Teaching and Learning through the pandemic; the effects of remote work on women academics

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Abstract

During the pandemic, the Higher Education had to rapidly adapt to new ways of working with both staff and students having to swiftly work in a remote environment for a prolonged period. This research is focusing on how women in academia within the Higher Education environment in the UK have adapted to virtual working, online teaching and learning and in what way they were affected by the pandemic in their various professional and home life. The research approach is to investigate women in academia perspectives during the transitional period from face-to-face onto e-learning and the mechanisms that they have used, in order to endure the challenges of work and everyday life.

Keywords: Remote work, pandemic, women academics, Higher Education, support, teaching

1.0 Introduction

Higher Education institutions were compelled to rapidly move all their operations to a virtual environment, at the start of the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown. This has had an effect on technological developments, as institutions were forced to abruptly utilise platforms in a way, never used before, for specific functions such as teaching and learning, examinations, research activities, conferences, training activities, virtual and hybrid meetings. This has proven to be a new way of working which can be applied within a crisis situation in future. The transition to online teaching and learning due to the pandemic has led to a wider conversation on flexible education amongst the higher education institutions. This is creating opportunities for innovation and setting new boundaries for knowledge exchange (teaching and learning) and remote working.

It is inevitable that this virtual working era could generate the circumstances for new legislation regarding the processes and technology used for online learning (Basilai...
& Kvavadze, 2020) and for remote working in general. The concept of a widespread online learning during a crisis brings along challenges in the quality of teaching and learning, student engagement and the specific needs of the students.

2.0 Effects on academics and students

The covid restrictions have affected how teaching and learning is conducted but it is a cause of reflection (Chertoff et al., 2020), in order to adapt and ultimately adopt innovative teaching methods. The rapid arrangements that were put in place for training on academic delivery of hybrid teaching and professional services staff supporting students remotely has become the norm in recent years. Academics and students had to quickly adapt with the majority of the practical elements of their studies to be restricted or cancelled, such as travelling, fieldwork, on some occasions, lab work and practical sessions (ibid, 2020). In the meantime, other practical subjects such as health and medical studies, where face-to-face interaction is necessary, have had to be adapted to virtual teaching while attempting to keep students engaged remotely.

Both staff and students would need to have some experience of using online platforms, in order to be able to use them positively for their learning (Aguilera-Hermida, 2020). The aspect of individual behaviour towards the technology and online teaching and learning is one that can be varied in people, and this could affect all aspects of engagement, resilience and motivation (Kemp et al., 2019). Aguilera-Hermida’s research has identified that students prefer the face-to-face over online learning due to a variety of reasons in relation to lack of resources and support in an online environment. This is not an unexpected result due to the circumstances that the shift to online learning occurred and how prepared higher education institutions were with the infrastructure in place (or not). There is scope and room for improvement, as both parties, students and academics, had to make the transition simultaneously, without any prior preparedness and user testing practices. This experience has equipped them with knowledge on usage of technological tools and platforms to use in future (Murphy, 2020).
The effects on women academics, in particular, were evident, as they have had to find ways to cope during the lockdowns, in the midst of challenging situations they were potentially facing while working from home (Minello, 2020; Lutter & Schröder, 2020; Oleschuk, 2020). It is apparent that women academics have suffered increased pressure during this period and the situation deteriorated when caring responsibilities, increased housework and high levels of emotional stress were affecting them. Even before the pandemic, the increased use of technology in academic work, had contributed to blurring the boundaries between work and home, especially affecting academics with young children (Currie & Eveline, 2011) but the lockdown during the pandemic, intensified all this and increased academics’ work – home conflict (Adisa et al. 2022).

The shift to online teaching and learning has impacted students’ anxiety levels, depending on their demographics (Jehi et al, 2022), similarly to academics, especially women (Augustus, 2021). The elements of home infrastructure, social and academic life, wellbeing, and institutional support (Aristovnik et al, 2020) were crucial in the process of rapid change, notably during the first lockdown. For a number of academics, the lockdown has created efficiencies in the way they had to work from home and used their research time, in spite of the obstacles they may have faced due to the use of ne technology and new ways of work (Acze, et al, 2021). Support from universities in the UK was varied and in some cases, there were some “inter-sectional impacts of the pandemic on minority staff, which consequently prevent the achievement of equity (Blell et al, 2023).

### 3.0 Technological effects

Prior to the Covid pandemic, counter arguments of technological advances would focus on how the use of technology cannot replace face-to-face communications, the extreme reliance of data can be misused and that all employees must have access to such systems, in order for them to work effectively (Varma & Budhwar, 2011). The rapid swift to online and remote working has used, not only pre-existing technological advances but employers had to created new ones in order to identify ways of staff working together from a distance and in an effective way, in order to ensure that they
are beneficial and accurate to serve their purpose. Remote working for women academics has had a negative effect, according to Marchiori et al.’s (2019) research, due to the widespread and constant exposure to technology, thus creating higher levels of techno-complexity and techno-uncertainty than men.

Stoller (2021) has researched how the pandemic can provide opportunities and conducted a SWOT analysis for higher education institutions. His research has identified opportunities such as strategies to improve virtual teaching and learning, interface between different study levels, leadership opportunities within the crisis, as well as enforcing resilience and compassion. The focus on virtual participation in meetings and the usage of software to allow staff to attend, made it easier in some respects to promote inclusion (Nguyen et al, 2020). Stoller (2021) also referred to certain disadvantages in relation to home working, such as the individual conditions at home (Aguilera-Hermida, 2020) and the loss of face-to-face interaction which may affect training, recruitment, student/academic interaction, equipment issues (ibid, 2020) and virtual meeting “fatigue”.

One of the consequences of virtual education is that it minimises interaction and networking (Nguyen et al, 2020), with financial implications for universities in a variety of levels, from housing to tuition fees and recruitment of students. Stoller concludes his research by making suggestions on using best practises to develop virtual opportunities for expansion and development, such as suggestions for academic on teaching and assessment, for students on virtual interviews, for professional services staff to acquire extended knowledge on most virtual platforms, to review space and working patterns and communication and support for students and staff.

The transition to online learning has brought significant changes to academics, not only in relation to the online environment but in relation to the flexibility and willingness to adapt and change their teaching practises (Quezada et al, 2020). Academics and educators are required, even prior to the pandemic, to keep themselves informed of recent developments and technological advances in teaching and learning, as the demands from the students increase every year. The usage of technology in teaching and learning has become a necessity recently, so academics who were using
traditional methods of teaching could be potentially battling to adapt to virtual learning due to its nature and complexity of the environment. The speed in which the changes had to be made and the type of resources available gave little time for academics to familiarise themselves with new technologies.

4.0 Methodology

This research was conducted one year after the latest lockdown within HE institutions in the UK. Through an inductive approach, we identified a gap on how women academics experienced the period of the pandemic with a focus on teaching and learning. Academics have adapted their work processes, teaching methods and home working environment from the early stages of the first lockdown and up to recently, in order to work successfully and fulfil their duties towards the institution and realise their responsibilities towards students and colleagues in the midst of the academic year. We have used semi-structured interviews to collect data, so this research is focusing on one qualitative methods; 31 women academics from a variety of disciplines were interviewed; ethical approval was confirmed full information shared with the participants. The sampling method was initially convenience in order to identify academics from institutions familiar to the authors, but we also used the snowballing technique for access to academics from further institutions. The method used for this research is qualitative analytic, and specifically using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to identify the themes and be able to draw conclusions based on the narrative.
5.0 Preliminary Findings

5.1 Collegiality
The notion of academic colleagues working together and supporting each other is one that has been evident throughout the interview process. We have looked to explore the concept of support, whether this is support from the Universities, the Schools or departments and support from individual colleagues. The perception of collegiality was evident throughout the interview process, as participants reported productive cooperation between colleagues, not only the ones who may share similar responsibilities in a group, but also colleagues working together in different areas.

5.2 University Support
A number of academics have reported that what was extremely concerning for them was the support they felt they had to provide to students during this time, which meant on several occasions, emotional support to students out of “office” working hours. This has had an effect on the emotional wellbeing of the academics themselves, as they discovered they almost had to resume the role of counsellors to be able to assist and support students who were struggling psychologically during the lockdowns. They have reported that no specific training was provided for them from their own...
institutions to be able to perform such a role and the ones who got drawn into this type of support, were negatively affected from the experience.

5.3 Work/life balance
The home environment for single academics was quickly adapted to suit the working day, as opposed to academics with caring responsibilities (Collins et al, 2020), but the majority of the interviewees have admitted that the boundaries between work and home life were confused, especially in the first lockdown. In addition, the support academics were required to provide to students resulted in blurring the boundaries of work and home life, especially when students needed additional support to be able to cope with the pressures of the remote learning environment. In addition, the participants of the research had a notion of productivity that can be measured in terms of teaching, research, administrative duties and future effects of their productivity and career progression (Myers et al, 2020). They believe that their productivity has suffered (Gultom, 2021) due to the additional responsibilities of the teaching material they had to organise for students and the support they had to provide, which effectively resulted in long working hours from home (Amano-Patino et al, 2020).

6.0 Conclusion
The effects of the pandemic can be visible amongst students and academics, especially during the lockdown period and home-working era. The issue of support is a crucial one in relation to isolation and home working, for all higher education employees, as the duration of the pandemic may have affected people in different ways (Salah & Al-Doghmi, 2023). In cases where academics were digitally advanced, this can be seen as the opportunity to be innovative and develop teaching and learning environments to improve remote student experience.

Through our research, we have identified that the issue of the response towards the pandemic as a crisis has been translated differently by the participants, according to their individual circumstances. A variety of participant responses have shown that universities have shown their support by offering information and practical solutions, such as extra days of annual leave. Responses at times of crisis, and preparedness can
take different forms and shapes. However, based on our preliminary findings, it seems a challenge to prepare for the unknown, especially when people or a group of individual’s circumstances are so different that it cannot fit a specific model.

References


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