

# The Business case for flexible working

Why are we talking about work/life balance in Higher Education?

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Why is flexible working an important part of work/life balance?

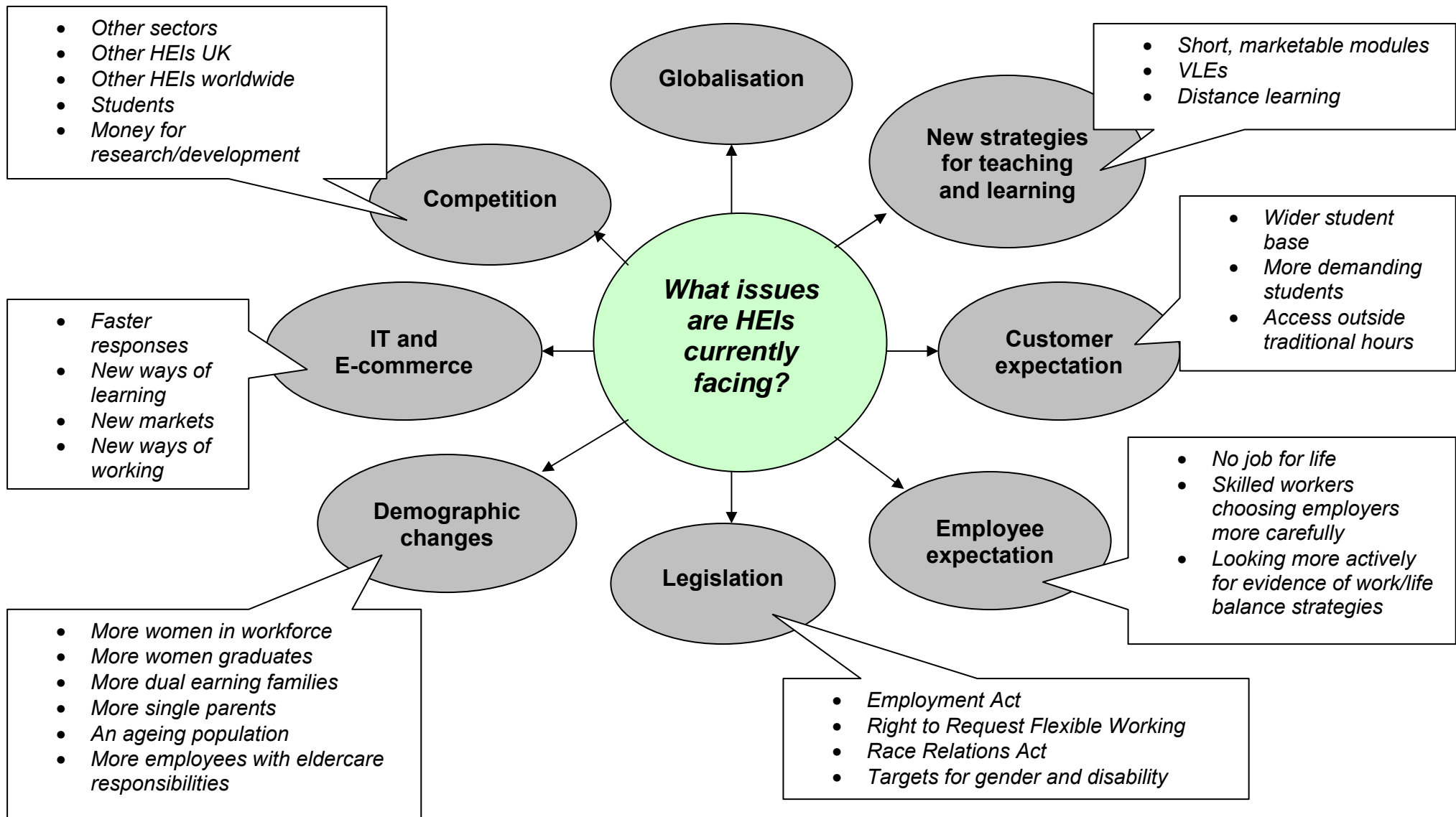
There are many reasons why organisations should consider a more flexible approach to working patterns and leave arrangements. The benefits can be wide-ranging and long-lasting as well as providing short term solutions.

Many leading-edge organisations have been actively promoting this approach for several years and have measured the benefits across a range of criteria over a significant time period.

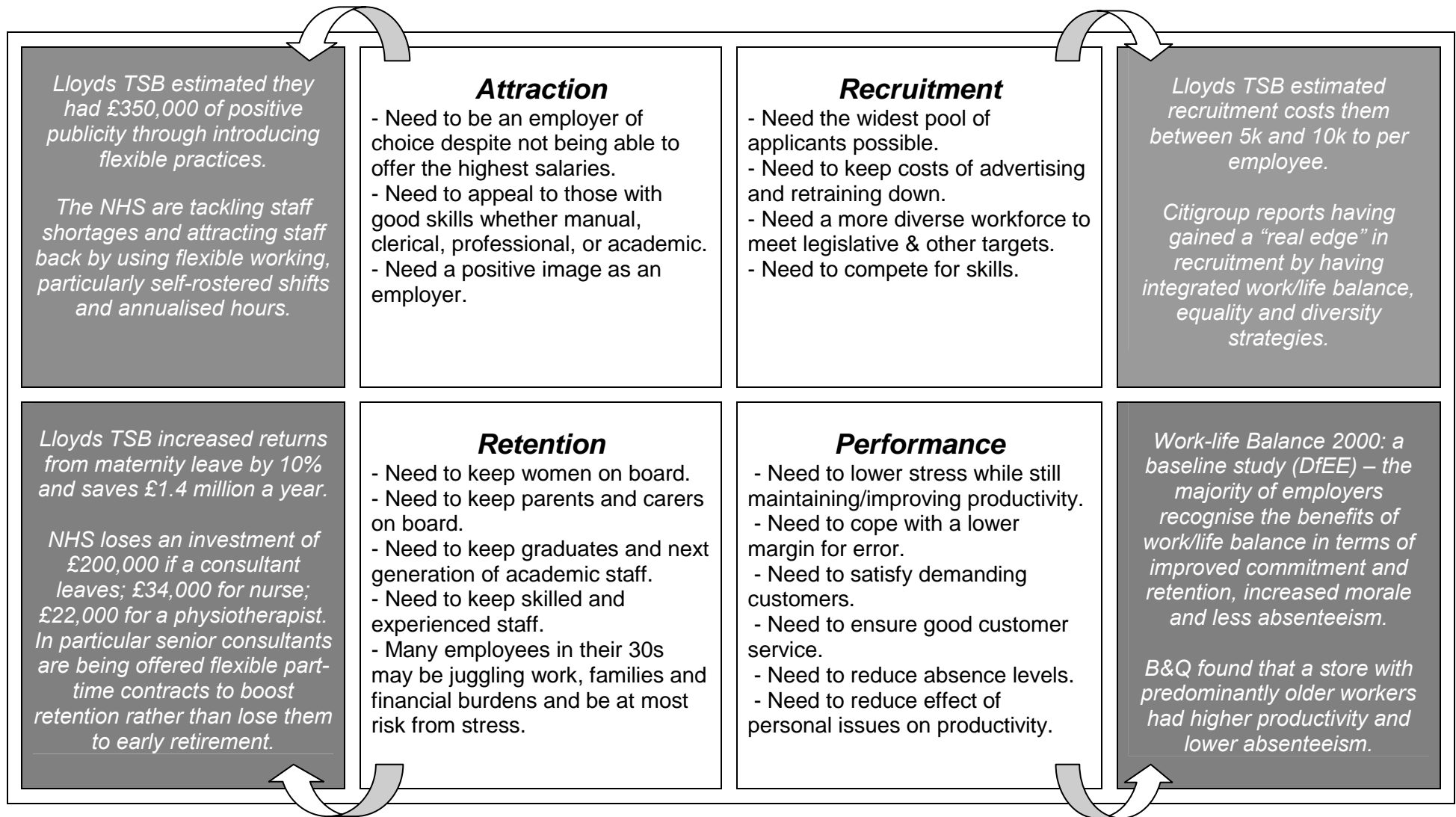
As this business case will demonstrate, investing in employee well-being makes good business sense, not only in terms of improving performance, raising morale and reducing stress, but also improving attraction, recruitment and retention performance.

Sunday Times 100 Best Companies to work for, 2003 –  
***“Companies that allow their staff to work flexibly reap handsome dividends. It is a case of a little going a long way.”***

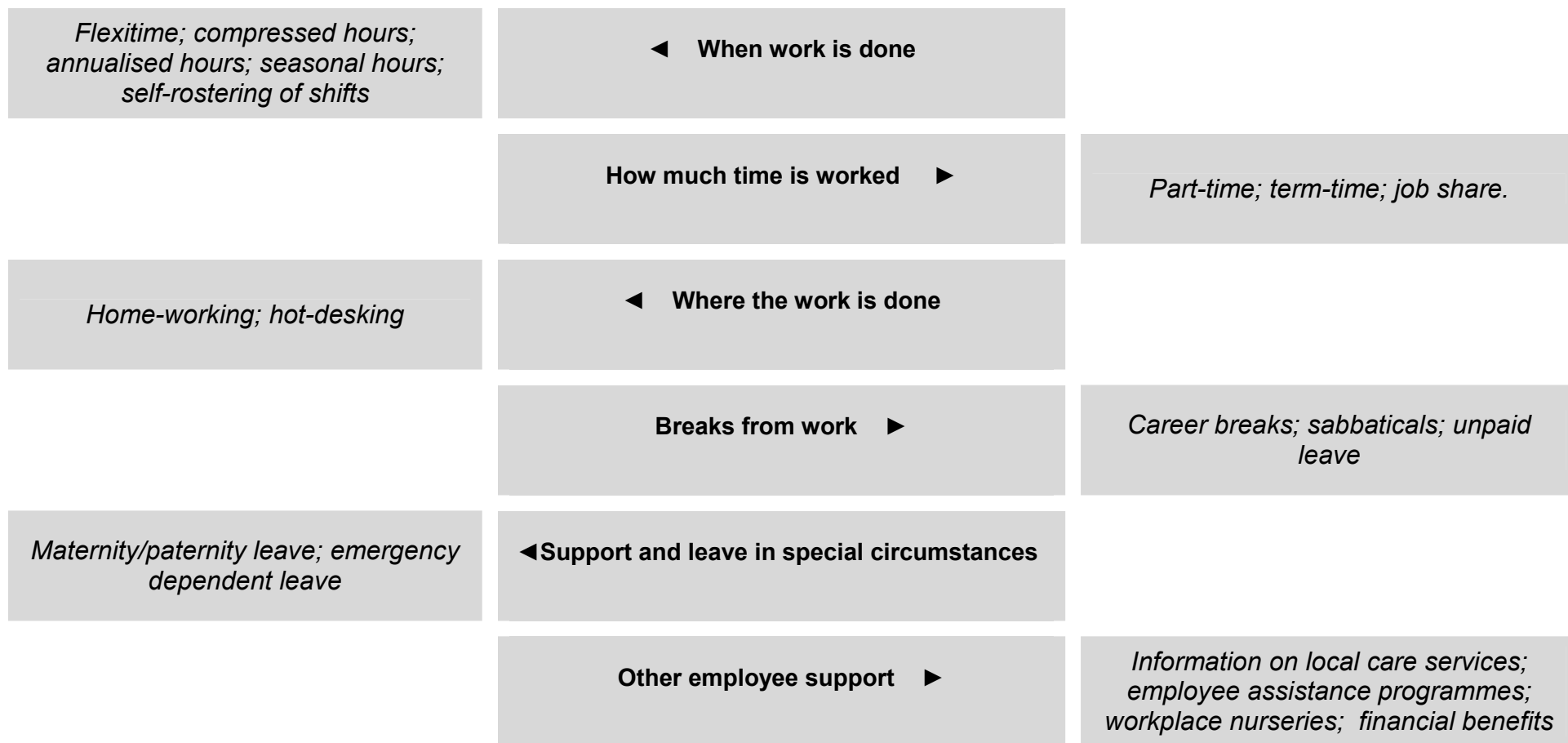
DTI work/life balance site –  
***“Work organisation and flexible working practices that benefit both the employer and the individual, will characterise the high performance work place of the future.”***



**These issues can result in many problems for higher education, but in terms of staffing they can particularly affect – attraction, recruitment, performance, and retention.**



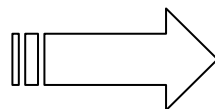
**So one of the ways employers have found to ease the effect of these issues on employees is to offer more flexible ways of working – whether it is:**



▼ (Note: Some of the examples for the next section are taken from the Flexible Employment Options (FEO) Project. Background information on the project can be found on the last page of the document.)

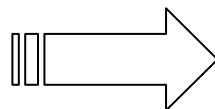
## More flexible working arrangements can help meet business objectives in the following ways –

- **Can help to extend the working day –**  
Using flexitime, compressed hours, staggered hours.



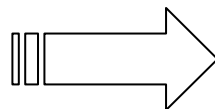
BT used compressed hours to lengthen engineers' days - reported higher levels of job completion & customer satisfaction; engineers enjoyed half day off a week.

- **Enables better time management –**  
Using access to a variety of options to help employees achieve a balance of work and personal issues.



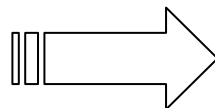
Finance Dept. in an FEO (Flexible Employment Options Project) pilot scheme used 7am – 7pm flexitime to successfully extend the office day.  
Generally, FEO pilot participants reported reduced stress levels.

- **Reduces absence levels, particularly short term –**  
Using flexibility of work start/finish times to manage appointments and emergencies.  
Using flexi-leave and not sick leave for the odd day/ half day off.



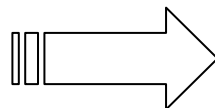
Merton Council introduced 7am-7pm flexitime & home-working – sickness absence dropped by 50% and absence due to medical appointments dropped by 75%

- **Reduces turnover –**  
Employees can use reduced hours; seasonal hours; job shares; emergency caring leave; unpaid leave and so on to help them cope rather than leave the organisation



BBC World Service has emergency childminders available; over 12 months this saved £21,000 in productivity, absence & overtime.

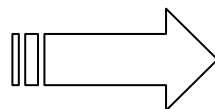
- **Reduces pressure on parking and other facilities –**  
Using such options as home-working and flexitime.  
Using options such as flexi-time enables employees to adjust their travel arrangements to reduce stress.



Northumbria Water introduced flexible working in 1999, and reduced turnover from 8% to 3% in 2 years.

FEO pilot – “Journey to and from work significantly eased.”

- **Boosts morale and performance –**  
Giving employees control over their work empowers them.  
Relaxed, happier staff are more productive.  
Image as an employer is raised for employees.

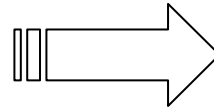


Merton Council measured a 30% rise in productivity from introducing home-working.

FEO focus groups reported more effective workload management, better use of time, and improved productivity.

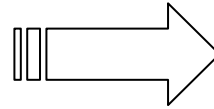
20% of FEO participants & managers reported a rise in morale over the year of the pilot.

- **Attracts a wider pool of applicants –**  
 Variety of working patterns and start/finish times.  
 Employee benefits such as vouchers.  
 Support such as nurseries, holiday schemes and EAPs.  
 Here is an employer who cares for their employees.



NHS uses self rostering to successfully cover shifts – attractive to potential employees and returnees.

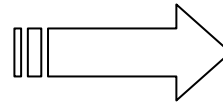
- **An “Employer of choice”**  
 Being competitive in the market place.  
 Potential employees looking at benefits of employment and evidence of a work/life balance package.



B&Q increased its % of older employees, reducing absence, raising productivity and increasing customer satisfaction.

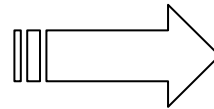
Northumbria Water states that it offers flexible working to have access to a wider pool of applicants to recruit the best person for the job.

- **Can reduce casual/temporary staff costs –**  
 Seasonal and term time hours to fit with work patterns.



Leeds Metropolitan University states that flexibility is implicit in everything they do, and that such employment practices are necessary to deliver their services.

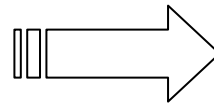
- **Can reduce costs of caring, transport and so on for staff –**  
 Using flexitime to travel in off peak times.  
 Work from home.  
 Using a variety of patterns to arrange hours around school/nursery times to reduce childminding costs.  
 Using a variety of patterns to arrange hours around the needs of an elderly relative.



A finance dept. in the FEO pilot saved £10,000 through a seasonal hours pattern instead of employing casuals at peak times.

An FEO pilot participant saved £100 a month in childminding fees by using flexitime to start later.

- **Promotes an atmosphere of trust**



One employee uses flexitime to take an extra long lunch time to cook a meal for an elderly relative.

A dept. in the FEO pilot using flexible working for the first time reported that staff felt less anxious, worked better as a team, and felt empowered and trusted.

FEO pilot participant –  
**“Knowing that my employer is willing to consider helping me to balance work and other commitments is a very positive thing.”**

FEO pilot manager -  
**“As a section leader, I have found the introduction of the scheme to be a very beneficial especially in terms of morale and team building.”**

## However, different groups of staff may well be looking for different types of flexibility –

- Female employees may want reduced hours, job shares, or term-time patterns.<sup>1</sup>
- Male employees look more towards flexibility in the working day such as compressed hours or annualised hours.<sup>1</sup>
- For many female managers and academics support for staying in fulltime work for their career may be more important, so they may look for sympathetic timetabling, home working, workplace nurseries, and holiday play schemes to cover half terms and other holidays.<sup>2</sup>
- Male employees will also need recognition of and help with such things as caring responsibilities.<sup>2</sup>
- Many employees will be looking to balance their lives with other interests, further study or voluntary work.<sup>2</sup>
- All employees look favourably on being able to vary slightly their hours of work daily by using such schemes as flexitime.<sup>2</sup>

(<sup>1</sup> DfEE “Work-life Balance 2000: Baseline study”; <sup>2</sup> FEO research, 2003)

## So how about a “one stop” shop?

Most employees want to strive for balance in their lives and would like the means to do so, but as different groups may want or use different types of flexibility, offering a range of options and benefits within *one* package is very effective.

- **Examples from other sectors include -**

### **BT – Freedom to work**

A scheme that allows staff to pick their own work pattern. BT recognises that better work-life balance reduces absenteeism and costs of business and increases productivity and loyalty, empowering employees.

### **NHS – Improving Working lives**

Has developed many flexible working options aimed at improving retention and recruitment across the board, from part-time flexible hours for senior consultants to self-rostering for nurses. Aims to combat lack of ability to pay high salaries with flexibility.

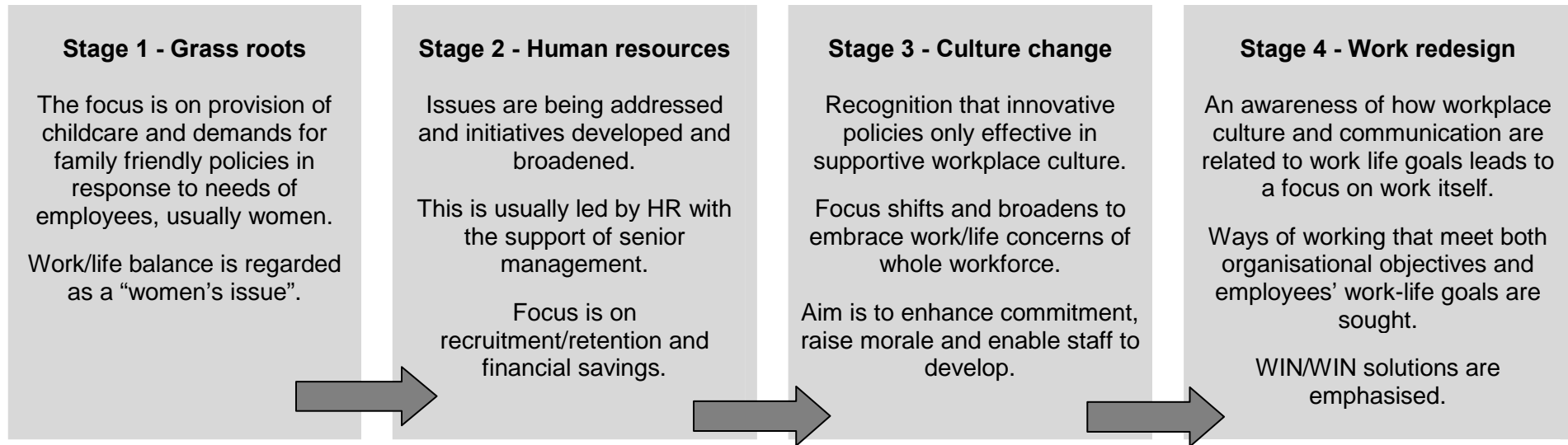
### **Nationwide – Work/life Balance**

States “there’s more to work than life”, and offer a range of flexible working patterns to “suit the business and its people.” Value people highly and has many schemes to support fairness, equality and opportunity for employees.

### **BP – Workchoices**

Website to promote a raft of benefits and other work/life programmes for UK based employees. It includes support tools and training for managers. BP values its employees, and work/life balance is embraced as important for everyone.

**One of the models used to demonstrate this need to open up flexible working to all employees is outlined in the *Work-life Benchmarking Framework* (Work Life Research Centre, 2000) -**



The model is based on experience in the USA, and is apparent within many UK institutions. Moving from stage 2 to stage 3 is the most difficult. Generally businesses recognise the need to move beyond policies to address workplace culture – the norms and values which govern attitudes and behaviours.

**A note about stress in the workplace -**

**Stress has a serious effect on work performance and is one of the main causes of imbalance between work and personal life for many varied reasons. This is relevant at all levels including academic staff and senior management – the stress may have different causes but the resulting effect on partners, families and friendships is the same.**

**Flexible ways of working and personal control over work can provide an important mechanism for coping with stress whether it be work or home based. However there is some indication that high workloads and long hours can make the successful implementation of flexible working, and therefore the balance of work and personal life, difficult.**

## Yes that's all very well BUT . . .

It will cost too much.

Costs of design, implementation and perhaps training for line managers, balanced against gains outlined earlier.

It's too much hassle.

What are the costs to the institution of ignoring employee work/life balance issues?

It's just for mums.

All employees at all levels can benefit from having some control over when and how they work.

They'll all want different things and we won't be able to cope.

Research shows most people are happy with a little flexibility. Most like routine schedules with leeway for emergencies.

Won't we be left with no staff on a Friday?

Work is a priority and teams/departments should plan together to ensure office coverage and fairness in allocation.

How do I know people are working if I can't see them?

Measure by objectives and targets not presenteeism. The majority of employees are hardworking and trustworthy.

If they want work then they'll have to do the hours we tell them.

Allowing employees flexibility in start/finish times often results in longer coverage as some like to come in early and some late. Good teamwork ensures office coverage. Those that are unable to work fulltime have valuable skills HE cannot afford to lose.

People shouldn't let personal issues affect their work.

Personal issues cannot be ignored at work and can adversely affect performance. Allowing employees enough flexibility to sort out these issues themselves benefits the individual and the organisation.

If they can't cope they should leave.

As well as having a negative impact on the image of the organisation, this approach is costly in terms of recruitment and retention.

Why should we be bothered with extra things such as nurseries?

Most HEI's are large employers, and such employee benefits will help attract new employees and help to make coming to work easier for existing employees.

Informal arrangements are fine why mess about with them?

Formal policies are fairer to employees, as they are consistent, objective and transparent. In addition, arrangements such as home working have health and safety implications which need to be dealt with on a formal basis.

Part-time staff are less committed to the organisation.

Refuted by all research; productivity is usually higher among part-time and job share staff; as is morale.

HE is different to other employers.

Is it? All organisations can use flexibility to some degree, and many HEIs are already doing so too.

#### **However it is important to bear in mind that –**

- *Changes to work patterns should always be considered within the context of any business objectives.*
- *Flexible working of course remains a concession, not a right. Indeed, the best way to ensure fairness when considering changes in work patterns is to look at work role and the business objectives, and not the reason of requesting change.*
- *It should be recognised by employees as well as employers that a change to more flexible working is not always possible, but even so the reasons for not accepting a requested change should have a sound business basis.*

**The goal should be to reach the WIN/WIN situation found in stage four of the Benchmarking Framework.**

## How do we introduce flexible working?

There are other documents and information available for line managers who are implementing flexible working at ground level, but the following are helpful at organisational level -

- Lead from the top with changes in organisational culture.
- Aim for organisation recognition of / awareness of the fact that –
  - Employees also have a life outside work
  - Employees work best when work and personal issues are in balance
  - Employees' needs change over time, with job role and with age.
- Aim to have well informed and trained line managers who are flexible in attitude and work by setting objectives.
- Remember that within large scale formal policies the requirements for flexibility can be very individual.
- Aim for equality and fairness with one package of choices that are available to all.
- Ensure the institution's business objectives remain as a benchmark of priority.
- Remove the fear of asking for personal issues to be considered, relax employees and generate trust.
- Remember for ordinary employees small changes, such as being able to choose your own start and finish times, can make a huge change in morale, productivity and stress at all levels.

**“How *inflexible* can my organisation afford to be? <sup>4</sup>**

(<sup>4</sup> Stedwick, J and Ellis, S; “Flexible working practices: techniques and innovations”; IPD, 1998; p296)

## Background Information

More information for employers interested in flexible working can be found on the following websites –

[www.dti.gov.uk/work-lifebalance](http://www.dti.gov.uk/work-lifebalance)

[www.employersforwork-lifebalance.org.uk](http://www.employersforwork-lifebalance.org.uk)

[www.flexibility.co.uk](http://www.flexibility.co.uk)

There are many others, and a more comprehensive list can be found at [www.staffs.ac.uk/feo](http://www.staffs.ac.uk/feo)

### The Flexible Employment Options (FEO) Project –

Set up in 2000 as part of HEFCE's Good Management Practice Programme, the FEO Project has spent the last four years researching flexible working practices suitable for higher education. Different options have been trialed in pilot schemes with over 500 employees at four higher education institutions to obtain the opinions of employees and line managers. Two national conferences have been held to discuss and disseminate the project's findings.

The FEO project is currently offering HEIs a free training module in flexible working aimed at line managers. In addition the project team is undertaking more research into particular flexible working options, the needs of academic staff, and how flexible working can increase the diversity of the workforce.

The main aim has always been to develop employment practice that will meet the challenges created by new strategies for learning and teaching, by improving recruitment, retention and raising employee morale and productivity.

This document is one of several to be found on the project's website at [www.staffs.ac.uk/feo](http://www.staffs.ac.uk/feo)