Findings from the WiRN working at home pulse survey

Prepared by: Ioana Ramia and the WiRN Executive, Sept 2020

Survey and sample

UNSW Women in Research Network members were invited to complete a short survey about their experience working from home since 1 March 2020, the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. The survey was open between 21 May and 29 June, 2020. A total of 140 members filled in the survey, with 112-131 valid answers across the entire questionnaire. All but one respondent identify as female, the majority are academic staff (86%), 7% professional staff and 8% HDR students. Just over half of respondents are permanent staff (52%), 42% on contract and 6% casual. Among academic staff, 11% are at level A, 34% level B, 25% level C, 19% level D and 11% level E. Professional staff were at levels 7 to 10, with half of respondents at level 8.

Working from home – time allocation, challenges, and successes

Time allocation

Almost one in two respondents (45%) reported a reduction in their research time[1] and only 16% reported their research time increased. As expected, time spent in research increased for respondents whose research is COVID-related. On the other hand, one in three respondents (36%) reported an increase in teaching time. Time necessary for administrative tasks also increased for 43% of respondents since March 2020. As such seven in ten respondents (72%) indicated it has gotten more difficult to work.

> Many respondents spent more time in teaching and administrative work and less time in research between March and June 2020 compared to the same period last year.
>
> Emotional wellbeing was ranked at four or less (on a zero to ten scale) by 60% of respondents.

Under new working from home arrangements, almost one in four said some aspects became easier while other more difficult. Interestingly, most often the elements that made it more difficult to work at home related to the individual's ability to disconnect, to look after personal time (58%), or to separate personal and work life (57%). Such difficulties at personal level are also reflected in the very low levels of emotional wellbeing among respondents. On a zero to ten scale, six in ten, or 60% of respondents, ranked their emotional wellbeing at four or less. These findings are alarming, indicating that the pandemic has taken a toll on their emotional wellbeing.

Challenges

Among work-related difficulties respondents ranked the lack of a working space (44%), or increased meetings/administration (44%), but also restricted access to funding (36%), reduced access to campus facilities (36%) and more time spent teaching (33%). In some instances, the lack of a quiet environment, the increased family and caring responsibilities also contributed to difficulties to work since March 2020.

In addition, many challenges working from home in March – June 2020 related to the socio-economic situation and pandemic in NSW, Australia, and the world. Respondents reported higher levels of stress and anxiety resulting in reduced motivation or capacity to concentrate on work, loss of loved ones to COVID-19, partner losing their job, anxiety about job-related uncertainties and uncertainties in general. A small number of respondents expressed their preference to return to office for most of their working days, for example due a small living space or because they

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[1] Almost one in five (19%) reported that their research time reduced significantly and 27% that the research time reduced compared to the same period last year.

dislike working on their own. Other difficulties encountered working fully remotely are inability to see people in person and have conversations that are difficult online, harder to collaborate with industry partners, or reduced opportunities to meet frequently face-to-face for team-based commissioned research.

Successes

Some things did get easier working from home: no or reduced commute time (59%); flexible work hours (41%); quality time with children and family (23%); ability to juggle work and home responsibilities (21%); access to a good workspace at home (16%;) less meetings/admin 9%; easier to undertake caring responsibilities for others 9%; less time spent teaching 2%. As such, almost half of respondents indicated they were satisfied with the new work arrangements (42% of respondents ranked their satisfaction with the changed work arrangements between 6 and 10 and a further 18% at 5).

Aspects of working from home respondents would like to maintain into the future: flexible work, option to either work from home entirely or 1-4 days per week; not having to commute; continuing to use technology; use teaching resources in the future; being in the office should not be a proof that one is "really" working; dress casually; more virtual meetings; teaching online. Others indicated that if working from home is not doubled up by needing to assist their children's online learning, they much prefer to work from home, for example to be able to look after their health, work around school hours, be more efficient with control over workflow and work hours and most often flagged – flexibility – *"We don't need to be in the office to prove that we are "really" working."*

Commuting seems to have been a burden for many, digging into time they could use to improve their wellbeing: *"I would like to work from home at least 3 days per week as I have a long commute. I have replaced that time with sporting and recreational activities which means I am less stressed and have a better quality of life. Prior to COVID19 I was constantly tired and stressed."*

> Most respondents would like to see the maintained trust in working flexibly or from home arrangements and a change in perception that "face to face" is the first/best option for all meetings. It is important also to have the option to return to campus for those who cannot work from home.

> More than half of respondents feel as engaged (41%) or more engaged (11%) with their work.
>
> On the other hand, one in three feel they are losing contact with their networks.

Some also perceived working from home safer: *"Less exposure to bullying behaviour and ageist comments" "As transgender, I am not terrified at using the toilet at home"*. For some, with or without work – family conflicts, working from home made *"all spheres of life more sustainable"*.

Given that respondents were both supportive of continued working from home and returning to work, it is hence important to remain flexible, to understand needs across staff and allow, where possible, to work flexibly to accommodate other daily activities such as picking up children from school, an exercise routine or engaging in caring responsibilities. While acknowledging that some physical presence might be necessary, overall, respondents agreed that staff should have the option to work remotely and flexibly. On the other hand, and equally important, this should not be imposed on everyone, as some still prefer to work from campus.

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What opportunities are there as we emerge from the COVID-19 environment?

Many respondents saw opportunities to change the way we work, new arrangements across faculties, across research and teaching. These include:

- Greater acceptance of flexible and remote working arrangements and increased trust in staff.
- Staff that is directly engaged with COVID-19 research felt "a greater sense of job purpose, security (increased funding)".
- Optimism about research opportunities but respondents were worried they could not focus on them due to increased teaching load and administration.
- Opportunity for the library to expand its digital collections, especially of new research monographs.
- Online workshops, seminars, conferences, that make it easier to engage without the extra time spent travelling.

> *"Recognise importance of both working from home flexible arrangements *and* in person contact with colleagues. Recognition of the importance of campus attendance and face-to-face meetings for international HDR students. Recognise how conscientious and hard-working most people are in all circumstances"*
>
> *"Retain flexibility and choice for employees if they want/need it - stop imposing unnecessary and artificial constraints on where people spend their time"*

There were many negative feelings related to the future and many respondents could not see opportunities emerging post-COVID.

> *"My research is almost non-existent at the moment and far from considering opportunities at the university, I am unsure of whether my place there will continue much into the future. That makes it harder again to give all the extra time and effort that I *have* given, to steer my teaching responsibilities through the crisis successfully."*

Others shared this view, quoting the lack of communication from school or faculty management, teaching program being closed, job loss being already in sight [note this survey was conducted prior to VR and workplace change being announced]. Some felt helpless and hopeless about the future of universities, or negative about the future of universities and the future in general. There was anxiety among respondents about future and own job, team and resources given uncertainties about funding and future university management decisions.

> *"This is a very worrying time. I expect that I will have to leave academia as my contract ends in a few months and there are hiring freezes for all academic positions now, and no options to extend my contract by UNSW even for a few months."*

Some staff felt stretched and not able to perform as normal while others seem to have been more productive. There was a sense of a gender bias in terms of being able to perform during Covid-19.

> *"There needs to be greater acknowledgement of the gender bias for women in academia during Covid-19 in relation to women taking on more caring/family responsibilities (i.e. home schooling) while still being expected to maintain (or even increase!) research outputs."*