

# Every Researcher Counts

## Resource E

### Supplementary guides

#### E1 – A guide to flexible working for research staff: The principal investigator perspective

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## Acknowledgements

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As institutions review their policies to support a diverse research workforce, this may open up opportunities for research staff to benefit more from practices such as flexible working, career breaks and increased support with issues such as working with a disability and working in a second language. The provision of these resources can contribute to training Principal Investigators (PIs) in the diversity and equality principle of the Concordat (Principle 6), encouraging them to work with a diverse range of researcher staff within their group, where every researcher counts.

The 'Every Researcher Counts' Advisory Board has been instrumental in the development of the project including these resources. Vitae would like to thank them for their input:

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# Flexible working for research staff: The principal investigator perspective

This resource aims to help researchers manage different working patterns in a research environment. It provides an overview of some of the key aspects of flexible working and the considerations required. This document concentrates on the principal investigator (PI) perspective and it should be read in conjunction with institutional policies and guidance on the subject.

## What is flexible working?

Flexible working is a term used to describe a range of different approaches to working.

It includes (but is not limited to):

- Flexible hours – this might affect start and finish times to give researchers flexibility at the beginning and end of the day
- Working part-time – this does not necessarily equate to a researcher working 0.5 FTE – a researcher could for example work 0.2 FTE or 0.8 FTE
- Job sharing – this usually involves two people sharing a full-time post
- Working compressed hours – this enables a researcher to fulfil their contractual hours over fewer days. For example, working a 37 hour week over a four day period
- Working different hours at different times of year depending upon the requirements for teaching and research in your department or only working at particular times in the year, for instance in term time only
- Flexibility of work location including the opportunity to work from home or a location closer to home
- Flexibility for personal needs on a regular or occasional basis – this may include periods of carers' leave or emergency dependents leave

## The case for flexible working:

Employment legislation gives some researchers a statutory right to request flexible working. Researchers are eligible to request flexible working if they have been employed for a continuous period of 26 weeks and they:

- have or expect to have parental responsibility for a child under the age of 17
- have or expect to have parental responsibility for a disabled child under the age of 18 who receives Disability Living Allowance
- are the parent/guardian/foster carer or are applying to care for a child who is under the age of 17 or disabled and under the age of 18
- are a carer who cares for or expects to care for an adult who is a relative or is not related but lives at the same address.

Flexible working may also be appropriate in other circumstances, for example, on the return to work after an illness or to help manage an ongoing illness or disability.

There is also a clear business case for flexible working and it is for this reason that many employers, including higher education institutions allow all staff, not just those who have rights under employment law, to make requests for flexible working.

### Attraction

- The need to be an employer of choice despite not being able to offer the highest salaries
- The need for a positive image as an employer to attract the best candidates

### Recruitment

- The need to keep costs of advertising and retraining down
- The need for a more diverse workforce to meet legislative and other targets
- The need to compete for skills

### Retention

- The need to retain graduates and the next generation of academic staff
- The need to retain skilled and experienced staff
- The need to retain employees in their 30s, 40s and 50s juggling work and home commitments

### Performance

- The need to lower stress while still maintaining/improving productivity
- The need to ensure good customer service
- The need to reduce absence levels
- The need to reduce effect of personal issues on productivity

From 'Making Flexible Working Work in Higher Education: A good practice guide for higher education institutions' (2008) [www.staff.ac.uk/feo](http://www.staff.ac.uk/feo)

As a principal investigator you can work together with your Human Resources department to understand the flexible working policy of your institution and how it can be implemented in your team.

## How does flexible working work in practice? Practical examples:

- Jason is a physicist and he has two children aged four and seven. Jason and his partner do not live close to their family and to ensure childcare provision during school holidays Jason works in school term times only
- Joanne has a 0.6 FTE contract and works two days per week from home on research and one day per week teaching in her department. She is flexible about coming to the department for meetings on her research days. She and her principal investigator agree with as much advance notice as is possible the important meetings and whether she will be participating by phone or in person
- Tessa leads a large team of researchers, some of whom have children. She allows her researchers to work from home for a maximum of one day per week on a flexible basis. Tessa allows them to manage this themselves as long as all of her team are in the department every Wednesday, which she has denoted a 'core day'
- As a Reader within the department, Tom needs some flexibility to look after his mother, who has recently been diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease. He needs to leave work on two afternoons at four o'clock, as he shares the evening care of his mother with his brothers. Tom is able to catch up on reading and emails when he is away from the lab. His need to leave early on two days per week has forced him to manage his time at work more efficiently and concentrate on the most important priorities in his research environment.

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## If a researcher makes a request for flexible working do I have to agree?

Researchers have a right to request flexible working if they have parenting and caring responsibilities but there is no obligation for you to agree to their requests. However, if you decline a request from a researcher with parenting or caring responsibilities you must state in writing the business reason for declining their request and include information on your institution's appeals process.

The key to coming to an arrangement over work flexibility is that both you and the researchers you are responsible for are prepared to discuss and apply the principles of flexible working to achieve a successful outcome for both parties.

It is important to give full consideration to any requests for flexible working and to look at the ways in which the researcher making the request will be responsible for the successful implementation. The initial request may require fine-tuning from you, and others in your work environment, with the aim of finding a workable solution.

Encourage any researcher requesting more flexibility to look at the situation from all sides before discussing the subject with you. You need to see that they have thought through the implications for their work and how it impacts the wider team. This will also help you to decide whether you need to be more flexible in reaching a manageable solution for this researcher.

You will need to do your preparation ahead of any discussion or request for flexible working. Do not revert to a default answer of 'no' without considering the wider case the researcher is presenting to you and whether your working environment can accommodate the changes that the member of your team is requesting. Just because your environment has always operated in this way does not mean to say that it cannot be adapted to meet the needs of members of your team. You can also consider having a trial period to see how flexible working works for the researcher concerns and your department.

There are several points to consider when preparing for this discussion:

- **What flexibility can you actually offer?** Can you be flexible on start times, working from home, how and when your team takes their holiday? Can the wider work of your group be done in a different way to the way it has always been done?
- **What do you want the researcher to offer in return for flexibility?** Flexible working is not a one-way agreement. What commitments would you need from the researcher?
- **Why would you say yes to a request for flexible work?** For a number of reasons – retention of good researchers, keeping your team committed and motivated by being able to put yourself in their shoes. They will not ask for flexible working without a good reason and some understanding from you will be appreciated
- **What flexibility is there in your work at the moment?** Although your work environment may have operated this way for many years, more flexibility may be possible. It is up to both you and the researcher to find a workable solution: activities that do not need to be carried out in the workplace could be done elsewhere, creating flexibility on both sides
- **Do any other principal investigators you know have examples of flexible working that you can draw on?** Human Resources will be able to help with the process of agreeing flexible working; it is also helpful to talk to your peers. Discuss with your wider network and discover different examples of flexible working and how your peers make it work

■ **How are you going to make it work?** This is a two-way responsibility for the researcher as well as for you to manage. It may require some change in your own behaviour to make it work. What can you do to help your team member be more effective in the work place and for them to have the benefit of flexible working? You will also need to consider how this will work with your other team members and how you will manage multiple requests. Communication is key to this. Whilst it is largely up to the researcher to make this work, it will require flexibility and cooperation from you and your colleagues

■ **How long is it needed it for?** It is best to clarify this up-front; you might want to agree a trial period, after which you both evaluate its success. You can both learn from this before making a decision to extend or curtail the timeframe

The key points are:

- Be prepared and do your research before automatically turning down a request
- Be flexible over the exact nature of the changes you can agree to; it might be easier than you think
- Encourage your researcher to look for a range of solutions rather than one fixed outcome

## What is the process for (formally) asking for flexible working:

Employment legislation requires that an employee submits their request in writing (even if it is based on a series of conversations). You have up to 28 days to hold a meeting with the researcher or to provide a written response agreeing to the flexible working arrangements. Following the meeting you have 14 days to inform the researcher in writing of the outcome of their request, this can be a compromise. If the request is rejected and the researcher decides to appeal, you have 14 days in which to consider their appeal. Within 14 days of hearing their appeal you are required to notify them in writing of the outcome.

If a request for flexible working is agreed then it may result in a permanent change to the researcher's contract and if the researcher works fewer hours then it is likely that their pay will reduce.

## Summary

Our working environments require us to be flexible as team members and leaders to be able to get our work done to a high standard and to meet the needs of the institution and funders. The challenges of managing responsibilities in and out of work mean that researchers may require some flexibility too, regardless of seniority or age. Flexible working can be beneficial to both sides if it is agreed in a way that provides mutual benefit so that the quality and quantity of work the team is committed to doing does not suffer.

In considering a request for flexible working you should consider the needs of your researcher as well as your own needs and those of your research. Showing some flexibility to a member of your team at a time that they need it can help to build commitment and loyalty to the work that you do as a team. Generally, researchers do not ask for flexible working without a valid reason and they have usually given considerable thought to the request before making it. Admittedly, sometimes this can be biased to the benefits to themselves rather than to the work of the team or their colleagues. As the senior person you can encourage them to think about the practicalities of how they (and their colleagues, including you) will be affected by a change to their working pattern and how you are all going to manage this to the benefit of the individuals in the team and the work you do as a team.