

Making hybrid work for diverse staff in higher education: A behaviour change approach

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Abstract

Despite being considered the 'new normal' for many workers since the COVID-19 pandemic, there is a dearth of applied research on hybrid working, especially in the context of inclusivity. This study uses the Behaviour Change Wheel to examine barriers, which hinder, and enablers, which help, to support hybrid working after the COVID-19 pandemic and then identifies intervention strategies for its improvement. Data included 36 open-ended questionnaires and 20 interviews from diverse (gender, sexual and ethnic identities; age; job role/grade scale; caregiving responsibilities and disability status) academic and professional staff at a large UK public research university, collected in May–July 2022. Barriers included the lack of technological skills, lack of clarity and application of the hybrid working policy, childcare and travel issues, no suitable space and equipment, managers' lack of understanding of specific needs, feeling lonely and isolated, and fears and uncertainty. Enablers included self-management skills, purposeful office days, positive feelings, work/life balance, productivity and support from others. Issues related to equity and inclusivity were highlighted based on disability status, caregiving responsibilities, age and job role. Strategies are offered to improve hybrid working, such as training,

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organisational infrastructure and practices and policies to enable a collaborative, cooperative and inclusive hybrid work environment.

Hybrid working is a flexible working arrangement where some working time is spent in the office and some remotely, normally from home. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, there was an enforced shift to fully remote working (working exclusively from home) for many employees globally. In the United Kingdom, for example, remote working was reported by 47% of the British workforce in 2020 (Platts et al., 2022). From January 2022, working from home guidance was lifted, with people no longer encouraged to work remotely where possible. As a result, the proportion of workers who were hybrid working rose from 13% in early February 2022 to 24% in May 2022, while the percentage fully remote working dropped from 22% to 14% in the same period (Office for National Statistics, 2022). Despite being considered the 'new normal' for many workers, however, there is a dearth of applied research on hybrid working in the behavioural sciences, or even in the wider social sciences, especially in the context of inclusivity (Bouckley et al., 2020).

Within behavioural science, the Behaviour Change Wheel (BCW) is a comprehensive theoretical framework, based on a synthesis of 19 frameworks of behaviour change (Michie et al., 2014). It provides a systematic process through which a behaviour, such as hybrid working, can be analysed, examining barriers, which hinder, and enablers, which help, the performance of a behaviour, and then offering evidence-based strategies to bring about improvement. This qualitative study adds to the current literature base through exploring and responding to the experiences of hybrid working for a diverse professional and academic staff at a UK university, contributing to inclusive research in this area. Furthermore, focusing on hybrid working during the spring and summer of 2022 offers a unique vantage point, as employees were transitioning from fully remote working to hybrid working.

1 | RESEARCH BACKGROUND

Previous pre-pandemic research has examined the numerous benefits to fully remote working including job satisfaction, productivity, commitment, flexibility, work-life balance and perceived autonomy (Gajendran & Harrison, 2007; Martin & MacDonnell, 2012). Workers also report increased personal satisfaction resulting from having less commuting time, spending more time with family and experiencing greater independence (Tavares, 2017). This research also highlights the barriers to remote working such as being unable to disengage from work during family time, having unclear boundaries between work and home life and experiencing increased stress when working from home (Eddleston & Mulki, 2017; Song & Gao, 2019). Social and professional isolation can also be a barrier, which can be moderated by organisational social support (Bentley et al., 2016). Not having a dedicated work area in the home can also potentially impact workers' physical and mental health and blur the boundary between work and home (Green et al., 2020).

These pre-pandemic studies reflect a planned choice in working exclusively from home, allowing individuals and organisations to maximise productivity and ensure a better work-life balance (Oakman et al., 2020). Research undertaken during the pandemic, however, signifies a forced and likely rapid adoption of remote working (Green et al., 2020). Studies have found that workers report negative factors such as social isolation due to less interaction with colleagues, longer working hours, unsupportive employers, lack of a work-life balance (partly due to blurring of home/work boundaries), stress due to the adoption of new technologies and financial worries, such as reduced overtime pay (Adisa et al., 2022; Battisti et al., 2022; Galanti et al., 2021; Xiao et al., 2021).

While these previous studies offer insight into remote working during the pandemic, there is less research on hybrid working, specifically focused on the transition to hybrid working from fully remote working after COVID-19 working at home restrictions were eased. There are likely to be different influences for workers who alternate between working from home and working in the office, especially for those employees who enjoyed working exclusively at home during lockdown. There may also be challenges to working in a hybrid team, when some members are working remotely while others are working on-site on different days, such as reduced team collaboration (Winkler et al., 2022). In a university context, this may be particularly relevant as some staff are required to work on-site more than others due to the nature of their position. This separation between colleagues who are working face to face and those who are remote working can result in perceived disparities and division among co-workers (Winkler et al., 2022).

Further research can also illuminate how the experiences of hybrid working after fully remote working during the pandemic might differ for diverse employees. There is evidence, for example, that work-life balance may have shifted more for females than males when remote working during the pandemic. In a 2020 survey of over 1000 faculty members in US higher education institutions, more women than men responded that their workload increased and their work-life balance deteriorated since the start of the pandemic (Chronicle of Higher Education and Fidelity Investments, 2020). Another study, with participants outside of academia, suggests a more nuanced pattern of women's work-life balance during the pandemic. In a mixed methods study examining workplace well-being for employees at a multinational organisation in the Netherlands during COVID-19, females reported a greater increase in work-life balance in May 2020 than males above pre-pandemic levels. Qualitative data from the study suggest this might reflect a greater ease in combining work and personal life when remote working, allowing women to balance their different roles as both 'employee and mom' (Syrek et al., 2022). While this study focused on remote working during the pandemic, the findings suggest that having the flexibility offered in hybrid working may be preferable than working exclusively at the office for those with caregiving responsibilities.

The importance of work-life balance may also vary according to age and career status. Syrek et al. (2022) further found that younger employees reported a greater decrease in their work-life balance from January to April 2020 than older employees when remote working, followed by a return to baseline levels in May 2020. The authors suggest that this might reflect the lack of a well-established routine and network of colleagues providing support for younger employees, perhaps due to their earlier career status (Syrek et al., 2022). However, this study focused exclusively on remote working during the pandemic, so it remains unclear whether the experiences of hybrid working might differ between older and younger employees.

Limited evidence further suggests distinct advantages to home working for disabled workers. From February to April 2022, a study surveyed 406 disabled workers living and working across the United Kingdom about their experiences of both remote and hybrid working throughout the pandemic and conducted 20 qualitative interviews with disabled people in Greater London (Taylor et al., 2022). Disabled workers reported increased autonomy and control of when and how they work which allowed them to better manage their health and well-being. However, they also reported barriers to home working including lack of specialist equipment at home, misaligned work patterns with colleagues and concerns about pay and career progression. With the increasing use of hybrid working, the authors further highlighted the importance of establishing inclusive work practices for those who continue to work from home (Taylor et al., 2022). Overall, these studies underscore the importance of examining the enablers and barriers to hybrid working for a diverse sample of workers, yet no research to date has done so.

2 | BEHAVIOUR CHANGE WHEEL FRAMEWORK

The BCW framework (Michie et al., 2014) provides an evidence-based approach to understanding the influences on a behaviour and then identifying strategies for improvement. At the centre of the BCW, the COM-B model postulates that capability, opportunity and motivation interact to influence behaviour (see Figure 1). Using the

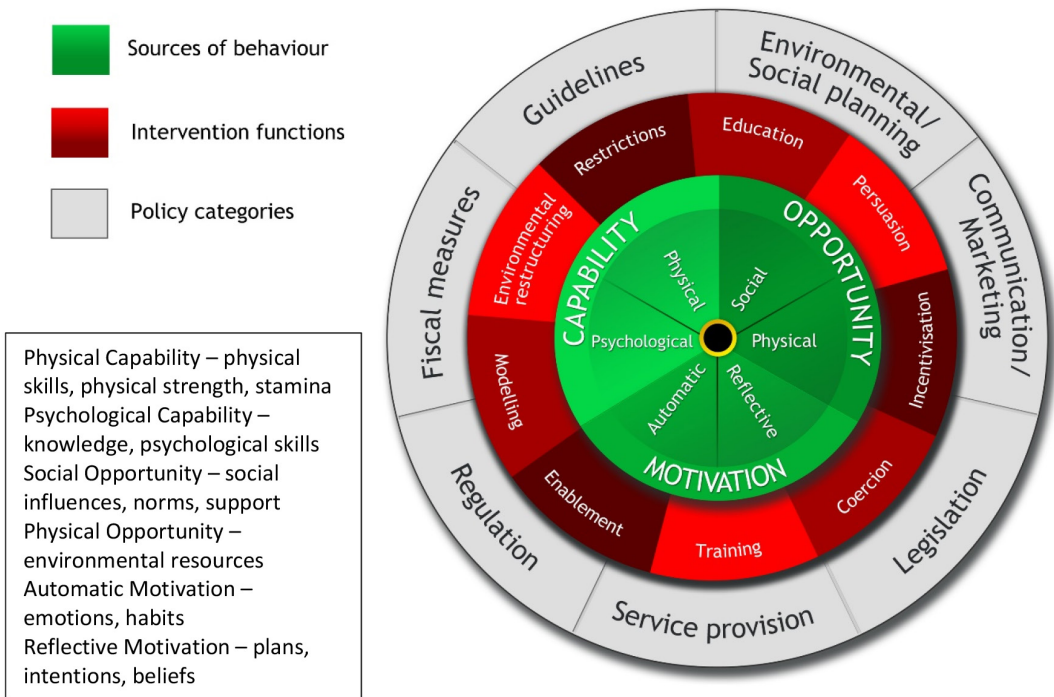


FIGURE 1 The behaviour change wheel (Michie et al., 2014).

COM-B model, barriers and enablers to a behaviour can be identified as potential levers of change. For each COM-B barrier/enabler identified, there are corresponding intervention types and policy functions, shown as layers in the BCW, that are likely to be effective in bringing about that change. Intervention functions can also be mapped to behaviour change techniques (BCTs). The BCT taxonomy (BCTT v1) collates a list of 93 evidence-based BCTs (http://www.bct-taxonomy.com/pdf/BCTTv1_PDF_version.pdf). BCTs are observable, replicable strategies designed to enhance the enablers and address the barriers of a behaviour. The framework has been applied to examine behaviour change to promote equality and inclusivity in higher education (e.g. Paske & Chadwick, 2021), although further research would support the use of the BCW in this context.

3 | CURRENT STUDY

This study examines questionnaire and interview data gathered from May to July 2022 from diverse (gender, sexual and ethnic identities; age; job role/grade scale; caregiving responsibilities and disability status) staff at a large, public research university in the United Kingdom. Qualitative research is utilised to illuminate the influences on hybrid working in a diverse sample, capturing the complexities and contradictions that can characterise individual's identities and circumstances (Clarke & Braun, 2013). Using the BCW, this study aims to answer two questions: (1) using the COM-B model, what are the barriers and enablers to hybrid working for a diverse group of higher education staff? and (2) using BCTs, what are the potential behaviour change strategies to improve hybrid working in this context?

Higher education provides an interesting context to examine the transition to hybrid working. In response to COVID-19 restrictions, UK universities instituted periods of remote working and hybrid working, so most employees experienced both modes of working throughout the pandemic. After lockdown restrictions eased in 2021, most staff were expected to work at least 40% of their time on-site. In 2022, the university offered hybrid working

as an option for those workers whose role did not dictate that they are always on-site, with 20% to 80% of working time on-site at the university. Understanding the barriers and enablers to hybrid working for diverse professional and academic staff in higher education can help to identify more equitable and inclusive practices and policies in this sector.

4 | METHOD

4.1 | Participants

Staff members were recruited through newsletters and emails sent by the University's Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) team in May and June 2022. To be eligible, staff needed to be (1) over the age of 18 years, (2) currently employed by this university and (3) employed by this university since 1 March 2020, at the start of the pandemic (this final criterion was only required for the interviews). Eighty-eight individuals expressed an interest in the project. Of the 88 staff members, 36 met the inclusion criteria and completed a questionnaire. For the others, eight did not meet the inclusion criteria, one did not want to complete the questionnaire and the remaining 43 did not respond to follow-up emails. Of the 36 participants, 20 individuals were selected to participate in an interview scheduled in June or July 2022; interview selection aimed to achieve a diverse sample of both professional and academic staff from a range of grade scales, genders, religions and sexualities, including minoritised groups such as Black, Asian and other ethnic minorities and those with disabilities. Participants were offered £25 as a voucher or charity donation for taking part in the interview.

Table 1 shows the demographic information for the final sample of individuals who completed a questionnaire and those who completed both a questionnaire and participated in an interview. To maintain their anonymity and ensure participants are not identifiable, gender, sexuality, religion and ethnicity are not shown. Most of the staff who volunteered ($n=31$) were from professional services, including Information Technology, Human Resources, Finance, Communications and External Affairs, representing a range of job levels from administrators (grades 5 and 6) to senior managers (grades 8 and 9). Five participants had research/clinical academic roles. The majority lived with family and over half did not have any caring responsibilities. Most were between 31 and 50 years-old. Twenty-four participants identified as female, nine as male, and three as non-binary/gender-fluid. The sample included those who identified as trans ($n=2$) and those who identified as bisexual, gay or queer ($n=6$). Thirteen participants identified as disabled or neurodiverse; seven of these stated that they had a disability, two were neurodiverse and four did not specify. There was representation from different religions but the majority described themselves as Christian or having no religion. Participants self-identified themselves as White (British, Irish, Other; $n=14$), Asian or Asian British (Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Indian, Other; $n=10$); Black or Black British (African, Caribbean, Other; $n=5$), Chinese ($n=2$), Filipino ($n=1$), Mixed Heritage ($n=2$), European ($n=1$) and Vietnamese ($n=1$).

4.2 | Procedure

The study was registered with the University's Data Protection Officer and received approval from the Ethics Committee (CEHP/2020/579). The participants first completed a questionnaire which contained demographic questions, in order to select a diverse sample for the interviews, and two open-ended questions which were as follows: 'How would you say the new hybrid working arrangements have affected you?' and 'What, if any, suggestions do you have to further help you in the new working environment?'

Interviews were then conducted via MS Teams and split between the second and third authors. Each interview lasted between 30 and 40 min. The interview included questions based on the COM-B model and open-ended

TABLE 1 Demographics of participants in both the questionnaire and interview.

ID	Length of service (years)	Grade	Role	Living arrangements	Caring responsibilities?	Age	Disability?	Interview/questionnaire
1	10	7	Professional services	Live with friends	No	41–50	Yes	Both
2	8	8	Professional services	Live with family	Yes	51–60	Yes	Questionnaire
3	3	6	Professional services	Live with others	No	31–40	No	Both
4	18	7	Professional services	Live with others	No	41–50	Yes	Both
5	3	9	Professional services	Live with friends	No	41–50	No	Both
6	3	6	Professional services	Live with family	Yes	31–40	No	Both
7	8	8	Research	Live with family	Yes	41–50	No	Both
8	16	8	Professional services	Live with family	Yes	41–50	No	Both
9	3	7	Professional services	Live with partner (unmarried)	No	21–30	Yes	Both
10	19	7	Professional services	Live alone	No	51–60	Yes	Both
11	30	8	Professional services	Live with family	No	41–50	No	Both
12	3	6	Professional services	Live with family	No	31–40	No	Questionnaire
13	4	7	Professional services	Live with friends	No	41–50	Yes	Both
14	2.5	8	Professional services	Live with family	Yes	31–40	No	Both
15	20	7	Professional services	Live with family	No	61–70	Yes	Both
16	1	7	Research	Live alone	No	21–30	No	Questionnaire
17	30	9	Clinical academic	Live with family	Yes	61–70	No	Both
18	10	7	Professional services	Live alone	No	41–50	Yes	Questionnaire
19	6	6	Professional services	Live alone	No	51–60	No	Both
20	3	9	Professional services	Live alone	No	51–60	Yes	Questionnaire
21	5	9	Professional services	Live with family	Yes	41–50	No	Questionnaire
22	12	7	Professional services	Live with family	Yes	41–50	No	Questionnaire
23	3	8	Professional services	Live with family	No	41–50	No	Questionnaire
24	5	8	Professional services	Live with family	Yes	31–40	No	Questionnaire

TABLE 1 (Continued)

ID	Length of service (years)	Grade	Role	Living arrangements	Caring responsibilities?	Age	Disability?	Interview/questionnaire
25	10	7	Professional services	Single parent living with child	Yes	41-50	No	Questionnaire
26	1	6	Professional services	Live with family	Yes	31-40	Yes	Questionnaire
27	8	9	Professional services	Live with family	Yes	41-50	No	Both
28	3	6	Professional services	Live alone	No	41-50	No	Questionnaire
29	1	6	Professional services	Live alone	No	21-30	Yes	Questionnaire
30	5	7	Professional services	Live alone	No	41-50	No	Questionnaire
31	5	8	Research	Live alone	Yes	31-40	No	Both
32	7	6	Professional services	Live with family	No	21-30	No	Both
33	6	5	Professional services	Live with family	Yes	51-60	Yes	Questionnaire
34	3	8	Professional services	Live with family	Yes	41-50	Yes	Both
35	1.5	7	Professional services	Live with family	Prefer not to say	31-40	No	Questionnaire
36	2	8	Research	Live with family	No	31-40	No	Both

general questions on their experiences of working during the pandemic (see Table 2). This allowed researchers to capture a broad range of views from participants, guided but not limited by the underpinning theoretical framework (McGowan et al., 2020). Interviews were conducted online and then transcribed.

4.3 | Data analysis

The questionnaires and interviews were both coded using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-stage thematic analysis. The first stage involved being immersed in the data through reading and re-reading the transcripts/questionnaires. Then, deductive coding using the COM-B model was conducted. For the deductive themes, an initial proportion of the interviews and questionnaires were second coded among the authorship team and discrepancies were discussed until there was 100% agreement.

This was followed by inductive coding to identify more granular and data-specific themes. Inductive codes were then reviewed among the authorship team and assigned to broader, overarching themes. For data triangulation, inductive themes arising from both the questionnaires and interviews were discussed among the authorship team and reviewed to ensure that they accurately represented the data. Final inductive themes were agreed upon and labelled through consensus. Inductive themes were then further analysed to understand their relationships with equality, diversity and inclusion, for instance, noting when themes were particularly salient for individuals based on their identities and/or circumstances. All the authors have been trained in thematic analysis and deductive coding using the COM-B model. Figure 2 shows a thematic map with overarching COM-B themes with the inductive sub-themes beneath.

As shown in Table 3, the barriers and enablers within each COM-B domain were next linked to intervention types which were then mapped onto BCTs by the first, second and third authors, with an agreement rate of 100%. This was guided by the BCW book, which used expert consensus to link COM-B domains to intervention types and then intervention types to BCTs (Michie et al., 2014). The most frequently used from the list were considered and the most relevant were identified based on how they could be operationalised in the context of hybrid working. These were evaluated by applying the APEASE criteria, an acronym that refers to the principles of affordability, practicability, effectiveness/cost-effectiveness, acceptability, side-effects/safety and equity (Michie et al., 2014). This 'checklist' helps to determine which BCTs are most feasible and more likely to be implemented (Atkins et al., 2020). The first, second and third authors first discussed and evaluated the APEASE criteria in relation to the strategies, as a group, then the wider EDI Team provided additional feedback and further suggestions.

TABLE 2 Sample interview questions.

COM-B component	Hybrid working—COMB questions
Psychological/physical capability	What sort of skills (physical or psychological) and knowledge have you developed to help you work effectively in the new hybrid working environment?
Reflective motivation	How effective do you consider yourself to be at working in the hybrid environment?
Automatic motivation	How do you feel about the current hybrid working situation?
Physical opportunity	How have environmental factors such as space to work and equipment influenced the way you are working in the new hybrid environment?
Social opportunity	What has been your experience of the social elements of work in this new hybrid working environment?
Open-ended question	Is there anything else that you would like to add about your experience of hybrid working?

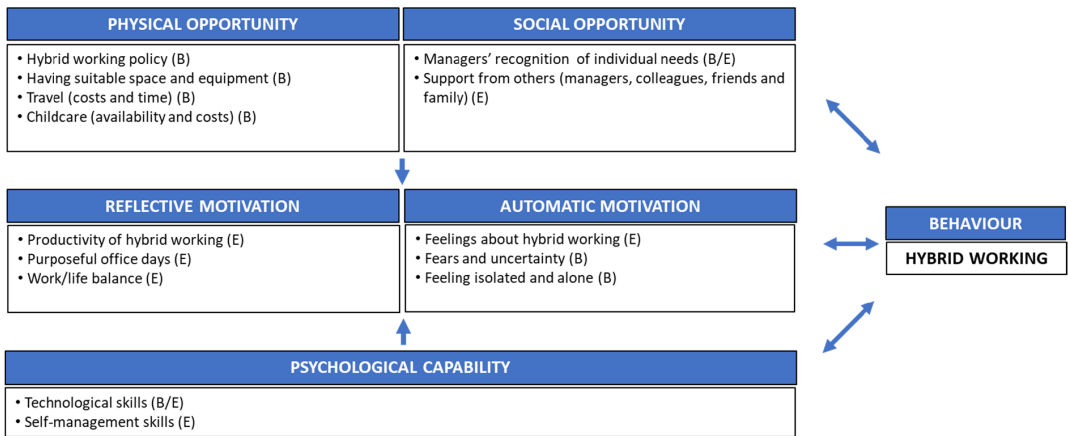


FIGURE 2 Thematic map of barriers and enablers categorised by COM-B components.

5 | RESULTS

As shown in Figure 2, 14 core themes were identified in the open-ended questionnaire and interview data; two in psychological capability, four in physical opportunity, two in social opportunity, three in reflective motivation and three in automatic motivation. Of the 14 key themes, six were barriers, six enablers and two were both barriers and enablers. All the themes were identified in both the interviews and questionnaires. Data from interviews are indicated by (I) and those from questionnaires by (Q).

5.1 | Psychological capability

5.1.1 | Technological skills

Technological skills were mentioned by more than half of those interviewed but viewed as both a barrier and an enabler. Some participants noted a lack of technological skills they felt they possessed, or experiences of struggling with certain online systems which made it difficult working using the hybrid model. 'It is actually more difficult now to run such (workshop) sessions hybrid with both face to face and online' (P5(Q)). One participant, who was a member of teaching staff, highlighted this as being particularly challenging due to their age. 'It's the age and not being savvy, you know, because I can see, you know, these sort of younger people...they take to this much more easily than me' (P17(I)). For others, this was an enabler as they spoke of new skills that they acquired. 'Well, we all had to learn Zoom and Teams' (P19(I)).

5.1.2 | Self-management skills

Self-management skills were highlighted by many participants as an enabler to hybrid working. Most described the planning and time management skills they needed to work successfully in a hybrid way. 'It (hybrid working) has given me greater flexibility and improved my workload as I am able to be better organized' (P29(Q)). Another participant noted, 'We have open calendars and that helps me manage my workload as well and to keep some time available for me to actually get on with some work' (P13(I)). Some expressed that working from home required self-discipline to enable them to manage distractions more effectively. 'If you're at home, you need to motivate yourself to work. You could easily, for example, I've got my Xbox right behind me right here' (P3(I)).

TABLE 3 BCTs and their example application based on barriers and enablers to hybrid working.

COM-B domain: enabler/barrier	Intervention type	BCT ¹ suggested	Example application	APEASE
Psychological capability: technological skills	Training: education	Instruction on how to perform a behaviour; demonstration of the behaviour	Workshops, videos and blogs on collaboration software, for example MS Teams, teaching tools, events/conference platforms. For more widely used tools, these could focus on using more advanced features such as live captioning	Affordable—no cost if delivered internally and/or asynchronously by IT staff Practical—yes Equitable—yes, if delivered in different formats Acceptable—likely to be welcomed Safe/side effects—none foreseen Effective—suggested as effective in Green et al. (2020) and Winkler et al. (2022)
Psychological capability: self-management skills	Training: education	Instruction on how to perform a behaviour; demonstration of the behaviour	Provide training on the use of task management software; offer tips, tricks and tools through blogs, etc. Training on personal effectiveness and time management skills	Affordable—no cost if using a software already licensed such as MS platforms Practical—yes Equitable—yes, if tools are in accessible formats Acceptable—depends how complex the tools are Safe/side effects—potentially less inclusive Effective—recommended in Winkler et al. (2022)
Physical opportunity: [lack of clarity of] hybrid working policy	Environmental restructuring	Restructuring the physical/social environment; adding objects to the environment	Provide guidance for managers to accompany hybrid working policy and support them in recognising and responding to individual needs and the requirements of the role Focus performance management processes on outcomes and contributions rather than inputs, for example time spent in office	Affordable—low cost Practical—quick and straightforward Equitable—supports equitable application of policy Acceptable—yes, especially for those with individual needs Safe/side effects—none envisaged Effective—recommended in CIPD (2022) and Patrick and Anim (2022)
				Affordable—low cost Practical—quick and straightforward, may require manager training Equitable—yes Acceptable—yes, likely to improve inclusivity Safe/side effects—possible negative side effects, if it encourages longer working days to meet targets Effective—recommended in CIPD (2022)

TABLE 3 (Continued)

COM-B domain: enabler/barrier	Intervention type	BCT ^a suggested	Example application	APEASE
[Not] having suitable space and equipment	Environmental restructuring	Restructuring the physical environment; adding objects to the environment	Rethink office spaces and technology provided to maximise hybrid teams	Affordable—potentially a significant cost attached Practical—may be more practical for some offices than others Equitable—would support engagement of staff both at home and in office Acceptable—yes Safe/side effects—none foreseen Effective—recommended in CIPD (2022) and Green et al. (2020)
			Ensure hybrid working policy provides flexibility for staff with disabilities who cannot work effectively in office	Affordable—no cost Practical—requires simple policy change Equitable—improves equity for staff with disabilities Acceptable—yes, especially for staff with disabilities Safe/side effects—could make disabled staff feel more remote from colleagues, other suggested interventions elsewhere could mitigate Effective—suggested in Taylor et al. (2022)
			Having distinct spaces in the office (e.g. quiet room)	Affordable—depends on extent of adaptations required Practical—as above Equitable—yes Acceptable—yes Safe/side effects—none foreseen Effective—yes, likely to be effective for those with disabilities according to Taylor et al. (2022)
Travel	Environmental restructuring	Restructuring the physical/social environment	Meetings to be online by default unless all staff can attend in person	Affordable—no cost Practical—dependent on needs of individual team members Equitable—some staff find online meetings challenging Acceptable—likely to be acceptable to some staff, but perhaps not all who regularly come into the office Safe/side effects—none anticipated Effective—recommended by CIPD (2022)

(Continues)

TABLE 3 (Continued)

COM-B domain: enabler/barrier	Intervention type	BCT ^a suggested	Example application	APEASE
Childcare	Environmental restructuring	Restructuring the physical environment	Introduce partnership with flexible/emergency childcare provider	<p>Affordable—depends on the arrangement with the provider</p> <p>Practical—yes, if using an established high-quality child care provider centre with different locations</p> <p>Equitable—may be seen as inequitable to those who do not have children</p> <p>Acceptable—likely to be acceptable to staff with children and promote family-friendly work practices</p> <p>Safe/side effects—none foreseen</p> <p>Effective—recommended by Modestino et al. (2021)</p>
Managers' [lack of] recognition of individual needs	Training and education	Information about health/emotional consequences	Provide diversity sensitivity and empathy training (in person) for managers	<p>Affordable—yes, if included in existing manager training</p> <p>Practical—as above</p> <p>Equitable—aimed to improve equity</p> <p>Acceptable—yes, likely to be welcomed by those in marginalised/minority groups</p> <p>Safe/side effects—none foreseen</p> <p>Effective—recommended in CIPD (2022) as effective and in Patrick and Anim (2022)</p>
Support from others	Enablement	Social support (unspecified)	Encourage buddying programs and team building activities	<p>Affordable—low cost</p> <p>Practical—yes, should be possible within existing workforce</p> <p>Equitable—yes, if all staff have access. Buddies could also address inequalities and support those who feel marginalised</p> <p>Acceptable—yes</p> <p>Safe/side effects—none anticipated</p> <p>Effective—recommended by CIPD (2022) and Green et al. (2020)</p>
Productivity of hybrid working	Enablement	Framing/reframing; goal setting (outcome)	Frame/reframe office days as collaboration days, while home working days are focused on individual/quiet work	<p>Affordable—low/no cost</p> <p>Practical—yes, if included in policy and guidance</p> <p>Equitable—yes, if methods are developed to include those who are unable to be in the office</p> <p>Acceptable—already happening with some staff</p> <p>Safe/side effects—none anticipated</p> <p>Effective—yes, suggested by participants and recommended in CIPD (2022)</p>

TABLE 3 (Continued)

COM-B domain: enabler/barrier	Intervention type	BCT ^a suggested	Example application	APEASE
Purposeful office days	Enablement	Action planning	Encourage teams to plan regular office days and meaningful activities for maximum collaboration and social/networking opportunities	Affordable—low/no cost Practical—yes, if organised through existing team meetings/events Equitable—would need to consider team members with disabilities who are unable to be physically present for office days Acceptable—yes, if plans are agreed collaboratively within teams Safe/side effects—none identified Effective—recommended by CIPD (2022)
Work-life balance	Enablement	Action planning; restructuring the physical/social environment	Teams to establish local hybrid working practices, for example the use of asynchronous tools, regular online meetings on specific days and even meeting free days	Affordable—low cost Practical—yes, this happens already in many teams Equitable—easier for some roles Acceptable—harder to achieve for those whose meetings are dictated by external partners/stakeholders Safe/side effects—none anticipated Effective—recommended by CIPD (2022)
Fears and uncertainty	Training; enablement; environmental restructuring	Information about emotional and health consequences; social support (unspecified); reduce negative emotions	Mental health awareness training for managers; raising awareness of existing support such as mental health first aiders Provide greater communication about the longer-term strategy with respect to hybrid, for example town hall-style meetings for staff input	Affordable—yes Practical—yes, could be added onto existing meetings/events/newsletters Equitable—helps with equity and inclusion Acceptable—likely to be welcomed by staff Safe/side effects—none foreseen Effective—recommended as effective in Bailey et al. (2022) Affordable—low/no cost Practical—yes, as long as strategy has been defined Equitable—yes, if communications are available in-person and online Acceptable—yes, participants wanted this certainty about but may be less acceptable to leadership who need to be 'agile' with plans Safe/side effects—may be some fall out if strategy changes from current position Effective—suggested by CIPD (2022)

(Continues)

TABLE 3 (Continued)

COM-B domain: enabler/barrier	Intervention type	BCT ^a suggested	Example application	APEASE
Feeling isolated and lonely	Enablement	Goal setting (outcome); goal setting (behaviour); social support (unspecified)	Increase collaboration between staff members through task interdependence, where different members of the team define their contribution on a specified task and how they will work together to accomplish it	Affordable—yes, this involves a simple change of existing team-based working practices Practical—yes, if team managers are skilled to set up work in this way Equitable—yes, aims to improve support and well-being for all team members Acceptable—yes Safe/side effects—none anticipated Effective—recommended in Winkler et al. (2022) and CIPD (2022)

Abbreviations: BCT, behaviour change technique; CIPD, Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development.

5.2 | Physical opportunity

5.2.1 | (Lack of) clarity and application of the hybrid working policy

A handful of staff mentioned that the lack of clarity in the hybrid working policy contributed to inconsistency in its application. 'Have a consistent way that policy is implemented across departments. Because the same policy can be interpreted very differently' (P19(I)). Some of these participants also compared how their experience differed from colleagues in different teams, often depending on their job role and/or seniority. 'Equity, parity and transparency: it appears that not all staff are coming in two days a week with senior members not doing so in some departments' (P30(Q)). A couple of staff also noted a distinction between professional services and academic staff, with the former seen as having a more rigid application of policy. 'Because there's always been the flexibility within most, not all, but within most academic and research roles for a certain level of working from home. Professional services haven't always had that' (P19(I)).

5.2.2 | Not having suitable space and equipment

Almost all those interviewed highlighted that not having suitable space and equipment, either in the office or at home, was a barrier, with the office environment often not appropriately designed, stocked or set up to facilitate hybrid working. This includes a lack of integration of software to allow simultaneous online and face-to-face meetings, a deficit in the correct equipment such as a camera to allow this to happen successfully, and issues with noise and distractions within the office making the environment unsuitable for online meetings. This was particularly salient for staff with a disability. 'As a hearing aid user, being in a busy open-plan office is very fatiguing and I struggle with concentration and to communicate with my colleagues' (P9(Q)). Some participants also felt that meeting rooms were not sufficiently equipped for hybrid working and there was a lack of space for individuals to have private meetings online. 'The meeting rooms aren't really set up for hybrid, although you would think they are because they have, you know, things to connect your laptops and a big screen in there' (P19(I)). Other participants discussed their home set-up and equipment and its suitability for long-term hybrid working, such as not having two computer screens, a suitable desk or allocated quiet space at home and a stable Internet connection. 'I'm still kind of working from the sofa and sometimes I use my dining room table as well. But yeah, not really much of a good set-up' (P32(I)). One participant with a disability, however, found the office environment overwhelming and preferred their home set-up for hybrid working. 'Because I need a bit of consideration with noise and light or touch...the sensory overload. Which is why being at home we all can have a home set up that's perfect for us and we love being at home for that reason' (P19(I)).

5.2.3 | Travel

This theme reflects the challenges associated with commuting to the office, with just over half the participants interviewed discussing travel time or travel costs. These were alleviated when working from home, improving participants' work-life balance. 'So that I can drop the kids off at school and pick them up and not have 2h of commuting time in a day' (P7(I)). Another participant also identified travel time as a barrier. 'It is not an ideal scenario at all to travel in just to sit at the office desk. Also, at home, I can use the 3h I save from travelling on getting more work done and having more rest' (P6(Q)). The barrier of the office commute was particularly salient for staff with disabilities. For example, one member of staff with a disability came in early to avoid rush hour and having to stand on the train but this meant less overlap in working hours with colleagues. 'I get in at 6AM...So yeah, there's no one on the bus so that's really

good, that makes me feel safe. And yeah, I do miss seeing people...My colleagues don't come in until about 10AM so I will actually have done 4 h there on my own' (P15(I)).

5.2.4 | Childcare

Although only mentioned by a small number of participants in this study who were parents or carers, childcare could be an enabler or a barrier to hybrid working. When working at home, the reduction in childcare requirement resulting from less commuting time and greater flexibility in working hours was depicted in both questionnaires and interviews as an enabler. 'The biggest thing for us is just childcare costs' (P7(I)). However, childcare can also be seen as a barrier when face-to-face meetings are scheduled and staff need to go into the office, especially without sufficient notice. 'If there's a meeting and it's gonna be face-to-face that means I'm suddenly questioning myself. How am I gonna do this around childcare?' (P8(I)).

5.3 | Social opportunity

5.3.1 | Managers' (lack of) recognition of individual needs

This theme was mentioned by a handful of staff and captures participants' views about whether their manager recognises their needs regarding hybrid working. This includes circumstances such as having caring responsibilities and specific needs such as having a disability. As a barrier, this lack of recognition left some participants feeling aggrieved. 'Requests to work from home considering my personal circumstances are met cautiously almost as if I am at fault for having a child' (P35(Q)). As an enabler, a few participants noted that their manager accommodated their individual needs, especially for those with a disability, such as allowing particular working hours or patterns. 'I spoke to my manager, and we agreed that I would come in one day a week because of the difficulties with open plan office working and my hearing in particular' (P9(I)). On the other hand, several who identified as having an invisible disability, highlighted that their managers often did not acknowledge their disability when adjustments to the hybrid working policy were required. 'There's something about having a very visible disability that makes line managers very comfortable to put in reasonable adjustments. When it's an invisible disability, they struggle' (P19(I)).

5.3.2 | Support from others (managers, colleagues, friends and family)

Support from others was discussed as an enabler by most participants. They talked about the support they had received from work, including their manager or colleagues. This support included emotional support such as understanding and responding to their personal needs. 'I've had some support from work. I've definitely had some understanding' (P17(I)). This also includes practical support such as provision of equipment. One participant stated, 'They [work] bought a chair. That's been great. I, basically I'd ruined my back because I was sitting in a bad chair during the pandemic' (P7(I)). One participant in their questionnaire also noted '[work] offered me support via providing office material to be more comfortable at home and flexible arrangements' (P34(Q)). Some also mentioned support from friends and family as an enabler to hybrid working. For instance, 'My sister is looking after my twins two days a week. I can take a deep breath, relax, knowing they're fine Tuesday, Wednesday, they're with her' (P27(I)).

5.4 | Reflective motivation

5.4.1 | Productivity of hybrid working

This theme was mentioned as an enabler by most of the participants. Participants highlighted that hybrid working has the potential to improve their work productivity under the right conditions. 'If you've got the right kind of support in place then I think it can do wonders for morale and I think people can work better' (P14(I)). This was repeated in questionnaires. '(Hybrid working) allowed me to better plan aspects of my life outside work and I feel it has allowed me to use my time more efficiently' (P2(Q)). Many expressed that they were more productive at home in comparison to the office. 'So, the office days are productive in a way, but not that much productive as the online days' (P36(I)). Office days, in contrast, were viewed as more productive in terms of collaborating and socialising with colleagues. 'But in the office is now more like if we go in, it's more like social time. Catch up with colleagues and everything, and you may not actually end up doing any work sometimes' (P9(I)).

5.4.2 | Purposeful office days

Purposeful office days was an enabler reflecting when those days spent at the office are planned and purposeful rather than mandatory. Many staff spoke about their desire to make the most productive use of their time in the office by arranging events that would benefit from being in person, such as face-to-face meetings with colleagues. 'I am not against being on campus when my whole day is spent productively doing things that cannot be done online, but if I'm made to sit in an office just to warm an office chair and mostly spend my day attending online meetings... management is simply wasting my precious energy on commuting' (P18(Q)). However, many of the participants noted that they were often unable to achieve this, with days in the office often feeling pointless or even unproductive, with some staff commuting long distances to sit in an empty office. 'Doing the same sorts of activities in the office meant that I was online a lot, so I'd just go to meeting rooms and sit by myself. So, it's like, well, I could be doing that at home and so this feels like a waste of time' (P19(I)).

5.4.3 | Work/life balance

Work/life balance was an enabler for most of the staff, noting the substantial autonomy they had due to hybrid working. Both those with and without caregiving responsibilities mentioned work/life balance as being an important enabler of hybrid working, '...the autonomy over my time, like the hours like I can do, parenting and work' (P9(I)). Most participants discussed being able to connect more with family, make more efficient and bounded use of their time and achieve more tasks which they felt they would be unable to do if working from the office, such as managing more chores or taking a walk when stressed. Several participants highlighted how they had discovered the possible benefits that hybrid working could have during the pandemic and were reluctant to lose its benefits. 'Hybrid working has helped me to realise how important a work-life balance is' (P12(Q)).

5.5 | Automatic motivation

5.5.1 | Feelings about hybrid working

This was an enabler for staff, most spoke positively about their experience of hybrid working. Some staff expressed positive emotions regarding the return to the office after fully remote working. 'I found it a huge relief

when we could return..., so since March 2021, I have returned' (P17(Q)). There was also positivity about the combination of both working from home and at the office. 'I've just personally taken quite a flexible approach and I've really enjoyed the days I've been in' (P31(I)). Several noted that hybrid working was the new and better way of working. 'I do think hybrid working is the best option going forward. Giving people the freedom to work how best works for them or within their teams' (P9(I)).

5.5.2 | Fears and uncertainty

Fears and uncertainty were an important barrier for a small number of participants who expressed the strong emotions they experienced, including fear and worry, when thinking about returning to the office. 'I also have the continuous fear that we will be back in campus full time soon like nothing has been learnt from going through a pandemic' (P34(Q)). These staff feared that working from the office, or a greater proportion of time working from the office, may be enforced and this brought up feelings of uncertainty for them. 'Frankly, I am terrified of going back to toxic pre-lockdown working conditions!' (P18(Q)). One participant expressed anxieties over using public transport and catching COVID, while some expressed concerns about job stability and future career prospects. 'I am still really worried and especially because of the young baby, you know, with my long commute, I am not comfortable to travel and catch anything and bring it back to my baby' (P9(I)).

5.5.3 | Feeling isolated and lonely

This barrier was experienced by a small number of participants who described still feeling remote or lonely even though they were now working in the office a certain number of days a week. 'I do feel quite remote sometimes from the other people in the department' (P17(I)). This was related to the fact that not as many people were in the office as before the pandemic. 'I also really enjoy the days I do go into campus. The downside is that when I do go to the office, there is hardly anyone there' (P7(Q)). Having fewer people in the office could make it hard to connect with people. 'Some days can be very alone, feeling of being alone' (P36(I)).

5.6 | BCTs and recommendations to optimise hybrid working

[Table 3](#) describes the barriers/enablers, intervention type(s), final BCTs identified and example(s) of their application (see [Section 6](#) for further elaboration). Positive feelings about hybrid working were not addressed, as this enabler can be enhanced through the other BCTs.

6 | DISCUSSION

This study identified barriers and enablers to hybrid working for diverse professional and academic staff, in the period after working from home restrictions eased, in higher education in the United Kingdom. Issues related to equity and inclusivity were highlighted based on disability status, caregiving responsibilities, age and job role in terms of professional versus academic staff. Specific themes also related to going back to the office after the experience of the pandemic. The findings are discussed in light of previous research and then evidence-based strategies are offered for improvement.

6.1 | Barriers and enablers to hybrid working

In line with recent research (e.g. Galanti et al., 2021; Green et al., 2020; Xiao et al., 2021), enablers included a better work-life balance, higher productivity, positive feelings about hybrid working and social support from others, while barriers included feeling isolated, having suitable space and equipment and commuting (travel). This study further extends previous research through the identification of specific influences on hybrid working during the transition from fully remote working due to the pandemic at a higher education institution in the United Kingdom. In terms of motivation, some expressed fears and uncertainty about returning to the office, but others noted positive feelings about hybrid working. Staff also stressed the importance of purposeful office days, in terms of managers ensuring that office space and equipment are available and conducive to hybrid working teams, as well as providing meaningful opportunities for shared interactions with colleagues. In terms of capability, there were new demands on their skill sets including better self-management to balance working from both home and office and increased expertise in using more sophisticated technologies. For opportunity, issues related to the clarity and application of the hybrid working policy and managers' lack of understanding of their specific needs were highlighted as barriers. Overall, many of the themes identified reflect an inadequate organisational infrastructure to support hybrid working and workers' insufficient experience with balancing working from home with the office, both of which relate to the rapid adoption of this way of working due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Barriers and enablers were also interrogated to highlight themes related to diversity, inclusion and equity. Contrary to previous research showing gender differences in work/life balance (Chronicle of Higher Education and Fidelity Investments, 2020; Syrek et al., 2022), this was not reflected in this study. Other themes were also not shown to be more important for specific groups based on the participants' self-identified gender, ethnicity, sexuality and religion. However, staff with parental and/or caregiving responsibilities stressed the availability and cost of childcare as a barrier to hybrid working, as compared to fully remote working. Their concerns were also prevalent in themes related to managers' recognition of their needs, the clarity and application of the hybrid working policy and work-life balance, with both mothers and fathers highlighting these as relevant.

In line with recent COVID-19 research (Gutman et al., 2023; Taylor et al., 2022), having disabilities played a prominent role in several themes. Some disabled staff stressed that managers' lack of recognition of their needs was a key issue especially for those with invisible disabilities. Travelling to the office and not having suitable space and equipment were other barriers prominent for disabled staff. These identified barriers further stress the importance of implementing inclusive strategies for staff with disabilities to promote equity in the hybrid work setting (Taylor et al., 2022).

Job role, as well as age, were also emphasised in some themes. One participant mentioned their older age as a barrier to using technology. A few participants highlighted the lack of equity in the application of the hybrid working policy according to job role, viewing professional staff having more requirements to be present in the office than academic staff. As discussed in Winkler et al. (2022), this can create perceptions of inequality and may lead to resentment and disengagement among staff.

6.2 | Optimisation strategies to improve hybrid working

Strategies are suggested to optimise hybrid working, enhancing the enablers and addressing the barriers identified in this study. These focus on additional training, work practices and policies that organisations can put in place to better support their employees with hybrid working. In line with the COM-B model, many of these suggested strategies can interact with and impact other influences on hybrid working. Although generated in the context of higher education, these strategies are relevant for most organisations (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development [CIPD], 2022; Winkler et al., 2022).

First, training and education can be offered to staff to improve their knowledge and skills (BCTs: instruction on how to perform a behaviour and demonstration of a behaviour) in terms of their technology use and self-management (CIPD, 2022; Green et al., 2020), which may in turn improve their work/life balance and productivity. Managers can also be offered training to support their staff with hybrid working. Mental health awareness training (BCT: information about health and emotional consequences) can be provided to managers to counter staffs' feelings of loneliness and uncertainty (Bailey et al., 2023); mental health training has been shown to impact managers' attitudes about, and understanding of, mental health (Dimoff et al., 2016). In addition, managers can attend sessions on diversity awareness and empathy training (BCT: information about health and emotional consequences) to improve their recognition of their staffs' individual needs, which can lead to more inclusive and equitable practices and support in relation to hybrid working (CIPD, 2022; Patrick & Anim, 2022).

Second, organisations can provide more infrastructure to support hybrid working through the allocation of physical resources (BCT: restructuring the physical environment) such as quiet rooms for disabled staff who might benefit from reduced noise/distraction (Taylor et al., 2022), office spaces and technological tools conducive to hybrid working teams (CIPD, 2022; Winkler et al., 2022) and a partnership with an established child care provider that can meet the needs of hybrid working parents/caregivers (Modestino et al., 2021). This BCT can also be applied to address barriers related to the hybrid working policy through further guidance to help managers understand and implement the policy, defining hybrid working in relation to the requirements of the role, taking into account specific individuals' needs when applying the policy and allowing flexibility for disabled staff who are unable to work in the office on a regular basis (CIPD, 2022; Patrick & Anim, 2022; Taylor et al., 2022). Another strategy to promote inclusivity for hybrid workers is to schedule regular meetings online by default unless all of the team members can attend in person (CIPD, 2022). This option may be especially helpful for staff with disabilities, releasing the requirement to travel to work expressly for attendance at a face-to-face meeting.

Third, organisations can address motivational barriers to hybrid working with practices and policies that enable a collaborative, cooperative and inclusive hybrid work setting. To address influences related to productivity and productive office days, hybrid teams can frame (BCTs: framing/reframing; goal setting) office days as having the purposes of collaboration, brainstorming and meeting with colleagues, while home working days are focused on more quiet work (CIPD, 2022). To facilitate this, teams can discuss and plan office days (BCTs: action planning) to ensure they involve face-to-face, collaborative meetings with colleagues, social events and/or in-person training (CIPD, 2022). As suggested in CIPD (2022), work-life balance can be enhanced further through encouraging hybrid working teams to establish their own channels for communication by making use of asynchronous tools, regular online meetings on specific days with sufficient breaks in-between to avoid back-to-back meetings and even meeting-free days, if possible (BCTs: action planning; restructuring the physical and social environment). To counter feelings of loneliness, collaboration among team members can be promoted through goal and task interdependence (BCT: goal setting), which is a functional way to ensure that staff have to work together to accomplish work goals and tasks; it involves specifying who needs to do what, when it needs to be done and how people will work together to accomplish the task (CIPD, 2022; Winkler et al., 2022). Finally, social support can be enhanced and social isolation reduced through arrangement of social/well-being groups, increased team-building exercises and buddying.

6.3 | Limitations and future studies

The findings of this study should be considered in light of several limitations. First, data were gathered from a wide range of academic and professional staff, however, participants were recruited via EDI channels and volunteered to participate. As a result, participants may be more likely to have had specific issues related to inclusivity and hybrid working that they wanted to raise in the questionnaires and interviews. Second, a number of participants

did not progress from initially expressing an interest in participating in the study to completing the questionnaire. It is possible that some staff from particular groups were put off by the amount of personal demographic information which was requested to allow analysis from an EDI perspective. Third, participants worked at the same higher education institution, therefore, the findings may not be applicable to other institutions or organisations. Future studies should investigate whether similar themes arise in different contexts. Fourth, there is the possibility of social desirability bias given that interviewers were also associated with the institution. As a result, participants may have been more reserved in how they expressed their views. However, this was mitigated by data triangulation with the questionnaires which showed similar themes to the interviews. Lastly, this study may not have captured important themes due to the inclusion criteria (for the interview) of being employed at the institution since March 2020. Although questionnaires from staff who worked at the university for only 1 year were gathered, the interviews were focused on staff who worked at the university during the pandemic to gather views about transitioning from remote working to hybrid working. As a result, most staff who were interviewed worked at the university for three or more years. This may explain the reason that themes related to career progression and access to opportunities were not generated. Further studies should include participants transitioning to new roles, in order to examine this issue. Such future research would be particularly important for disabled workers, who may have concerns about opportunities to develop and grow in a hybrid working environment (Taylor et al., 2022).

6.4 | Implications and conclusions

The UK government's withdrawal of guidance to work from home as a result of the pandemic resulted in a significant increase in the number of people working in a hybrid way and this is expected to be an enduring change. Therefore, understanding how to optimise hybrid working for the benefit of both the staff and organisation during this period is important. This study contributes to the previously limited literature by examining the influences on the transition to hybrid working from fully remote working during the COVID-19 pandemic for staff in a UK higher education institution. The study identifies evidence-based strategies which could improve the experience of hybrid working for all staff, and in particular, those from diverse groups. This study is therefore potentially of interest to other higher education institutions, and organisations more broadly, who wish to maximise the effectiveness of hybrid working for their staff and improve the engagement and inclusion of diverse employees. Finally, it further demonstrates that a behaviour change approach can be effectively deployed in the context of higher education. Future studies may benefit from utilising the recently published BCT Ontology which expands the possible BCTs available for selection (Marques et al., 2023).

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Leslie Morrison Gutman: Conceptualization; writing – original draft; formal analysis; methodology; funding acquisition; validation; supervision; visualization. **Rachel Perowne:** Formal analysis; writing – review and editing; investigation; project administration; methodology. **Fatima Younas:** Investigation; formal analysis; writing – review and editing; methodology. **Eanna O'Hanraughtaigh:** Investigation; formal analysis.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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How to cite this article: Gutman, L. M., Perowne, R., Younas, F., & O'Hanraughtaigh, E. (2023). Making hybrid work for diverse staff in higher education: A behaviour change approach. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 00, 1–23. <https://doi.org/10.1111/hequ.12487>