

**The timetabling of meetings and events in the Law Faculty:  
recommendations from the Equality and Diversity Committee**

Background to this paper

In Michaelmas term 2021, a number of research-related events were scheduled to begin at 5pm or later, including (until a decision was made by PRC to change this) the Faculty’s research seminars. The concern is that late afternoon / early evening timeslots tend to exclude those with responsibility for care for small children (who are most likely to be women members of the Faculty but will of course also include male members of the Faculty) from participation. Early in the term, PRC resolved – because of this concern, and having regard to our Athena Swan (AS) commitments – that the research seminar series had to be moved back to an earlier time slot. However, a range of other discussion groups and special research-related events have remained concentrated in the late afternoon and early evening. Given this, and the fact that the research seminar series timing was only changed because a complaint was made to the Associate Dean for Equality and Diversity and then brought to, and acted on swiftly by, PRC, the AD suggested to the EDC that it consider formulating a suggested policy on the timetabling of Faculty meetings and events. The EDC has now considered this matter at 3 meetings, the first by reference to a preliminary discussion paper prepared by Kristin ([Equality and Diversity Committee Papers – 26 Oct 2021 – pages 5-9](#)), and the second by reference to this document, which was also drafted by Kristin and then revised to reflect feedback from members of the EDC.

Reasons for acting

In making the recommendations below, the EDC has had regard to the following:

- (a) the Faculty’s general obligation to avoid unlawful discrimination and to comply with the public sector equality duty;
- (b) the specific requirements of the Athena Swan Charter process;
- (c) the results of the 2021 Staff Experience Survey, viewed in the light of our 2016 Athena Swan application;
- (d) evidence of best practice from elsewhere in the University and the HE sector more broadly.

As to (d), the AD for Equality and Diversity noted that the [University’s Equality and Diversity Unit](#) encourages the arranging of meetings “within core hours”, explaining “meeting before 9 or late afternoon may be impossible for staff with childcare or other caring responsibilities...”, and that the [central University’s AS 2017 application](#) reports that the University “leads by example: University committee meetings are generally scheduled between 10.00am and 4.00pm”. The AD drew the Committee’s attention to a range of “core hours” policies from departments and faculties across the University. As the AD explained, these policies do not appear designed to require staff to be ‘at their desk’ or fulfilling their duties at particular times of day; rather, consistent with the EDU and central University AS statements, the idea is to prevent or discourage certain type of activities<sup>1</sup> from occurring outside the stated hours, with a view to supporting those with caring responsibilities, and particularly those with small children. By way of example:

- Earth Sciences states:

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<sup>1</sup> Which vary from policy to policy: all include committee meetings, but some also cover research-related events and teaching.

*“Employees or students who are new to the Department of Earth Sciences and have children, or who are thinking about starting a family, will find a supportive attitude backed up by family-friendly policies and working practice.*

*The Department welcomes flexible working to assist parents with their childcare arrangements. The core hours in the department are 10.00 am until 3.00 pm.*

*Children are welcome at departmental social events. The Researcher’s Common Room within our building was explicitly modified during the design of our new building in order that it should be safe for children.*

*There are also baby changing and rest/private feeding facilities available within the department, accessible to both Mums and Dads.”*

- The Economics Department said this in its 2018 Athena Swan application:

*“Staff meetings take place at 1pm and other committees normally meet in the middle of the day to accommodate caring responsibilities such as school/nursery collection. Until three years ago seminars typically started at 5pm. In response to requests for a more family-friendly timetable almost all seminars were moved to the middle of the day, with a small minority at 4pm or 5pm. Social gatherings include the Department tea (Tuesdays 3.15pm), and lunches to welcome new staff or seminar speakers. Dinners may be held when seminar speakers or visiting lecturers stay overnight: these are advertised well in advance.”*

- The English Department’s 2020 Athena Swan application indicates that academics “are not required to teach at particular times if those would conflict with family and other responsibilities”; that meeting times other than those for Faculty committee meetings are agreed by consensus with participants; and that, in response to concerns ventilated to the Department’s self-assessment team, the Department had resolved that committee meetings and special lectures would no longer be held on bank holidays in term time. Additionally, the Department resolved in its 2020 Action plan that, in relation to the funding of research seminar series:

*“2.6.3 Timing of Faculty research seminars – one third of all seminars within a series in the course of a year to be held in working hours. Seminar series which do not comply with this requirement will not be funded in future years”.*

- The Department of Physics states that it is “committed to making the work culture as family-friendly as possible with measures in place including scheduling meetings and seminars in core hours...”.

The AD noted that other institutions in the HE sector also have core hours policies of this kind, including the LSE.<sup>2</sup>

As to (b) and (c):

- it is a principle of the Transformed Athena Swan (“AS”) Charter (to which the Faculty has recently subscribed, and under which we will be making a submission to Advance HE at the beginning of May 2022) that we are committed to “mitigating the gendered impact of caring

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<sup>2</sup> The LSE’s 2019 Athena Swan Action Plan states: “LSE has core hours of 10am-4pm. Annual reminders to sent out to all staff that regular meetings must fall within these times. If regular meetings are scheduled outside of core hours for exceptional reasons, this needs to be approved by HOD or Head of Division”.

*responsibilities and career breaks, and supporting flexibility and the maintenance of a healthy ‘whole life balance’.*

- in our 2022 AS application, which must be submitted by 31 May 2022, we are required to reflect explicitly on how we have been giving effect to this principle, and what future actions we will take to do so.
- in our 2016 AS application, we observed, when reporting on Staff Experience Survey results, “of those with caring responsibilities, the majority in most groups described the support provided by the Faculty as ‘some but not much’, ‘very little’, or ‘none’ (although the numbers replying could be very small)”, and reported a range of concerns around the recognition of, and visibility for, female scholars in the Faculty ([Athena SWAN Bronze Application 2016 - pages 47-48](#)). We committed to a range of targets and actions in relation to support for staff with caring responsibilities, and in relation to recognition and visibility, but we did not appear to regard timetabling as a problem area. On this issue, we said:

*“The flexible culture of the Faculty means that there are no core hours. Staff are expected to fulfil their duties but when they do so is largely up to them and there is no general practice of ‘presenteeism’. Committee meetings and Faculty meetings are nearly all held in the middle of the day. Many Faculty social events are lunches and family members are invited to most Faculty social gatherings outside 9-5 (end of term drinks, etc). Lecture times are scheduled by the Faculty because of the need to allocate Faculty rooms but are done so in a consultative process with Faculty members. While there was no general concern about lecture times in surveys and discussion groups, there were isolated examples of where lectures were scheduled outside 9-5 Monday-Friday”.*

- our 2021 Staff Experience Survey (SES) results suggest that those of our academic staff who have caring responsibilities do *not* feel supported in discharging these responsibilities: unfortunately, only 23% of the 32 such respondents felt so supported (thankfully, 80% of the 11 professional staff who responded to this question did feel supported).<sup>3</sup> Across several job types, only a bare majority of respondents felt that the Faculty takes caring responsibilities into account when scheduling meetings.<sup>4</sup> The same Survey also points to persisting concerns about recognition of, and visibility for, women scholars in the Faculty,<sup>5</sup> although on this point it is right to note that the AS self-assessment team has registered concerns with the interpretation of some of the survey questions.

The EDC considers that a policy on the timetabling of Faculty meetings and events is one practical way that we can increase our support for those in the Faculty with caring responsibilities (we note that such a policy may also be one way to give effect to the broader AS principle of ‘maintenance of a healthy ‘whole life balance’, in line with the Faculty’s new policy on when work emails can be sent). Having such a policy should help to ensure that the impact of scheduling decisions on those with caring responsibilities is given due regard *before* a scheduling decision is made. The Committee regards it as important that the burden not be placed on those with caring responsibilities to advocate for scheduling

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<sup>3</sup> In our 2016 action plan, we did set specific targets in relation to the extent to which staff with caring responsibilities feel supported. The survey data relied on to generate those targets is not directly comparable to that generated by the Staff Experience Survey, which makes it difficult to assess whether we have met our targets. The academic response to the 2021 survey is, however, clearly concerning.

<sup>4</sup> 51% of APs thought so; 59% of professional and management staff; 25% of researcher grade 7; 60% of support and technical staff; 50% of statutory professors; 86% of researcher-related staff grades 6-10.

<sup>5</sup> Only 36% of respondents to the SES 2021 agreed that ‘women and men have an equal experience of working in the Faculty’ (female and male alike). With regards to promotion and recognition, 41% of female respondents agreed that ‘women are as likely to succeed as men in applying for permanent posts in the Faculty’ (vs 53% male) and 40% that ‘women’s scholarship is equally as well recognised as men’s by members of the Law Faculty’ (vs 61% male).

changes, given our existing duties and (public) AS commitments. Having such a policy may also – by sending a signal about our values (and these are values that we already hold, as evidenced by a bundle of existing practices in scheduling decisions) – help to ensure we continue to attract the best candidates for appointment in recruitment exercises.

The Committee is mindful of the fact that it is not possible to concentrate all Faculty meetings and events into the hours of 9.30am and 4pm, and that when it comes to one-off research events (conferences, workshops, book launches, etc) it would not necessarily even be desirable to attempt this (given external speaker preferences, audience and speaker location for hybrid events, etc). In relation to the latter, the Committee is also mindful that Faculty members need to feel encouraged to, rather than discouraged from, organising such events. These factors are hopefully reflected in the way in which the recommendations are formulated below.

We emphasise that our recommendations are not intended to reduce any existing support currently afforded to those with caring responsibilities; rather, our intention is to ensure the maintenance of existing support practices or to increase the support made available, depending on the type of event or meeting in issue. We further note that our recommendations include a review clause, under which the EDC will be charged with periodically reviewing the efficacy of this policy and reporting to Law Board on this.

#### Recommended approach

Having regard to the above considerations, the Committee proposes the following:

- 1. Regular Faculty meetings should not be scheduled to begin before 9.30am or finish after 4pm. Bank holidays should be avoided.**

By ‘Faculty meetings’, we mean: meetings of the Equality and Diversity, Personnel, PRC, Research, USC and GSC committees, as well as course committees; professional/technical staff meetings; meetings of Law Board; start-of-term and annual whole Faculty meetings; and Faculty research seminars. By ‘regular’ Faculty meetings we mean those ordinarily scheduled to occur throughout the academic year, in contradistinction to extraordinary meetings. From time to time it may be necessary to convene extraordinary meetings outside the above times, but naturally, this should be avoided to the maximum extent possible.

We acknowledge that there are at least two types of Faculty meetings that may be whole-day meetings that extend beyond 4pm: final meetings of examination boards, and meetings of the Faculty undergraduate selection committee. In such a case, the Chair should: (a) consult in advance with Committee members as to whether they have caring responsibilities that may impact on participation at the relevant meeting, (b) strive to support these members in discharging these responsibilities, including by permitting Committee members to leave and come back into meetings, and through the use of hybrid facilities after 4pm. We understand this to be the current practice.

- 2. The use of hybrid facilities for research-related events after 4pm on weekdays, and on weekends, is strongly encouraged.**
- 3. Applications to the Faculty’s Research Support Fund for support for research-related events should evidence substantive consideration of the impact of scheduling on participation by those with caring responsibilities.**

A field should be added to the standard form for this purpose.

- 4. Research Group Chairs should regularly remind group members of the potentially exclusionary effects of timetabling research-related events to begin after 4pm on those with caring responsibilities.**

By ‘regularly’, we mean at least once a year. It may be most effective to issue this reminder each September, in the lead-up to planning the calendar for the new academic year. Chairs should strive to encourage genuine reflection on this by group members.

The Associate Dean for Equality and Diversity should periodically remind Research Group Chairs of this.

- 5. At least one third of discussion group meetings, and other regular research-related meetings (such as the Business Law Workshops, for example), should be held between the hours of 9.30am and 4pm.<sup>6</sup>**

The Committee regards the one third suggestion as a bare minimum, and strongly encourages Faculty members to strive for a higher proportion than this.

Where meetings are held outside the hours of 9.30am and 4pm, the use of hybrid facilities is strongly encouraged (see 2. above).

The Committee recognises that conferences and other special research-related events may need to be scheduled to occur on weekends, or outside of the hours of 9.30am and 4pm on weekdays. It is hoped that appropriate regard for the impact of scheduling on those with caring responsibilities will be secured through the combination of 2., 3. and 4. above.

- 6. One or more Faculty offices should be made available to external speakers who participate in a day event and need space to work in between the event and a related dinner.**

Some external speakers may prefer to speak in the day and then return home. Others may wish to stay on for a dinner with Faculty members. The suggestion is that an office be made available so that the speaking event can still be held between 9.30am and 4pm, where convenient for the speaker.

- 7. The operation of this policy should be reviewed by the EDC after two years of operation, and then annually thereafter.**




The Committee is not currently making any recommendation in relation to teaching (noting the complexities of timetabling, and the fact that we have part-time as well as full-time programs), but does strongly endorse the current practice of consulting with Faculty members about timetabling decisions, and of allowing Faculty members to indicate where they cannot teach outside the hours of 9am and 4pm.

Our recommendations in summary form:

We provide a tabular summary of our recommendations below so that Faculty members who wish to do so can print a short-form version of this paper to serve as a visual reminder. Chairs of Research Groups will be separately periodically reminded of point 4 above.

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<sup>6</sup> This is the approach introduced by the English department, as noted above.

 <p><b><u>DO NOT:</u></b></p>		
<p>Schedule regular Faculty meetings to begin before 9.30am or finish after 4pm, or on bank holidays. (NB: The definition of regular Faculty meetings in our policy includes Faculty research seminars).</p>	 <p><b><u>PAUSE before:</u></b></p>	
<p>Schedule all meetings of a discussion group, or other regular research-related workshops, to be held outside of 9.30am-4pm (NB: at the very minimum, one third of such meetings should be scheduled to begin after 9.30am and finish by 4pm).</p>	<p>Arranging research-related events (including discussion groups and other regular research-related workshops, as well as special events) to occur after 4pm or on weekends, so that you can consult potentially affected Faculty members (NB: applications to the Research Support Fund should evidence substantive consideration of the impact on participation by those with caring responsibilities).</p>	 <p><b><u>DO:</u></b></p>
	<p>Deciding not to use hybrid facilities for research-related events that occur after 4pm or on weekends; the use of such facilities may better enable participation by those with caring responsibilities.</p>	<p>Consult relevant Faculty members before scheduling research-related events (including discussion groups and other regular research-related workshops, as well as special events) if you think that any component may have to be scheduled outside 9.30am-4pm. Ditto all-day Faculty meetings.</p>
	<p>Assuming that an external speaker for a research-related event will not be interested in presenting between 9.30am and 4pm, or that such timetabling would preclude the holding of a related dinner. (NB: our policy requires that one or more Faculty offices be made available for use by visiting speakers).</p>	<p>Listen openly to, and be flexible in response to, requests for further accommodation of caring responsibilities.</p>
		<p>Strive to play your part in creating an inclusive culture that maximises opportunities for meaningful participation in governance and all research-related events by Faculty members.</p>