WP3 - Smart working and the organisation of labour: smart working and internal labour markets in **Spain**

Case Study 2 – EDUCATION

Content

Introduction

The employer is a charter school based in Valencia which, as of January 2023, employs some 120 workers. Charter schools in Spain are mixed "semi-private" entities financed by both the State and privately collected fees. Like standard public schools, they operate under the national framework for education - and therefore abide to standard rules concerning i.e., the maximum number of students per class, total hours in the classroom, holidays, et cetera. The feature that sets charter schools apart from public ones is that they are privately run and managed.

The interview took place via Zoom with 3 employees:

- 2 Teachers (both in their early 50s), one female (T1) and one male (T2).
  ### Main job tasks
  - *Prepare and deliver lectures*
  - *Liaise with students*
- Administrator (mid 40s, female) [ADM]
  ### Main job task
  - *Schedule teaching activities*
  - *Certifications, Inventory*

Management of out-of-office work

The school had no **protocol** for out-of-office work before the pandemic, and the only **motivation** for adopting OOOW was the necessity to abide to the new legal restrictions. Prior to that, staff had only basic knowledge of tools that were used routinely such as, for example, digital platforms for keeping track of students' attendance and grading (teachers), or for administrative tasks (administrators). This previous know-how was useful but unevenly spread across employees, and staff had no training about many aspects related to OOOW.

At the beginning of the pandemic the school provided an 'emergency course' to provide workers with only 'very basic skills' but **no specific tools** – such as i.e. computers, printers, chairs, et cetera. All employees perceived the transition to OOOW as "traumatic and chaotic" and report that most found "colleagues with more expertise who volunteered to help as the main point of reference to move forward".

Regarding the **advantages** of out-of-office work, the interviewees only mention not having to commute, while they identify several **disadvantages**:

- Inadequate workspace at home (ALL)
- Deteriorating relationship among colleagues due to pressure, uneven work burden, lack of communication (ALL)
- Difficulties in establishing and maintaining a constructive communication with both students and parents (T1, T2)
- Lack of communication and interaction with administrative staff resulting in administrative bottlenecks (ALL)
- Technical issues i.e. internet connection, unresponsive online platforms (T1, T2);
- Congestion in the home internet router – especially when partner and kids are connected too (ALL);
- Lack of adequate tools – i.e., old computers, no printers, no scanners (ALL).

Impact of COVID-19 on managing out-of-office work

After the COVID emergency work schedules for teaching went back to pre-COVID standards – in presence only – while administrative staff can opt for OOOW up to two days per month.

Working conditions in out-of-office work

Significant differences emerge when comparing the experiences of teaching staff with that of the administrative employee. Table 1 summarises how OOOW affected various dimensions of working conditions for all employees.

Dimension	Effect of out-of-office work	Remarks
Earnings	No changes (ALL)	

Working time, flexibility of working hours	Very negative (T1, T2) Moderately negative (ADM)	<u>T1, T2</u> - "It was very difficult to establish **boundaries** that parents and students respected. For example, they expected us to reply to their queries at any time of the day/night" <u>ADM</u> - "Before COVID few online **protocols** existed or were known/used – i.e., the electronic signature. The first weeks were very chaotic because we had no or obsolete protocols that could not be used in the OOOW modality"
Work-life balance	Very negative (ALL)	<u>ALL</u> - "It was very difficult to find an acceptable **balance** as we (both T1 and T2) are also parents and so we had the responsibility to help our own kids keep up with their classes and homework"
Stability and job security	No changes (ALL)	
Social protection	Negative (ALL)	<u>ALL</u> - "The school did not provide us with any equipment"
Employment status/form of contract	No changes (ALL)	
Engagement and **motivation** to work	Negative (ALL)	<u>T1, T2</u> - "Keeping students interested was very difficult as neither us nor most of them were in suitable conditions to concentrate and interact, let alone learn". - "On the other hand, staying motivated was hard for us too, given that we were improvising and were constantly worried about technical glitches (i.e., bad connection, computers not working, error messages) that might prevent carrying out activities" <u>ADM</u> - "For us it became immediately clear that working in a system (Spanish) that

		is very bureaucratic with no adequate online protocols was simply impossible"
Productivity at work	Very negative (ALL)	<u>T1, T2</u> - "This was the most complicated issues as most learning activities nowadays are based on group work and interaction between students, which was obviously very difficult. Besides, students are not used to classes based on the teacher talking for an hour, nor are they used to do all work by themselves. Performance plunged across the board".
Stress, intensity at work	Negative changes (ALL)	<u>T1, T2</u> - "Planning remote execution of activities that are designed to be interactive is very difficult, we had no experience and in addition faced significant technical hurdles – for example in preparing videos or trying to organise virtual group activities. We know there are tools available but had no time to learn how to use them". <u>ADM</u> - "We kept seeing important deadlines being missed due to lack of protocols"
Work overload	Negative changes (ALL)	<u>T1, T2</u> - "Especially at the beginning, there was no other choice but to have additional meetings after the official work time to consult between ourselves, with managers and administrative staff to address doubts, issues that emerged or to ask for instructions".
Occupational health and safety	No changes (ALL)	<u>ALL</u> - "The school did not provide us with any protocol, instructions, tips"
Integration at the workplace	Negative change (ALL)	<u>ALL</u> - "If by integration we mean interaction, we had a lot of it mostly by necessity and often unstructured and tense. As regards work tasks, the problem was not that we were not involved in the

		design or allocation, the problem was that we did not know how to execute them".
Right to disconnect	Negative changes (T1, T2) No changes (ADM)	<u>ALL</u> - "The school respected the right to disconnect" <u>T1, T2</u> - "The main problem was that students and parents didn't understand that we had to focus on our families and often reached out to us via text, phone calls or messenger services during the evening or the weekend, and expected us to respond immediately".
Costs of out-of-office work	Positive, cost savings (ALL)	- Lower expenses due to no commuting (ALL)
Commuting and work-related travels	Positive changes (ALL)	
Access to **trade unions**, collective bargaining	No changes (ALL)	<u>ALL</u> - "Unions have kept the same pace of information sharing. Some additional emails were circulated concerning to warn staff about exhaustion and risk of overworking"
Access to **information, consultation**, and **participation rights**	No changes (ALL)	

Table 1: How have several aspects of working outside the office been affected?

Impact of COVID-19 on working conditions

All interviewees agree that the COVID-19 emergency has not and **will not consolidate OOOW** in teaching, they also concur that unfit domestic working conditions – i.e., not having a space at home that is suitable for work tasks, or enough silence – have been major burdens in the perception of OOOW during lockdown which led to very negative outcomes for both students and for families – including their own.

"Mobility restrictions affected negatively both the performance and the personality of many students, often resulting in a virtuous circle since schooling is about learning but also about

socialising. Going back to the classroom was almost as challenging as remote schooling because many students were disengaged and more withdrawn".

Working conditions therefore have been difficult both during lockdown, due to the issues outlined above, and after, when teachers observed growing gaps in students' learning and in their attitude.

Skills in out-of-office work

The participants identify several **skills challenges** that emerged during the OOOW experience. First, **time management** was the most critical for efficient workflow

"Teaching entails developing and delivering classes using a novel medium (online) but also assessing students' performance and, occasionally, devoting time to individuals in need".

By the same token, **communication skills** are paramount especially in remote setting

"We had to stay alert to detect low motivation and figure out ways to engage students. The problem for us is that when some students disconnected from the workflow, others followed by way of imitation. This is problematic because each topic has a series of milestones that are necessary to build on and keep learning: missing one prevents reaching the following one. In many cases, cumulated learning gaps imperil the probability of moving on with the school curriculum. Our most gigantic task was to make sure students understood this".

On the other hand, both teaching and administrative staff were under pressure due to the need to master **digital skills** to use new platforms.

"We had some but not sufficient familiarity with these platforms, and had to learn in a virtual environment and test their functionality and face issues or glitches in front of students".

Representatives of teaching staff point out that one of the major issues has been that they were expected to operate as if they were in normal circumstances.

*"It soon became clear that the standard curriculum and teaching workflow are **incompatible** with remote delivery but there was no way we could modify anything in the middle of the school year. A suitable solution would have been to suspend classes for two weeks, give us time to*

reorganise the material, select the content, prioritise learning outcomes and adapt the style of delivering classes and of assessing students' performance".

Role of social partners in ensuring workers' rights and decent working conditions in out-of-office work

Interviewees did not notice significant changes in union participation throughout the Covid emergency.

"Unions maintained a steady level of communication throughout the strict lockdown period and provided plenty of useful guidelines regarding practical aspects of working from home."

Following on the above, given the urgency of the circumstances, interviewees feel that unions could have not done much more given the high level of uncertainty, on top of the mandate to give continuity to teaching activities. Having said that, in meetings after the COVID emergency teaching staff pointed out to union representatives that

"Teaching is evolving fast and part of the new tasks entail increasing use of digital technologies, so it would be appropriate for us to have access to courses and be provided with tools to navigate this increasingly complex terrain. Although we are no longer in remote work setting, some job tasks now are routinely carried out at home".

Conclusions

The transition in and out of OOOW during and after the pandemic was rather complicated for all the interviewees. The implementation happened in a rush and in a state of emergency, and the interactive nature of the job did not facilitate a smooth transition to the remote setting.

A broader reflection concerns the long-term. While OOOW is not suited to teaching and learning due to lack of personal interaction and engagement, the health crisis has emphasised the difficulties that stem from the **rigidity** of the school curriculum, and of how teaching is

accordingly organised and regulated. Learning goals and assessment criteria need to adapt to a new reality in which, moreover, technology is a key ingredient. School staff often lack adequate tools and skills to confront the inevitable challenges of this smooth and irreversible transitions. The hope is that future legislation will fill these gaps by focussing not only on regulating the content of teaching but also by designing new protocols for delivering it.

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