UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN

STAFF SURVEY 2020 – COMMENTS THEME REPORT

1.0   Background

The University, in conjunction with Capita Surveys and Research, undertook a Staff Survey in November 2020. The results of the survey were, on the whole, very positive with the University scoring particularly well in the areas of job satisfaction and support from colleagues. Areas highlighted which required improvement included workload and stress.

The survey included the following 2 questions which allowed staff a free text response:
1. Please note below one thing you think is good about working for the University
2. Please note below one thing that you feel could be improved at the University

Responses to these questions were anonymous and Capita edited any answers which contained information that could identify either the respondent or anyone else within the organisation. The comments were not linked to a respondent's profile, other than the School, Directorate or Institute that they belonged to. A report was compiled which included all the information contained in the free text responses. Each Head of School/Directorate was given a confidential report which contained the comments specific to their own staff. In line with the Data Agreement with Capita, the comments are not to be widely shared or directed quoted.

Within the survey, staff were able to select a theme, from a pre-determined list, which they felt best reflected the content of their comment. This was helpful for a top-level review of the information but further analysis highlighted that this was not as beneficial for those who had articulated multiple issues and, in some cases, the chosen theme did not correspond with the text in the comments section. In order to overcome these issues each response has been individually categorised to identify the prevalent themes contained within the text. There were 2503 occurrences of positive comment themes which have been mapped into 17 different categories. There were 2581 occurrences of improvement comment themes which were mapped into 30 categories. Each category contains multiple themes and these themes may have been repeated within the comments report numerous times. For example:

The Grading System category, within the improvements comments, contains 6 different themes which are detailed below (please note that these are **not** verbatim quotes from the Capita Comments Report). The number of times each theme occurred within the comments report is displayed in brackets:

1. Grading system is unfair (6)
2. Grading system should be abolished and pay should be based on workload and output (4)
3. There are no pay rises once you reach top of scale (3)
4. Inability to be promoted past the first point of a new grade (1)
5. Could lose money if promoted due to overtime no longer being payable (1)
6. Increments should be applied more fairly e.g. following 12 months service, not at a fixed date (1)

A list of all the categories and the number of themes within each can be seen in Appendix 1.

2.0   Results Summary

Overall, the biggest single reason staff indicated which made working here a positive experience was the people themselves within the University community. The positive culture of the University, which includes areas such as supportive colleagues and Schools and Directorates, the friendly and collegiate working environment and feeling valued, accounted for 35% of the total positive theme occurrences identified within the comments report. This is over three times higher than the next identified category. Additional popular categories included the flexible working environment, positive Covid-related issues, job role and SMT and management issues.

In relation to what could be improved within the University, staff indicated that workload was the single biggest issue, responsible for 17.4% of the total improvement theme occurrences identified within the comments report.   Additional categories which featured heavily were promotions and career progression, communication, negative Covid-related issues and administration and bureaucracy.

A list of the top individual themes for both the positive and improvement comments, outwith the category structure, can be seen in Appendix 2.

2.1 Positive Themes[1]

Culture (35%)
Feeling supported by colleagues accounted for 8.1% of the comments identified within the report and when combined with feeling supported by their School or Directorate this increased to 12.8%.

Staff believe that the University provides a good, friendly working environment (6.8%), they feel valued and listened to (3.8%) and people like the feeling of community and common purpose that working here gives them (3.3%).

Flexibility (11.4%)
The ability to work flexibly was the main issue within this section accounting for 6.3% of the positive responses within the comments report. Many within this group also acknowledged that this assisted them to fit in family responsibilities alongside working.

The other main themes within this category related to the flexibility that staff are afforded within their roles and in how they undertake their duties (5.1%).

Covid (9.4%)
Good management support during the Covid period was the main theme for this category and was responsible for 5.1% of the positive comments from staff. Communication throughout the lockdown period was also highly rated (2%).

Other comments indicated that staff appreciated the additional rest days as well as the support that has been provided by the IT Department while people have been working from home.

Job Role (9.1%)
Job security, especially during the COVID period, was highlighted in 2.85% of the positive responses as being a beneficial element of being employed by the University.

Various elements of job satisfaction were responsible for 4.7% of the overall positive responses categorised under this theme. These ranged from enjoying the fact that roles were varied, interesting and challenging, to being able to work with people who were passionate and proud about what they did. For others, knowing that the work they did was making a real difference was the best thing about working here.

SMT and Management (8.8%)

The top theme within this category was that the Senior Management Team are making a positive difference to the culture of the University (2.65%). This was underlined by other comments related to SMT producing caring people policies, genuinely wanting to listen, as well as being approachable and effective (2.7%).

Good line management was recognised (2.2%), as was the level of transparency within the Management Teams overall (0.6%).

Other Positive Themes

Equality and Diversity – staff felt there was a real agenda for inclusion and enjoyed working in such a diverse community where people were treated fairly.

Terms and Conditions – many highlighted the good pay and benefits structure with the level of annual leave being particularly recognised as a good benefit.

Working with Students – staff enjoy their work with students and highlighted the sense of achievement they got from watching them develop throughout their time at the University. The fact that the University genuinely cared about our students was also a positive highlighted within this area.

---

[1] The percentage figures quoted relate to the number of occurrences identified in the positive comments report, i.e. X% of 2503.

Teaching and Research – the report reflected that staff took pride in the fact that the whole University community pulled together to ensure that great teaching and research was provided. The support for research, the ability to carry out research in areas of interest and being able to participate in life-changing research were all positive elements expressed by survey respondents.

Health and Wellbeing – there were two distinct topics within this category. The first was that the University genuinely cared about the mental health and wellbeing of staff and the second concerned the provision and promotion of a good work-life balance.

2.2   Improvement Themes[2]

Workload (17.5%)
The fact that workloads were too high accounted for 6.2% of the total improvement comments made by staff. Another theme within this area was the fact that workloads were impacted by the lack of staff (2.9%), with suggestions being made that staff:student ratios needed to be improved, and benchmarking in respect of staff numbers should be undertaken.

Other issues raised in relation to workload included the inability to take leave, or the additional rest days, which exacerbated the lack of a good work-life balance (1.4%).

Promotions and Career Progression (7.1%)
Fifty percent of the comments within this area were related to the current promotions system. Many felt that the system needed to be improved. There were several reasons cited for this and these ranged from the system needing to be more transparent to ensuring that those being promoted should be being rewarded for their abilities rather than their long service, or because the system was skewed in their favour due to their job role.

Issues surrounding limited career progression being available for staff in Professional Services accounted for 1.6% of all improvement responses. In addition, staff highlighted the need for more information and guidance in respect of their individual career development (0.7%).

Communications (5.5%)
Many staff were looking for a general improvement in communications within the University (2.8%). In addition, it was highlighted that there was a need for a more consistent approach internally within Schools and Directorates and a better dissemination of information by line managers (1.2%).

One other area of concern within this category was the need for better strategies to ensure that information reached staff in lower grades who may not routinely access University e-mail addresses (0.3%).

Admin & Bureaucracy (4.7%)
Comments within this category reflected the fact that many of the University processes are not as efficient as they could be (1.7%). Staff felt that current processes did not support fast, or efficient, decision making or they were just too complex. Others thought that some departmental procedures should be standardised or replaced with more efficient IT systems.

Too much bureaucracy within the University was cited as another issue (0.62%). It was also highlighted that additional admin support within the Schools would assist with workload issues (0.8%).

Covid (4.7%)
There were a wide range of themes within this category, with the top scoring individual theme being that the Covid situation could have been managed better by the University (0.35%).

Various themes related to wellbeing during Covid accounted for 1.1% of the improvement comments from the survey, with staff stating that mental health and wellbeing could have been better supported during the crisis.

---

[2] The percentage figures quoted relate to the number of occurrences identified in the improvement comments report, i.e. X% of 2581.

The provision of resources was another area where staff felt support had been lacking (0.9%). This included the financial outlay or increase in costs that some have incurred due to working from home.

Other Improvement Themes

Interdisciplinary Working – most staff who commented in relation to this category felt that there needed to be an increased level of collaboration and communication between different parts of the University.

IT – within this category the majority of comments were related to IT systems. Staff felt that there needed to be more investment in the IT infrastructure. Many of the current systems required updating and those that were being used were not compatible with each other, which had led to increased workloads and stress.

Research – there were a wide range of issues identified within this category. These included better support and career progression for Early Career Researchers, the need for a more formal procedure to protect research time, as well as some who felt that research was supported at the expense of teaching.

Management – the need for better, more supportive line management was identified by 1.3% of the improvement comments. This was underlined by others who suggested more management training was required in this area.   Improved leadership, including strategic thinking was suggested for School/Directorate level management teams.

Other issues - two areas of note within the improvement themes which do not occur within the top-level categories are:
1.   'a stressful working environment' (1.2%)
2.   the fact that staff believe 'unacceptable behaviour is not challenged' within the University (1.1%)

These appear within the Top 10 individual themes highlighted in Appendix 2, even though their individual percentages appear relatively low. This indicates that the topics are important to staff and steps should be taken to ensure that these issues are addressed. The issue of stress, in particular, was a significant area of concern highlighted within the wider survey results.

3.0   Further Action

This report has been compiled to highlight the themes found within each of the free text questions with the aim of helping identify areas of good practice and to assist with action planning.

Many of the top comments reflect the themes which were highlighted by the numerical results of the staff survey. All of the comments themes which have been identified will be disseminated to the relevant Directors and/or Committees and Working Groups. Those which are specifically relevant to particular Schools or Directorates such as IT or HR, will be shared with them. The comments related to each of the themes will be shared with the relevant Director e.g. Director of Digital and Information Systems for those relating to IT or Library matters. This will enable the full extent of the issues to be reviewed without compromising the confidentiality of the data.

Each category and theme will be allocated with the aim of helping to shape the relevant Action Plans which are currently being developed. The Action Plans and their progress will be reviewed by members of the Senior Management Team ensuring that steps are taken towards addressing the issues raised by staff and improving the working environment for everyone.

4.0   Further Information

Further information is available from Karl Leydecker, Senior Vice-Principal karl.leydecker@abdn.ac.uk and Sam Waldram, HR Partner (Specialist Services) sam.waldram@abdn.ac.uk

5th May 2021

Freedom of Information/Confidentiality Status: Open

Appendix 1

Positive Comments		
Category	**Number of Unique Themes in Category**	**% of Total Positive Theme Occurrences (2503)**
Culture	58	35%
Flexibility	7	11.4%
COVID Related	13	9.4%
Job Role	21	9.2%
SMT & Management	14	8.8%
Equality & Diversity	8	4.2%
Terms & Conditions	9	4.1%
Students	4	4.1%
Teaching & Research	11	3.6%
Health & Wellbeing	2	3.6%
Training & Development	8	2.2%
Estates & Facilities	10	2%
Interdisciplinary Working	5	1.4%
Communication	2	0.8%
Miscellaneous	3	0.2%
IT	2	0.1%

Improvement Comments		
Category	**Number of Unique Themes in Category**	**% of Total Improvement Theme Occurrences (2581)**
Workload	55	17.5%
Promotion & Career Progression	35	7.1%
Communication	14	5.5%
Admin & Bureaucracy	30	4.7%
COVID Related	52	4.7%
Interdisciplinary Working	19	4.5%
IT	26	4.2%
Research	37	4.1%
Management	39	4%
Training & Development	28	3.8%
Staff Recognition	29	3.2%
Change Management	22	3.1%
HR Related Issues *Bullying & Harassment* *HR specific* *Grading System* *Recruitment* *Family Friendly Issues*	31	3.1%
Terms & Conditions	23	3%
Equality & Diversity	29	2.8%
Job Related	36	2.8%
Underperforming Staff	14	2.7%
Health & Wellbeing	11	2.6%
Buildings & Facilities	26	2.2%
Casualisation	11	2.2%
Feedback	14	2.1%
Flexibility	7	1.8%
Students	33	1.6%
Culture	22	1.5%
Professional Services & Academics	17	1.4%
Blended Learning	18	1.3%
General Policy	22	1.1%
Lack of Transparency	5	1%
Budgets & Finance	7	0.3%
Estates & Facilities	5	0.2%

Appendix 2

Top Individual Comment Themes

Graph 1 – Top Individual Positive Comments

Top Individual Positive Comment Themes
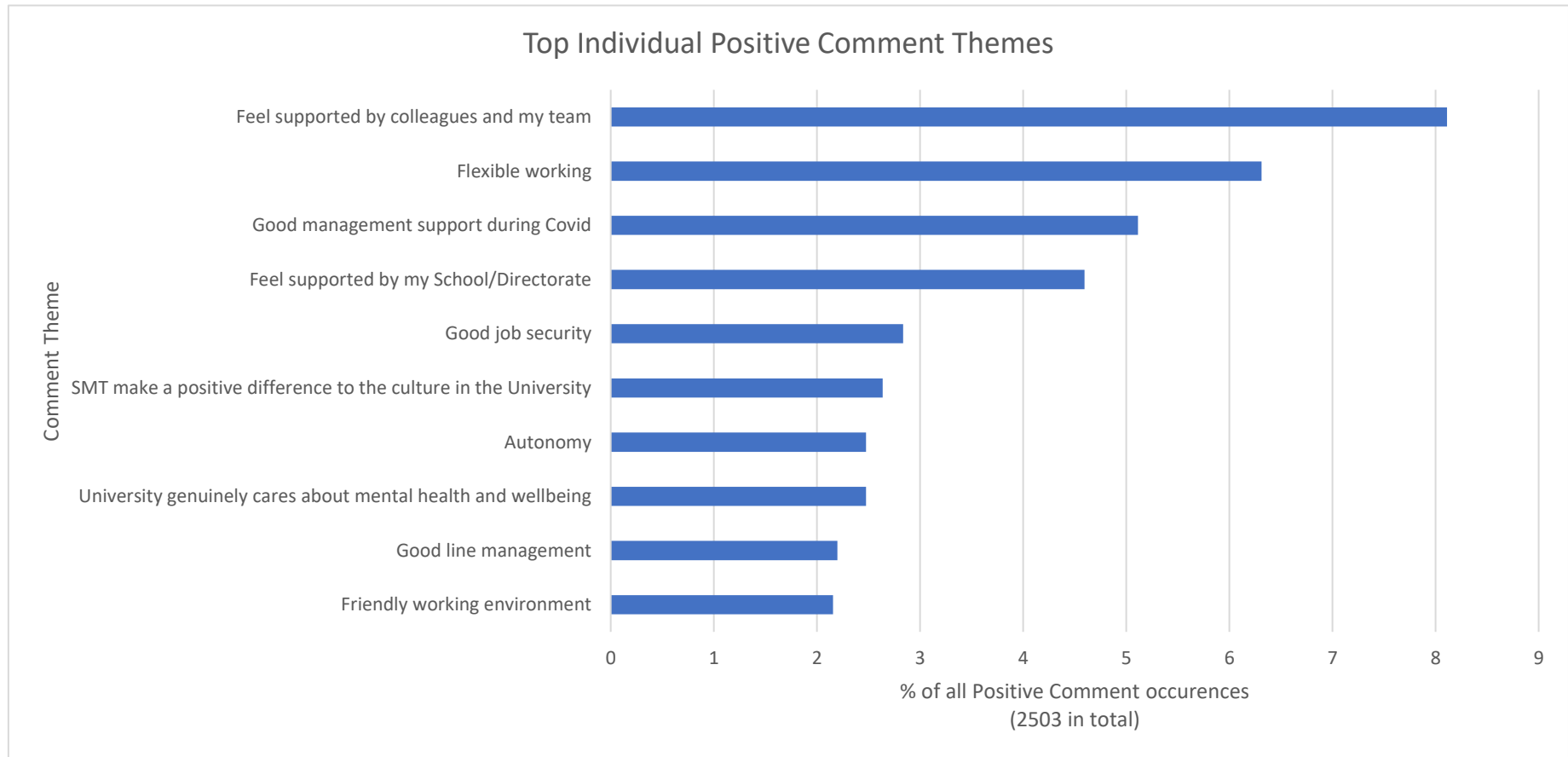
Graph 2 – Top Individual Improvement Comments

Top Individual Improvement Comment Themes

% of all Improvement Comment occurences
(2581 in total)