



“Brilliant at
everything,
saying yes to
even more”

THE REALITIES OF
OVERWORK IN ACADEMIA

Presenter: Toma Pustelnikovaite
Co-authors: James Richards (PI),
Vaughan Ellis, Siddhartha Saxena

Leaveism (@leaveism)

- Leaveism: using allocated time off to work; related to presenteeism & absenteeism (but distinctive);
- Common in professional/managerial employment;
- Types of leaveism (Hesketh et al 2014):
 1. Utilising allocated time off (e.g. annual leave entitlement, flexi hours banked, etc) to take time off when they are unwell -> 37% of workplaces (CIPD 2018);
 2. Taking work home that cannot be completed in normal working hours -> 57% of workplaces (CIPD 2018);
 3. Working while on leave or holiday to catch up -> 33% of workplaces (CIPD 2018);
- Academia: overwork (almost) normalised – “being an academic is not a 9-5 job” (Sang et al 2015:235);
- Aims:
 - to understand how pervasive leaveism is in academia;
 - to explore academics’ experiences of leaveism.

Data

- Gathered via e-survey on personal experiences of leaveism (not exclusive to academics);
- Questions asked: types of leaveism performed & why, impact on wellbeing, changes in leaveism over the last 3 years...
- Distributed via Twitter, LinkedIn, Facebook. Focus on the UK;
- Data collected between 2 January – 31 December 2019;

- Total sample: 1237 responses (959 self-identified as having experiences of leaveism). 466 qualitative comments (34 000 words);
- Academia: 403 responses (32%); 143 qualitative comments (11 200 words);
- Data analysis: SPSS (exploratory factor analysis, confirmatory factor analysis, principal component analysis with varimax rotation); inductive thematic analysis.

What are academics' experiences of leaveism?

“Only this week, the VC at my institution said ‘we are at our best when challenged’ and suggested this should be the basis of our general attitude to work. I run fastest when pursued by a bear, but I’d very quickly cease to be an effective runner and would fall prey to the bear.”

“Mother died last year and my memory of her saying why are you answering student emails on Xmas day has led me to now refuse to work weekends and attempt to take all my annual leave. If work doesn't get done then that's not my problem anymore. My mother was dying and I spent my time working rather than with her because I was terrified I'd be fired and now I hate my employer, academia, my job.”

Causes of leaveism

- Overall, leaveism is increasing;
- **Macro-level factors:** technological developments, marketisation;
- **Meso-level factors:** organisational culture/climate, underfunding, unrealistic workload models, professional expectations;
- **Micro-level factors:** personal circumstances (e.g. disability), ambition/career progression, precariousness, attitude to work (e.g. perfectionism, “the habit of saying ‘yes’”).

“Was given 4 days to respond to a grant feedback, that included a weekend. Funder was EPSRC. Line manager commented that "I'd have to pull a couple of evenings". College PVC commented that academia is a privilege.”

“When I am not working, I feel guilty and ashamed, and like I will be trampled under by others who are racing ahead of me.”

Causes of leaveism (survey)

- Leaveism mostly caused by meso-level factors:
 - 1 – 320 responses
 - 8 – 310 responses
 - 2 – 245 responses
- Organisational pressures are also internalised – some frequently cited micro-level factors:
 - 1 – 303 responses
 - 5 – 220 responses
 - 3 – 146 responses
 - 6 – 139 responses

Variables	Items
Macro Level factors	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. It's so easy to be in touch with work these days2. Work just seems to increasingly spill-over into my private life
Meso Level Factors	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. I'm required to be in touch with colleagues and/or clients who are in different time zones to me2. To stop work piling up3. I have an impairment/do not experience reasonable adjustments4. We are short-staffed5. I only do it when there is a new project to work on6. It is expected of me by my employer/boss7. I am a staff rep and this role creates time pressures on my job8. I am shamed into working in this way9. Unclear role boundaries / unclear role expectations
Micro Level Factors	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. I love my job/my job is more than a job2. I am disorganised/have poor time-management skills3. I like to impress my boss4. I'm looking to be promoted5. I find it hard to delegate work6. I fear losing my job/redundancy7. I get bored when I am not at work/taking annual leave8. I feel insecure if I do not complete all the tasks and roles I am expected to do9. I find it hard to balance work and non-work life

Patterns in leaveism

- **Rhythm:**
 - work is not only extensifying, but also intensifying;
 - participants wrote about “peaks and troughs” of leaveism, although “the troughs are becoming less apparent”;
- **Function:** participants mostly engaged in leaveism to do research (but there were exceptions).

“The amount of work I am expected to have completed during my contracted hours has increased exponentially and my job simply cannot be done in 35 hours a week. I work over every weekend and every holiday to simply keep my head above water in terms of workload.”

“In academia, I can't see how I can do the research I am expected to do without actually taking annual leave in order to get the time to do it.”

Feelings about leaveism

- Feelings about leaveism somewhat mixed:
 - Some accepted leaveism as an inevitable part of the job and/or felt positive about it – they often associated leaveism with autonomy/flexibility;
 - Most shared negative emotions, such as: guilt/shame, stress/worry, feeling overwhelmed, even suicidal;
- Academics seem increasingly willing to challenge leaveism as “just part of the job”.

“I took the decision to cut down the amount of my own time I use to complete work tasks. I realised that it wasn't appreciated or recognised, and more and more work life has become toxic - they want their cake and eat it too! I made a concerted effort to try not to work at the weekends.”

“Since the USS strike, the number of colleagues refusing to do this has also significantly increased.”

Concluding considerations

- Developing the concept of leaveism:
 - not so much an employee-led practice but a phenomenon largely caused by external (especially organisational) pressures;
 - not static: work not only extensified but also intensified, extent of leaveism continuously changing;
- Evidence suggests leaveism is a significant issue in academia -> scope to revisit policies related to annual leave, flexible working, performance, right to disconnect;
- Need for further studies of leaveism post-Covid.



Thank you

t.pustelnikovaite@abertay.ac.uk

j.richards@hw.ac.uk

v.ellis@napier.ac.uk

siddhartha.saxena@ahduni.edu.in