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Maria Vardaki

Royal Holloway University of London, Matm015@live.rhul.ac.uk

Niki Panteli

Royal Holloway University of London, niki.panteli@rhul.ac.uk

Eleni Tzouramani

University of the West of Scotland, Eleni.Tzouramani@uws.ac.uk

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Remote Work and the impact on Women Academics in the Covid-19 era

Research-in-Progress Paper

Maria Vardaki

Royal Holloway University of London
Egham Hill, Egham, Surrey
Matm015@live.rhul.ac.uk

Niki Panteli

Royal Holloway University of London
Egham Hill, Egham, Surrey
Niki.Panteli@rhul.ac.uk

Eleni Tzouramani

University of the West of Scotland
Paisley Campus, High Street, Paisley
Eleni.Tzouramani@uws.ac.uk

Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic has not only changed our daily life and the way we think and interact with others, but caused rapid changes in all sectors, especially in Higher Education. This research is focusing on how women in academia within the Higher Education environment in the UK have adapted to resilience trends during the sudden and rapid shift from face to face to online learning and their resilience levels for the duration of the pandemic to date. For the purposes of this study, my 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 and are currently still using, in order to endure the challenges of work and everyday life.

Keywords: Women, Academia, Covid-19, pandemic, resilience, remote work

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has brought changes in our everyday life and caused rapid adjustments in all sectors (Quezada et al, 2020), including Higher Education (HE). The global scale of the pandemic, the speed on how this has contributed to an enforced remote work and the prolonged period of this work arrangement have been key characteristics of this period. There was a closure of all higher educational institutions in Spring 2020 across 188 countries (Toquero, 2020; Crawford et al, 2020) which in several cases lasted for several months, which has impacted both staff and students. Evidence exists that women, in particular, have struggled to maintain a suitable work-life balance during this period (Oleschuk, 2020). With this in mind, our study aims to examine the extent to which women have developed resilience during this enforced remote work period, and the impact on their career.

This research aims to have a contribution in the field of HE in the UK and specific implications in the study of HR area and resilience within HE responses in times of crisis. This study is important as it will show the relationship between resilience and women in academia and this specific interrelationship at times of crisis has not been research thus far. The research can be expanded further in the future by looking at the overall resilience perspectives of all staff within HE and compare women and men on how they have adjusted and created mechanisms during the pandemic. It can also contribute to further research on how HE institutions

have supported and may support in future different individuals and how flexible HE is becoming from the start of the pandemic until today.

In this research, we present the literature review of the study, we describe the research methods adopted and present the core findings. The implications of the study and directions for future research are discussed in the last section.

Literature Review

Higher Education: context and challenges

The Higher Education (HE) in the UK has seen an increased number of challenges and inevitable transformation (Youell, 2017; Shaw, 2013a; Shaw, 2013b; Young-Powell, 2013; Jones, 2017; Dar et al, 2020; Batty, 2020). Notwithstanding the challenges that students face in relation to the financial overburden and the general economic situation as well as mental health and welfare issues in a pressurised educational system, there has been additional circumstances that make the HE environment even more challenging both for students and staff. The decision on Brexit has brought a certain level of instability both on a practical level regarding student recruitment from EU countries, but at the same time, overseas expansion to compensate for a possible decline; competitiveness amongst other UK institutions is expanding to include up-coming European HE institutions, on recruitment, research outputs and grant applications, with confusing information on the position of UK HE institutions within EU funding organisations. The HE sector has also seen one of its worse times worldwide in the recent years due to the pandemic. We discuss these challenges in the section that follows.

Digital environment and Remote Work

The transition to online teaching and learning due to the pandemic has led to a wider conversation on flexible education amongst the HE sector. This is creating opportunities for innovation and setting new parameters for delivering teaching, as well as remote working. This virtual way of working will inevitably create the circumstances for new legislation regarding the process and technology used for online learning (Basilaia & Kvavadze, 2020) and remote working. Although the concept of distance learning has existed for years, this was only used by a certain group of students that suited their circumstances of remote learning. According to Nguyen et al (2020), challenges on online learning during a crisis bring “collective resilience and creativity”, which we will have to take advantage of, in order to create the opportunities to adapt in new ways of working as “new learners” and create innovative opportunities and solutions for future generations.

The pandemic is one of those crises that technological opportunities and pedagogical advances can be made within the HE sector, in order to establish progress and advances for the benefit of students and staff. Stoller (2021) has researched how the pandemic can provide opportunities and conducted a SWOT analysis for HE, identifying 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. Through the pandemic, administrative functions have been re-evaluated, due to virtual working on all levels. 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) 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 (Aguilera-Hermida, 2020) and virtual meeting “fatigue”. In addition, a consequence of virtual education 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 (2021) makes suggestions on using best practices to develop virtual opportunities for expansion and development, such as teaching and assessment for academics, virtual interviews for students and professional services staff to acquire extended knowledge on virtual platforms, to review space, working patterns, communication and support for students and staff. The issue of support is a crucial one in relation to isolation and home working, for all HE employees, as the duration of the pandemic may have affected people in different ways.

Women academics and Remote Work

During the lockdown periods, women academics in particular have had to find ways to cope, in the midst of challenging situations while working from home (Minello, 2020; Lutter & Schröder, 2020; Oleschuk, 2020). It is evident 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 COVID-19 lockdowns, intensified all this and increased academics' work-home conflict (Adisa et al. 2022).

At the early stages of the pandemic, an online survey was conducted by Yildirim & Eslen-Ziya (2020) amongst HE academics, which concentrated on measuring working hours at home, housework and childcare routines, and any potential changes to their housework due to the pandemic. The results of this survey did not produce any "alarming" gender gap figures for academics without childcare responsibilities. On the other hand, "the daily routines of women academics with children have been dis-proportionately affected by the pandemic-related lockdown" (ibid, 2020, 247). Women academics have been disadvantaged from being allowed to produce high quality academic work, along with all relevant academic responsibilities, due to tending to their children (Minello, 2020). On the other hand, men were not affected by lack of productivity during this period as, evidently, they did not assume heavy childcare duties at home (Lutter & Schröder, 2020).

In the context of working remotely and increased exposure to technology, women in Marchiori et al.'s (2019) research, reported being subject to higher levels of techno-complexity and techno-uncertainty than men. These refer to the internal factors of remote work such as difficulties with the constant changes in technology whereas men demonstrated higher levels of stress with the external aspects of technology, such as techno-overload and techno-invasion. Although a number of studies suggest that men exhibit higher levels of technostress, recent studies in universities during the pandemic show evidence of higher overall technostress in women (Spagnoli et al. 2020, Gabr et al. 2021, Penado Abilleira et al. 2021). Further research is needed to explore the complex interrelationship between the pandemic, the particularities of academic work and women's experiences.

Resilience

The concept of resilience could have a different meaning for different research in a variety of disciplines. There is a distinction made between individual and community resilience. It has been debated if resilience should be considered a state or a temporary condition or if it should be considered a characteristic of an individual, or even both (Liu & Boyatzis, 2021). "Resilience" generally refers to the capacity of a dynamic system to adapt successfully to disturbances that threaten its ability to function and continue developing (Masten, 2014). Newman (2005, p. 227) refers to resilience as "the human ability to adapt in the face of tragedy, trauma, adversity, hardship and ongoing significant life stressors". "In its broadest sense, resilience is a measure of the ability of a system to withstand stresses and shocks—its ability to persist in an uncertain world" (Perrings 1998, p.221). A number of definitions of resilience go back to the term's Latin roots 'resalire' meaning jumping back and they suggest it is about bouncing back after loss or adversity. These definitions have been criticised as demeaning the impact of adversity and the importance of difficult emotions. All concepts, though, have certain themes in common which refer to a crisis or traumatic event and the way individuals adapt to the challenges of the new status quo and change along with the challenges that the abrupt event brings.

During the pandemic, resilience was the key concept that knowingly or subconsciously, all individuals had to embrace, in order to go through and process the rapidly changing environment (professionally and personally). It is important to research the role women's resilience plays in the way women in academia have adapted their way of working, in order to achieve work/life balance. Critical research on resilience encourages us to see beyond romanticised notions of womanhood, family and household to address issues of gendered inequality (Smyth & Sweetman 2015) and organisational responsibility (Witmer, 2019). To further expand on this concept, women in academia are the category that one can argue have suffered the most and had to endure the majority of the challenges in their personal life. We believe this research reflects on the theoretical contribution in the topic of resilience, especially at times of crisis and the more practical

contribution on the perceptions of women in academia during the times of a crisis from a gender equality perspective. This research is important due to the theoretical contribution on how women academics cope in times of crisis. Additionally, it will have practical implications for the way the HE sector operates on best supporting women academics and add value in the area of gender equality and the perceptions that women themselves have within academia of their role and responsibilities. Resilience is an individual concept and women can view it at many different ways and apply it in their daily life differently.

Resilience can be enhanced from feedback taking into account stakeholders' experience and their interpretations of the disturbances and how they have operated within an organisation. Any type of previous experience is also depended on the type of adversity that individuals have experienced and their resilience is closely connected with that. This means that "resilience can be facilitated by learning from experience with adversity" (Williams et al, 2017, p.749) but it is can be compromised with time, as both individuals and organisations relax measures as time progresses. Furthermore, constant disturbances due to certain challenging events may lead to misinterpretation of how to manage business as usual and the relationships between individuals and tasks.

Research methods

Adopting an inductive approach, we explore women academics' experiences and the ways in which they have adapted their work processes and teaching methods from the early stages of the first lockdown in order to complete successfully their duties towards the institution and their responsibilities towards students in the midst of the academic year. In the same approach, we look into how women perceive their resilience levels, during this period. We seek to explore this phenomenon and identify themes/patterns (Clarke, et al, 2015) depending on individual circumstances but, at the same time, identifying common ground.

The research was conducted in HE institutions in the UK. Data have been collected by using qualitative methods (semi-structured interviews of 28 women academics, across 12 institutions, from a variety of disciplines; figure 1).

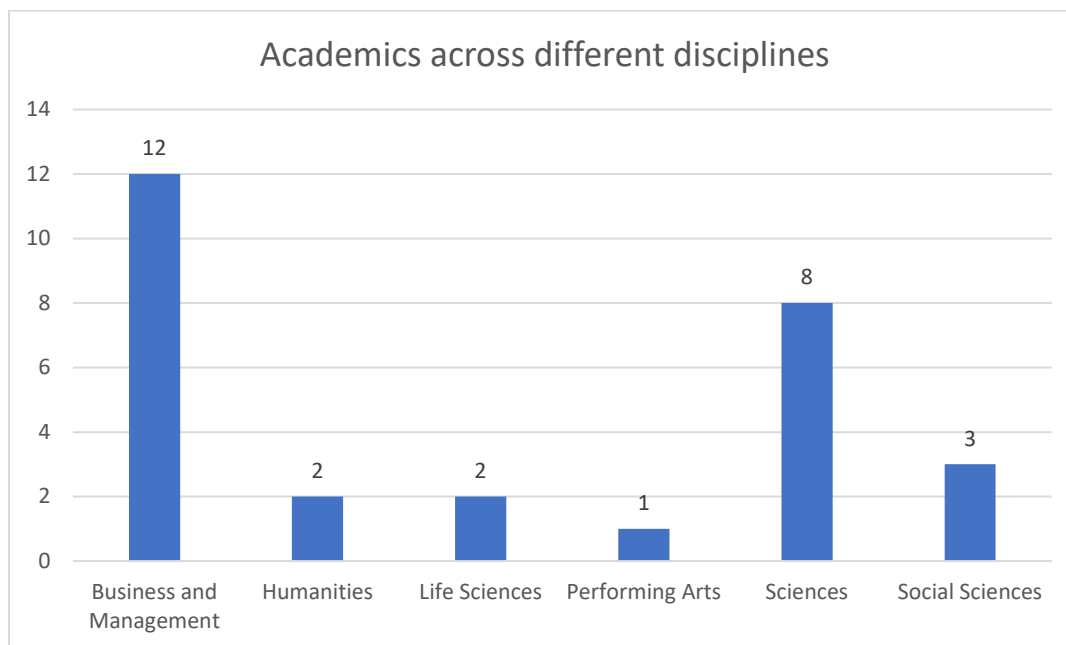


Figure 1: Number of interviewees across different disciplines

The participants of this research are from a variety of age groups and seniority levels to ensure the majority of different circumstances are covered (figure 2). The sampling method was initially convenience in order to identify academics from one institution but we also used the snowballing technique for access to academics from further institutions. We endeavored to select a diverse sample of women in academia, varying from early researchers to more senior staff due to potential differences in their attitude (Pflaeger Young et al., 2019) and check reliability after the data collection.

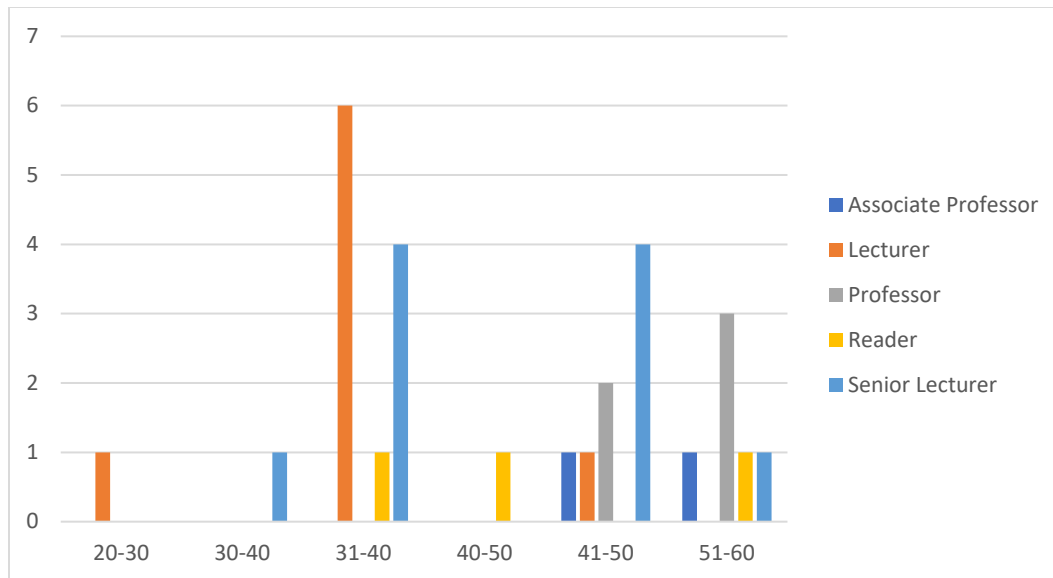


Figure 2: Background of participants (age group and seniority level)

Due to the circumstances and restrictions at the time of the research, the interviews have been conducted online using tools such as Teams. As a qualitative analytic method, we use thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), due to the flexibility that it offers, especially with regards to the analysis not linked to a specific theory. Data has initially been analysed to identify emergent themes on women academics and remote work.

Ethical issues have been considered at all the different stages of the research (Saunders et al., 2012, 236), informing all participants of the confidentiality of their information and anonymity, retaining our integrity and objectivity in all stages of the study and providing the information to participants, in advance. Introductory communication is arranged directly with the participants, in order to explain the process and allow time to reflect and consider their full participation. Special care has been taken to support participants during the interview and conduct a debriefing at the end so as to ensure they are left in a positive psychological state.

Findings

Data analysis contributed to the identification of three initial categories which are related to working space and use of technology, wellbeing issues and resilience in connection to gender inequality.

Workspace and Technology

The topic of home working space and issues with technology were two of the initial challenges that women academics faced at the start of the pandemic and the first lockdown. The homeworking environment, was, to an extent, challenging for academics who have not worked from home previously, they were not exposed to a digital learning environment and did not have the necessary technological arrangements and suitable working space. In this case, the situation was somewhat affected by family circumstances at home. The family situation for single academics, living on their own, was certainly easier to manage and the transition from on site to home working was smoother, whereas challenges concentrated on technological issues (in terms of having suitable equipment, such as laptops, headphones, printers, suitable desk etc). The home environment for single academics was adapted to suit the working day and the majority of the interviewees have admitted that the boundaries between work and home life were confused, especially in the first lockdown. It is worth noting that one interviewee mentioned: "...once I organised a dedicated space to work, I was very productive...".

Following from this category, women academics with different family situations have found the issues of workspace and technology more challenging during the first lockdown. In a home environment with a

spouse working from home, there were issues with suitable working space when both the academic and their spouse had to adapt to home working. The majority of the academics have reported that they have "offered" the study space they have at home to their spouse to work, and they have adapted alternative areas in their house such as living room or kitchen to create suitable working spaces. There was an additional burden to this arrangement in cases where spouses were also academics and technological issues, such as internet connection, was not adequate to use for online teaching and meetings. The academics that belong to this category have explained that a common problem was the boundaries of their working space with family living, as it interfered with the areas of relaxation and meal preparation.

A third and most challenging category was the academics with spouses and children at home, both with children of school age, as well as toddlers or babies. In this category, the academics have had to initiate strict regimes and a robust structure to their daily life. One example was of an academic, who would wake up at 5:00am, to start her working day, and interrupt at 9:00am in order to assist the children with home schooling. In this case, the academic would work sporadic hours during the day and in between her children's needs. The same situation was faced by another academic with children of a younger age who mentioned that she had to be with them constantly, as they needed her attention, and she would try to work during nap times and in the night. In such cases, the space boundaries were non-existent in the family home. It is worth noting that one academic mentioned "I found it very hard to work with young kids at home..." and another one mentioned that "I had to have some structure in my day, in the same way as I had when I used to go to the office". The situation was even more challenging when partner's working patterns were affecting the academic's working patterns, in addition to childcare support; the level of spousal support during the lockdowns was a major criterion to academics' working progress (whether support was present or not). There were two occasions when academics have reported that extended family support could make a difference to their work productivity. If the two households were creating a support bubble, the academic was given the space to work without any disturbances.

Wellbeing

We have identified, early on in the interview process, that mental health effects in women academics were a significant factor to their working life. The situation of the pandemic and the lockdowns, together with the sense of an unknown virus, at that time, put a significant strain on their mental health. In three cases, substantial health issues that the academics faced due to the pandemic, either themselves or close family members, have had an adverse effect on their professional career and their work/life balance. The situation has progressed to more serious cases presently and academics are still facing ongoing issues as a result of the pandemic. It is worth noting that one academic mentioned "I did not publish anything during the lockdowns, it was a challenging time for me".

The concept of achieving success has resulted in burdening themselves with increased working hours, in order to be able to be treated "equally" to their colleagues. The need for progression, in certain occasions, was a cause for working additional hours, during evenings and weekends. The academics have admitted, in these cases, that the boundaries between home life and professional life were nonexistent and they have realised, during the interview process, how much more they have been working, in order to achieve recognition by their peers and senior management. In terms of resilience, they have identified that either it comes from within themselves and the way they have been raised or from the aim to achieve career progression. In one case, an academic admitted that she has to be showing a lot of "masculinity" in her working life, in order to be treated in the same way as her colleagues, and this had an adverse effect in her mental health.

Resilience

Women in academia have shown high levels of resilience, which are connected to a variety of factors. Success and the need to be a successful academic is an area this research has identified as an important factor, but also the sense of what success is for women academics is what "keeps me going", as one of the participants has mentioned. The need to "look after" students and their families is something that comes from within themselves and the way women have grown up, as well as the values they have acquired. Career promotion and a sense of wanting to seem adequate to male colleagues is another factor that was identified, with the notion to appear "equal". On several occasions, women academics have mentioned that they have to show "masculinity" to appear equal to male colleagues and this required high levels of resilience. Finally,

women academics have shown high levels of resilience in order to appear they are managing well, while trying to manage their welfare, especially at a volatile time. The sense of the unknown, especially during the first lockdown in the UK, has forced women to overcome their fear and keep themselves busy in their daily family and professional life. This resulted in women academics not discussing constraints at home which prohibited them from working and progressing with the professional career. It is worth noting that one of the senior academics said that “I would never tell a male colleague about childcare problems at home, no way”.

A significant issue was identified during the interview process that relates to high quality work as opposed to mass productivity. In the case of senior academics or academics with older children who were not in need of constant attention, the academics were significantly more productive; noting one academic that mentioned “I was very productive during the lockdowns...”. In such cases, a small number of academics have admitted that the quality of work may not have been to a high standard, as they were used to work previously, and this is connected with the overall situation and environment that academics were operating under. In the case of early career academics, the situation was somewhat different; in one occasion, the academic admitted that “I tried to submit a project proposal, but I found it hard to work with some male colleagues; I really believe they tried to obstruct my proposal...”. The outcome of this interview revealed a high level of competitiveness amongst academics during the pandemic, as they had to operate in a more constraint environment and this resulted to inequalities in working relationships.

Discussion and Implications

For the HE sector, the pandemic has been a stepping stone to digital learning, remote working and an educational community working in isolation. The work-life balance of university staff has suffered, due to the home-working environments, which are not always suitable and adequate for work. The pandemic has intensified a “gendered inequality” due to the working conditions and home circumstances for men and women (Oleschuk, 2020). In many cases, women have been stepping up to make amendments to their working patterns, in order to manage housework, home-schooling and any other type of caring and family responsibilities (Collins et al, 2020).

This study is limited to research women academics in the UK, from a variety of disciplines but recognise that not a full consideration of all disciplines and seniority levels can be covered. This means that the sample may not fully represent academics from all fields, as comparison research between different fields is beyond the scope of the study. For this purpose, further research is needed amongst academics from all disciplines, and, for an expanded comparison, investigating both men and women academics' experiences during the pandemic. Additionally, further research can potentially investigate the longitudinal aspect of this study, and lessons learned from this period, as well as how the behaviour of women academics currently is. Have women academics become more resilience facing these challenges? Is wellbeing important and have priorities in life changed? Do women academics look after ourselves, and have they learned to say “no”?

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