# QUESTIONS TO THINK OF WHEN CONSIDERING FLEXIBLE WORK:

## Full time or part time work, what's best for you?

**Professor Sue Gray, Department of Meteorology:**

*"I have thought on and off continually for years about officially reducing my hours but cannot see a way to do that without making my research even more of a part-time hobby than it currently is and also increasing my stress levels."*

**Professor Ellie Highwood, Dean of Equality and Inclusion and Professor in Meteorology, works part-time:**

*"I have worked 80% FTE (or thereabouts depending on whether you assume HR hours or normal academic practice hours) for the past 5 years. Once both children had full time places in nursery, I considered going back to full time, but we decided that we could afford to take the financial hit of remaining at 80% working 4 days per week because this gave us flexibility as a family. My working environment is more permitting of part-time than my husband's, otherwise things might have been different. Being officially part-time made a big difference to my/our stress levels. On Fridays I sometimes kept one child home from nursery to do something different with them, but more often caught up on "domestic management" so that we didn't have to do them at the weekend and could enjoy our family time together. Having said that, I think I work much more intensively now, so the total of useful hours is probably the same as before!*

*Since September, I've changed my routine to cope with the school-run and still work 80% but spread over 5 days. The benefit of being officially part-time is the ability to say no to things that would disproportionately skew how I spend my working time. Of course it is hard to mark 80% of a dissertation, or teach 80% of a module, but I feel happy saying I will supervise fewer projects or tutees to compensate. Although this was always recognised and supported by my line manager, I finally felt this was taken seriously when I was asked to take a leadership role  and successfully negotiated to take on only part of it that was more in line with being 80%."*

## Can I afford a reduction in salary?

Flexible work allows you to work full time hours whilst spending part of these working from home, or to reduce your hours to work part time only. If you choose to work part time, your salary will be reduced pro-rata. The decision on whether to work full time, flexibly, or to cut your hours and take a reduction in what you earn, very much depends on personal circumstances, choice and on whether you have additional costs such as childcare to cover. Working from home will reduce the costs of travel if you live at a distance from campus, and working around school pick up times can also reduce the cost of additional childcare.

## Will you do this formally or informally and how do you arrange this?

There is a formal request route which can be found on the HR website (see the Flexible working Application form in the "Working at Reading" section). Normally a formal request for flexible work is reviewed on an annual basis, with your line manager. However many people have informal

arrangements which are made in discussion with their line managers and these arrangements can be very flexible depending on what you are working on, the time of year or personal circumstances (e.g. school holidays, ill health in the family). Any arrangement requiring a reduction in your working hours needs to be done formally through your line manager.

## What should I discuss with my line manager?

You should always have a discussion with your line manager before changing your working patterns, to seek their approval and agree arrangements. Any discussions about flexible working arrangements should include what you are hoping to achieve and how this will benefit you and the School. You could also chat this through with colleagues to find out what they think. Ideally, this means working on a specific project or task (e.g. part of your research, marking exam scripts or writing reports) which you can ideally complete more successfully from home, free from distractions and interruptions. However, particularly for those with irregular working patterns (e.g. working in evenings), this can be used to keep on top of emails, manage a "to do list" and keep control of a burgeoning inbox. Having *that discussion* with your line manager is very useful *to them* (to keep track of your working patterns and achievements), *to colleagues* (who know when you are in the office and to maintain their trust), and also *to you*, so that you use this time successfully. Your discussion might include the following:

- Your requested working patterns, contact details from home (e.g. mobile, etc), and why this is going to work (i.e. beneficial or neutral effects to the organization. Your line manager will consider any reasonable requests for flexible working but staff must appreciate that they will need to take into consideration the constraints that might demand a refusal or modification of the request).

- How you will inform colleagues of your whereabouts (you can do this through administrative staff if you benefit from this support, or by email to others).

- Adjusting what you hope to achieve and focusing on one achievable target rather than having a scatter gun approach.

- Setting goals is a very important if you are planning to work flexibly. The SMART objective is useful when planning this work:
  **S**pecific "I will work on this project",
  **M**easurable "What do I want to have achieved by the end of the day"
  **A**greed (with your line manager and colleagues)
  **R**ealistic "Is this the most urgent priority, can this be done from home…"
  **T**ime-bound "I will do this by … date…"

- Realistic reduction in your workload (if you choose to work part-time) and how to manage the demands of your research.

- How will I manage the demands of others (in the team or external) and do my arrangements balance my needs with those of the team?

- What essential meetings / events do you need to attend?

- Keeping a timesheet for work carried out, outside of office hours or from home with specific achievements. For those using TOIL (Time Off In Lieu) this should be recorded.

- When you will next assess the effectiveness of these working arrangements.

# What are the IT and technology constraints for working from home?

You may have a laptop at home or work which you can use, but you should make sure you are complying with the university guidelines on working from home and that you have VPN access and access to any specialist software that is needed so that you can work from home. You should also make sure that your internet connection at home is sufficiently powerful for the sort of work you are going to carry out.

# How and where will you work when you are at home?

Your environment needs to be sufficiently quiet to be able to work productively. You may need to arrange for care for your children if they are still little, so that you can work. You should also make sure you can be contacted on your mobile whilst you are at home in case this is needed.

# What will the impact be on the rest of the team?

You need to make sure that your team knows your working hours. They may need to be able to reach you easily by email or phone, and in many roles you may still need to respond to emails regularly while working from home.

# How do I cover for absences?

Ensure that all commitments relating to teaching and administration duties are covered, either by rearranging classes or by arranging for a colleague to cover for you. Ensure that you are up to date with any work and where possible pre-empt any matters that might need attending to, while you are away and to arrange for a colleague to handle these for you should the need arise. Stay in regular e-mail contact with staff and students – if this is not possible please make sure you have set up the automated "away from email message" (https://www.mailopts.reading.ac.uk/ or on MS Outlook: Mail/Tools/Out of Office Assistant) to warn of your absence from email, and arrange with a colleague to field queries on your behalf. If you are going to be away for an important meeting, make sure that relevant papers or presentations are sent in on time, and that close colleagues can report back to you (you may be able to participate through conference calls or Skype).

# Do the requirements of my job fit in with flexible work?

You may need to consider this if you are a service provider in a specific location (i.e. can I do my work from home). If you provide a service, you will need to make sure that you are not working away at times when you will be needed, and that you have adequate cover whilst you are away. Some research is also more easily done from the work place, particularly if you are using specific software or programme, as VPN and other tools are not always satisfactory from home. If you have line management responsibilities, you need to make sure that your colleagues can have regular face to face contact with you (email contact is not sufficient for good line management), so you will need to make time whilst you are in the department to see them. Those with administrative responsibilities need to make sure that they are around in the department at important meetings.

# How will my performance be managed?

There are no differences in the performance management of those working flexibly. The university recognizes that part-time work impacts on output, for example in promotion cases, there is a section

on personal circumstances where this can be recorded, and panels will take into account that there will be fewer papers or outputs for staff working part-time. This is also taken into consideration by the Research Excellence Framework (REF).

Nevertheless, both the school and you need to benefit from your working practices and therefore it is reasonable to have a discussion about how this is working out, with line managers and colleagues, to make adjustments if necessary. Obviously, performance management is dependent on the outcome of your work. If you have set specific targets and deadlines for work and evaluate your progress regularly, with your line manager then this is simple. The PDR is a good time to think about this and talk about your effectiveness. As we all work in teams, you should also keep in mind whether your colleagues feel comfortable with these arrangements, to maintain good working relationships with them.

## How will I manage my visibility at work, if working flexibly:

- Allowing others to know of commitments and availability during the week (i.e. use of up to date electronic diaries)

- Timing meetings on one day during the week (to release other days for research work or teaching preparation).

- Although it is tempting to shut yourself in your office when you are in the building, it is really important to still meet people for coffee or lunch – just regard these as part of work rather than "a break" and it's easier to justify.

- Making sure that you have a "protected" day when you are always around in the department, *and available* and making sure that cover at home is available for that day, for unexpected problems.

- Making your flexible working patterns known to others – your hours and when you are working from home, in your email signature box, note on your office door and telephone answering messages.

- Making sure there is sufficient flexibility to attend seminars out of normal working hours, where this is important.

- Working during core hours, between 10.00 am and 3 pm each day.

- Make sure others know of your working hours and alert them of the fact that you will not be able to respond to emails or make management decisions outside these times.

- Work with administrative staff, so that they know your movements and can inform others of your availability.