

**FLEXIBLE WORK ARRANGEMENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION:
A TALE OF TWO GROUPS**

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ABSTRACT

Flexible work arrangements (FWA) and family friendly policies have been used as sign posts of modern progressive organisations, and tools of attraction and retention during periods of economic boom and downturn. Benefits of FWAs have been widely reported for both employees and organisations; however, studies and findings are sparse in the higher education sector. The sector is interesting in that the boom-bust cycles are reversed; and with the downturn in the economy, many are returning to tertiary study. As well, the higher education sector has traditionally had a clear delineation between the work of academic and general staff. In this paper we propose that with the intensification of work in the higher education sector, the divide between the work arrangements of these two distinct groups, academic and general staff, is narrowing. The focus on students as customers has raised expectations of 'service' to students by academic staff resulting in the need to be 'present' and available. On the other hand, non-traditional study pathways have resulted in less rigid work environments for general staff, in turn allowing this group better access to FWAs.

Keywords: New forms of work organisation, Work environment, Job analysis and job design, Human resource management policy, Equal employment opportunity.

INTRODUCTION

Flexible work arrangements, family friendly policies and work life balance are concepts that have increased in prominence in the human resource management literature since the 1970s. Work practices associated with these concepts have gained momentum in the world of employment since the intensification of the 'war for talent'. During the resources boom, organisations were keen to stand out as 'employers of choice' by differentiating themselves and their work practices. Since the downturn in the world economy, focus has turned to retaining core workers including the best and the brightest, and managing the talent base within organisations.

Flexible work arrangements (FWAs) are work practices that allow variability in the work location and arrangements. These practices are promoted as offering benefits for the organisation, individual employees and stakeholder groups as well as society at large (Melbourne 2008). The benefits and downsides of FWAs have been well researched in most organisational settings; however, research on uptake and complexities associated with their usage in the higher education sector is somewhat limited.

The work environment in the higher education sector is seen as unique as the workforce is streamed by role to academic and general staff. The different job roles have traditionally been subjected to different work environments by virtue of the tasks performed. The tasks in turn dictate the possible degree of flexibility enjoyed by each group. This paper highlights issues associated with FWAs in the higher education sector in Australia.

THE CHANGING WORK ENVIRONMENT

The post 1990s boom has given way to the largest global economic downturn since the great depression. The so called 'Global Financial Crisis' (GFC) has significantly changed the landscape of work and employment in a very short period of time. Many organisations have had to modify their human resource management (HRM) policies and practices to rapidly reposition themselves for survival (Reilly 2009).

FWAs have been utilised as retention strategies, and to highlight organisations as 'employers of choice'. With the downturn in the economy, retention of core and valuable employees becomes paramount, as does talent management. FWAs can be seen as mechanisms for attracting, retaining and progressing the best and the brightest on one hand; and on the other, as tools to rationalise the workforce and organisational costs.

The higher education sector is unique; the boom-bust cycles are reversed. During the resources boom where jobs were plentiful, potential students turned to employment, and attraction and retention of students suffered. In the downturn, many are returning to higher education to gain new skills (and therefore maximise employment potential), or to ride out the worst of the GFC (Corrigan 2009). Due to external environmental forces (such as: government policy, competition and globalisation) universities began repositioning themselves with improved focus on students during the economic boom (Bradley, Noonan, Neugent & Scales 2008; Small 2008). This included appropriate, timely and student-centred academic and administrative services aimed at improved retention and progression. With the recent resurgence in enrolments the focus on students as critical customers must be

maintained. As with any other modern workplace, contemporary work practices become a key to staff engagement, in turn affecting the quality of services to students.

FLEXIBLE WORK ARRANGEMENTS

Flexibility in work arrangements can be temporal or spatial (Shockley & Allen 2007) and refer to shifting times or schedules, number of hours worked and the location of work (Lyness & Brumit Kropf 2005: 37). Examples include: annualised hours, compressed hours, flexi-time, telecommuting, homeworking, job-sharing, shiftworking, staggered hours, 'term time' working (during school term) and multi-site work (Bratton & Gold 2007; Gainey & Clenney 2006; Secret 2000).

According to Melbourne (2008:44) FWAs allow employees to balance family and work commitments, work uninterrupted for longer periods and spend less time commuting to and from work. The fact that employees perceive themselves to have more control over work and family matters indirectly improves their attitude, mental and physical health (Thomas & Ganster 1995, cited in McDonald Guthrie Bradley & Shakespeare-finch 2005:480).

FWAs may be of interest to employees who are unable or unwilling to work standard hours or in a traditional work environment. This could include people with carer responsibilities or other personal or family circumstances, such as an inability to commute, limitations on mobility or those seeking work-life balance. It can be argued that these workers may have been overlooked in the past, but that the recent skill shortages forced employers to seek non-traditional arrangements for employees (Porter 2004).

Brumit Kropf (1999: 179) found that managers, human resource representatives, and senior management highlighted a wide range of benefits to business, beyond retention, when offering flexible work alternatives. FWAs were also found to be useful when recruiting valuable talent and "expanding client/customer service beyond traditional hours". In an increasingly global work environment including in higher education, this last benefit could be particularly valuable to organisations.

While FWAs are generally seen as a way for employees to balance their work life, research also suggests that there are employer benefits associated with these work practices. One study investigated the relationship between FWAs and stressors, burnout and behavioural job outcomes and found evidence highlighting the benefits of FWAs for both employers and the employees (Almer & Kaplan 2002). This research found a significant association between job satisfaction and turnover intentions; particularly important in a labour-market where employees can easily find new employment, but also where the employer is seeking to achieve and maintain service excellence. Almer and Kaplan's (2002) research did, however, highlight a disparity between awareness, accessibility and actual uptake of FWAs. This can be associated with both employer and employee concerns about the implications of flexible work practices.

Cole (2006: 536) points out that success in business involves "to some extent having a workforce flexible enough to meet changeable demands". FWAs, according to Atkinson (1985 cited in Twinaume Humphries & Kearins, 2006: 335) were initially aimed at achieving financial gains for the organisation and increasing managerial control. The focus has now become a two-way relationship, with options for employees enjoying an increased focus. The rise in flexible options, however "intensifies the headache for employers faced with the already unenviable task of marshalling their workforce" (Cole 2006:539).

A limitation of work-family focussed policies, as identified by McDonald et al. (2005: 481), is that although the policies are supposedly gender neutral they "in practice revolve around facilitating the working conditions of women". The high number of women using these arrangements has, according to McDonald et al., led to women being seen as the "beneficiaries" of special treatment, at times a cause of resentment. A further challenge for those who utilise FWAs, and those who move from full-time to part-time employment, is the fact that this appears to affect further career advancements. The notion that time at the office demonstrates commitment and productivity is still very much alive; managerial roles are likely to still require a full-time presence (University Work and Family Guide, 1997 cited in McDonald et al. 2007). This seems to be a trade off that these employees are willing to make. Regardless of this preparedness, career considerations could still be a factor for certain

employees not to take up FWAs. Almer, Cohen and Single (2003) have identified that employees on FWAs may not reach the depth or breadth of experience and may reduce their opportunities for networking, mentoring and development of professional relationships, still key factors in career advancement.

There is general consensus that FWAs can provide benefits and challenges to employers and employees alike. In higher education, the evidence is that whilst these benefits and challenges are similar there are particular characteristics of the sector that make the environment unique.

THE HIGHER EDUCATION SECTOR

There is considerable discussion about the changing nature of work in universities; staff now operate in very different environments compared to twenty years ago. The Australian higher education scene is awaiting the changes flowing from the Bradley Report (2008). In the meantime, other changes continue and staff experience growth in workloads, increased stress levels and greater reliance on more complex technology. Previously, the Coaldrake Report (Coaldrake & Stedman, 1999) identified key factors which contributed to these changes, altering the landscape of Australian higher education including: internationalisation; increased workloads; government funding; knowledge transformation; information technologies; corporatisation; managerialism and the public perception of the sector. Ten years ago it was claimed that these changes had not yet been adequately researched and analysed (Marginson 2000:23), and while there has been some progress in the intervening period, the focus of research seems to be on workload for academics and the changing nature of academic work.

There is no consistent label for the staff who occupy roles which are not classified as academic, including for example, administrators, lawyers, architects, receptionists, technical or library staff. Many terms are used to delineate that as a collective group they are somehow different from their 'academic' colleagues. Doherty and Manfredi (2006) use the term Administrative, Professional, Technical and Clerical (APT&C) staff. Other terms which are used are non-academic, allied, administrative, general, support or technical staff. For the purposes of this paper the term 'general

staff' refers to all staff not engaged to undertake traditional academic roles of teaching and research, in keeping with the terminology used in employment agreements.

The concept of an academic-general staff 'divide' within higher education appears to have been a matter of interest in recent years. Academic staff have traditionally enjoyed freedoms associated with all but the requirements of face to face teaching. Such freedoms include where, and when, they undertake their work, a form of flexible work arrangement. General staff, on the other hand, have been more often required to work standard hours to service the organisation and the students.

Szekeres (2004) identifies that general staff are often perceived as having better working conditions than academic staff (e.g. better pay, lighter workloads and greater balance), whereas other authors (e.g. Wohlmuther 2008) suggest academic staff are often seen to have better career opportunities and access to more flexibility in their working arrangements. Dobson (2000:208) concludes that the perception of an academic-general staff divide is widely held, and that "the situation in Europe, differs in few ways from the one in Australia".

It can also be argued that there is a three way divide with McWilliam, Green, Hunt, Bridgstock and Young (2000: 238) suggesting that academic and general staff are separate again from senior management. This argument stems from the fact that senior management roles tend to have less contact with students (Johnson & Deem 2003) thus creating a 'third' subculture. Given the nature of senior management appointments, working hours and working arrangements are less applicable to this group of staff and are beyond the scope of this discussion.

Academics in particular have been the focus of investigations into workloads and working hours, stress and work motivation. Levels of job dissatisfaction, low morale, stress and burnout have been previously found to be considerably greater than they were up to thirty years ago for Australian academic staff (Anderson, Johnson & Saha 2002:96). Coaldrake and Stedman (1999:9) reported a decade ago that "many academics feel burdened by the increasing weight of expectations placed upon them, in contrast to their ideal of determining the parameters of their own working lives", but that there was still evidence of their being intrinsically motivated by their work. This apparent

contradiction was also found to be the case by other researchers. Business school academics, for example, tended not to be seeking employment elsewhere despite reporting ‘deteriorating’ conditions (Bellamy, Morley & Watty 2003). The evidence is that workloads and working hours are still a concern for academic staff. Forgasz and Leder (2006) were able to demonstrate that academics in two universities worked approximately 55 hours per week with the work spread from 7:30 am to 10:00 pm and on weekends.¹ and many universities have workload and working hours as a current focus in collective bargaining negotiations. Technology has increased the expectations of students and administrators as to the ability to communicate with academics across a wider spread of hours, while at the same time freeing up academics to work away from campus with the learning and communication technologies at their fingertips. A facilitator of flexible working arrangements as well as a potential detractor from work life balance.

A recent action research project on the effects of ‘flexible employment options’ in four tertiary institutions in Britain found that flexibility was often not consistent between areas of the university, and not monitored effectively. This study also found that senior and middle management support, based on training and guidance, were important factors for success, as was clear communication to staff about what options were available. Predictably more women than men were found to want flexibility, but it was not just those with children or elders that were interested. This project also found that there were considerable limitations to introducing flexibility in some roles (Scott 2002 cited in Doherty & Manfredi 2006).

The contention that more generous family friendly policies are needed in U.S. universities to retain and advance more women academics was examined by Mayer and Tikka (2008). They made a comparison with Finnish and Swedish universities where such policies have been in place for a long time, and concluded that it is not merely the existence of family friendly policies or FWAs which are a factor in advancement for women. They worked on the assumption that if family policies are a significant factor in retention and promotion, then women should be better represented at senior levels

¹ The study did not track the late evening or early morning hours and may have missed data for some academics who often work outside these hours.

in the Nordic universities. They found that advancement may be more related to social conditions and gender stereotypes than to the existence of such policies, and that there was no significant difference in the representation of women amongst senior academic staff. Doherty and Manfredi (2006), however, report that there was a view that job sharing at senior levels would allow flexibility in relation to family commitments as well as career progression.

Doherty and Manfredi (2006) reported on a case study of a work-life balance program at Oxford Brookes University in Britain. They found that the achievement of a work life balance was challenging for academic staff. Academics have traditionally been able to reorganise their time to attend to personal commitments. Recently, intensification has led to a reduction in this flexibility, impeding efforts to achieve balance. On the other hand, general staff believe that there should be more equity in the way they are treated. This was of particular concern with regard to homeworking. Whilst acknowledging that some jobs do allow this easily, general staff were not allowed to work from home even if particular tasks were more likely to be done more effectively in this way (e.g. report writing). General staff wanted more trust and greater autonomy, with a desire for flexitime, and compressed hours being available in addition to home working opportunities.

Of particular interest in Doherty and Manfredi's (2006) conclusions is that many of the obstacles to FWAs for general staff were able to be overcome by progressing through the problem solving approach of action research. Traditionally, work-life balance for academic staff has not been part of workplace negotiations. Given that this seemed to be coupled with what Doherty and Manfredi (2006: 241) term "universities' disinclination to tackle academic work intensification" the 'divide' to which we refer may be even more marked.

Whitchurch (2006) along with Marshall, Adams, Cameron and Sullivan (2000) point out the increasing administrative functions being carried out by academics, and the greater interaction between general staff and the teaching and learning aspects of academia, are leading to a blurring of the boundaries between the roles. Marshall et al (2000) go on to argue that the long standing deeply held views of the nature of academic work make cultural shifts difficult and onerous, and act as

significant barriers to institutional change. The increasing administrative functions being carried out by academics are seen to be a devolution of responsibility associated with changing views about academic leadership. Increased accountability and regulation imposed by external agencies are seen as part of work intensification causing debates about academic workloads and responsibilities. This infringes on the ability of academics to undertake leadership roles in research and teaching, where the traditional academic leader should be focused (Yielder & Codling 2004). These changes, however, may offer opportunities for other changes to be mooted, including an examination of working arrangements for both academic and general staff to enhance attraction and retention of both groups of employees. If applied in a fair and consistent manner, FWAs have been promoted as allowing employers to meet the increasingly different demands from stakeholders, while at the same time increasing the job satisfaction of employees who are seeking a balance between work and non-work life.

THE DIVIDE

The higher education sector in Australia is currently experiencing significant external and internal pressures. The former including changes deriving from the Government response to the Bradley review and the GFC; the latter, resulting from the transformation of university operations. These changes have had an impact on the work environments of both academic and general staff, leading to the traditional 'divide' between these two groups becoming at the same time both greater and smaller.

The blurring of the boundaries between traditional academic work and administrative functions has led to a loss of clarity about task and role for staff. On the one hand academic staff are now required to undertake increasing level of administrative and technical work, including the provision of services to clients-students. On the other hand general staff are more involved in, for example, the provision of discipline related advice to students.

Interactions with students require academic staff to be more available to students at times other than that required in the traditional academic environment, requiring a less flexible approach to work

arrangements. This availability includes a need to be more present on campus, interaction via electronic means such as email, and off-shore commitments involving both travel to international venues and availability outside “normal” teaching hours (including evenings and weekends). General staff on the other hand need to be available for a greater spread of hours to cater for diversity in student demands, but are also now using technology and undertaking work which can be performed outside traditional work arrangements, including report writing and data analysis which can be undertaken remotely.

This blurring of roles and responsibilities means that flexible work arrangements may offer opportunities for both groups of staff to benefit should universities choose to embrace previously untapped aspects of this paradigm.

THE WAY FORWARD

In devising and implementing FWAs within the tertiary sector a number of key issues must be taken into account. First, the employee group is not homogenous; there are at least two if not three specific occupational groups within the tertiary environment: academic staff, general staff and senior management. Notwithstanding different enterprise agreements and individual contracts, access and equity to differing work arrangements will be factors worthy of attention.

Second, clear guidelines must take into account role delineation between and within the different occupational groups. This is also important within the wider university community, as different faculties and divisions may develop and implement ‘local practices’ depending on the nature of the student group, and the workforce. As an example, Business schools may need staff who are accessible in a more ‘round the clock’ pattern, as many students may be full or part-time workers, therefore needing additional flexibility in their dealings with university staff. The same may not be true for Engineering or Agriculture students and their respective faculties.

Finally, the overarching principle remains ‘sensible’ management practices. In an academic environment no two jobs at the same classification and within the same occupational group will be

identical. As such a problem solving approach to devising individualised FWA is needed to ensure program benefits are realised for the employee and the employer.

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