

Key issues – Highlighted by the FEO pilot scheme

- From the FEO Project report, 2003

These are the main issues concerning flexible working in Higher Education that the FEO project research highlighted. This document differs slightly from the Key Issues section in final project report disseminated in December 2003, but only in layout and clarity of headings. The issues are listed below and then amplified with comments in the main text.

The key issues arising from the FEO project research were –

- 1. The research supports the business case for flexible working.**
- 2. Flexible working is already operating well in some areas.**
- 3. Perceptions of and attitudes to flexible working are very uneven, and consequently access to flexible working is very uneven.**
- 4. The importance of work culture and senior management support is highlighted.**
- 5. More advice is needed on the practical operation of flexible working**
- 6. The attitude of management is vital.**
- 7. High workloads and pressure lead to long hours and a lack of balance.**
- 8. Long hours prevent the implementation or use of flexible working**
- 9. Academics are not always aware they already have access to flexible working practices that other employees do not.**
- 10. Academics identify other major issues that are affecting work/life balance such as workloads and hours of work.**
- 11. Peoples' needs change throughout their working lives.**
- 12. Flexibility is equally valued by those without dependents as those with.**
- 13. Employees value highly the ability to vary their own hours.**

14. Even such schemes as flexitime do not always go far enough to provide adequate flexibility.
15. The compressed hours option offers possibilities for those working in more senior roles, especially where other options do not appear feasible
16. Options to accommodate care of dependents, especially children are very important
17. Part time workers can feel less valued
18. Reducing hours from full-time can pose problems
19. More use could be made of seasonal and annualised hours options
20. More roles may successfully incorporate some home-working
21. Pensions are a major issues with any pre-retirement option
22. Employees were encouraged by the fact that their institution was looking into flexible working with the Flexible Employment Options Project.

1. The research supports the for the business case for flexible working

There was a great deal of evidence from the research that supports the business case for flexible working - that it improves commitment, morale and productivity, and reduces stress with little or no reduction in office efficiency. In addition employees from the pilot groups made a variety of comments supporting the business case:

"I feel a flexible approach to working hours can generate more commitment from staff. I have worked on a flexible system before and it worked well."

"There is a lot of stress in my area and flexible working hours and working patterns would help to relieve this for all concerned."

"During discussion with colleagues we all agree that the scheme has been beneficial."

"Colleagues certainly approve of flexibility and flexible options of working. It is . . . very important to the working lives of many people."

"The members of our team have all opted for various flexible working options. We are all very happy about the way it can be adapted for our own individual needs and the scope it offers."

Respondents commented that staff feel empowered and in control of their own hours and elsewhere that staff have more choice but office productivity has not been compromised.

Productivity was improved and stress reduced. Even non participants have felt the benefit as colleagues are happier and less stressed. One manager commented:

"Other colleagues have found the scheme useful and feel that productivity has improved. There is a general feeling that stress levels on the whole have fallen."

Another line manager felt that employees were happier so "grumble" less about other things, and another commented that,

"Whilst I have not personally applied for any of the options, as a section leader I have found the introduction of the scheme to be very beneficial especially in terms of morale and team building."

Although more than half of respondents to the interim questionnaire believed that morale had not been affected by the scheme, a significant minority (over 35%) believed that it had either improved or greatly improved. Less than 4% believed that morale had been either reduced or greatly reduced.

Improved staff morale is one of the key factors supporting the business case for the introduction of flexible working, and managers were firmly of the opinion that this had improved. Almost 67% of responding managers reported that morale had either improved or greatly improved, whereas only 6.1% felt it had decreased. The respondents to the Interim survey also found that morale for individuals and teams had either improved or greatly improved (35% and 38.7% respectively).

Managers also responded positively on the matter of staff productivity. None of them felt that productivity had been reduced, although more than half felt it had been unaffected. However, more than 27% believed that productivity had either improved or greatly improved. Once again, managers were more positive than staff as a whole, although the Interim survey found that more than 1 in 5 (21%) believed productivity had either improved or greatly improved in individuals, and 17% believed this was the case with team performance.

2. Flexible working is already operating well in some areas

Flexible working was operating well already in some departments, working patchily and more informally in others, and not approved of elsewhere. This was backed up by the projects' audit of HEI's. The fear for some people was that formalising any informal arrangements would result in a loss of flexibility.

3. Perceptions of and attitudes to flexible working are very uneven, and consequently access to flexible working is very uneven.

There is a perception that only certain roles are suitable for certain forms of flexible working, but also that access to flexibility is uneven and this causes resentment between categories of staff. Support staff can resent the freedom academic staff seem to have, particularly with home-working, but equally academic staff comment that other staff have different terms and conditions, for instance settled holiday entitlements and more generous paternity leave. There seems to be a need to look at how terms and conditions of employment differ between categories of staff and between institutions, and how to deliver fair equitable flexibility to all employees. Some respondents pointed out that flexibility seemed to be on offer to certain staff groups, such as management and academic related staff, and not to others such as administrative staff.

4. Formal policies allow equality of access for all staff.

There is much good practice, albeit much informal, from departments and managers who are adapting to need and workload, but this response is reactive rather than proactive, and some staff commented that they do not even ask as they know that the response would be negative. Formal policies give equal access for all staff, gives them "permission" to ask, and removes any taint of favouritism. One respondent in a line management role commented

"We currently enjoy some degree of flexibility in our work informally/unofficially. We adopt the view that if we require staff to come in early, stay late and work some weekends, we must be prepared to allow them some degree of flexibility if they need to rearrange their hours in order to accommodate their domestic arrangements. I would welcome having this as official policy and therefore minimise possible perceived favouritism."

5. Importance of work culture and senior management support

There were comments on the perceived lack of care by the “institution”, and the lack of support for work life balance at senior management level, although some individual departments were informally supportive and flexible. In fewer cases it was the department or line managers who were cited as inflexible. The importance of the work culture of the whole organisation and senior management support is backed up by the finding of the questionnaire filled in by pilot group line managers which revealed that for almost 58% of line managers, the attitude of senior managers was either significant or very significant to the success or failure of the scheme.

“There must be more recognition and acceptance of flexible working condition from the top.”

A number of respondents indicated their contentment with their job and immediate team, along with the flexibility offered within their department, but their dissatisfaction with the overall performance/care shown by the institution. This included a respondent given flexibility to study at postgraduate level by the department, but not feeling valued by the institution. Another respondent pointed to the apparent lack of training for managerial staff and those at Head of Department level.

A respondent in a managerial role commented that the communication and structure of an organisation needs to be looked at alongside flexible working, because a “top down” corporate structure can lead to employment experience becoming more inflexible, whereas flexible work needs conditions of “trust”, “ownership”, and “personal growth”.

6. More advice is needed on the practical operation of flexible working

More advice is needed on the practical operation of some forms of flexible working, such as calculating holidays and part time hours and advice on recording methods. Further understanding of how options such as compressed hours and seasonal hours operate and how they can be used within a team setting was also required. It is important to remember that this style of working is very new to many managers and departments.

There is a need to tackle the perception that staff working flexibly automatically take Mondays or Fridays as time off (particularly in the case of compressed hours or reduced hours) leaving less choice for other staff.

All options should be considered in context, so that workloads can be balanced across a team and/or department. This highlights the importance of management creating the right environment, where staff can talk about their needs, even where a flexible employment pilot is running –

“Greater encouragement by senior staff to join - no one in my office has joined and although I would like to, I feel this would not be allowed.”

7. The attitude of management is vital

Even with legal requirements and policies in place the attitude of local management is vital to the success of a scheme. Managers need to be empowered to listen to staff and examine workloads more flexibility, through the whole work culture, training and use of guidelines. A package of flexible options available to all staff may reduce perceived favouritism among employees. The approach used when handling day to day issues can make an important difference to work life balance, stress, morale, job satisfaction and ultimately productivity.

There were several comments from staff on the need for training and guidelines for managers – to get commitment; fire enthusiasm; clarify the process of application and rejection; gain confidence to try things out and help with the flexible management needed to balance the needs of staff and the institution. Without the backing and encouragement of senior staff, employees feel they are “not allowed” to take up flexible options.

“More in terms of guidelines/training for line managers and supervisors prior to roll-out to ensure more enthusiastic commitment and a genuine opportunity for staff to explore flexibility in their work.”

One respondent made a telling point:

“Some of the statements in section 13 [of the initial questionnaire] seem quite radical for this organisation, but there is no real reason why they should. The important thing for this institution is to make sure staff have clear objectives and the necessary working conditions to achieve them. Whether people work from 9 till 5, Monday to Friday, is less important than what they achieve. However, I think there will be trouble getting middle management to accept this cultural shift. There is an emphasis on control rather than empowerment. I believe that my own line manager had commented that FEO will not work for this office.”

8. High workloads and pressure lead to long hours and a lack of balance

Having to work long hours just to get the job done seems to be a huge issue for all categories of staff. Academic and management staff generally have flexibility to manage their hours to suit their work load and to occasionally work at home, but the high workloads and pressure lead to long hours and a lack of balance, which in turn can lead to stress, ill health and damage to family life. There are issues around the clarification of holiday entitlement for some academic staff, and also the balance between teaching, research and administration; the latter seemingly having grown rapidly over recent years. There is some recognition that long hours are needed at first to establish an academic career, but the main problem seems to be administrative tasks. However there is also comment that any monitoring of academic hours would reduce trust and breed resentment. It remains however that long hours prevent the implementation or use of flexible working and can lead to a lack of balance between work and home life.

9. Long hours prevent the implementation or use of flexible working

Several people working long hours felt unable to operate flexible working and take the time owed, even using compressed hours or flexitime. Some cited stresses of the academic calendar, and one focus group participant said they felt guilty because they were working only contractual hours and some work was not getting done.

However, long hours were often mentioned by others too, both administrative staff and management/academic related staff. Several commented that until the hours are reduced there is no scope for flexibility –

“When overwhelmed with work, flexibility/flexi-time doesn’t really help.”

One mentioned regular hours of 8am – 6pm and weekends, and this prevented the use of flexible options, although in an ideal world flexible working would be “great”.

Another respondent commented that –

“Avoiding 11 hour days would be good to start with.”

However, another commented that flexible working could help with a heavy workload, and suggested using compressed hours and occasional home-working to help deal with workload,

open plan office, constant interruptions and enquires. There was also a suggestion that moving staff between departments would help with workloads and clear backlogs.

10. Academic staff are not always aware they already had access to flexible working practices that other staff did not, but workloads and hours of work are major issues.

Academic staff were not always aware that they already had access to flexible working practices such as varying hours according to need, home-working, managing their own workloads, and being judged on outputs rather than time, and therefore viewed it as irrelevant. They tended to feel that long hours were a major issue for them.

This topic was frequently mentioned by respondents from the academic staff group, with one commenting that, in an ideal world, balanced work commitment, some freedom at the edges, proper breaks, and less long hours is the healthy option. In practice they feel *“stretched and stressed”*.

Academic staff almost invariably work long hours and weekends –

“Research is done in what a normal 9-5 job would consider “our own time”. 9-5 we are teaching, admin and generally organising.”

Some academic staff mention 60-70 hour weeks in term time, and on top of this researching/writing for publication in their own time, even though these aspects form part of an academic contract. Leave entitlement is not taken, and unpaid leave means finding cover for lectures and tutorials. One respondent noted;

“My home life is drastically affected by my workload over a long period now.”

11. Peoples’ needs change throughout their working lives, and flexibility is equally valued by those without dependents as those with.

There needs to be more recognition that peoples’ needs change throughout their working lives, and no job or life responsibilities stays the same. The concern is that flexible working is seen as pandering to those with children. However, those without dependents have commented on seeing the relevance and importance for those who have, and others have expressed relief that these things are available should they need them in the future. Many without dependents commented on how much they valued flexibility to enhance their working and personal lives.

Many respondents felt that their ability to enjoy leisure and/or social opportunities had been positively affected by the pilot scheme. Nearly 31% of respondents felt that this area of their life had either improved or greatly improved, whilst only 1.7% felt it had negatively affected them.

12. Work impacts on the wider community

Employers need to be aware that work impacts on the wider community and the ability of employees to commit to regular voluntary activities, as well as pursuing leisure and social opportunities.

13. Staff value highly the ability to vary their own hours and flexitime does not always go far enough.

Staff value enormously the ability to vary their own hours through the use of such schemes as flexitime, however it is often not seen as flexible enough to meet peoples' needs. Staff could be trusted more to use their hours well and work in self managed teams, reducing the need for core hours. One of the pilot groups worked an extended scheme with no core hours which worked very well, with good team cooperation to cover the hours needed in the office. There are fears that a change in personnel in a department where flexibility is working may cause problems, whether it be a new manager or a new, less flexible, team member.

One respondent commented that flexitime had been available in their old job, and that they had applied for their current job because it offered flexitime and they believed that generally flexible options were important. Another commented:

“I have worked in flexi-hour environments in the past. I feel they benefit and motivate staff. Different people work better in the mornings or evenings and they should be given the opportunity to achieve their best.”

Another respondent commented that they were:

“Very happy with flexitime opportunities.”

Conversely a respondent from an area where flexitime is unknown expressed uncertainty:

"The topics of hours and changing them to suit yourself seems good but rather idealistic"

They went on to suggest that monitoring needs to be of a high standard and would take time and money. As has been demonstrated in the pilot study, it is a big step into the unknown for some managers and departments.

There were many comments on the usefulness of flexitime to cope with caring responsibilities –

"Flexibility is vital for those with small children and other dependents, and should be available for all staff sections."

However there were also many others highlighting the use of flexitime to solve other issues. One respondent stated that they were in favour of "flexi hours", starting about half an hour earlier and finishing half an hour earlier. They comment that flexibility improves motivation and raises morale, and should also reduce sickness absence. It also enables travelling outside of the rush hour so that time and energy are saved and stress levels reduced.

This particular respondent would also like to work longer hours in winter and shorter in the summer. Others used flexitime in particular to cope with the journey to and from work, both by private car and by public transport. An early start to avoid traffic and get parking at the institution was mentioned by several respondents but this issue was identified at the later focus groups for participants as one of the barriers to using flexitime fully for those people arriving later than the normal start time. One respondent commented:

"I think the flexible scheme is working well. Due to car parking problems, I can see myself having to revert back to my old hours. This will definitely affect my morale and increase levels of stress. It will also mean a financial loss as I will have to start paying a childminder again."

One respondent chose not to make use of the flexitime system due to a car share arrangement and the need therefore to stick to particular hours, and another welcomed flexibility to cope with the weather and a journey to work crossing rivers liable to flooding.

Some respondents commented on the actual operation of the system, one stating that it is essential that flexitime is co-ordinated to maintain service level and prevent colleagues taking on a disproportionate amount of work. One commented –

“If flexitime was introduced, not sure whether I would qualify as I am part time. If I had the choice, I would welcome flexible working hours.”

Another respondent commented –

“As a part timer working in the flex-time system, I already have some access to flexible working. I would welcome the opportunity to take up more flexible working, should the need arise in the future.”

14. Even such schemes as flexitime do not always go far enough to provide adequate flexibility.

There were some comments on core hours – that they were not flexible enough; that core hours of 2-4 do not sit well with school hours, or accommodate other more occasional appointments; that a relaxation of the core hours would make the system much more useful. There were more comments to this effect included in the Interim questionnaire filled in by pilot scheme participants. One of the projects’ pilot groups successfully trialled a flexitime scheme with no core hours. Core hours were often viewed as too limiting especially the 4pm limit, as employees find it frustrating to be able to come in early but not go early. However, one respondent wanted the flexitime scheme extended to 7.30pm to cover work such as organising graduation ceremonies.

There were difficulties with finding an adequate monitoring/recording system which could cope with a large department and which did not reduce trust, but instead gave employees a sense of being in charge of their own workloads and times; difficulties in finding systems that could cope with the part time and weekend hours, be easy to use, be transparent, and easy for managers to monitor.

One respondent commented that as flexitime was already in place and the office open 8am-6.30pm, they felt the other options offered limited benefit.

Managers were requested to report on their perception of the success of particular options offered within the scheme and in line with other national surveys, the option perceived as most successful was flexitime. Nearly half of the managers regarded flexitime as very successful and a further

15.2% reported it was successful, with less than 10% neutral, and no responses indicating unsuccessful.

15. The compressed hours option offers possibilities for those working in more senior roles, especially where other options do not appear feasible

Compressed hours worked well for some people, but were difficult to operate in other circumstances due to operational details or changes to job role. Many found flexitime suited their needs better. Compressed hours was the only option that was perceived by managers to be unsuccessful and only one felt that this was the case. However, compressed hours offers good possibilities for those working in more senior roles, especially where other options do not appear feasible, allowing long days, but also some time off. One manager commented:

"The compressed hours option fits well with my personal needs, my work and also my colleagues work and personal needs."

16. Options to accommodate care of dependents, especially children are very important

The family friendly policies for those caring for children are seen as very important, and there were many comments centred around the problem of getting children to school and coping with school holidays. However single parents may have different issues. There is also evidence that there is local flexibility and help for those who are caring for ill or disabled dependents, but less flexibility on work patterns for those employees with permanent illness or disability, or for those with elderly dependents. However it is important to be seen to be fair and to ensure that those without dependents are not always left to cover unsocial hours or Friday afternoons.

The pilot scheme had a positive influence on respondents' ability to accommodate their caring responsibilities. More than a quarter (25.5%) felt that this had either improved or greatly improved, whereas only 2 respondents (0.9%) felt that the pilot scheme had reduced their ability to combine work with caring.

There was one request for institutions to provide more childcare facilities. This was also mentioned by an academic respondent who was wary of reducing hours, but had difficulty with after-school care. Respondents would also have liked greater flexibility around returning to work after maternity leave.

There were several comments concerning adjustment of hours to cope with caring for children. The comments below highlight that flexibility in a job is often the priority, rather than career opportunities, and suggest that organisations may not be providing promotion opportunities for talented members of staff because flexibility is not on offer for higher level roles –

“While more money/recognition etc. would be very nice, the most important thing to me is the opportunity to structure my hours around my child, who starts school in September.”

“Institution gives flexibility for childcare arrangements, but not the stimulus or any career path.”

Another person wanted flexible working so that they could alter their own work patterns to fit round a child starting school and a partner’s shift pattern. Another highlighted the “juggling” that many parents do to combine caring and work –

“As the mother of two small sons, I would welcome the opportunity to work more flexibly to fit in around school hours/ holidays, without reducing my overall working hours. At present juggling between work and childcare commitments is extremely stressful and can occasionally affect my performance at work.”

There were several comments on combining career and childcare, particularly from academic staff:

“The post I am in (Academic) has permitted flexible working hours so that I could drop off and collect children when needed and put the extra time in at home - this was very useful indeed.”

“I would like the opportunity to reduce my hours for 18 months or so when they (two children, currently primary) move to senior school. The university seems to encourage mothers back to work, but not be particularly flexible to any future changes where childcare demands become a problem.”

There were particular problems for single parents, including job security –

“I am glad that (the institution) is looking into this issue, as the balancing of work and home is always difficult when you are a parent! Especially a single parent.”

“Flexible working is cloud cuckoo land for lone parents with dependent children and child care costs. If I was part of a standard nuclear family with another member of

the family working full time I could afford some of these options. As I am not, realistically they will never be open to me. So in some aspects they are window dressing rather than true provision of equal opportunities."

A similar employee was more positive -

"On the whole I find the degree of flexibility in my job as it is quite satisfactory. I am able to do some tasks at home if this fits in with my timetable at the University. Although I do a lot of work during vacations, there is flexibility over when and where this is done. At present I do not require additional flexibility, although circumstance can change. I do not want to reduce my hours, or to work extra long hours in order to get days off at other times. The main issue for me is job security."

Children were not, of course, the sole source of caring responsibility –

"Questionnaire picked out varying hours to deal with childcare but not disability/health problems."

The respondent goes on to comment that some disorders / disabilities are better/worse at certain times of the day and flexible working can be used to make use of the best times. Also that flexibility can be used to cope with treatment and appointments.

"I would be interested in working some evenings/occasional weekends to increase my 0.8 contract at times. I have regular caring commitments on Mon and Thurs pm and one in two Sundays, however I would be free some evenings and weekends to be able to increase my hours to 0.9 and this would obviously help with raising my salary."

Only one respondent specifically mentioned an elderly relative who will need care in the future, but demographic predictions suggest that this will be an issue of increasing concern. There were also some comments about the effects on those employees who do not have children -

"Flexibility for some on childcare means those who do not have children end up doing all the unsocial hours."

17. Part time workers can feel less valued

As the literature suggests part time workers can feel less valued, with no career, and can be resented as those who “go early”. More work needs to be done to convince managers and others that it is possible to work part time at all levels and with a career progression, and that commitment and productivity is often higher. As domestic and personal issues are usually dealt with outside working hours there is less interruption at work. Part time work is greatly valued by those juggling family needs, and was also regarded as a successful way of working by managers, although the numbers selecting this option under this scheme were relatively small.

More than 21% of pilot scheme managers considered that this option had been very successful, and a further 6.1% considered it had been successful. However, 63.6% of respondents either failed to answer this question or reported that it was not applicable.

18. Reducing hours from full-time can pose problems

A member of staff wanting to reduce their hours from full time can pose particular problems, but such a request can be used to assess the work load and roles of the whole team. Such a request may be only a small reduction, perhaps a drop to 0.8 FTE or just a reduction during school holidays.

Although academic staff fear damaging their careers by reducing their hours, many have successfully done so to care for children. Others use sympathetic timetabling and the flexibility inherent in the role. However, a reduced post may still carry a high workload of teaching and administration but for less pay. Reduced hours can increase the pressure on the rest of the team, but so can other stress factors and ill health. It remains however that many staff have found that reducing their hours, either temporarily or permanently, has been very helpful in balancing work and home responsibilities.

19. More use could be made of seasonal and annualised hours options

Some roles may be suitable for seasonal or annualised hours, although not necessarily following the traditional term-time pattern. There can be savings on the use of temporary staff at busy times and staff are able to recover time owed during quieter periods. Workflow very much varies from department to department and may be affected by the increasing all-year pattern of conferences, modules, short courses and courses starting at times other than the autumn. This option has been

used successfully during the pilot scheme, with a staffing cost saving as a side benefit. Several respondents commented on how it could be used effectively:

“Flexible working would make a big difference to those of us who because of the nature of the job have very hectic periods of the year and who need a break to recoup, rather than eating into precious holiday time.”

“Good idea to work more hours at certain times and work less at other times of the year.”

“Have staff working different hours during vacation – with agreement from other staff.”

20. More roles may successfully incorporate some home-working

Home-working has traditionally been confined to academic and management staff but in fact many other roles may successfully incorporate some home-working. Staff usually request home-working firstly to ease travel, secondly to enable them to complete work in a quieter environment, and in a few cases to combine this with fixed nursery/ school timings or childcare.

All comments referred to occasional home-working, no more than a day a week. Although this option can be used to combine work with care of dependents, this would not be feasible with babies, young children or anyone needing constant attention and care. More credence could be given to staff being aware of their own work loads and knowing what will help them personally to achieve their goals and what will not. Thought would need to be given to other issues such as IT support, as one respondent noted -

“If we are to work from home effectively, staff need to be provided with appropriate IT equipment and support.”

21. Pensions are a major issues with any pre-retirement option

The option to reduce hours approaching retirement rather than having an abrupt end has some popularity, and understandably more comments were received from those approaching the end of their careers. However the biggest issue was the effect on pensions. These issues are likely to be addressed at a national level as the population ages and people live for longer.

Any interest in reducing hours leading up to retirement also cited preservation of pension rights, particularly concerns about final salary. One respondent talked of resigning at 60 and then looking for new part time work.

Flexible working could form part of a whole retirement planning package –

“Most of this doesn’t affect me - I have fairly flexible hours. Planning for retirement would be something that I would like to see offered to staff around my age”.

22. There was positive support for the Flexible Employment Options Project itself

There was much positive support for the project itself, and people were encouraged by the fact the issue of flexible working was being investigated. Many commented on how they had benefited from taking part in the FEO project. Comments from participants included:

“Members of my team have been happy with the scheme. Putting in extra hours is no problem, but taking time off is often difficult because of pressure of work - but we manage.”

“The feedback has been very positive; it has given first line managers more control over their sections activities.”

“I’ve only had positive feedback from staff. They have always been an excellent team, but they have responded very positively to the appreciation of their circumstances and the trust that has been placed on them to manage workloads and still provide a good quality service.”

The responses contained many supportive comments about how beneficial the scheme is, how pleased staff are that it is available and how they hope it will continue, including –

“Please continue this scheme. Some people may only be able to work if such schemes are in existence.”