



DEVELOPING GOOD
MANAGEMENT PRACTICE

A HEFCE Initiative

CONCLUSIONS

– FROM THE FEO PROJECT REPORT, 2003

While there is evidence of widespread flexibility across the sector it appears to be largely informal, inconsistent and not monitored or evaluated effectively. This means that many employees do not have access to any form of flexible working while many of those who do, have to rely on the goodwill of their manager as there is no formal policy in place. This would suggest that there is scope for the HE sector to capitalise on the potential benefits that introducing more formal, consistent and well-managed schemes can bring.

Historically the HE sector has allowed some flexibility in terms of working arrangements particularly for academic staff. Some of the pilot departments, being academic based, already had a large majority of the staff working flexibly, albeit informally. In these departments concerns about working conditions, workloads and working long hours were raised, with many academics believing that heavy workloads prevent them from taking advantage of any flexible arrangements. However the support staff in these departments seemed to benefit greatly from having access to the scheme. HEI's will have to address these wider issues related to academic staff if the benefits of offering flexible working arrangements are to be optimised for both organisations and employees. The issues concerning the applicability of flexible working options to academic staff will be taken up as a separate issue in the second stage of the FEO project.

It is clear that senior management "buy-in", commitment and enthusiasm are needed for success, but it must be recognised that this group of staff may have their own work/life balance issues. Comments such as "*They [the staff] appear to like it.*" and "*This seems to be a paper generation exercise.*" highlight the importance of senior management attitudes to work organisation and understanding the concepts of flexible working. Having commitment from senior managers before this type of scheme is introduced is essential but equally important is the support of middle managers who will directly manage the scheme. With the support of their line manager, employees will have a clearer understanding of the policy and the available options and will be more inclined to have a positive approach towards trying an option and making it work on a personal level and

also at a team and organisation level. If line managers indicate to staff that they do not support the scheme then the take up of options is likely to be very low. The most successful pilot schemes have been in groups where the line manager was confident, enthusiastic and determined that the pilot would succeed. The need for more training and guidance for line managers, so they can provide a genuine opportunity to explore flexible work patterns, will be taken further as part of the second stage of the FEO project.

Most groups were satisfied with the information that they received about the project and felt that they had the support they needed although new employees were not always informed about the scheme and it was sometimes not made clear to existing staff that they could apply for an option at any stage, not just at the beginning of the pilot. Comments from participants also imply that some departments did not meet regularly to review the scheme and flexible working was not openly discussed. Only one respondent mentioned that regular review meetings had been taking place. Regular, clear communication is vital throughout the process, so that staff feel supported and confident in using the scheme. In some cases there may have been a lack of support from senior management after the initial launch of the pilot, and no encouragement to join or to find common solutions for team working. One respondent had commented that they would have liked to have tried an option, but as no one else in the department had requested more flexibility, they did not like to ask and there was no encouragement or open discussion. Some managers took a team-based approach and decisions about flexible working were discussed collectively; this approach appeared to work well particularly when employees were given the responsibility, as a team, for ensuring that service standards were maintained.

The majority of employees in the pilot scheme indicated that they would value more flexibility and that their current role did not provide them with as much flexibility as they would like in their ideal job. Although the results showed that more women than men wanted access to more flexible work arrangements it was not just those employees with caring responsibilities who were interested in flexible working but the vast majority of employees. In groups where more flexibility was offered to employees, work life balance for these individuals improved over the period of the pilot schemes whereas for the employees in the control groups this was not the case; this would suggest that providing access to more flexibility has the effect of improving work life balance for individuals. This evidence would imply that HEI's could do more to improve the job satisfaction of the majority of employees by providing more flexible working arrangements.

Interest in the option to vary hours on a daily basis, i.e. some kind of flexitime scheme, was greater than for any other option although there was significant interest in all the options. The vast majority of those employees that did request an option wanted to work some kind of flexitime scheme where their hours, days and location of work remained largely the same but there was an

opportunity to adjust the pattern to some degree. Introducing a flexitime scheme is one of the simplest ways of allowing employees some flexibility, while the organisation incurs negligible costs and potentially benefits from factors such as increased morale and productivity.

The vast majority of staff are content to continue working standard hours and patterns. Despite the fears of some managers prior to the scheme that offering more flexibility would 'open the floodgates' and make managing a team impossible, only about 20% of employees requested a change through the scheme. For the majority of participants who actually took a flexible option the scheme worked very well and the perception of these people was that the personal benefits and the benefits for their team were significant. This perception was also reflected in the responses of the people within the pilot groups who chose not to apply for any flexible options. The managers taking part also felt that the scheme was a success and recognised the benefits for the team and for the organisation. Many of the benefits suggested in the literature on flexible working were in evidence in the pilot scheme, for example, increased morale, productivity and team working.

Speedier decision making; monitoring systems that work well; holiday calculations; changing the way a team operated; managing days off and workloads all were issues that line managers had to tackle, often in a new way and for the first time. The project team were available to provide practical advice in some of these situations. The better known options inevitably caused fewer problems than others, but delays while details were sorted out frustrated participants who wanted to start using flexible options. Departments who went ahead and approved options seemed to fare better, even though after a review some participants changed what they were doing and used another option instead. The compressed hours and selling/buying annual leave options seemed to cause the most problems, although conversely in several cases the compressed hours option worked very well.

The concern that increased flexibility for some employees might cause friction within a team appears to be largely unfounded. Where discontent was in evidence this appeared to be either the highlighting of existing tensions or the result of poor management such as a lack of feedback for applicants or poorly thought-through implementation. Introducing a scheme of this type does not need to result in disruption within the team; some managers recognised the benefits of reviewing the way the team approached its work and empowering teams to manage flexibility themselves.

There are limitations to introducing flexible arrangements which need to be given careful consideration. For example, some employees will be very limited in the flexibility they can use due to the nature of their role and where teams are small i.e. 2 or 3 people there is less scope for flexibility to be introduced although most roles and team situations do allow some flexibility.

There are no significant costs associated with the introduction of this type of scheme other than administration and management time during the design and implementation stages. The project pilot groups provided some examples of direct cost savings for the organisation which gives an indication of the potential financial benefits of introducing this type of scheme.

Guidance on monitoring systems, calculating hours and holidays may be necessary for some options as well as guidance on the suitability of options for certain job roles/workloads. More training could help managers and staff to plan options more effectively in relation to the team and workloads, not just personal choice. A better understanding of seasonal or annualised hours may help those employees who have heavy workloads but do not seem to be able to use compressed hours or flexitime successfully.

Overall the feeling of people within the pilot scheme seems to be that when flexible working is implemented properly, it is very beneficial and works well, but where it is implemented and supported poorly it can have exaggerated negative effects. The effects of a rejection or little feedback when someone has applied for a flexible option seem to ripple out to the rest of the department/team. In addition, trying to implement flexible working may heighten already existing tensions between line managers and their team or between individuals and/or teams.

Finally, the variety of the responses even from within the same department illustrates the fact the flexible working is highly individual, and what is beneficial to one individual or team may not be right for another. Whether the desire to implement flexible working comes from the top down or increasingly from individual staff requests, options need to be considered in the context of the whole team and overall workload, and reviewed regularly.