Guidance on flexible working
For staff and students in the School of Physics and Astronomy

Introduction
There are many reasons that people wish to work flexibly, perhaps the two most common are health and caring responsibilities. Flexible working need not result in reduced pay: “compressed hours”, “varied hours” or temporarily working from home are options that have been taken up within this School or in other Schools. It is the School’s aspiration that everyone should be able to benefit from flexible working patterns in order to improve their work-life balance, while maintaining the quality of teaching and high level of student support that our undergraduates expect from us. This includes professional and technical staff, research and teaching staff, and PhD students.

For staff, the University has a Flexible Working Policy\(^1\) that sets out HR’s rules on flexible working. Over the past few years we have found that the wording of this policy has discouraged staff from applying for flexible working. The policy also does not acknowledge the reality that many academic and research staff work far more than the “standard” 37.5 hour week, a practice that should be considered before flexible working arrangements are put in place. Additionally, it does not acknowledge the reality of academic funding, for those on short-term contracts funded by an external body. This document aims to show how flexible working works in practice in the School, and provide examples of real-life flexible working patterns.

For PhD students, rules from funders vary, but UKRI (e.g. STFC, EPSRC) allow part time working at any level between 50-100%. Unfortunately, the University’s current policy is that PhD students may work half time (50%) or full time (100%). This is clearly inadequate for the needs of some students, and we are working to get this restriction lifted. If you are a PhD student interested in part time working, speak to the current DoPG who may have an update on this situation.

For professional staff, there are different considerations to take into account, such as expected workload throughout the year and cover in the School office.

First things to consider

- Do you routinely work a significant amount more than a “standard working week”? In the future, do you expect to work <37.5 hours/week and take all your holidays? If not, then taking a pay cut may not be appropriate. Perhaps compressed hours, varied hours or another formal change to your hours are a better option.
- Have you considered what your work patterns currently look like, and what you spend your time on? This can be difficult to ascertain after-the-fact: academic staff often feel like we spend all our time doing admin while the reality is a little rosier. Perhaps try a time tracker such as Toggl to get an accurate picture.

Flexible working in practice – staff
The HR flexible working policy states at the top that “an accepted application for flexible working is a permanent change to their contract… The agreed terms will become part of their contract of employment and cannot be changed until both parties agree otherwise.”. We recognise that this can discourage staff wishing to take a temporary reduction in workload or rearrangement of their work hours. In practice, requests for flexible working in P&A are made on a fixed term basis, to be reviewed annually. Renewals in the last 5 years have been painless following two emails.

Academic staff: the School has a workload model which covers our main teaching and administrative responsibilities. By reducing your hours you will receive a reduced load (e.g. 4 days = 80% load), naturally your research time will also be reduced, but this is accounted for where it matters (e.g. REF).

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\(^1\) Links are purposefully not provided in this document, as they change regularly. We suggest you google “St Andrews flexible working policy” to find it.
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All our staff are hired because they are excellent researchers: a few years at a slower pace does not mean you will “never get back into it”. It may even mean that you become more efficient and creative.

Post-doctoral research staff: for those on personal fellowships, most UK funders will allow an extension of the fellowship to accommodate part-time working. For grant funding that part-funds staff salary, and/or funds students and PDRAs, funders are often less accommodating and more careful thought and planning is required. In this case, grant PIs should consider whether funding pots can be rearranged to ensure funds are used up before the completion date of grants while longer lasting funds are retained. The School may be able to help by e.g. extending workload reduction beyond the end of the grant by a compensatory amount of time, or providing refundable bridging funds to optimise grant usage.

Professional staff: should discuss options to change working hours with their line manager in the first instance, bearing in mind the need to maintain cover during published office opening hours and ensuring that shared workload burdens are still fairly distributed. Options for varying start and finish times or working compressed hours have been approved for professional staff.

Flexible working in practice – PhD students
Recently we have found that the University asks students to stipulate the days that they will be working, which we recognise is inappropriate in some cases, perhaps due to personal circumstances, availability of equipment, running of experiments, fieldwork etc. We recommend that students instead keep a diary to record when they work, and ensure that this averages out to the correct amount. Students should communicate regularly with their supervisor(s) to ensure that supervisors are kept informed of working patterns and any changes.

How to apply for flexible working

Staff:
1) For PIs, think creatively about your grant funding. Can the school help to ensure optimum usage, without incurring an overall expense?
2) For PDRAs and professional staff, discuss with your line manager and/or mentor and/or co-workers. Obtaining their support first will greatly ease the formal process.
3) Speak to the HoS about the arrangements that you would like. Flexible working is not a “right”, but an ideal that we aspire to. Remember also that the HoS has to balance the many responsibilities of the School and a compromise may need to be reached.
4) Complete the form on the HR webpages and send to hospanda.
5) Respond promptly to emails from hospanda each year, to confirm you are happy to continue with the current arrangements (or arrange a meeting to discuss new ones).

Students:
1) If you are not funded by the EPSRC or STFC, see what you can find out from your funder about restrictions on part time working. This knowledge is useful for the DoPG.
2) Regardless of what your funder says, talk to your supervisor and/or the DoPG. If you like, the Director of E&D or the DoPG will be able to help you talk to your supervisor.
3) The DoPG will take this forward for you.

There are many examples of flexible working arrangements happening already in the School, amongst academic staff, professional staff, research staff and students. If you would like to speak to someone who has flexible working arrangements in place, speak to one of the E&D committee members who should be able to point you in the right direction. You will not be the first nor the last to ask, so have a think about what might suit you and be workable for the School, then ask!