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Working Hybrid at Universities: Old, Yet New Practice?

Short Paper

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Abstract

This study focuses on hybrid working in the university sector. The diversity of the roles performed in universities provides a unique opportunity to study how the ‘where and when’ of knowledge work is evolving in the post-pandemic era. Our research aims to understand how hybrid working is 1) planned and 2) practiced in a university context. Through an analysis of ten university policies, we find that the ambition for hybrid working reveals several contradictions. Further, technology is mostly backgrounded in discussions of this new way of working. These preliminary findings challenge us consider how the initiatives predicted in a hybrid working policy take place in practice, at a large Dutch university. Based on interviews and systematic observations, we aim to enrich discussions of hybrid working with an open stance towards how and what role technology plays in the new era of work in the university context.

Keywords: Hybrid working, universities, future of work, workplace.

Introduction

During the pandemic, working from home became mainstream. Now, offices are in most contexts again ‘open for business’ yet many workers are reluctant to return full time (Swigunski, 2021; O’Connor, 2021). The uncertainty facing the role of the physical workplace (Urbaniec et al., 2022) and the wide array of possibilities available to workers, have challenged organisations to identify which solutions best suit their needs (Cherubini et al., 2021). Recognising the widespread ambivalence towards working in the office, many organizations are championing “hybrid working” as a compromise solution that can work for everyone.

In our ongoing research, we investigate a particular yet large organisational context where hybrid working has found widespread traction: universities. Beyond their role of educating students and preparing them for the world of work, universities are also large employers. For instance, in the Netherlands (the site of our empirical research), they employ over 57,000 people (Universiteiten van Nederland, 2020). As a comparison, the whole real estate sector in the country employs a similar number of people (Statista, 2020). Despite being a significant sector, universities are often overlooked in literature concerned with digitalisation and new ways of working. In particular, little attention has been devoted to hybrid work in the academic context. In a search on the Web of Science core collection database, carried out on 6th April 2022, using the term “hybrid working”, we found 25 results, from which four were devoted to academic work. Apart from the low number of papers, the emphasis of each one is quite different: from a lab-related view (Powell, 2022) to teaching (Bartlett, 2022; Woo et al., 2021) and predictions regarding the future of education (Reddy, 2021).

Universities however present a unique opportunity to study how the ‘where and when’ of knowledge work is evolving: employees are often highly autonomous and they engage in a high diversity of work activities,

from administration and support to teaching and writing, from desk research to laboratory and field site research. Further, an interesting spatial and temporal tension is embedded in academic work, which is at once very local and situated and at the same time global and distributed (Zukas and Malcolm, 2019). In many ways, academic work has always been 'hybrid'. Yet now, we see explicit emphasis on moving universities to a 'hybrid way of working' at an institutional level, often with explicit policies, directives, guidelines, and goals. The vital role of technology in enabling such a widespread adoption of hybrid working in universities makes this topic particularly relevant to the IS community interested in the future of work.

Our research in progress aims to understand how hybrid working is 1) planned and 2) practiced in a university context. First, we ask: RQ1a) how are universities planning to implement hybrid work, as evidenced by their policy documents? And RQ1b) what role is attributed to technology in this planning? To answer these first questions, we draw on 10 university policies on hybrid working. Through an analysis of these policies, we find that the ambition for hybrid working reveals several contradictions. We also find that technology is mostly backgrounded in discussions of this new way of working. These initial insights invite us to put an empirical investigation forward. We ask: RQ2a) how is hybrid working being implemented in practice in a large Dutch university? And RQ2b) What role does technology play in these hybrid working practices?

To answer RQ2a and RQ2b, we are conducting a 6 month empirical qualitative case study of hybrid working across a range of faculties at a large Dutch university. We select this university because it is one of the largest in the Netherlands and is actively involved in adopting hybrid working, and also for reasons of access. We are seizing the opportunity to study both the hybrid working trial implementation period and what happens immediately afterwards. We will study the unfolding discussions and negotiations that arise as the workplace is reconfigured in both top down and bottom up ways. We maintain academic neutrality by studying faculties outside of our own discipline and we autonomously select participants and methods. Our analysis is also conducted within a team of researchers who push each other to consider alternative interpretations. We are conducting interviews and observations to gather data on how academics and support staff work – with an emphasis on where employees work, when, how, and why they work in these ways. Specifically we are interested in how technology is integrated in hybrid working practices – how it has been adopted, appropriated, and even rejected in the process of hybrid working.

Literature overview: searching for a definition of hybrid work

'Flexibility', 'adaptability' and 'dynamicity' are principles that define work in a digitalised context (Aroles et al., 2021). Organizational environments are getting more complex and dynamic with techno-social developments making it more difficult to anticipate events or predict how they will progress (Jensen and Stein, 2021). To cope with the unpredictability and unsettling effects of the pandemic, organisations have experienced an acceleration towards digital transformation (OCDE, 2020), largely spurred by the need to support employees in working remotely. Similarly, in the university sector, an overnight shift required new work arrangements and distribution of the workforce. For instance, Madsen et al. (2020) reported an accelerated digital transformation while analysing a Danish case. The authors noticed that the university has adopted digitally enabled measures to re-organise core activities, leverage existing resources, and intensify communication (Madsen et al., 2020). Teaching has also been affected by such digital transformation. For instance, Raman et al. (2021) describe the adoption of a 'Hyflex' teaching model during the pandemic, while Toney et al. (2021) have discussed implementing digital strategies, such as asynchronous activities, to keep students interested and actively learning. Currently, with vaccination advances and the reduction of hospitalisations due to the coronavirus, organisations worldwide are challenged to persist with the implemented changes in the workplace since "employees want their experience of work to be flexible, real-time, technology-driven, and collaborative" (Jensen and Stein, 2021, p. 45). In that sense, hybrid work emerges as a possibility to meet expectations from different actors involved in organisational environments.

While business press speaks confidently about hybrid work, hybrid workplace, and hybrid ways of working, we lack a clear scientific definition of each of these terms. After all, do they mean the same thing? So far, academic literature also employs several terms, such as hybrid work (Summerfield, 2022; Pitacho et al., 2021), hybrid model (Yang et al., 2022; Reddy, 2021), hybrid environment (Lahti and Nenonen, 2021), hybrid production workplaces (Müller et al., 2018) and spatial hybridity (Halford, 2005). These terms mean different things though. For instance, Yang et al. (2022) define a "hybrid work model, in which employees

split their time between remote and office work, or a mixed-mode model, in which firms are comprised of a mixture of full-time remote employees and full-time office employees”. Alternatively, Lahti & Nenonen (2021) prefer to address it as a hybrid environment, referring to the processes of learning and working as being digitally and physically integrated. This diversity of terms and associated concepts reveals a lack of consensus on what features make up ‘hybrid working’.

Hybrid, remote, virtual, and nomadic work are all arguably a part of the larger phenomena of ‘digital work’ (Orlikowski and Scott, 2016) and flex working (Ajzen and Taskin, 2021). Hybrid work however distinctively incorporates interstices of multiple locations (digital and physical) and the relation they assume in time and space, all of which impacts the collective experience of work, requiring more sophisticated levels of negotiation. In contrast, remote and nomadic work research focus mostly on the offsite experience (away from a central location). In ‘virtual work’ research, the attention is primarily on what happens online/through technologically-enabled interactions. Hybrid working however requires us to explore the intersections and relationality of workplaces (plural), including both the digital and physical realms, how they are layered and how they impact each other. We specifically lack a clear understanding of the role of technology in hybrid working, because in this context technology is often backgrounded – or discussed simplistically in terms of tools and procurement. Intriguingly, IT artifacts often assume a peripheral position in such discussions, usually being taken for granted as instruments (Orlikowski and Iacono, 2001) detached from their production and consumption environments. However, “IT artifacts cannot be made sense of without considering contexts, purposes and beneficiaries” (Zhang et al., 2011).

This idea that technology is highly important for understanding new ways of working is already recognised in research. For illustration, while reflecting upon digitalisation in education, Aroles and Küpers (2021) acknowledge that technologies entail ambivalence, but also enable new possibilities to process, understand and respond to contemporary challenges. Whittle and Mueller (2009) show that by using technological artifacts, workers can perform their activities from home or ‘on the road’. In a similar direction, Halford (2005) emphasises the decreasing relevance of space, as technologies allow work to be done anytime, anyplace, anywhere: at home, on the train. In an alternative take, Hafermalz and Riemer (2021) show that technologies can offer a ‘place’ for workers to meet, perform their work, and debrief. We therefore contend that it is important to study how/when people use technology in hybrid working, how they transform technology through appropriation while working ‘hybrid’, and to identify where and why technologies become embroiled in tensions, challenges, and breakdowns.

Universities are complex environments, including diverse roles and areas of expertise. Whereas teaching is a common activity across departments, there are many differences among faculties’ pedagogical requirements, which is also reflected in how they do research. For instance, laboratory and field work activities require skills in using several types of equipment, and learning about them usually demands in-person practice. Desk research, in contrast, relies on software skills which can often be acquired by using a laptop that can be placed anywhere. Should we assume that some roles cannot benefit from hybrid working? Or is a differentiated approach possible? Adopting hybrid working in the university setting necessitates a nuanced approach, to avoid inequalities and unnecessary conflict among employees, given their diverse needs.

Addressing RQ1: Analysis of 10 University Hybrid Working Policies

Methodological steps

To answer research questions 1a and 1b, we have used policies developed by universities to support the implementation of hybrid working. These policies are an ideal source for studying how universities plan to implement hybrid work, because “formal policies are tools that are most readily available to organisational decision makers to shape actions of employees and other stakeholders” (Kaganer and Vaast, 2010). As pointed out by Wang and Boell (2021), policies are strategic initiatives adopted by organisations to reduce uncertainty. From an open search on the web, based on the term “Hybrid Work Academic”, we have found and selected ten university hybrid working policies to analyse, following the criteria: a) open access; b) available in English; c) geographical coverage. We searched for data from universities in Asia, Africa, and South America, first generally on Google and then specifically on universities’ websites, considering those included in the Shanghai ranking. However, no publicly available hybrid working policies were found from these regions. The selected universities are located in Europe, North America and Oceania. Each university

has a different approach to their hybrid working plan, resulting in a different set of documents. Table 1 details the studied policies and which material we have accessed for our analysis. We draw on content analysis (Bardin, 2013) to code, organise and analyse the data. First, we've read the material several times and identified the broad themes approached by the policies, mainly highlighting similarities and differences among the mentioned topics. Second, to code the content we created a table with detailed aspects included into the policies. Third, we reorganised the previous table into three main categories: definition of hybrid working, working arrangements, and work environment description. Considering the diversity of material and our goal, we identified several themes relevant to the research question of how universities are planning to implement hybrid working.

Country	University	Initials	Documents available online
Australia	Victoria University	VU	Policies, working remote checklist
Canada	University of Alberta	UA	Bias Awareness sheet, Building trust sheet, Meetings, emotional intelligence sheet, Ground rules and team norms, Hybrid leadership, Managing hybrid, Working from home program, FAQ
England	Durham University	DU	Principles, FAQ, Staff overview, Managers overview, Development roadmap, Flow chart, Action plan for managers, Hybrid Working Information Hub
	University College London	UCL	FAQ, Pilot policy, Interim guidance
Ireland	University College Dublin	UCD	Guidelines for trial hybrid, FAQ, Management support
Netherlands	Utwente	UT	Policy, Talking card
	Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam	VUA	Discussion points; Future perspective on hybrid working; Hybrid meetings; Guidelines; Presentation
Scotland	University of Edinburgh	UE	General information, Framework, Guiding principles, Blog
	University of Dundee	UD	Policy
United States	University of Illinois	UI	Glossary, Guidelines, Executive summary, Requirements to apply hybrid, Return to onsite working tree, Policy
Table 1. University policy documents related to planning hybrid working			

An overarching narrative that we noticed across the policies was that during the pandemic, many university workers found themselves to be productive while working from home and have expressed the wish to remain working remotely after the pandemic restrictions are lifted. The policy documents were largely a response by university administrators to this widespread desire for remote working provisions amongst staff. In the policies, this starting point informed discussions and statements about: who is allowed to work hybrid? Which criteria are in place to define how this selection will be made? What should be considered while setting up a mobile workplace? We report the key topics covered by universities in their policies (Appendix 1) and discuss the central themes that we identified, as a result of our analysis of the ten-university hybrid working policy documents.

Analysis and Findings: Key Themes in Planning Hybrid Working

Employee demand to work off campus motivates the need for a hybrid working policy

In six of the ten policies, university managers indicate that they have surveyed their employees and learned that university staff wanted to continue to work off-campus, at least some days a week. The policies

represent efforts to create a balanced response to this situation – ‘balanced’ because the importance of on-campus presence is also emphasised as a counter to the desire to work from home. For example, the role of the campus is evoked in sentences such as “*We are a campus-based organisation that is people-centric*” (UCD), “*We are a campus-based University*” (UCL), “*Working on campus is the foundation*” (UT) or “*The campus must remain at the heart of our vibrant University community and therefore almost all colleagues will be required to spend time working on site*” (DU). Therefore, we infer an administrative intention to, at least to some extent, ‘get back to business as usual’, by encouraging a partial return to the way work was performed before the pandemic.

Hybrid working is mainly defined in terms of place of work

‘Hybrid working’ is defined in nine out of the ten selected policies (the exception is VU). In line with Yang et al.’s (2022) conceptualisation, the focus of these definitions is on the place where work is performed: on/off campus (UE), campus/home (DU., UA), campus/elsewhere (UCD, UCL, VUA, UD, UI). UTwente’s proposition, instead adopts the terms physical/digital in their definition: “*Hybrid working, a combination of physical and digital collaboration will become our way of working at UT*”, connecting to Lahti and Nenonen’s (2021) perspective. Durham University, University of Alberta and Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam also described the benefits of working remotely when defining hybrid working, for example increased productivity and motivation, enhancing the university’s reputation, less travel time, more flexibility, job satisfaction, and retention of employees.

Hybrid working policies vary in tone: from ‘provisional’ to ‘definitive’

We detect in several of the policies a ‘provisional’ tone that borrows from the popular ‘agile’ way of working to indicate that how hybrid working ‘works’ will be shaped through experimentation and feedback from employees. Durham University policy informs that “*the approach to hybrid working is being trialled over the academic year 21/22. We need time to pilot hybrid working, to periodically review arrangements*”. Also, University College London, University College Dublin, University of Edinburgh, University of Dundee, and Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam all highlighted this agile and provisional approach, describing hybrid working as a temporary experiment, with trial activities taking place in the academic year. The University of Alberta, University of Illinois, Utwente on the contrary adopted a definitive tone by defining strict procedures that workers should follow when working hybrid. Interestingly, the earliest policy that we analysed, developed by Victoria University, was published prior to the pandemic, so it is possible that they developed this policy in an ongoing way throughout the two-year pandemic period. For instance, they state that “*academic employees already have flexibility in their working hours*” and set the group of employees with preference to have flexible work arrangements: “*a. they are the parent of a school age or younger child; b. they are a carer; c. they are returning to work after having a child; d. they are 55 years or older; e. they have a disability; or f. they are experiencing family or domestic violence*” (Victoria University).

Working arrangement adaptations depend on conversations with line managers

The trial periods of hybrid working did not include plans to make formal changes to employees’ contracts. Agreements on the minimum time spent on campus varied from 50% (UCD, VU, and VUA) to 40% (UCL). Nevertheless, the ‘final word’ on employee work arrangements mostly relied upon line managers’ approval. For instance, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam’s policy suggests that “*hybrid working can only work properly if employees and managers make clear agreements, trust one another and make allowances for each other*” and the University College Dublin policy indicate that “*managers and employees can identify and agree on which activities might work from an off-campus location and which cannot*”. The worker profile and activities to be performed off-campus were framed as input to employee-manager discussions about specific work arrangements for individual workers. Durham University and University of Illinois shared a decision tree to support the evaluation process of who is suitable for hybrid working. The manager’s role is highlighted in six of the policies, including direct guidelines to talk to employees (VUA, UT, UCL) and advice on how to manage hybrid teams (UCD, UA, DU). We notice in this planning an emphasis on dialogue-based work arrangements, which could lead to quite diverse and idiosyncratic experiences of hybrid working in practice. This manner of implementing hybrid working, featuring an interpersonal agreement between manager and employee, suggests an intention to modernise management practices, getting inspiration for example from networked and flat organisations (Jensen and Stein, 2021).

There is a strong emphasis on wellbeing and autonomy in hybrid working policies

Work-life balance and employees' well-being are dominant topics in all policies and are put forward as a guiding principle for shaping hybrid working practices over time. The University of Edinburgh policy mentions an 'emphasis on people and well-being', while University of Dundee states the intention "*to support a positive work-life balance for staff*". Victoria University named the policy 'Employee Well-being' to highlight the focus. Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam approaches the matter by "*allowing employees to choose a safe, pleasant and suitable workplace that works for them*". Thus, hybrid working is associated with having a healthy and happier life, by giving employees autonomy in defining what work arrangement is best for them. However, based on the previous themes we have identified in the policies, we note that such autonomy is also framed by university needs and often requires a manager evaluation. This requires negotiation skills and could mean that autonomy is more or less restricted depending on department-level work culture and individual managerial attitudes and decisions.

Working off campus also motivates changes to both the home and on-campus work environment

All studied policies define rules and offer support to employees to set up their work environment, and this impacts both the home work environment and the campus work environment. At University College London and University of Dundee, workers are now required to book rooms and desks when they go to campus. At Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, on-campus "*workplaces are no longer allocated to a particular employee unless the nature of the work or the use of specific facilities means that there is no other option*". All universities support workers to be able to move between on campus and off campus work environments by providing laptops and related IT equipment and desks and chairs (by loan in most cases). For the home work environment, only Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam explicitly offers an allowance for internet, while the UK universities we looked at rely on a government tax relief. In terms of data security and confidentiality, only University College London has explicitly provided guidelines, forwarding an Information Security Policy. University of Illinois' policy points to the existing rules on the matter, which includes VPN access, and University of Edinburgh mentions that the matter is under consultation.

Hybrid working planning emphasises HR and Facilities, with IT only in the background

Overall, the policies signal that universities have listened to employees' desire to work remote or hybrid. To this end, they address human resources and facilities issues in some detail. We identify however a lack of a deeper acknowledgement of how technology is embedded in the process of working in a hybrid way. Where technology is addressed in the policies, the discussion focuses on hardware and software availability. For instance, "*to enable people to work remotely, the University [of Dundee] will supply, within reason, the IT and associated equipment necessary*". Also meetings receive special attention regarding the requirements for hybrid gatherings. The University of Illinois policy, for example, defines that "*the supervisor will ensure that on-site staff include the remote worker in meetings as appropriate, using teleconference or other electronic means*". Furthermore, the useability of these technologies, and their fundamental role in supporting people who are working from different locations, both synchronously and asynchronously, are not tackled. Technology is treated as a tool or infrastructure that is similar in kind and complexity to an office desk or chair - its potential role in supporting connection, knowledge sharing, and even as a potential 'place' for workers to inhabit is not acknowledged.

Discussion

Our analysis allowed us to answer RQ1a) how universities plan to implement hybrid work. We found that universities have joined other organisations in the struggle to retain employees - keeping them both satisfied and productive. Achieving this goal motivates the implementation of hybrid working. The policies extend pandemic-era arrangements by allowing remote work, yet at the same time aim to encourage staff to come back to campus, which is positioned as an irreplaceable experience. In most cases, a trial period has been installed, oriented by informal arrangements and promised revisions in the future. The role of place is the main feature used to define hybrid working. Other aspects, for instance the equipment required to create a home working environment, are approached in an operational way. For example, the policies include different tools to support employees in setting up a working environment at home, including supplying them with basic furniture. From the analysis, we understand that chairs and laptops are utilities that are linked to both wellbeing and productivity.

We now reflect on RQ1b) what role is attributed to technology in the planning. Our analysis reveals that IT artefacts are treated in a peripheral way (Orlikowski & Iacono, 2001) in the studied hybrid working policies. Technology is mainly associated with furnishing the work environment and workplace set-up (laptops, monitors, keyboards, mouse devices). The policies include instructions for how employees can request IT equipment through a conversation with the line manager or a formal application addressed to the IT department. Data security and confidentiality considerations are few and limited. Building on this finding and our assessment that IT is treated mostly just as a tool or infrastructure for work, we wish to tentatively put forward an alternative perspective, which we plan to develop further, using our empirical findings, before the ICIS conference. We wish to argue that the notion of place itself could be understood in a more truly 'hybrid' way, going beyond the physical/digital; campus/elsewhere oppositions found in the policies. Beyond the place where the laptop lands, it is vital to understand the place that flows throughout the laptop tabs. Contributions from IS are crucial to supporting such a transition from positioning IT artifacts as objects akin to desks and chairs, to a deeper understanding of how technology can support a new kind of place for hybrid working. In line with Jensen and Stein (2021), we contend that the hybrid workplace depends on a holistic configuration of people, process, and technologies.

As Aroles and Küpers (2021) remark, academic practices require versatility to move between embodied-real (on-campus) and digital-virtual (elsewhere) forms of working. Or, as Hafermalz and Riemer (2021) following Goffman, indicated, technology can offer a 'backstage' environment, where employees can share experiences and evolve in their practice. The policies we looked at do not yet consider the social implications of using digital tools and platforms for work, and how they can support interaction and knowledge sharing particularly, regarding informal connections among employees, that are more likely to create collective belongingness. Instead, a vertical relation between employee and line manager is emphasised, which ultimately relies upon private negotiations that are vulnerable to power dynamics.

Next Steps: An empirical study of hybrid working at a Dutch university

We are very aware that what is planned does not necessarily mean what occurs in practice. We are therefore now conducting the second stage of our research: an empirical study of hybrid working in practice at a large Dutch university. We are using qualitative fieldwork to find out: RQ2a) how is hybrid working being implemented in practice in a large Dutch university? and RQ2b) What role does technology play in these hybrid working practices? Fieldwork allows us to unveil work arrangements, technological appropriations and updating of the provisory rules expressed in the university policy. We aim to understand how hybrid work as a practice is embodied through technologies in situated work activities (Boell et al., 2016).

We conducted semi-structured interviews with leaders of the hybrid working initiative at a large Dutch university to understand how hybrid working was envisioned. After this, the bulk of the research will take place over the following six months, including interviews and systematic observations with university staff. Our focus is academic workers however we also include support staff across a variety of functions. We will use stratified sampling to ensure that we include participants who perform a diversity of work - specifically, laboratory research, desk research, and fieldwork; and across seniority and contract levels e.g. PhD, Tenure Track, Associate/Full Professor, as well as casual academic staff.

We are particularly interested in temporal patterns (for example what a day looks like, a week, and also some seasonal differences in work patterns e.g. location/timing of work during the Summer break), including the divide between synchronous and asynchronous activities. The 'red thread' across our inquiries is how technology plays a role in stitching together places and people, and even becomes a place in and of itself. With this focus we aim to enrich discussions of hybrid working with an open stance towards how and what role technology plays in the new era of work in the university context. The findings to be reported towards the conclusion of the fieldwork are of relevance to the IS community, on the one hand, due to the emphasis on a holistic comprehension of the workplace (Jensen and Stein, 2021). On the other hand, by sharing experiences among colleagues who are experiencing a similar situation – the implementation of hybrid working - in their institutions, we will be able to discuss the impact of the acceleration of digital transformation for university work (Madsen et al., 2020) as well as the changing nature of work more broadly (Aroles et al., 2021).

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Appendix 1

	Period	Consulted Employees	Type of Arrangement	Hours/days on/off campus	Guidelines to managers	Does it mention Security and confidentiality?
DU	2021/2022	Not clear	Informal	Decided between manager and employee	Yes	Yes
UCD	2021/2022	Not clear	Informal	50%/50%	Yes	No
UCL	2021/2022	Yes	Formal	60% off 40% on	Yes	Yes
UA	From February 2022	Not clear	Formal	Not clear	Yes	Yes
UE	2021/2022	Yes	Informal	Not defined yet	Not yet	No, under consultation
UD	2021/2022	Yes	Formal	Based on the role	Not yet	Yes
UI	Not specified	Not clear	Formal	Defined by the manager	Not yet	Relies on pre-existing policy
UT	Not specified	Yes	Formal	Based on activities	Yes	No
VU	Not specified	Yes	Formal	50%/50%	Not yet	No
VUA	2021/2022	Yes	Informal	50%/50%	Yes	No

Table 2. Key topics covered by the policies