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# **Established, accelerated and emergent themes in flexible work research**

## **Abstract**

Flexible labour markets, flexible working arrangements (FWAs) and motivations behind their use are established and expanding strands of sociology of work and employment relations research. This article provides a review of key themes and debates connected to workplace flexibility between 2000-2015 utilizing research located in leading sociology of work, employment relations, industrial relations and HRM journals, in addition to key texts published during this time period. We establish that flexible work research is a growing area of research and focus our analysis on identifying key themes categorised as established, accelerated and emergent. We conclude with areas of contention yet to be resolved and possible avenues for future directions in flexible work research, noting a disconnection between macro analyses of flexibility at the economic level and the focus on flexible working-time arrangements (FWAs) at the workplace level. Furthermore we observed few quantitative multi-level modelling analyses or multi-methods research designs. To that end, analyses that can synthesise these literatures would enhance the field, as might innovations in methodological approaches which advance multi-level modelling and multi-method designs to give multiple and dynamic perspectives.

**Keywords:** flexibility; work; workplace; employment; flexible working arrangements

## **Introduction**

Flexible labour markets, flexible working arrangements (FWAs) and motivations behind their use are established and expanding strands of sociology of work and employment relations research. However, in recent years there have been few notable systematic reviews and those existing tend to focus on discrete themes such as contingent work (Connelly and Gallagher, 2004) or flexibility and performance (Kelliher and de Menezes, 2011). To add to these contributions, this article seeks to provide an up-to-date review of key themes and current debates on workplace flexibility broadly connected to macro-economic themes, as well as FWAs at the workplace level, and the potential interconnection between the two levels of analysis.

The review was based on several criteria. First, articles included in the review were based on research contributing primarily (not residually) to debates on workplace flexibility. This was determined by article titles and keywords and in the absence of keywords, abstract content. Articles were required to include direct reference to flexible work arrangements or terms synonymous with workplace flexibility, including atypical work, non-standard work, working time and/or contingent work in addition to various forms of flexibility and FWAs (for example part-time, temporary, casual, flexi-time and remote working).

Second, the paper concentrated on studies that were published 2000-2015 given the focus of the Special Issue is "IR Now". The fifteen year period was then separated into the two decades: 2000-2009 and 2010-2015 with these two decades being used to identify established, accelerated and emergent themes.

Third, the review focused on high impact, international journals in the subject areas of industrial relations, employment relations, HRM and sociology of work. Journals in the field of management have been excluded as they often provide a different perspective to debates on flexibility which are not focused on workplace dynamics but more on individual motivations and psychological dispositions. Such debates are beyond the scope of this article. Journals which were included were 3\* and 4\* in the Association of Business Schools (ABS) list and/or A\*, A or B in the Australian Business Deans Council (ABDC) Journal quality list.

Using these criteria, a total of 656 articles were identified as within scope. Notably and somewhat surprisingly, the volume of articles within scope published within the ten year period 2000-2009 (n 322) was similar in number to those published in the five years 2010-2015 (n 334) indicating this is an expanding and highly topical area of research and scholarship. Drawing on knowledge of past debates and our review of current literature, we identify established, emergent and accelerated themes. Established themes are those which have developed a critical mass of contributions before which is maintained during the first and second decades of the 21st century. Accelerated themes are those established 2000-2009 then rapidly expanded 2010-2015. Emergent themes are new themes which are steadily growing in coverage.

We outline established themes on: performance, job quality and satisfaction; reconciliation of work and private life, and flexibility, careers and professional work. Two accelerated themes emerge on topics of precarity, insecurity and flexicurity, and recession, restructuring and redundancy. Emergent themes focus on the intersection of flexible working with age and the life course and migrant labour.

## **Researching flexible work in social and economic context**

Flexibility and flexible work are terms widely used and variously defined. They can refer to macro-economic process, for example, dynamics of institutional and regulatory change leading to diversification of contract forms (Kalleberg, 2011) or micro level FWAs implemented and negotiated either individually or collectively at the organisational level, concerning control over timing, location and scheduling of work (Sweet, 2015). As such there are many 'actors' involved in flexible work research including the state, regulatory bodies, trade unions, employers, human resource managers and employees.

Organisations and workplaces are often the sites at which these contested and conflicted interests play out. It is critical to note that external pressures and global forces which reconfigure labour markets, workplaces and jobs are often not aligned with the flexibility needs and preferences of workforces that are changing in demographic composition, especially in terms of age and responsibilities for care. These two concerns (macro-economic change and flexibility at the workplace level) are often expressed in different, but seldom integrated, bodies of literature.

Social and economic context matters. Our review takes place at a time when there has been significant economic strain including the global economic crisis, sovereign debt crisis – felt acutely in Southern and Mediterranean European countries and of course ensuing austerity measures enacted by governments, to varying degrees, around the world. But prior to these recent events, many commentators have emphasised that the pursuit of more 'flexible' or 'adaptable' labour markets has been a key economic strategy of governments and supranational institutions such as the European Union for some time, in the face of increased global competition (Auer, 2011).

One recurrent question is: who is most affected by reconfigured labour markets and workplaces? Those most vulnerable to negative effects of flexibilization including the erosion of employment rights and job security – those traditionally positioned as “outsiders” - include women, certain ethnic minorities and low skilled workers. These literatures are fairly well established, but there are also some newer social groupings, notably young and migrant workers. We return to these issues and themes in the following review.

### **Methodological approaches in flexible work research**

Research on flexible work takes place at different analytical levels ranging from macro (cross-national comparisons of labour markets and societies; national economies, employment sectors) through to micro (workplace dynamics and negotiations, as well as studies designed to uncover the lived experiences of flexibility for individuals, households and families). As might be expected of such a wide-ranging subject area, a range of quantitative, qualitative and conceptual/theoretical approaches are used to shed light on the motivations for and consequences of flexible working, however multi-level modelling is rare and mixed methods research infrequent.

From our review, we identified different types of studies: empirical studies based on quantitative and qualitative methods, mixed methods or articles that were conceptual.

TABLE 1 HERE

The vast majority of the articles were based on empirical studies, most using quantitative techniques, with researchers making use of a wealth of secondary datasets, many large in sample size and/or cross national in scope. This was most notable in the USA which has numerous longitudinal and cross sectional surveys and labour market data sets, such as the Current Population Survey, the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth and the National Longitudinal Dataset of the Labour Market Experience. Focusing on employers as a key actor a number of studies use

the National Employers Survey (part of the Economic Census in the USA). In the UK key resources are the Work and Employment Relations Survey (WERS) and the Labour Force Survey (LFS), in Australia HILDA and across Europe the European Labour Force Survey (ELFS).

Methodological approach varied somewhat by theme. Established themes, such as work-life balance (WLB) were often based on the use of large-scale datasets, such as the European Work Conditions Survey (EWCS) which allows for comparative analysis across many countries. Nevertheless, research examining how individuals experience balancing work and life through the use of FWAs, how individuals negotiate careers while working flexibly and studies on the gender and the life-course regularly employed qualitative methods, and in particular semi-structured interviews.

Similarly, research on the two accelerated themes on, firstly, flexible working and precarity, insecurity and recession, and, secondly, redundancy and restructuring utilised a range of qualitative and quantitative methods, though again rarely together in a multi-method approach. The former topic lent itself to more quantitative analysis (for example, wages and income inequality). Analyses were often conducted at the level of labour market (single and comparative) making use of coordinated labour market and social indicator data-sets including Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the World Bank or aggregated data from Eurostat. In contrast qualitative research provided the opportunity for case studies at workplace levels, alongside qualitative interviews focusing on the lived experiences of insecurity and consequences of restructuring and redundancy for workers and households.

Emergent themes, such as migration and FWA, were typically examined either based on qualitative methodologies which lend themselves to explorative research alongside some conceptually driven ideas pieces.

## **Established themes in flexible work research**

We identified three established themes in our review: analyses of flexibility in connection to overlapping areas of performance, job quality and satisfaction; flexible

working in professional and managerial careers, and; flexibility and reconciliation of work and private life. We discuss each in turn.

### Performance, job quality and satisfaction

Whether employees who have access to and use FWAs are more or less satisfied with their work and job quality than standard full-time jobs is a longstanding debate in flexible work research. Do FWAs enhance the performance of individuals and firms? Are those using FWAs more committed to the organisation? Each of these questions is difficult to answer definitively, due to the various ways flexibility is defined. For example, research on FWAs which are designed to give employees more control over timing, scheduling and location of work report different results from studies focusing on flexible contracts, for example, temporary, casual or fixed-term.

As this is a huge literature, we narrow our focus to the availability and use of FWAs in the first instance, rather than diversification of contract forms. Studies on the link between flexibility and productivity tend to distinguish between employee and organisational performance. A range of studies show that employees are motivated by, perform better and even work harder when they have some control over their working time, location of work or schedule (Eaton, 2003; Kelliher and Anderson, 2010). Studies also show that FWAs assist with retention and organizational commitment (Armstrong-Stassen and Schlosser, 2010), and can help employees adapt to new performance requirements and workplace demands (Bernhardt and Krause, 2014). Other studies point to reciprocity when accommodations suit workers (Dex and Schiebl, 2001).

With regard to organisational performance, some studies also suggest positive results for employers who offer FWAs (Bal and Dorenbosch, 2015). Of course benefits and challenges associated with offering FWAs are likely to vary, particularly by establishment size and sector (Dex and Schiebl, 2001; vanWanrooy et al, 2013). For example, Ortega (2009) found that the use of discretionary FWAs was positively associated with “high-performance” work systems, and that employer motivations were more closely connected to organisational performance indicators (with employees identified as higher performing granted more discretion) than concerns for work-family balance.

When the issue shifts to job quality and/or satisfaction and flexible contract forms (part-time, temporary, fixed term or casual), the picture muddies. These flexible contract forms are more likely (with the exception of part-time work) to be imposed by employers, rather than sought by employees. Felstead and Gallie (2004) confirm that more temporary and part-time workers occupy more low skilled jobs than permanent full-timers. Beyond this, it is challenging to evaluate job quality and levels of satisfaction of flexible work for a number of reasons (Green et al., 2010). First, job quality comprises of different components, namely objective (such as pay, job security, access and availability of FWA) and subjective (employee wellbeing, working-time preferences, career aspirations) making evaluation and comparison challenging. Illustrating this, Callea et al (2014) articulated two broad sets of indicators of job satisfaction, intrinsic (subjective components) and extrinsic (objective elements) and found they these are linked differently with each contract type, mediated differently by perceived job insecurity.

The diversification of contract forms makes it difficult to make neat statements about job satisfaction and job quality of flexible workers in general. Different forms are associated with better or worse aspects of job quality leading to a degree of ambiguity (Iseke, 2014). For example, temporary, agency and fixed-term workers tend to report lower job satisfaction than permanent workers (Callea et al, 2014; Aletraris, 2010) but Buddelmeyer et al (2015) argue that this lessens as job tenure increases.

Part-time work is different again. Sometimes more secure, but highly gendered and connected to family care work, satisfaction of part-time workers is often linked to intrinsic or subjective factors. For example many women do not prefer low paying, low skilled part-time work, or wish to make transitions to part-time jobs which result in occupational downgrading (Tomlinson, 2009) but if they require part-time hours they may appear more satisfied with their work than they might otherwise (Walters, 2005). This also touches on adaptive preferences, a process through which individuals articulate a “mixed bag” (preference for flexible work met but coupled with low quality jobs) as an active preference rather than the outcome of constrained options.



## Flexibility and reconciliation of work and private life

A second dominant theme in the literature on flexible work is the extent to which FWAs can enhance or hinder the reconciliation of work and private life. The debates and issues raised vary cross nationally. For example, in Europe policies such as shared parental leave, reduced working weeks and universal systems of childcare are highlighted as progressive legislative policies to facilitate reconciliation of work and family life, though access to these policies varies across Europe (Warren et al, 2009). In Australia, as in Europe, the recent 'right to request' flexible working has been the subject of much debate (Cooper and Baird, 2015).

In the United States, long hours and overtime cultures (where employees more hours than they wish) (Wharton and Blair-Loy, 2002) and underemployment (where employees have fewer hours than they wish) are each important matters of concern - both strategies often driven by employer-led flexible staffing arrangements designed to 'transfer risk' onto employees (Lambert, 2008). Such strategies have negative consequences for families and their ability to plan financially, organise childcare and, critically, access healthcare insurance. Underemployment can be as big a problem as very long hours (Alexander and Hayle-Lock, 2015), especially in contexts where welfare support such as in work tax credits, healthcare and sick pay are contingent on work status or hours worked. We also know that the ability to make flexibility work for employees who need to combine work and family care varies by occupation leading to class (dis)advantages and gender divides (Gerstel and Clawson, 2014).

As with so much in the employment relationship, the line manager or supervisor with discretionary powers is a key gatekeeper in facilitating access to and use of FWAs – managers and supervisors can either embrace or remain ambivalent to the work-life balance of employees (Kossek et al, 2015). As such, no flexible working policy or initiative can routinely enhance or exacerbate reconciliation of work and private life, rather it is context dependent: the organizational culture including employee discretion and control and employer motivation for use of flexible working practices (which may or may not be motivated by employee wellbeing) matters.

That said, we can be fairly sure that certain flexible contract forms are unlikely to facilitate reconciliation of work and private life. For example, zero hour contracts (where employees have a contract of employment, which may or may not be

exclusive, but no guaranteed hours) and casualised work are often a source of anxiety for working parents as these contracts prevent them from being able to plan and manage their finances and “fragmented” time (Rubery et al, 2015). Predictability of hours and money matters, especially when childcare arrangements and payments need to be made. For this reason, rotating shift patterns, while flexible per se, can become a problem for employees rather than solution, especially for those with little power to negotiate over scheduling (Gerstel and Clawson, 2014), while part-time work - facilitating in the sense of more time for family - is highly gendered and ultimately career limiting (Crompton and Lyonette, 2011; Durbin and Tomlinson, 2010).

#### Professional and managerial careers and workplace flexibility

The career trajectory of non-standard workers is also a longstanding theme in research on workplace flexibility. This can be illustrated in debates going back to dual labour markets and the flexible firm (Atkinson, 1984) where “core” workers, typically those on standard, full-time permanent contracts enjoyed career prospects and developmental opportunities that were not extended to non-standard “flexible” co-workers. It remains a dominant theme in current debates on employees’ experiences of FWAs in contemporary labour markets, occupations and professions, particularly in terms of the impact on career progression.

Lee et al (2002) notes, for example, in a context of global competition, restructuring tendencies which result in leaner and flatter organisational forms also mean longer - not shorter - hours for managers and professionals. Overwork is frequently reported as a concern for managers and professionals (Wharton and Blair-Loy, 2002).

When work demands meet personal and family pressures such as those facing dual career families, with child and/or elder care responsibilities, workers, mostly women, seek to adapt by requesting reductions in working time, or other forms of flexibility such as in the location or timing of work). The extent to which this takes place, of course, varies internationally with national, corporate and family norms and cultures as well as national-level welfare policies being important factors shaping variation.

But what are the consequences of such action in contemporary workplaces? Concerns about stigma and labelling part-time, or “reduced load” remain pervasive,

and reductions in working-time for professionals and managers seem difficult to obtain. For example in Wharton and Blair-Loy's (2002) study of 260 finance professionals working in the United States, Great Britain and Hong Kong, nearly half expressed interest in reduced hours, but only 7 professionals worked part-time.

Furthermore, the stalling and marginalisation of non-full-time career paths is commonly reported in the UK (Dick and Hyde, 2006; Durbin and Tomlinson, 2010), the USA (Kossek et al, 2015) and Australia (Charlesworth and Whittenbury, 2007). Current research shows that along with flexi-time and remote working, reduced hour work among the managerial and professional workforce still runs counter to prevailing expectations about how such workers should act and behave. For example key challenges highlighted concerns on how managers and professionals remain visible and organise work, supervise personnel, manage client relations and remain active decision makers.

While an established body of research highlights the challenges for employees in terms of sustaining a career while working flexibly, fewer focus on employers' views of professionals and managers working flexibly, and more critically fewer still identify what can be done to support and sustain flexible working at senior and professional levels within organisations. While management literature focuses on individual capacity for flexibility and reflexivity in careers, industrial and employment relations scholars might ask how the legislative context and key actors: employers, employees and other stakeholders might challenge assumptions, boundaries and structure which marginalise those who do not fit the dominant career type.

## **Accelerated themes**

The two accelerated themes in flexible work are located in the context of the global economic recession and its consequences. They are contemporary challenges for flexible work research. The first is recession, redundancy and restructuring which focuses on macro-economic changes, labour market and workplace reconfiguration through to the effects of these changes on employees working lives. The second theme of precarity, insecurity and flexicurity has grown enormously and eclipses all other themes in terms of coverage on flexible work in recent years.

## Recession, redundancy and restructuring

A growing yet fairly well established body of literature focuses on the link between recession, redundancy and restructuring and employer use of flexibility. What is interesting is the emphasis on different sets of actors in this body of research. While the contributions on recession emphasise the role of the state and government in the erosion of employment security, resulting in a greater diversification of contract forms, and disproportionate rise in precarious ones, studies on redundancy tend to focus on the working lives and personal experiences of those impacted. Flexibility is conceptualised here in a very different way. The success or otherwise of individuals post-redundancy appears to hinge, to some extent on their personal capacity for adaptability or flexibility in the face of change (Gabriel, 2013).

On restructuring, greater emphasis is placed on global competition, economic strain, and key actors are state and employer responses, as workplaces adapt and labour markets reconfigure (Sweet, 2015; VanRooney, 2013; Kalleberg, 2003). Illustrating reconfiguration, Suzuki (2010) observes that Japanese firms have been forced to change their employment relations practices. Most notably, employers have restricted recruitment of regular employees so that atypical employment, particularly part-time, temporary agency workers and fixed-term workers now count for one in three workers – most with few promotional prospect or employment security.

Approaching the theme of those acutely affected by economic change from a very different angle, a small body of literature focuses on the responses of individuals to critical life events such as redundancy (Gardiner et al, 2009; Gabriel, 2013). Often such papers emphasise the importance of a flexible response and willingness to adapt. A common theme in such studies is that individuals often have to contend with less well paid and less skilled jobs than they had previously held. As such a flexible outlook became essentially a blessing (in the sense of adaptability) as well as a curse, given labour market re-entry often involved occupational downgrading (Gabriel et al, 2013).

At the organisational level, Sweet et al (2014) examine the availability of FWAs during a period of “economic strain” comparing two time periods, one prior to and another during the economic recession in the United States. Setting the study up within a framework which asks whether organisations are likely to follow an

adaptation or institutional logic when faced with economic strain and uncertainty, Sweet et al. (2014) find greater support for the former perspective. They explore the extent to which availability of different aspects of flexibility: schedule; place; intensity; career, and the promotion of flexibility (by supervisors and line managers) have changed. They find that overall organisations offered fewer FWAs in 2009 than in 2006 and that there was less promotion of FWAs during this time. Analysis of WERS data in the UK shows similarity and difference in the UK. Van Wanrooy et al (2013) note that overall availability of FWAs decreased between 2004 and 2011, but that overall change was due to fewer options in the private sector, with little change recorded in the public sector.

With greater diversification of less secure contract forms and fewer FWAs designed to enhance workers autonomy and control in their jobs at the workplace level, it is little surprise that in flexible work research the dominant contemporary theme is that of insecurity and precarity.

#### Precarity, insecurity and flexicurity

Arguably precarity and insecurity are interchangeable concepts and are a dominant concern in studies on flexibility. Illustrating this, Prosser defines precarious work as:

“employment involving contractual insecurity; weakened employment security for permanent workers and non-standard contractual forms such as temporary agency, fixed-term, zero-hour and undeclared work... [and in other research extends to] indicators related to pay, unemployment, social security and employee voice” (2015:4).

In Europe there is an expanding literature on precarious work and concerns for employment security, the erosion of employment rights and regulations both before and since the economic crisis. In the US, a focus on insecurity is long-established in the literature. Recent contributions focus on polarization in which analysis of employment trends show how flexible workers, in particular those on temporary, part-time or hourly based contracts experience less favourable terms, conditions and employment prospects (rates of pay, health care, sick pay) to those workers with full-time standard contracts (Kalleberg, 2003; 2011).

Another term commonly used in the United States, coupled with insecurity, is instability - in particular regarding lack of certainty of hours of work and therefore income. Though similar in many ways, the distinction here is subtle but illustrative of different terms used in different national contexts. While in Australia and some European countries the tendency is to focus on casualization, in the UK the focus is the rise in zero hour contracts (Rubery et al, 2015) while in the US “underwork” and instability and fragmentation of schedules is a growing concern (Alexander and Hayle-Lock, 2015;).

For some commentators, the pervasiveness of precarious working conditions extends to all areas and levels of labour markets and employment systems, no longer confined to bad jobs and low skilled work or hourly workers and flexible employment contracts. Kalleberg argues that:

“polarized and precarious employment systems are not merely temporary features of the business cycle but represent structural transformations”  
(2013:428)

While agreeing that macro-economic forces explain much growth in precarious work, others attempt to show variation in the form and nature of this type of work. Prosser’s (2015) analysis of European countries illustrates differences in the relative importance of structural, demographic, regulatory/compliance and crisis-related causes. These lead to processes of precarity and flexibility in Anglophone (Ireland and UK), conservative-corporatist (the Netherlands and Germany), Mediterranean (Greece and Spain) and Central Eastern European (Latvia and Poland) countries. He argues that “liberalized” regimes (weakening of employment regulation and protections in particular) are evidenced in Anglophone countries and but now also in Mediterranean ones, following the fall out of the profound debt crisis. In contrast, a “dualized” process is more apparent in conservative-corporatist countries in which core workers retain protected status at the expense of non-standard workers, particularly those on temporary contracts. CEE countries illustrate hybrid cases.

With processes of liberalisation and dualization of labour markets leading to more flexible and precarious work across Europe, the notion of ‘flexicurity’ has become the focus of renewed attention and critique. The flexicurity model sought to balance the needs of employer and employee through the easing hiring and firing and regulation

on contract forms to facilitate flexibility alongside active labour market policy and generous social protections for the unemployed. Thus in the current context, empirical support of this model being successfully applied across Europe is weak. Heyes (2011) claims flexicurity has faced its most 'strenuous test' during and since the economic crisis. Likewise in his article on "the rise and fall" of flexicurity Auer (2011) argues the concept faces an uncertain future. Like Heyes, Auer (2011: 382) notes that in the recent economic crisis, countries with stricter regulation of employment security using internal adjustments (reduced hours) rather than external (layoffs) ones seem to have fared better.

In summary, flexibility at macro-economic and workplace levels is characteristic of most employment systems to varying degrees in different ways. However there is a general consensus that the dominant shift is "towards 'less security' rather than 'flexicurity'" (Heyes, 2011: 653).

## **Emergent themes**

Age and migration are two emergent areas of research on flexible work. With respect to age, both the experiences of younger workers entering the labour market and older workers who are in the process of transitioning out or looking to extend their working lives, have demanded more attention in recent years. A second theme, particularly visible in the European context, is that of flexible work and migrant labour.

### **Age and the labour market transitions of young and older workers**

The utilization of FWAs at early and late life course stages is an emergent theme in flexible work research. For older workers, the use of FWAs at the organisational level are explored as individuals plan for retirement or seek to extend working lives (Atkinson and Stanford, 2016; Armstrong-Stassen and Schlosser, 2010). For young workers, the trials of entry to the labour market are often set against economic contexts of increased precarity and insecurity.

On the first issue, Lorreto and Vickerstaff (2015) argue that existing literature on later working lives currently lacks a gendered focus, in particular, how gender informs

decisions about retirement or the extension of working-lives. The focus on the intersection of gender and age in later life stages is timely not least given changes to retirement policy in most developed economies. Others concur that post retirement work is understudied, and needs to be conceptualised as “a process than an event” (Pleau and Shauman, 2012: 114) especially for women whose decisions about when to retire are firmly set in the context of family care responsibilities, household dynamics including husbands’ retirement plans, and of course in light of income inequalities women experience across the life course.

While the developing literature on extending working lives often involves the study of how organisations can (or at times do little to) accommodate older workers through the use of FWAs, by contrast, the focus on younger workers is set against a economic context which makes entry the labour market challenging. Research frequently highlights the challenges facing young people who hope to achieve well paid, skilled work, or those simply hoping to find stable employment in countries such as Spain (García-Pérez and Muñoz-Bullón, 2011) and Greece (Kretsos, 2011).

Challenging economic contexts facing young workers in Europe and other parts of the world badly hit by recession are not set to change in the near future. Research also identifies that unions do little to engage young workers who feel detached from the labour movement, with a sense of division born from contract differences as well as the wider political and economic climate where austerity impacts heavily on the young (Kretsos, 2011). As such, understanding more about young people experiencing frequent entry to and exit from work and between contract forms, and how they might be better engaged in strategies and campaigns for progressive social and economic change, is a critical future direction for research.

### Flexibility and migrant labour

Research on migrant labour and flexible work is attracting considerable academic and policy interest, with focus concentrating on flows of migration between origin and host countries and migrants’ positioning in the latter. Illustrating this, Raess and Burgoon (2013) argue that immigration has risen substantially in many European societies and with it, the incidence of flexibility.



Research also focuses on the poor working conditions migrants encounter when working flexibly, often connecting to the accelerated theme of precarity and insecurity. For example, Hopkins et al (2015) argue that migrants are likely to occupy temporary work, low-skilled roles, experience 'hard' HRM practices, and act as peripheral and heterogeneous workforce (Underhill and Rimmer, 2015). Also drawing on segmented labour markets, Pulignano et al (2015) also locates migrant workers as over-represented in the proportion of labour market 'outsiders' rather than 'insiders' through their likelihood of experiencing temporary and agency contracts.

A number of studies concentrate on possible responses for example the different ways migrant workers may mobilise in order to improve work conditions and their position in the labour market and important emphasise migrant workers' agency. One such example focuses on the ways in which migrants strategize around temporary employment and move across different jobs and locations trying to improve their lives, using their transnational exit power by quitting bad jobs and defying employers' assumptions about their willingness to undertake poor conditions jobs (Alberti, 2014).

## **Conclusion**

From our review of established, accelerated and emergent themes, several overarching observations can be made connected to 1) flexible working arrangements; 2) diversification of contract forms and precarious work; and 3) synthesis of literatures and balance of power between actors.

First, the potential for FWAs at the organisational level to reconciliation of work, private life and careers across the life course, enhance gender equality and extend working lives is, as yet, potentially unmet. A large body of research indicates that control over working time and workplace flexibility has positive outcomes for organisations and individuals. Despite this access to, and use of, FWAs varies widely within and across organisational contexts. Policies designed to extend greater employee control over work, time and schedule also varies widely across economies (Berg et al 2004). It is also the case that the success of such policies, however measured (employee engagement, retention, organisational performance, employee

wellbeing) is difficult to establish, not least because it is challenging to separate out internal business innovations such as high involvement work systems which include the use of FWAs from broader external economic and social forces which lead to more use of flexible contract forms. The few studies that exist on FWAs in connection to recession show that in times of economic strain, availability and use of FWAs may decline. Understanding employer motivations for such decisions and their consequences for individuals and organisations, and the extent to which this trend exists is certainly an important area requiring further research. Analyses using multi-level modelling were found to be rare in this review, and certainly being able to analyse both organisational/employers simultaneously with matched employee data would be advantageous in terms of future research.

In terms of gender, we know a lot about women and their use of flexible working practices, and the consequences of this for inequality between men and women, we know much less about men's attitudes towards flexible working arrangements in the context of reconciliation of work and care at different life course stages. Research on the visibility and legitimacy of men's use of FWAs is understudied. This is certainly an area worthy of focus not least given recent changes in parental leave policy in many countries.

Precairety and insecurity through the diversification of contract forms and erosion of employment protections are contemporary challenges for researchers concerned for employee wellbeing and economic security. Debates continue as to the pervasiveness of precarity, whether we are all touched to a greater or lesser extent, or whether labour market insiders are protected at the expense of outsiders. What is very clear is that some are more vulnerable than others: the young, migrants, low skilled workers and women. Understanding these processes and establishing strategies to correct new and old inequalities (re)emerging through the diversification of contract forms is a key global challenge of our time.

Two bodies of research on flexibility have been identified in this review. One is the body of work operating largely at the organisational level concerning the use and application of FWAs as part of HRM/high involvement work systems. The second concerns the diversification of employment forms through the use of non-standard work located at the level of the labour market with the state being a key actor. As Felstead and Gallie (2004: 1294) note, "despite sharing a common interest in

organizational flexibility [these]... literature[s] have rarely crossed paths". There is clearly a need to rebalance the power relations between different sets of actors and stakeholders in the creation of organizational and workplace flexibility. Given the first strand of literature concerns the potential for employees to secure greater control over their working-time and location, while the latter sets flexible work in a context of wider social and economic forces, in order for research on flexible work to advance, it is critical that these literatures connect.

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Table 1 Approaches to flexible work research 2000-2015

	frequency	Percent
Quantitative	358	54.5
Qualitative	236	36
Mixed methods	26	4
Conceptual	36	5.5
Total	656	100