Work-life balance in academia

Myth or reality?

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Introduction

A survey of academic and research staff in one Irish university was conducted in 2015, gathering information on: the motivations of staff in applying for university posts; their working hours, experience of flexible working and work-life balance: how they defined it and their levels of satisfaction with it. Responses were sought on family-related (maternity, paternity and parenting) leave and any issues associated with availing of it, in particular the potential impact on careers (Drew and Marshall 2017). The questionnaire design was based on surveys conducted by the Athena Survey of Science, Engineering and Technology (ASSET) across UK universities and those conducted in the University of Michigan, US.

The survey questionnaire was designed and administered online using Survey Monkey as the data collection tool and the results were downloaded into EXCEL, SPSS and WORD files for analysis. The questions sought both closed (quantitative) and open-ended (qualitative) responses. The quantitative data were analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). This was complemented by content analysis of the open-ended responses. Recipients (1,017 academic staff and 804 research staff) of the online survey were asked to complete all questions. Recipients were informed that each question was optional and they could withdraw from the survey at any time. Despite assurances that all information collected through the online survey would remain completely anonymous and not be traceable to any respondent, a substantial number of potential respondents exited from the survey when asked to state their school/faculty within the university. In total there were 223 respondents who completed the survey, 161 women and 62 men. Hence the response rate was 12.3 per cent which compares favourably with that of 8 per cent for the 2010 ASSET survey conducted among all STEM departments in UK universities.

In order to validate and triangulate the survey results, three faculty-level focus groups were conducted in 2018 within Trinity College Dublin (TCD). An invitation was sent to faculty staff, of all genders, in the Health Sciences (HS), Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences (AHSS) and Engineering, Mathematics and Science (EMS) faculties asking them to attend a faculty-level focus group meeting.

The invitation set out the themes that would be explored. Attendees were self-selecting and predominantly drawn from female staff. Each focus group ran for between one and two hours and the discussion was taped and transcribed, with the permission of focus group members.

Work-life balance in Trinity College Dublin

The university operates formal and informal systems of flexible working to support work-life balance for employees. Academic staff do not have prescribed contractual weekly working hours and the academic contract of employment addresses work location and working hours obligations as are reasonably necessary for the proper performance of duties and responsibilities (TCD 2020). A flexitime scheme exists for administrative and support staff providing for flexible attendance patterns outside of core hours. For all staff, the university also operates arrangements for a shorter working year and reduced working hours. A dedicated webpage for staff wellbeing was also created on the university website for flexible working and work-life balance, supporting the argument that stronger promotion of the available schemes would increase their uptake. A set of actions to improve work-life balance was designed and included in the university's successful application for renewal of its institutional Athena SWAN Bronze Award in 2018.

The definition of work-life balance used by Trinity College Dublin (TCD 2020) is 'work life balance is about seeking to maintain a balance between an individual's personal and professional life' and the following policies are referred to as assisting its achievement: maternity leave, parental leave, paternity leave and teleworking. In Ireland, maternity leave of 42 weeks (26 weeks paid and 16 weeks unpaid) is available. Paternity leave of two weeks can be taken consecutively by fathers at any time within the first 26 weeks following the birth or adoption of a child. Employers (including TCD) can top up the basic state payment of maternity and paternity benefit (Daly and Rush 2019). Unpaid parental leave of 18 weeks duration, per parent, per child, is non-transferable between parents. It may be taken up to the child's eighth birthday, in separate blocks of a minimum of six continuous weeks or on other terms, subject to their employer's agreement (Daly and Rush 2019).

Literature review

The literature on work-life balance evolved from a narrower body of research that arose in response to rising levels of female labour force participation and demands by employers for greater flexibility in more highly employee-protected EU labour markets. Since 2000 the case for work-life balance has moved the emphasis from women-led and 'family friendly' demands for shorter (part-time) working hours to encompass a range of home/teleworking, statutory entitlement for leave to reconcile work-family and other caring responsibilities, alongside demand for child-care provision and supports (Drew *et al* 2002). An implicit rationale for work-life

balance has been the (as yet unrealised) expectation of ‘sharing the caring’ and the elimination of gender-determined roles in paid and unpaid work.

Noting the new managerialism that had permeated UK university cultures, Deem (2003) identified power relations, in terms of unequal household divisions of labour and gendered expectations of and about managers and management, as potential impediments to academic careers. While few men thought their careers had been affected by their own gender:

women were seen as disadvantaged by gender and particularly by motherhood, while fatherhood was regarded as not harming academic careers. Gender in this sense still equates to women.

(Deem 2003, 255)

Probert (2005) reiterated this finding in explaining women’s under-representation at senior management levels arising from gendered choices in parenting and career roles. Kinman’s (2014) work demonstrates how neoliberalism is undermining academic autonomy and working conditions in academia, referring to time-based conflict (reducing time available for non-work activities) and strain-based conflict (where the job role can have adverse consequences for individuals). This conflict is accentuated and even more difficult to counter for academic and research staff who have caring responsibilities, which are traditionally associated with women.

Lynch (2010) also pointed to the new managerial governance of universities and the pressures of marketisation as reinforcing an academic environment of ‘carelessness’ (having no caring responsibilities), reinforcing Acker’s (1990) concept of the ideal academic as a masculine norm, against which female staff often feel that they fall short. Herschberg *et al* (2018) elaborated on this norm of global hegemonic masculinity as a person who is not only highly productive, career-oriented and mobile but also free from primary hands-on care responsibilities. Ivancheva *et al* juxtaposed the celibate travelling scholars of medieval scholastic traditions against the current:

neoliberal demands for internationalisation and self-marketisation [that] require a new kind of monk, a truly elastic self with no boundaries in time, space, energy or emotion (Ivancheva 2019, 451).

Based on a study involving interviews with senior academic appointees in Irish universities, Gummell *et al* concluded that even having:

equal opportunities policies, work-life balance programmes and campaigns to encourage women to seek promotion will have little substantive impact on women’s chances of leading universities and higher education colleges when the jobs are increasingly defined as precluding those who have care-full lives outside of work.

(Gummell 2009, 204)

Reinforcing this, Morley (2013) argued that the prevailing culture in academia has been of a ‘care-free zone’ (free of responsibilities for children and other family

members) in which women encounter prejudice in an environment that compares them against the male norm and perceives female appointments as perceived risks. Morley labels universities as ‘greedy organisations’ in which leaders (mainly men) require ‘an elastic self’ to enable them to pursue increasingly corporate goals, leading to stress, lack of work-life balance and non-sustainability. Research by Huppertz *et al* highlighted the considerable tensions that academic mothers encounter in a culture of new managerialism in relation to taking maternity leave and accessing flexible work arrangements. They observed that formal or informal flexibility, facilitating self-management of workload, was a ‘double-edged’ arrangement in which the boundary between work and leisure was blurred and the ‘quest for academic self-improvement [becomes] a vocation rather than mere employment’ (Huppertz *et al* 2019, 784).

Survey results

Work-life balance, flexible working and family-related leave

The survey results showed that on average, 40 per cent of female and 46 per cent of male respondents work in excess of 50 hours per week. The gender difference was not statistically significant. To contextualise this, the EU Working Time Directive (2003/88/ED) states that each member state must ensure that every worker is entitled to a limit in their working time, which must not exceed 48 hours, including overtime. When asked if they tend to work weekends/evenings in addition to normal working hours, the vast majority of respondents (87 per cent of men and 86 per cent of women) stated that they did. If respondents worked weekends/evenings, in addition to normal working hours, they were asked about the reasons for this. These related to: excessive workloads being necessary to get the work done; to access equipment; to meet specific grant application deadlines or lectures; due to the nature of the research (for example experimental) process which could not fit into a 9–5 schedule; to compensate for flexible working (to drop or pick up children from school); and for career advancement.

Survey respondents were asked how satisfied they were with their current balance between their professional and personal life (Figure 5.1). Levels of satisfaction (satisfied/very satisfied) were not dissimilar for male (39%) and female respondents (42%). However, marginally more men (42%) than women (36%) were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with their work-life balance. Similar satisfaction levels were noted in the 2012 survey, hence suggesting no discernible improvement.

Work-life balance was defined in very diverse terms by the women and men surveyed, ranging from being able to take time off for weekends/holidays; time to spend on other activities; access to flexible working; being able to spend time with their children; and not ‘living to work’. Survey respondents were asked if they regularly worked from home. The majority of men and women respondents did, though the level was higher among male (73%) compared with female respondents (67%). One-third of the women who responded and 37 per cent of the men regularly worked evenings and/or weekends.

Figure 5.1 Levels of satisfaction with professional-personal life balance by gender (n = 220)

The survey established that it was women, rather than men, who opted for flexible working arrangements and who also availed of family-related leave. While 54 women had taken maternity leave, only four men had availed of paternity leave. When asked if they had experienced any difficulties in returning to work after such family-related leave, more women (28) compared to men (6) had experienced difficulties. For six women, these difficulties related to teaching: they had no cover or doubling up before taking leave. In the worst cases, mothers returned to an increased teaching load and/or were allocated new courses. Three women found that they had been removed from projects or their research group; three were faced with space or resource problems, including one who lost her desk for three months upon returning to work. Two women had to attend a job interview for a permanent post whilst on leave, which they found very stressful. Others emphasised feeling isolated, forgotten or overlooked, and they and others reported that it was difficult to catch up, particularly on their research, after three or more months on family-related leave. Mothers felt that there were no proper supports in place, including childcare, to help get them back up to their former levels of productivity. Typical of these mothers' experiences were:

'I did not exactly find any difficulties, but I found NO supports. You have to return to work at full speed and with the same administration and other load as everyone else. There is no consideration made of the major gap in terms of research time and research momentum which comes with maternity leave. It is not a sabbatical'.

'I found myself with the heaviest timetable in the department and one of my courses had been written out of the programme. When I asked for this to be reviewed I was told it had happened because I had been absent on maternity leave. Out of sight, out of mind. Worst year of my professional life!'

'On one occasion a research group of colleagues in my absence had undertaken to remove me from a research group as I had not inputted during maternity leave. . . . On return from both maternity leaves I had lost my familiar teaching and took on new subjects. This catch-up impacted on my research outputs'.

Some women returned to increases or changes to their workload:

'On returning I immediately had a full teaching load including new courses . . . and my publication rate decreased or plateaued in this time after return to work. This period is not accounted for in any promotion or grant application which usually only asks about the specific period spent on (maternity) leave without taking the knock-on consequences into account'.

'On one occasion all my teaching for the period of time that I had been on leave had been rescheduled for my return. Consequently, on my return I taught a full-years load over three and half months'.

Men also testified to the lack of adjustment and support when they were faced with parenthood:

'I only took a couple of days leave each time but was exhausted. Nothing was in place to help me with that. I just had to get on with it which I did and eventually got used to working with a new and reduced level of sleep'.

One of the major consequences of not accommodating women as new mothers was that specific aspects of their careers suffered:

'No cover was provided for my leave except for the teaching duties . . . there was a lot of catching up to do when I came back. This is particularly hard to do at a time when you are learning to juggle family and work life in a new set up, and that baby is frequently sick'.

In extreme cases, women returned after taking maternity leave to find themselves displaced from their office or desk:

'I had no desk (my desk was given away while I was on maternity leave) for three months after I returned to work. I had to turn up every day and find a desk which was unoccupied'.

and from research groups in which they had been active:

'Research projects that may have interested me were commenced while I was away, so I was not able to be involved . . . also, it is not easy when meetings are changed at short notice or are scheduled for very early in the morning or late in the evening'.

Some women reduced the time spent on maternity leave in order to keep their research career on track:

'It is perhaps important to point out that few female academics actually take their full maternity leave due to the pressures of research. I came back after two weeks to hold a research meeting with PhD students. It is difficult to switch off during maternity leave . . . if I had focused solely on maternity leave then my research output would be reduced, and I would not be at my current (senior) academic grade'.

It was not only women who were mothers who faced a non-supportive academic environment when they had caring responsibilities:

'My husband had cancer and I needed to be around more, so I cut to four days a week. My workload didn't reduce so I did five days in four'.

Not surprisingly, childcare posed problems for many female respondents:

'It was extremely difficult to find appropriate childcare within the university (long waiting list) or outside it. There was no support within the university regarding information on childcare facilities in the local area and this became a stressful, time-consuming exercise for both of us as parents'.

'I returned to work as head of my discipline with no childcare supports provided for my children. This meant additional costs and time pressures for the family. I had no assistance to support the return to work'.

Focus group results

In order to validate and triangulate the 2015 survey findings, the issues noted were further explored in three faculty focus group sessions conducted in 2018. These focus groups concentrated on highlighting the experiences of women and men in terms of: opportunities for their career progression (including entry to senior positions); support for family-related and other leaves; availability and uptake of flexible working; and any gender differences in negotiating and achieving work-life balance. Despite issuing an open invitation to staff of all genders, it was predominantly women, in each faculty, who signed up and contributed. The abbreviated identifiers used were F/M (female/male), AHSS (Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences), HS (Faculty of Health Sciences) and FEMS (Faculty of Engineering, Mathematics and Science).

Long hours culture

Referring to the perceived impossibility of having a life alongside an academic job, one discussant pointed to the high stress and long hours:

'I know two academics in the entire world who I would say have a good work-life balance . . . everybody else is massively overworked, frequently overwhelmed, and that's regardless of whether you're a parent, or are caring for elderly parents, which is the other big issue, and both of those responsibilities fall disproportionately on the shoulders of women at the moment, and that's societal. So, I think there's just a serious workload issue which is ever-increasing, and it's not actually sustainable'.

[AHSS] F

Focus group discussants referred to the male model that requires staff to be 'available all hours':

'We have workload allocation models, but I do think there is that . . . masculine role of . . . basically if you're to get on and do well, you need to be here 9–5 Monday to Friday, plus all the evenings, plus all the weekends'.

[HS] F

And how women fit themselves into this model:

'The workload is allocated in proportion, which is very fair, but what I've noticed over the years was, the sort of masculine model of 'be here all hours' has permeated through the females, where there are mostly females, they eat their own young almost, they're actually worse than men . . . so I think women copper-fasten the male hierarchy'.

[HS] F

'But this business of always being available . . . perish the thought that you couldn't get to a meeting on time, there's no flexibility around women having somewhere else to go besides . . . you really are under child pressure when you're a woman . . . so I do think we need a societal change, but I feel the availability is the big thing for me, that you need to be available all hours'.

[HS] F

Flexible working?

When asked if current flexible working arrangements meet the needs of staff, or need to be improved, discussants identified three different but interrelated issues. First, the potential flexibility of part-time work:

'I don't think there are any . . . what I don't understand is why there aren't more part-time roles. . . . It's not like some jobs which are quite difficult to carve up into part-time roles. Actually, in academia you can do part-time . . . it does come into that work-life balance issue, that if there were more part-time

roles, that would make it that much easier; and I think that would open up opportunities for flexibility, not just for women, but for men as well'.

[AHSS] F

Second, the difficulty of maintaining boundaries in part-time work:

'I'd say a number of people in our department, and wider, would be part-time, and I don't know if that's recognised in terms of career progression, and certainly I don't think so in terms of workload. No-one ever says 'You're a 0.5, so let's give you half the amount of teaching hours and half the amount of . . . it never works like that. I think people maybe forget that you're part-time and have the same expectations of you as a full-time person'.

[HS] F

Third, the extent to which part-time working is not recognised positively in career progression:

'Yes, you're in part-time hours and pay. Well not part-time hours, because you're working more [than part-time hours]. Maybe it's not acknowledged enough that while it's great that you're given flexibility in terms of maybe suiting your family, I don't know if it's acknowledged in terms of career progression, or in terms of workload'.

[HS] F

While some female discussants enjoyed the practical benefits of flexibility, in terms of autonomy:

'I was coming from a professional background into academia, I love the flexibility. I love that I can go home and do something, and take my kids to the dentist, and then do two hours at night . . . it suits me. I also love the autonomy, it's part and parcel of the same thing. And I think there are things within Trinity that they are very good at. So, I took a short period of parental leave to top up maternity leave, and that was no problem'.

[AHSS] F

Others referred to the *quid pro quo* (favouring employers) and the precarious nature of part-time employment:

'I think for me, talking very personally, the decision that I have made is not to work full-time, and not to pursue the full-time thing, because I want to balance it with my other commitments in life. And so to me the cost of that is that I am in this kind of precarious non-permanent situation. But the benefit of that is that I have absolute autonomy and flexibility, and that's the bargain I've made, if you like'.

[AHSS] F

Gendered division of family care

Some discussants noted how their research inevitably suffered with consecutive periods of maternity leave:

'You could be doing excellent teaching in the time between maternity leaves . . . you might be very creative, very innovative, and doing great things for the students, but because you're not doing any research . . . it would be . . . extremely hard to have continuous research if you have one or two or three maternity leaves. So, it's almost like you're putting your entire career on hold for the time that you want to have children . . . how would you do that [be research active] if you were someone who wanted to have a couple of children, how would it be possible to maintain that and to also be able to progress?'

[HS] F

Challenges relating to the pace of research were also identified:

'Research, depending on the type of space you're working in, can move very quickly, so even six months out of this place can put you behind and you're trying to play catch-up'.

[HS] F

One participant commented that taking time out contributed to the over-representation of men in senior positions:

'Some women that are very career-focused have to make a choice . . . it's almost like you're being punished for it. There's an amount of maternity leave you're required to take, there's a little bit of paternity for men, but they're not required to take any . . . you're out of the workforce for a certain amount of time, like it or lump it, whereas there's never a situation for men where they are absent from the workforce as a requirement. There's just a huge break in continuity for women'.

[HS] F

Suggestions for positive child-friendly facilities at conferences, networking events and places where research discussions take place were explored:

'One thing that a few conferences are starting to do, but there's no provision for it in any funding applications or anything, is bringing your children along to conferences, and childcare at conferences, because that's the thing . . . it's not just six months of maternity leave during which I can't travel, there's pregnancy during which I can't travel the last three months of, and then there's the breastfeeding phase, or a young child that can get sick at any point, during which I can't travel. That's conferences, that's networking,

that's proposals. Some conferences are starting to provide childcare on site, but there's something that Trinity could do, like a "bring your child to conference travel fund"'.

[FEMS] F

The societal issue of gender roles and expectations was raised in different ways corresponding to societal inequalities in the allocation of caring:

'the concept of co-parenting is not yet established in Ireland and would require that family work is shared more equitably, reflecting the more interchangeable gender roles now evident in the labour market'.

(Drew and Watters 2014, 4)

First, the demands of the daily transition from professional to domestic life:

'I think really a lot of it has to do with the fact that women are still primary caregivers at home'.

'Yes, I think it's a wider systemic issue. If you are literally thinking "I have three small kids, I pick them up from crèche, I make their dinner, I do their homework with them, my partner gets home at 8 o'clock' or whatever", and you have the option of going for a senior position, you're probably thinking "How am I going to do that, because I do all that at home, and possibly a lot more. How am I going to do that as well as my job"'.

[HS] F

Second, work practices which extend the professional working day:

'We've had in our school, supervision at 8am and 7.30am in recent times, underpinned by superwomen. I couldn't do that, it would be very, very difficult. Another thing about children too is, you're actually working when you go home. So, you've a whole day's work to do when you go home in the evening time usually as well'.

[HS] F

Third, expectations generated by the behaviour of other (super) women:

'About the superwomen, it really does put extra pressure on other women, because you feel like you should be able to achieve that. If one woman can achieve that, why can't you? . . . A lot of the time women are actually carers for parents as well, and it happens more so than for men, so you could have your kids at home and be a carer for a parent, and all those things that in a lot of circumstances, and I won't say always, but a lot of men don't have to consider'.

[HS] F

The daily reality of life for women in academia with dependent children was graphically described by one participant:

'When it's that busy time in your life, all you can do is just work and family, there's no time for you. I've been trying for years to try and do a yoga class or something like that, and I just don't have time. So, it's either work or family, and then just flake out, fall asleep on the couch, you're so tired. I suppose it's a choice as well, we work and we have family, whatever, but I don't see that you really do have a good work-life balance, because just there just aren't enough hours in the day, and I'm not going to get up and do a class at 5 or 6 in the morning, I'm going to sleep while I can. I don't know what the answer to that is, because you have to do your work hours. Maybe men need to step up a little bit more to give you time off, I don't know, but that's my experience'.

[HS] F

Finally, there was a recognition of one aspect of shared parenting as a positive way forward:

'This is not purely a female versus male issue, it's a primary caretaker issue, which in society we know how it breaks down, but . . . I'm in a very fortunate situation where my husband is almost caring more than I am, I'm more relaxed than he is. But I was reading the report before coming in, and it said about how few men take paternity leave'.

[FEMS] F

Paternity leave

Participants debated how current gender roles, in which caring is the primary responsibility of women, could be addressed, whether voluntarily:

'Could men have maternity leave . . . the way in some countries they split the maternity leave? I really think that society as a whole won't understand as long as we're the only ones who experience it. Whereas, if men had three or four months maternity leave and women had four or five months, like they do in some other countries, where women have slightly more but men still have a big chunk'.

[HS] F

Or as mandatory:

'One thing that institutions can do, is expect the new father to take paternity leave. It should be almost suggested to them. I know it's something crazy to say, but it should be. When they start from the very beginning getting really

involved, then there's more hope of them picking up that burden later on in the life of the child. I suppose the only way of helping women deal with this problem is when the men pick up and start doing more'.

[FEMS] F

The advantages to parents, if there is an expectation that both are involved in parenting, was clearly identified:

'I certainly believe that a very long maternity leave means that for the first six months of your child, you become the expert because you are full-time with them. . . . I just wish there could be an expectation [of] parents that it should be three months . . . of the dad taking over so that they become the expert'.

[FEMS] F

Light at the end of the tunnel?

Finally, there was a recognition of the different demands of caring for young children during a period when expectations in the workplace are high, with consequences for personal development and wellbeing:

'I'm back running now with a few friends and that's fantastic, and that's my little bit of time out now, but before that I was really thinking "this is my life at the moment. All I do is work, or else family, there's no me time. What about me?" But I feel like my children are getting a little bit older now so it's a little bit easier, but like I said I'm not sure what the solution to that is. I'm reading a book at the moment that's called "The Gift of Time" ' so I'm going to see if it will generate more hours in the day or something [laughs]. Time is at a premium when you've got multiple demands'.

[HS] F

Conclusion

The findings in this chapter underline those of Currie and Eveline's (2011) study in which flexibility in working hours and working from home have facilitated work-life balance but as 'a double-edged sword' since the expectations and demands of academic and research work clearly permeate into other spheres of life. The chapter supports the existing literature in demonstrating that expectations of family care and domestic responsibilities remain greater sources of work-life conflict for female scholars and reiterate that:

Societal attitudes and employers' behaviour need to alter to ensure that (a) men (as well as women) can also avail of leaves; (b) taking leave is socially acceptable and (c) it will not adversely affect parents' career prospects.

(Drew and Watters 2014, 17)

Despite the perception of freedom to juggle with working hours and place of work, male and female respondents surveyed worked well in excess of 40 hours in an average week, often spilling over into weekends and evenings, through working from home. Evidence from the survey and focus groups demonstrate that it is women, rather than men, who opt for flexible working arrangements and take leave for family-related care. Hence it was women who experienced difficulties returning to their posts, after leave, in which many were required to ‘double up’ their teaching before and after availing of leave. Some mothers emphasised feeling isolated or overlooked and described how difficult it was to catch up, particularly on their research, after taking leave. Mothers felt that there were no proper supports in place, including childcare, to help get them back up to the level they were at previously, in teaching and particularly with their research. The chapter concludes that work-life balance among staff is more aspirational than real with many staff testifying to academic work overload encroaching on their non-working time.

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