

# Work-life balance of early career academics in the context of COVID-19 pandemic-related regulatory changes

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Als Reaktion auf die Corona-Pandemie haben die deutschen Universitäten zwischen März 2020 und Dezember 2021 gesetzliche Rahmenbedingungen verabschiedet, welche Homeoffice oder hybride Arbeitsformen vorschreiben. Diese Regelungen schafften sowohl Möglichkeiten als auch Herausforderungen für die Work-Life-Balance der Wissenschaftlerinnen und Wissenschaftler. Basierend auf der Annahme, dass sowohl Wissenschaft als auch Familie als „greedy institutions“ – besitzergreifende Institutionen – einzustufen sind, zielt diese Research Note darauf ab, die Zusammenhänge zwischen den sich verändernden Regelungen und den Home-Office-Erfahrungen von Nachwuchswissenschaftlerinnen und Nachwuchswissenschaftlern an einer Universität in Nordrhein-Westfalen zu verstehen. Während diese Regelungen zum Schutze der Gesundheit eingeführt wurden, wirkten sie sich nachteilig auf die Vereinbarkeit der besitzergreifenden Institutionen Wissenschaft und Familie aus. Hierbei wurden Intersektionalitätseffekte beobachtet, wobei insbesondere Nachwuchswissenschaftlerinnen mit Kindern, die während der Pandemie im Homeoffice arbeiteten, nachteilige Erfahrungen in Bezug auf ihre Work-Life-Balance machten.

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## 1 Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic constitutes a significant transformation of how, when and where we work in academia. With its lockdowns, home schooling, work from home and various new regulations, COVID-19 has affected universities and academics in multiple ways (Marinoni et al., 2020). Home office work arrangements have become common, where academics work in online environments while also often coping with domestic and family responsibilities. German academia was not an exception.

Even though the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on academic practices have been studied, the work-life balance of female early career academics in the context of regulatory changes regarding home office still merits attention (Engelhardt et al., 2022; Guy & Arthur, 2020; Haag, 2022). Thus, we ask: What did working hours and the work-life balance of early career academics look like in the context of pandemic-related regulatory changes between March 2020 and December 2021? We aim to shed light on this issue based on a case study of one university in North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW), the state with the highest density of higher education institutions in Germany.

## **2 Literature review**

### **2.1 Changing control of academic work conditions**

A financial crisis and public distrust pushed European governments in the early 1980s to reform public sectors to cut costs and better serve public needs (Pollitt et al., 2007). The idea of making public sectors more efficient and effective has followed different trajectories in various European countries, and has been influential in transforming the governance arrangements in higher education (Capano & Pritoni, 2020). In German HE, these reforms have been implemented differently and to a different extent in the 16 federal states, with NRW following a significant managerial orientation. This has been achieved through negotiations, as the voices of professors and collegial decision-making are still powerful despite the formal powers given to rectors and external advisory boards following the managerial reforms (Hüther & Krücken, 2018). The role of federal states, however, is still strong in steering HE in Germany. The control of academic work conditions is thus a shared responsibility.

### **2.2 Work-life balance in academia**

In the context of managerial reforms, performance pressure, especially regarding research, has been evident (Leišytė & Wilkesmann, 2016). Academics on all types of contracts end up working overtime in order to reach self-imposed as well as externally-imposed demands of the university. At the same time, state and university employment regulations usually define the number of working hours for academics, to ensure work-life balance. The boundaries between work and home in academia, however, have been not as clear cut and are increasingly blurring due to the pressure of performance on the one hand, and on the other hand, the importance of quality of life and the need to pay attention to domestic arrangements. Here, having dependent children makes a big difference as parents and guardians may experience stronger conflicts between work and life (Manzo & Minello, 2020).

Furthermore, gender plays a strong role in work task distribution and family responsibilities, despite years of fighting for gender equality (Deryugina et al., 2021; Oleschuk, 2020). Female academics are known to engage in pastoral care of students more than male academics and spend more working time on academic housework, i. e., academic tasks and responsibilities that are usually unrecorded and go unrewarded, rather than on the activities crucial for career development, such as research (Acker & Armenti, 2004; Heijstra et al., 2017; Leišytė & Hosch-Dayican, 2014).

### 2.3 Academic work in the pandemic times

The COVID-19 pandemic forced many HE institutions to instigate strict home working policies, closing campuses in many European countries. In this context, academics were to work from home, researching, teaching and carrying out administrative tasks online, while taking care of their families (Watermeyer et al., 2021).

Academics having to rapidly switch to online teaching and assessment has resulted in increased teaching workloads and changes in research productivity, with women and early career academics most disadvantaged (Cui et al., 2021). The surveys of doctoral and early career researchers carried out during two lockdowns in the UK in 2020 and 2021 (Vitae, 2020; Vitae, 2021) have shown that working from home actually created more time, thus leading to higher productivity and work-life balance (Jackman et al., 2021).

Almost half of UK respondents in a second pandemic wave study in 2021 (N = 1,347) worked the same number of hours as before the COVID-19 pandemic, and 62 per cent of respondents with care responsibilities reported a negative impact for research time, teaching and administrative duties. At the same time, the second-wave study found fewer gender differences than the first-wave study (Jackman et al., 2021).

A survey of Dutch academia by Bol et al. (2021) also pointed out that academics experienced conflict in work-life balance during the lockdown period. Respondents did not manage to fulfil all work tasks to the standard they expected due to family-related stress. Gender differences were observed when it came to the perception of work-family conflict among academics with children, with women experiencing more conflict than men (Shankar et al., 2021).

## 3 Conceptual considerations

To better understand the tension between work and life, we turn to the notion of "*greedy institutions*" as coined by Lewis Coser (1974). These institutions aim to use all of a person's energy, leaving the person with no time for other commitments. Coser (1974) describes family as a greedy institution. Sullivan builds on Coser's notion to describe parenthood as a greedy institution that requires long hours of care and commitment (Sullivan, 2014).

Academia with its emphasis on research is characterised as another greedy institution with high demands for productivity, intense competition and long working hours (Bone et al., 2018; de Campo, 2013). Lind (2013) refers to research as a greedy occupation that demands a person's total commitment and leaves little room for other interests.

In her view, a greedy occupation means total identification with the activity and an unrestricted grip of the institution on the person. At the same time, she argues, research as a greedy occupation needs to be differentiated according to status groups. The greedy part for professors includes very high workloads and excessive working hours, while for early career academics it is not only about being completely absorbed by too high workloads, but this occupation's greediness also influences decisions regarding one's life plans (Lind, 2013; Metz-Göckel et al., 2009). Furthermore, online work in academia may intensify the *greediness* of this occupation (de Campo, 2013). As Sullivan (2014, p. 5), for example, notes, "*technology has enabled employers to get greedier—often while appearing to do just the opposite*", as employers can claim that technology saves time and brings efficiency.

Based on the above, one can assume that the COVID-19 pandemic setting, with many academics working online in home office, increased the pressure and conflict between two greedy institutions – academia and family. For academics with children, the tensions were probably exacerbated by home schooling and closed kindergarten facilities (and grandparents and nannies not being available in order to minimise health risks).

At the same time, the greedy institution of academia can be held in check by regulatory environments and other labour conditions, such as flexible work arrangements and holidays (Sullivan, 2014). Thus, regulatory environments may facilitate or prevent the absorption of individuals by the *greediness* of institutions. Here, the regulatory context is thus important as it could mediate the conflict between work and home. To better understand the regulatory context, we turn to the higher education governance equalizer model (de Boer et al., 2007), which identifies three dimensions of higher education governance: 1) regulation by the state, 2) managerial self-governance, and 3) academic self-governance (de Boer et al., 2007).

#### 4 Methodology

The study involved primary and secondary data collection, such as a) federal and NRW pandemic and HE laws and regulations, b) circular emails showing responses to the pandemic at the case study university, c) an interview with the officer responsible for pandemic regulation at the case study university, and d) an online survey of early-career academics on precarious fixed-term positions at the case study university. These early-career academics included doctoral candidates, postdocs and junior professors. We focused on the period from March 2020 to December 2021 as this was the time when regulatory frameworks required academics to work from home for the most part.

Drawing on document analysis, we traced pandemic-related regulation when it comes to defining academic work and regulating home office and childcare facilities. The

interview provided insights into how the federal and NRW regulations were implemented in the case study institution and complemented the information from the circular emails. Understanding the regulatory context by triangulating the sources of data was important to situate the conditions under which the studied academics worked in this challenging period in the case study institution.

To provide an illustration of the experience of early career academics' work-life balance during the pandemic, a survey of early career academics at the case study university was conducted in summer 2021 (N = 193), when home office was still the norm but children were attending schools. The population of academics at the selected university was 2,599 in 2021. We focused on academics from the faculties that do not engage in laboratory research, such as humanities, social sciences, and mathematics, as these staff were most likely to have worked remotely a good deal. The sub-population from the selected faculties comprised 1,390 early career academic staff. We received 193 usable responses. Thus, the response rate is 14 per cent. The distribution by academic rank is representative of the population, with less than 5 per cent deviation between the sample and population. Regarding gender, female respondents are over represented with a 20 per cent deviation between the sample and population; thus, the gender comparison results need to be read with care.

Among the respondents, 30.4 per cent had children at home, and 67 per cent were female. The majority of respondents worked as research assistants (wissenschaftliche Mitarbeitende) (N = 171) with a minority of junior professors (N = 22). All of them worked at home at least part of the time during the pandemic. The survey was conducted using Limesurvey, and data were analysed using SPSS.

## **5 Regulatory changes and their institutional implementation**

As a response to the changing regulations from various NRW ministries and the federal ministry, the case study university adjusted its internal regulations on a constant basis. During the study period, 64 circular emails were sent to all employees and students, informing them about the changes due to the new regulatory ordinances. As noted by the interviewed officer, the university management was anticipating changes regarding home office and acted fast responding to the new legal provisions. The university installed a committee to deal with the pandemic issues in March 2020, which worked on the translation of the rules into the local institutional context.

On 16 March 2020, the first announcement was circulated that home office will be the regular place of work for all employees from 18 March on. Working in home office was defined as being on-call, with employees who carry out their work in the home office ensuring their availability during core working hours and being on stand-by in

case their presence at the university was requested by their supervisor. The start of the semester was postponed to 20 April, and teaching was foreseen to be offered exclusively online as informed via email on 8 April. This gave academics around one month to prepare for teaching fully in the online mode. Next, on 15 April, the regulation allowed carrying out examinations and thesis defences in the online mode.

Towards the end of the first semester, in June 2020 the university was allowed to hold on-site events for up to 50 people. Home office, however, remained the norm for all employees. In July, working from home and on campus was allowed and treated as equally possible following the NRW "Verordnung zum Schutz vor Neuinfizierungen mit dem Coronavirus SARS-CoV-2" (VSNC) of 1 July 2020 (Fn 1).

In August 2020, some relaxation of rules was brought about through the VSNC of 31 August 2020 (Fn 1). This revision allowed onsite meetings as well as lectures and examinations on campus, following the general hygiene rules. Home office remained an alternative. These relaxed rules were in operation until October 2020, when home office again was more encouraged. The regulation VSNC of 30 October (Fn 1) pointed out that in winter semester, hybrid teaching was the norm, and home office was preferred to working in the office on campus. In November, only online teaching was allowed, with in-person examinations on campus possible only if some specific onsite equipment was needed, following the VSNC of 30 November (Fn 1).

At the start of 2021, home office, online teaching, and online examinations became the norm (VSNC, 7 January 2021). At the end of June 2021, the obligation to work from home expired, so home office and work on campus were treated on equal footing. From 31 July, teaching was allowed on campus with fewer restrictions (VSNC, 24 June 2021).

The regulation of work protection, the "SARS-CoV-2-Arbeitsschutzverordnung" (SCA), was prolonged on 22 November 2021, which allowed work from home for those who wished to do so. In December, another revision of the VSNC was published, according to which teaching was supposed to continue on campus following the 3G rules, but also online teaching could be allowed by the rectorates.

As could be seen from circular emails and as verified in the interview with the pandemic officer at the university, each department had to take care of the equipment and other office supplies to be taken home by university employees to ensure that home office could function well. Similarly, the university set up a range of online tools that gradually were adopted by academics in home office, such as zoom.

The timing of lockdowns and school closures roughly coincided with the period of home office for academic staff. For example, in 2020, schools in NRW were closed completely between 13 March and 4 May for first graders (Jungblut, 2020). Hybrid teaching in schools started on 15 November, when hundreds of schools closed or switched to hybrid teaching. From 22 February 2021 on, a reopening took place with children returning to school in an *alternating* class model, which continued until 23 April and meant partial home schooling for parents (Lehmann, 2022).

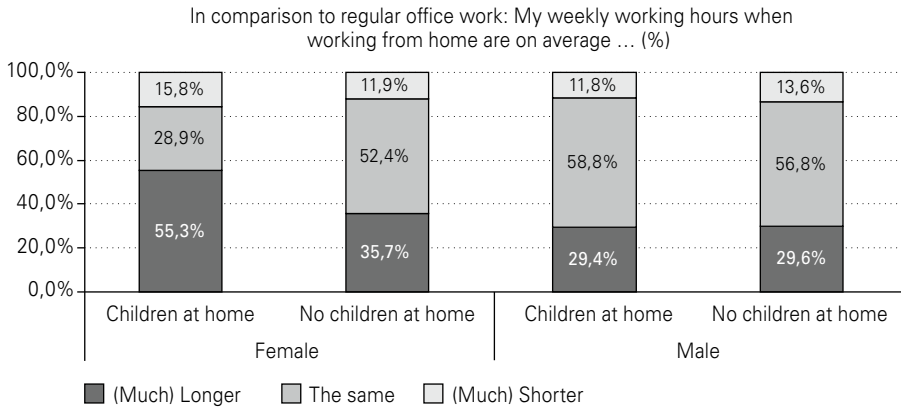
## **6 Academic views on home office, work hours and work-life balance**

Around 40 per cent of survey respondents indicated that they worked at home not because of their own choice. This points to the regulatory environment in which employees found themselves, as they had limited choice to work on campus in summer 2021. At the same time, 35 per cent of respondents (both male and female) voluntarily opted for working at home.

Looking at the work hours in home office, 49 per cent of respondents reported that they worked as many hours as in regular office. 38 per cent, however, reported working longer hours, and 18 per cent reported working shorter hours in the home office. Here, we can see some gender differences, as 47 per cent of female respondents and 57 per cent of male respondents reported working the same hours in home office, while 42 per cent of female respondents and 29 per cent of male respondents reported working longer hours.

When it comes to the work hours in home office among the respondents who have children or who do not, we also observe some differences. 47 per cent of respondents with children at home report working longer hours in home office compared to 34 per cent of respondents without children. A closer look (see Figure 1) shows that the highest percentage (55 %) of those working much longer hours are women with children at home. Similarly, this group of women also stands out, as it is the least likely to work the same hours in home office as in the regular office (29 % compared to more than 50 % for men and women without children at home). This points to the importance of intersectionality in understanding the working hours and workloads while working from home, in this case, the intersection of early career, being female, and having children.

**Figure 1:** Working hours in home office compared to regular office work hours (N = 183).



Furthermore, to understand the extent to which the respondents can separate work and private spheres while working from home, we asked two questions. First, we inquired if the respondents were distracted a lot while working in the home office. And second, we asked if the respondents found that they could leave work behind at the end of the working day and fully concentrate on their personal life. 34 per cent of respondents agreed that they were distracted a lot while working from home, while 41 per cent of respondents disagreed with this. When exploring the responses by gender, there were differences in terms of those respondents who disagreed, with 48 per cent of female respondents versus 29 per cent of male respondents indicating that they do not feel distracted a lot. Seemingly, a higher percentage of female respondents was able to concentrate more on work in the home office. One possible explanation is that women were more used to being interrupted prior to the pandemic (Heijstra et al., 2017).

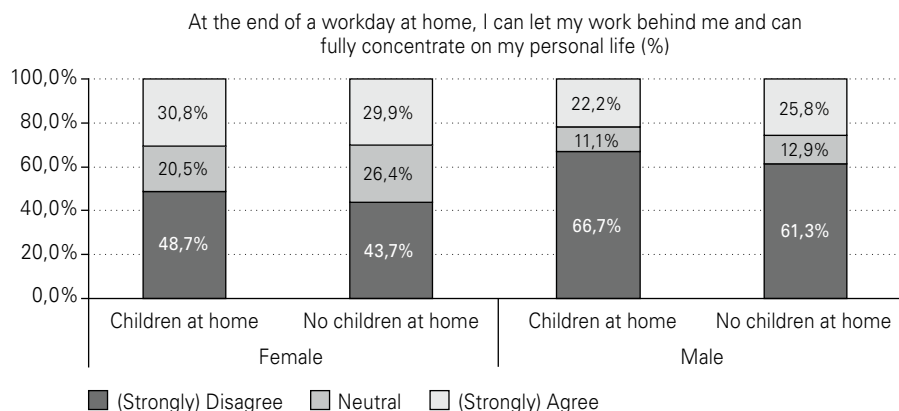
Around 51 per cent of respondents reported that the separation between work and personal life was harder in the home office, with 29 per cent indicating that work-life separation was as easy as working in the regular office. Looking closer at the responses by gender, differences can be observed. 61 per cent of male respondents disagree that they can leave their work behind and can concentrate on their life at the end of the day, compared to 46 per cent of female respondents. This might indicate that the men were used to staying longer in the university before the pandemic and thus escaped domestic tasks, and they continued the same pattern also during the pandemic (Maume, 2016).

The differences seem even more visible when exploring the responses by gender and by having children (see Figure 2). Respondents with children at home seem to be less



likely to leave the work behind at the end of the working day (49 % females, 67 % males), compared to respondents with no children at home (44 % and 61 % respectively). These findings again point to the intersectional effects of gender and having children on work-life balance. Here the responses show that having children means that separation of work and personal life is more difficult, with a stronger effect visible among fathers. At the same time, male respondents seem to be more susceptible to or deliberately seeking the greediness of academia irrespective of having children or not. Given that we have a slight overrepresentation of females in our sample, this effect may even be larger. Still nearly half of the female respondents as shown in Figure 2 (49 % and 44 % respectively) seem to be susceptible to the greedy institution of academia, as measured by the inability to leave work behind at the end of the working day. Further research should explore how this separation between work in the home office and personal life is affected by having the partner or other carer being at home, as this could have a mediating effect. Unfortunately, following the pandemic regulations, only family members from the same household could help out with care activities, while external help was not allowed, especially during the lockdown periods.

**Figure 2:** Separation of work and personal life in the home office (N = 188).



## 7 Discussion and conclusion

This research note aims to add to our understanding of how work-life balance and academic work changed for early career academics during the COVID-19 pandemic, studying the example of one university in the regulatory context of one German state (NRW). The results show that working hours and work-life balance during the first waves of the pandemic were gendered, with increased tensions between family and academia as greedy institutions. Our exploration of pandemic-related work and HE regulations and their institutional implementation combined with alternating schooling meant that nearly half of the surveyed early career academics had no choice but to

work in the home office, juggling competing tasks. The sheer number of changes in the regulatory environment and the translation of these regulations at the institutional level could be interpreted as a state's protection of its population from the spread of the virus, but could also be seen as a top-down effort that takes away broader social protection (for those who have dependents) ensuring the separation between work and home. The formal top-down measures mitigating the pandemic, in fact, increased the tensions between work and home. During the pandemic, state regulations have overrun many domains of life, including the functioning of HE institutions, and have redefined how and where academics work (Bosse et al., 2020). Academic self-guidance at the case study university seems to have been rather low when it came to making decisions related to home office arrangements, since the regulation adoption was hastily implemented, as can be seen from the dates when NRW regulations were passed and the dates when circular emails were sent to the university community. Thus, the steering capacity of universities and their leadership in the pandemic can be questioned and would need further research.

In line with the Fraunhofer IAO study (2020), where nearly half of responses showed a blurring of boundaries between work and home, our own study demonstrates that nearly half of the respondents, and especially male respondents, were unable to separate work and personal life during the pandemic. This points to the fact that the greedy institution of academia partly takes over personal life. This is not too surprising as early career academics, due to their precarious position, are known to work overtime to meet performance targets and to be *exploited* due to performance pressures and the need to find another contract (Academics Anonymous, 2016).

Furthermore, this research has shown that female respondents were more likely to work longer hours than male respondents in home office compared to regular office work. Also, half of the female respondents had difficulty separating work and private life. Here, the intersectionality effects are especially relevant, since the highest percentage (55 %) of respondents working much longer are women with children at home. Here we asked about working hours in the home office, not referring to the time of the day, or specifying the type of academic tasks, but controlling for gender and having children at home. Thus, the intersection of early career, being female academic, having children and working in the home office in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic regulatory framework matters for working hours. Working longer hours points towards the conflict between the greedy institution of motherhood or family in general, as well as the greedy institution of academia. Furthermore, the identified gender differences could also be interpreted as female academics being more likely to fall back into traditional gender roles as caregivers to family members as well as turning to care-giving roles for students (Fraunhofer IAO, 2020), which could have serious implications for their productivity and future careers (Bentley, 2015; Ruiz-Castillo & Costas, 2014).

The pandemic rules and regulations fostering home office in academia, as shown in the example of one university in the NRW, have increased the tension between the two greedy institutions of academia and family. In the crisis time of the pandemic, the control of academic work conditions was in the hands of the federal state and university management, rather than academics. The control of academic work has increased through state regulation and managerial self-governance, with diminished academic self-guidance. This is remarkable, since in NRW, universities have been rather autonomous from the state, with very strong managerial self-governance and still strong academic self-governance. Thus, the main contribution of this note is to reveal the important effect of contextual factors, such as formal regulations of home office and home schooling during the pandemic, on work and family situations of early career academics in a gender-differentiated manner. The study has a number of limitations, due to its small scale (regulations from 2020–2021 in NRW), convenience sampling of the case study (one university in NRW), lack of comparison with the pre-COVID-19 situation and a relatively low response rate. Some measures were taken to counteract these limitations. The author has discussed the findings with two colleagues to corroborate the document analysis findings. Furthermore, the interview with the officer at the case study university was another measure taken to check the timing and better understand the processes of institutional implementation of home office regulations.

Even though the generalisation of findings is not possible beyond the case study university in NRW, this is an illustrative example of early career academics' lived experiences of home office during the selected time period when the COVID-19 pandemic related home office regulations and lockdowns were hardest. Today in the context of debates about the future of academic work in the post-pandemic environment, it is important that regulatory changes reduce the tension between the two greedy institutions – academia and parenthood. One way to achieve this could be to ensure flexibility of where and when academics work, especially for female early career academics with children.

This note aims to contribute to opening a deeper discussion regarding the effects of home office on working hours, academic work-life balance and well-being in German academia in times of crisis, especially for female early career academics. It highlights the role of regulations in mitigating the greedy institutions of academia and family in such times. Further research should also explore in depth the mitigating effects of partners and caregivers in the work-life balance of academics in home office environments.

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