

Research Active Staff Engagement Survey: 'Share your views' Covid-19: What impact has it had on researchers and their work?

1. Executive Summary

The RAS survey was opened on 7th April and closed on 8th May 2020. The purpose of the survey was to engage with the research community to understand its key concerns and support required during the lockdown as a result of the Covid-19 crisis. Respondents were asked three questions:

1. What is your main research-related concern at this time?
2. What is your next most pressing research-related concern at this time?
3. What can we do to look after and support the Warwick Research Community at this time?

The survey was communicated via the May edition of the RAS Newsletter, which was sent to approximately 2000 people. The survey was also on the Organisational Development 'Helping the Research Community to stay connected' RAS webpage page. 41 responses were received. Although not a high number of responses, they provide a rich insight into the challenges currently faced by the research community at Warwick.

Responses to questions 1 and 2 overlapped and there was no real distinction between the 'main' and the 'next most pressing' research-related concerns. Therefore responses to the first two questions have been combined and collated into key themes for the purposes of this report. They are ordered by the number of responses received in relation to each theme, from highest to lowest.

This document summarises key findings and next steps.

2. Survey findings – key themes

2.1 Inability to conduct essential research

This is the primary concern with 22 respondents highlighting that they are unable to carry out fieldwork, practice, experimental lab work, face-to-face interviews and cannot access data, archives and secure laboratories. In addition they are unable to obtain peer feedback and to attend academic events and conferences. This in turn is contributing to anxiety around probation, promotion, job security and career (see 2.3).

2.2 Home working and balancing work and family/caring responsibilities

12 respondents referred to the challenges of finding both the time and concentration to focus on research whilst working from home and caring for children or other family members. Writing proposals and research papers takes the highest level of sustained concentration of any aspect of the job, and requires creativity. The need for undisturbed time and space is essential and this is not available to many in the current situation.

Several respondents indicated that their home office set up was inadequate. One said this was negatively impacting the quality of their work, and other said they had developed a physical condition due an inadequate chair.

2.3 Delays to research projects; impact on performance, career and job security

Many research projects are being delayed by the effects of the pandemic. 10 respondents highlighted this an area of concern. Specific concerns include:

- Insecurity of staff on fixed-term contracts
- Inability to produce enough papers to get through probation
- Lost research opportunities means staff can't apply for promotion
- Inability to produce the required number of outputs (a cause of stress)
- Inability to produce work to their usual standard
- Research commitments cancelled
- Lost opportunities to participate in collective funding bids and publications
- Lost opportunities to build and grow networks.

Responses indicate real, heartfelt anxiety about the effect on promotion, job security, finding the next job and longer-term career prospects.

2.4 Inequality caused by the Covid-19 situation

9 respondents referred to the fact that the lockdown is having disproportionate impact on those research staff with young children, who are more likely to be female, junior researchers. Respondents also highlighted a major concern that these staff therefore will be more disadvantaged in relation to probation and promotion processes.

2.5 Workload

Excessive workload and the expectation to 'carry on as normal', is referred to by 7 respondents. Workload includes outputs, REF, ranking, grant capture, undertaking additional work required to move teaching online and admin. One respondent described the pressure on research income as 'suffocating'. The message given by the University is that 'this is not normal', responses indicate that expectations have remained the same, and staff are expected to be able to attend meetings as normal.

2.6 Withdrawal of research time

The withdrawal of research time is raised by 5 respondents. The impact of this, plus an increase in teaching activity, means that it is very challenging to find time for research, and that staff will be unable to produce research outputs in the time required. One respondent said that they have several years' work behind them which cannot now be progressed due to the cancellation of research leave. Another concern is that research time next year will be curtailed due to increased teaching. This concern also causes anxiety around the impact on probation, promotion and careers

2.7 REF

5 respondents referred to the REF. The extension to the REF submission deadline is welcome, however uncertainty around the deadline is a cause of stress. There is concern about adhering to the current timetable of meetings/SSG calendar, particularly given the need to juggle work and caring responsibilities.

2.8 Anticipated focus on research funding for Covid-19 related research

3 respondents indicated concern that UK research funding councils will not have many open calls for areas other than Covid-19 related research, and that staff engaged in Covid-19 research will be favoured for promotion.

3. Survey findings – suggestions for greater support for the Warwick Research Community

In response to the third question 'What can we do to look after and support the Warwick Research Community at this time?' the following themes were identified:

3.1 Develop and communicate a plan for delayed research

16 responses referred to the need to know what will happen in relation to research that has been halted or delayed, and the subsequent implications for grants and those on fixed-term contracts. Suggestions included:

- Extending all Warwick co-funded research fellowships that are due to end within the next six months.
- Extending contracts to complete grants which end during the lockdown.
- STPs to remain on the payroll in the short term.
- Carry over departmental underspend on research allowances to next year to enable staff to catch up on field work and conferences.
- Allow RDF underspend to be transferred to allow completion of disrupted projects.
- Liaise with external funders to:
 - Amend expectations regarding research outputs
 - Establish whether research allowances can be extended beyond the end of the grant
 - Establish whether extensions to grants and projects are possible.
- Support the ECR community by extending fellowships.
- Relaxation of required research outputs (particularly to accommodate the disproportionate effect of the lockdown on female research staff).

3.2 Take account of the effect of the pandemic in relation to probation and promotion

As seen in the responses to the first two questions, the RAS community is overwhelmingly concerned about the effect of the pandemic on probation and promotion. 8 respondents asked that this is considered when making decisions about probation, promotion and reward. Several respondents requested that the disproportionate effect on those with caring responsibilities and with vulnerable characteristics is recognised in decisions and policies. Also that the University provides reassurance that key notes/talks that have been cancelled will still count towards promotion.

3.3 More communication for the RAS community

8 responses referred to the need for more communication. This was a wide ranging theme but particular areas of communication highlighted include:

- Reassurance that research is valued and the University will not undermine its research-intensive character.
- Provide as much certainty as possible regarding teaching and timetabling for the autumn.
- Briefings/information sessions for staff on fixed-term contracts.
- Provide a timeline of when further communications and decisions might be possible, for example in relation to delayed research (see 3.4).
- Staff appreciate being able to give their opinion/feedback.

3.4 Research leave

7 respondents referred to the withdrawal of research leave and conveyed a clear message that the University should consider the impact of cancelling research leave and its ED&I implications. Suggestions of support required include:

- Reconsider the blanket cancellation of research leave.
- Protect time for research/research leave and introduce practical initiatives to achieve this.
- Pause/extend or give back research leave to staff later.
- Give priority for research leave to staff those who have been most impacted, for example those who are carers or who have taken on additional teaching.

3.5 Resources

7 responses referred to different resources required by the RAS community:

- University Zoom licence.
- A wider range of e-books via the Library.
- Online peer feedback sessions and conferences.
- Lobby other Russell Group universities/ONS to have improved access to Secure Lab data and provide guarantees of data and computer security for home working.
- Online tutorials for using different online meeting platforms.
- Access to the office to collect stationery etc.
- Approve expenses to enable staff to work comfortably from home.
- Suggestions on time management.

3.6 Wellbeing

3 responses referred the supportive messaging which has been received, but which does not translate into practical arrangements to alleviate pressure:

- A recognition from leadership that that staff are not available for meetings etc. as they normally would be.
- No assumption that working from home increases the amount of time staff can allocate to their research.
- Relaxation of research outputs.

3.7 REF

2 responses referred to support required for the REF:

- Give clarity around the REF deadline.
- Postpone deadline for REF entries.
- Keep June meetings to a minimum for updates/progress checks.

3.8 Other suggestions

- Maintain RDF /internal funding for *all* types of research (not just Covid-19 research)
- Deliver fully functioning CL3/approve funding for CL3 modular facility.
- Extend PhD student stipends.

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Update as a 30th June 2020:

Message from Professor Pam Thomas:

Thanks to everyone that shared views as part of the recent Research Active Staff Engagement Survey.

Professor Pam Thomas, Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Research), received this feedback and arranged for it to be raised at the University Research Committee, of which Professor Thomas is the Chair.

A deal of work is underway to support all researchers during this period, and Professor Thomas will attend a July meeting of the Research Staff Forum to discuss this with colleagues and to hear your views with regards to research at the University.

An update in relation to Academic Promotions and the use of Zoom can be found here
<https://warwick.ac.uk/services/vco/cv-19comms/provcomms/1106>