working with other staff diversity networks to help the University create (or promote if it already exists) policy guidance across intersectional lines, such as in the case of carers for partners or other relatives with disabilities or mental health issues. They also discussed the potential for the Network to work more with HR, both through sharing information on how colleagues can request flexible working/home working etc. and through contributing to guidelines or examples of best practice on supporting working parents which could be shared with managers and senior leadership. A couple of respondents also flagged the possibility of information and feedback received by the Network being fed into discussions between the UCU and the University administration.

Continuing the great work they are doing campaigning and advocating for those too busy and exhausted (working parents!) to use their own voice.

A number of the responses expressed gratitude for the activities of the Network during the pandemic, with the Teams group and the informal peer support provided by the Network being particularly appreciated. However, several respondents commented that they had been unaware of the existence of the Network prior to the survey, suggesting that improved visibility and promotion is necessary to reach more colleagues.

Continue highlighting the challenges faced by working parents to the university and keep up the good work!

26 responses drew attention to areas of potential improvement which come under the University's influence rather than that of the Network, in particular alleviating workload pressure and continuing to enable home working and flexible working.

Appendix

Questionnaire and answers

About you

1. Which of the following best describes your job role at the university?
   a. Academic (Research only)
   b. Academic (Teaching & Research)
   c. Academic (Teaching only)
   d. Professional services (student facing)
   e. Professional services (non-student facing)
   f. Other
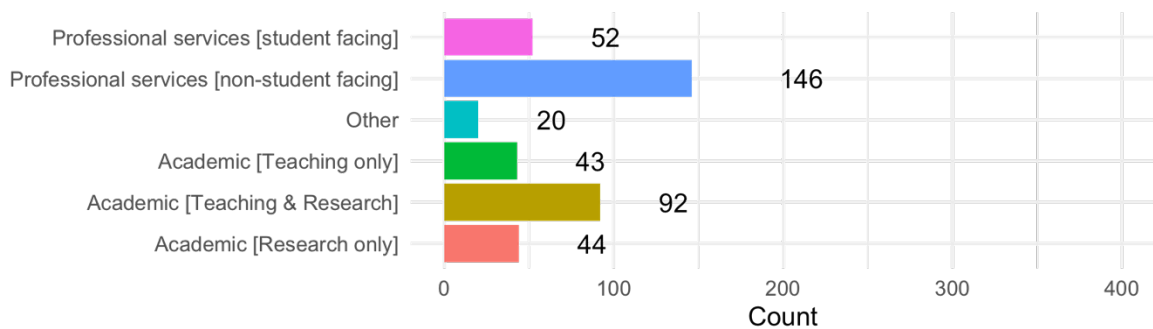
2. Which of the following best describes your contract type?
   a. Full time (over 30h per week on average) and permanent
   b. Full time (over 30h per week on average) and fixed term
   c. Part time and permanent
   d. Part time and fixed term
   e. Other
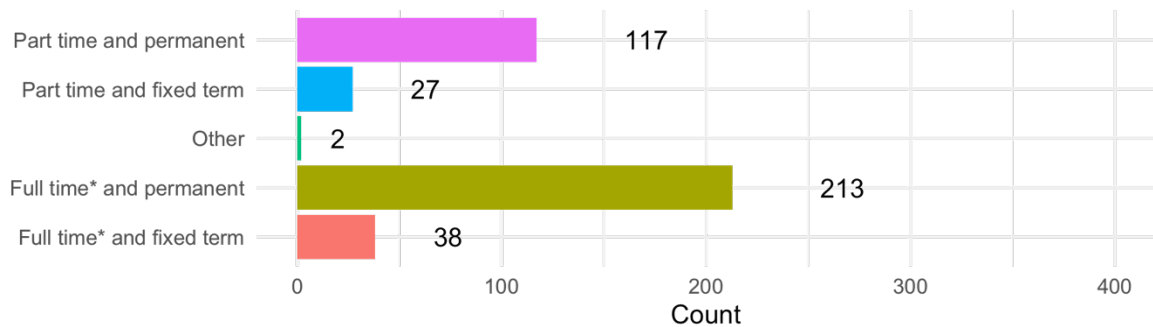
3. Have you taken any of the following during this period (since March 2020)?
    a. Maternity leave
    b. Paternity leave
    c. Adoption leave
    d. None of the above
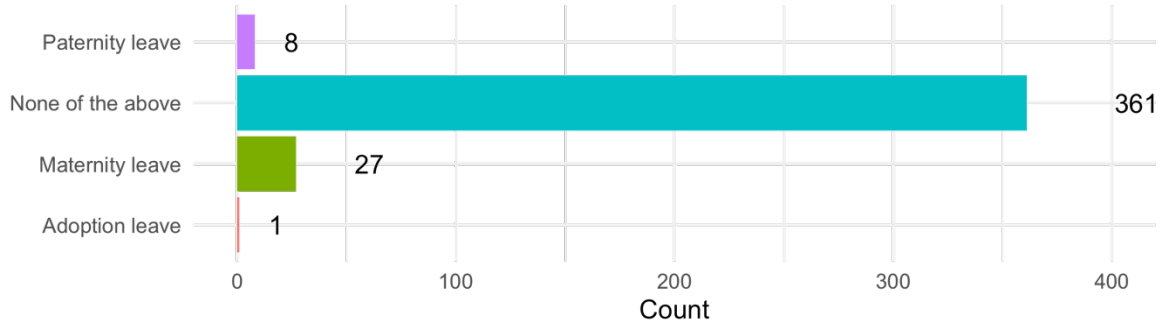
4. Which of the following best describes how you think of yourself?
    a. Male
    b. Female
    c. Non-binary
    d. In another way
    e. Prefer not to say

27
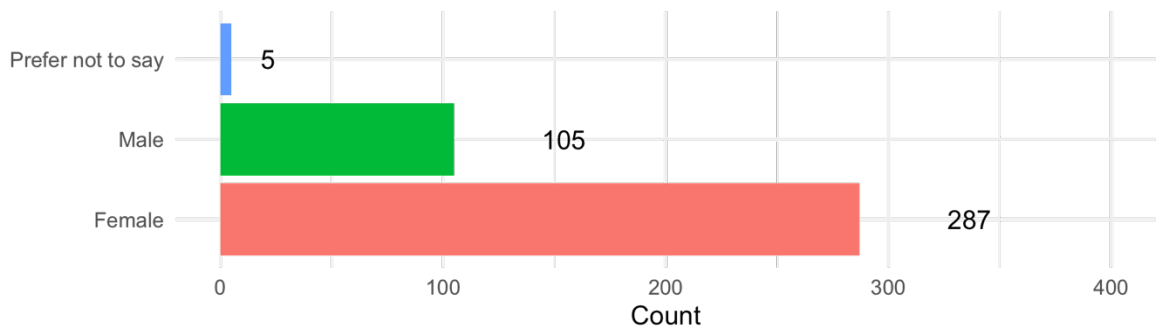
Your parental responsibilities

5.   Indicate the current age group of all children you have parental responsibility for (select all that apply):
   a.   Nursery or Pre school [under 4 years old]
   b.   Primary [4-11 years old]
   c.   Secondary [11-16 years old]
   d.   Post 16 education [16-18 years]

Preschool	X		X		X		X		X		X		X	
Primary School		X	X			X	X			X	X			X
Secondary School			X	X	X	X					X	X	X	
Post Secondary School						X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
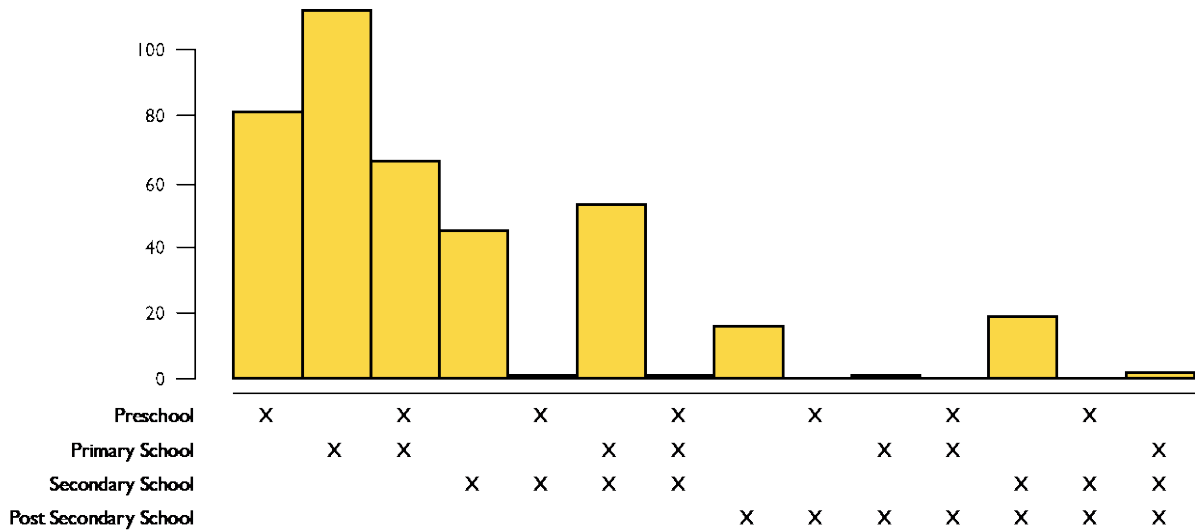
6.   Have you been able to share childcare/home schooling responsibilities with a partner or another carer e.g. as a childcare bubble?
   a.   Yes
   b.   No
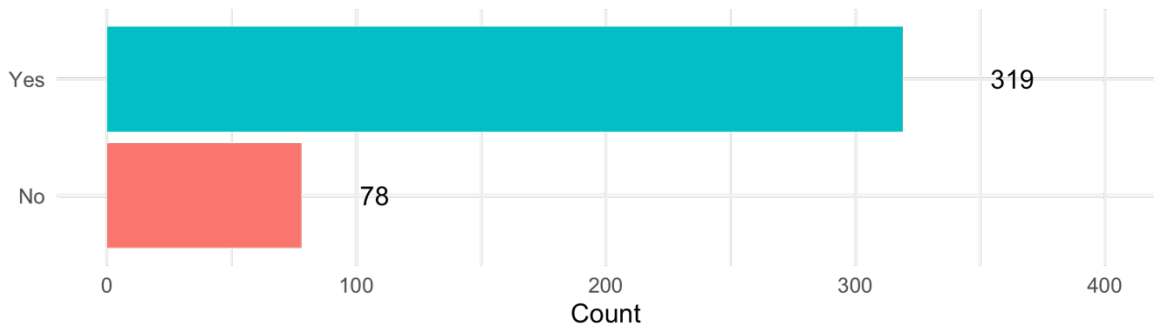
7.   Are there any specific circumstances regarding your parental responsibilities you would like to tell us about? e.g. caring for a child with additional needs, being a single parent, having a disability yourself
   Open text

Responses to national lockdowns and childcare commitments

8.   Have you used any of the following to help you manage your childcare commitments during any of the national lockdowns since March 2020?[††]
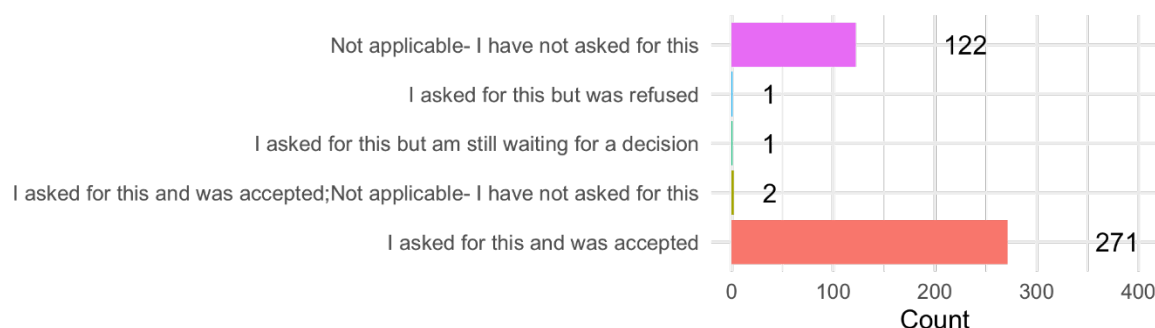
     a.   Unpaid parental leave
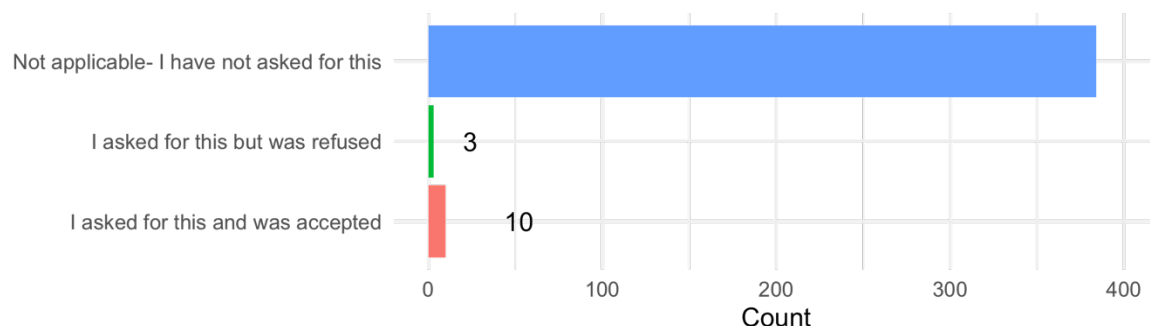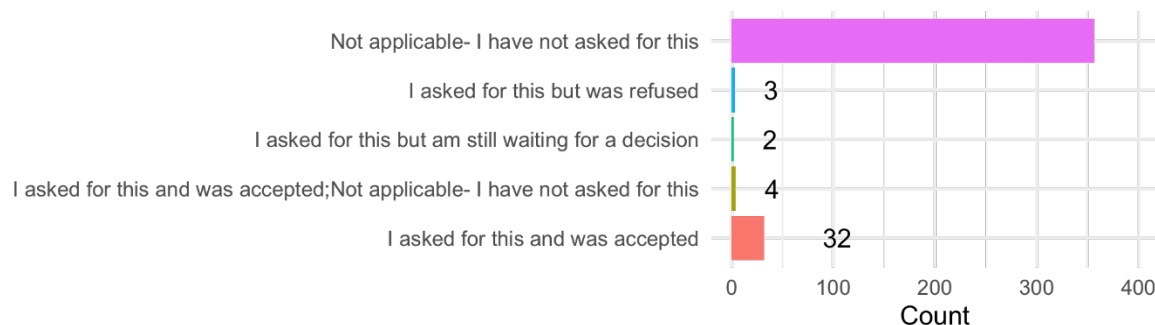

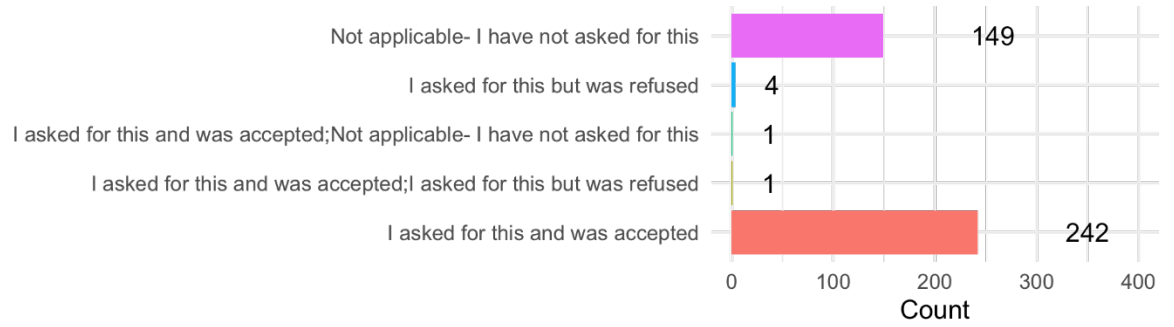   b.   Emergency dependent leave
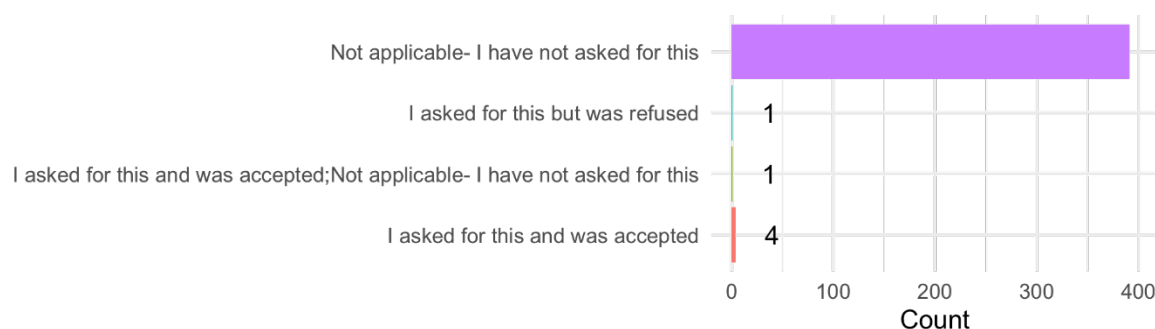
     c.   Annual leave

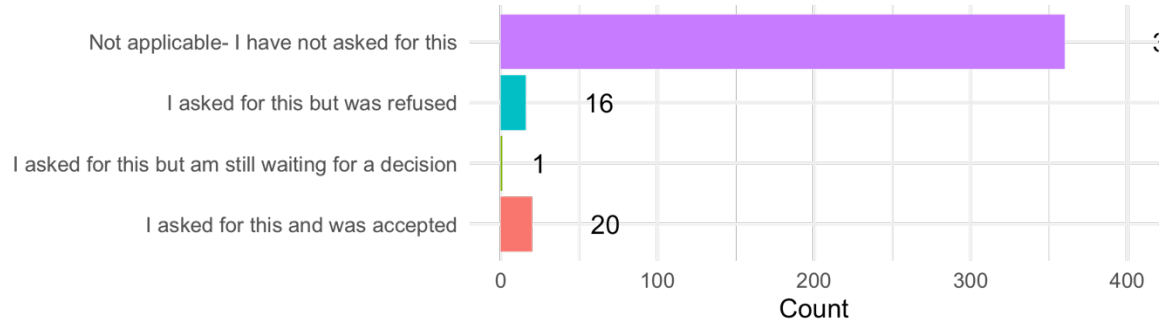   d.   Formal flexible working arrangement e.g change in contract

     e.   Informal flexible working e.g locally agreed flexibility in hours/days worked,

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[††] The survey system permitted multiple selections for each answer, resulting in combinations of answers.
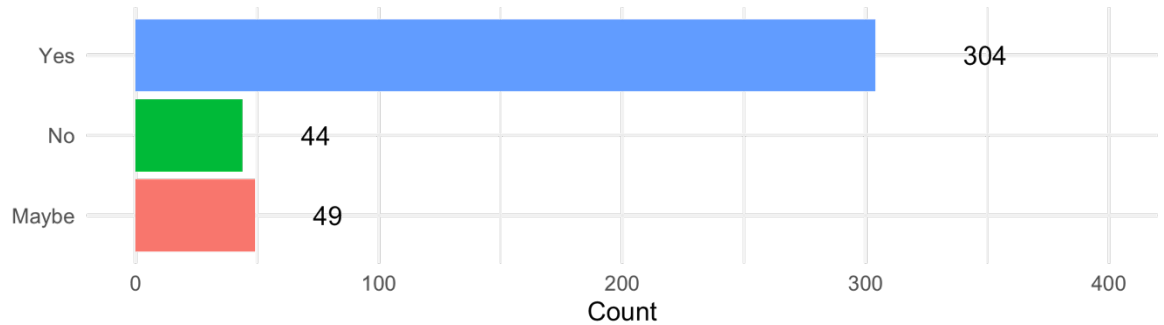
f.   Furlough

9.   Is there any additional information on Question 8 you would like to add?
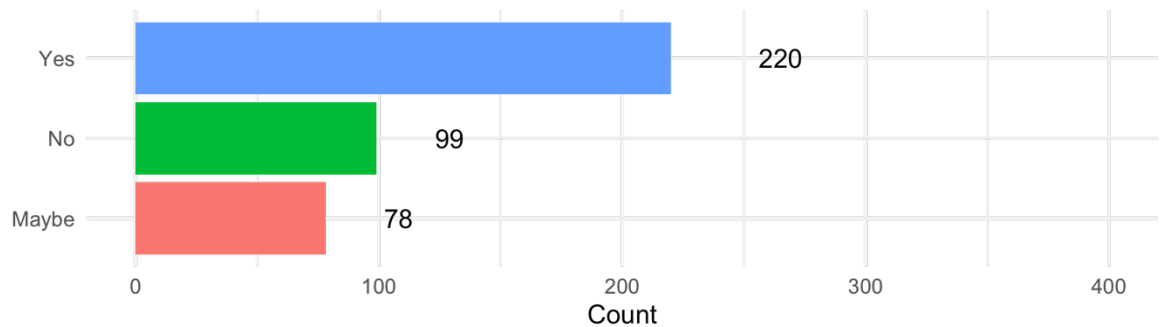**Open text**

Impact of national lockdowns

10. Have school or childcare closures during national lockdowns impacted your wellbeing?
    a.   Yes
    b.   No
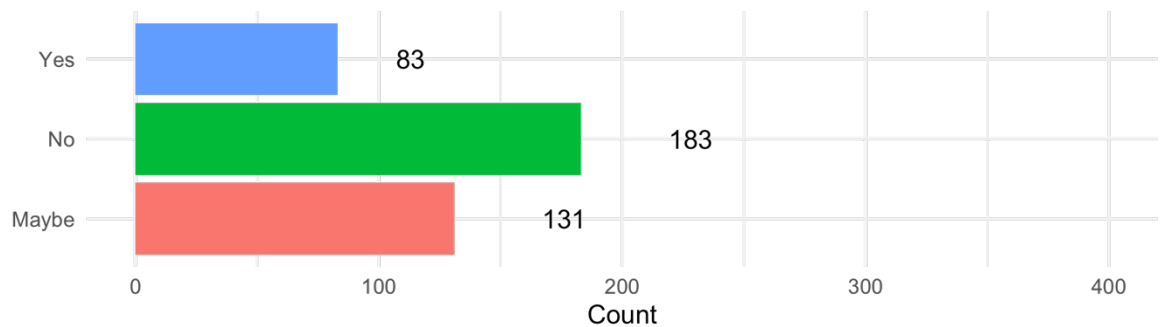   c.   Maybe
    Open text

Response	Count
Yes	304
No	44
Maybe	49

11. Have school or childcare closures during national lockdowns impacted your ability to fulfil your workload?
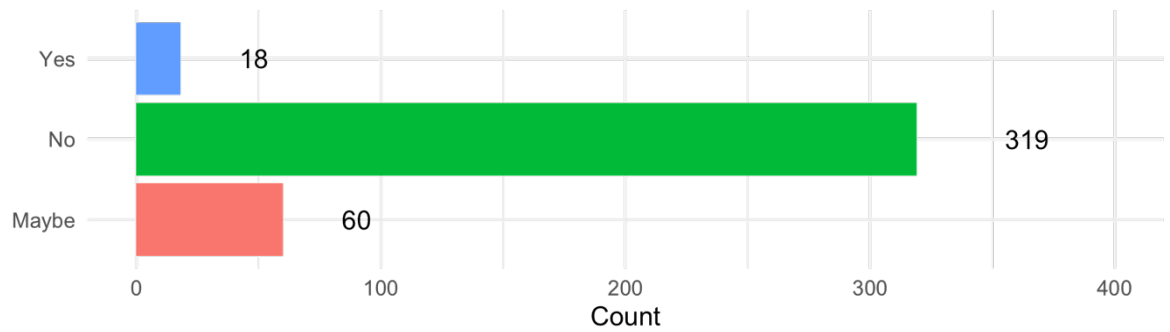   a.   Yes
    b.   No
    c.   Maybe
    Open text

Response	Count
Yes	220
No	99
Maybe	78

12. Is the period of school or childcare closures likely to impact your career progression?
    a.   Yes
    b.   No
    c.   Maybe
    Open text

Response	Count
Yes	83
No	183
Maybe	131

13. Have school or childcare closures during national lockdowns impacted your job security?
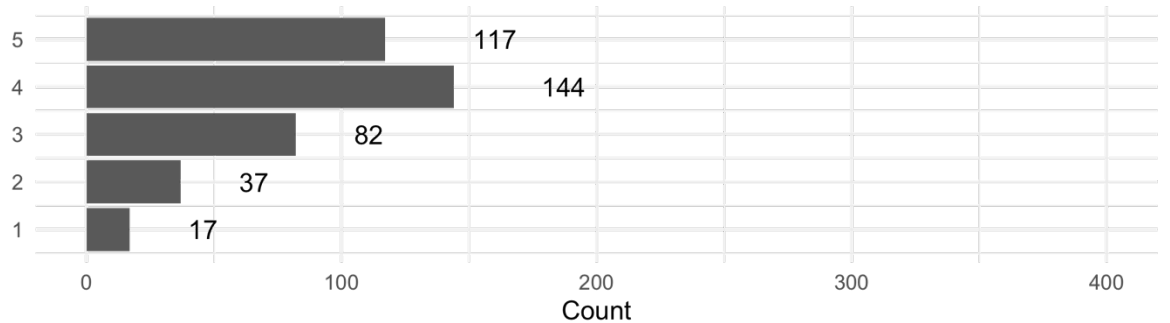   a.   Yes
    b.   No
    c.   Maybe

Open text

14. Is there anything else you want to tell us about how you managed/ are managing childcare/home-schooling?
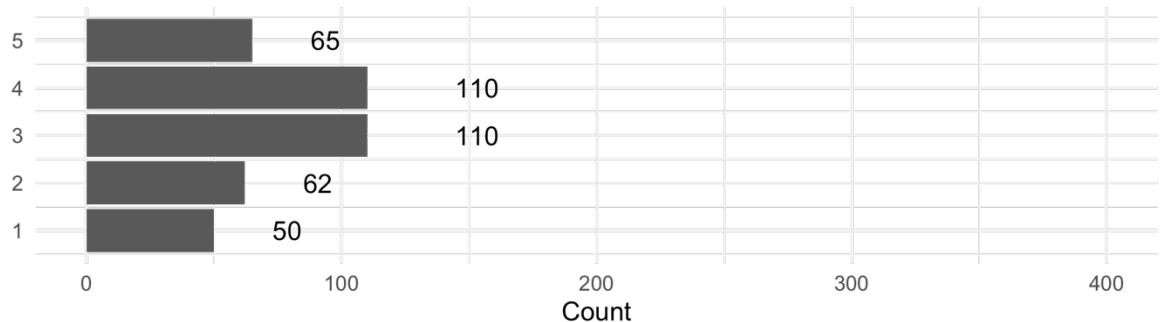**Open text**

Reflections

15. What level of support do you feel has been provided by your department/school/ or function?

16. What level of support do you feel has been provided by the university?

Please add any additional information on Questions 15 and 16

17. What actions/support do you think could have been helpful?
Open text
18. What do you think the Parent and Family Network can do to help the university and colleagues in the future?
Open text