

Family Leave for Researchers at LERU Universities

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Executive summary

This paper examines the complex and intertwined issues relating to family leave and caring responsibilities and the impact that they have on gender equality in academia. It explores the differing attitudes towards women and men as carers, issues relating to the management of family leave and the potential impact of family leave on research outcomes and women's careers.

While recognising that national (and in some cases regional) legislation and local norms differ by country, the paper explores the commonalities of experience across LERU universities and identifies examples of good practice. It proposes measures that universities can put in place to support researchers and minimise negative impacts, drawing on the experience of LERU universities and other actors in higher education.

Above all, the paper seeks to emphasise that becoming a parent is a positive and normal life event – around four in five people will become parents during their working lives. Putting in place policies and procedures to support parents to achieve a healthy work-life balance will not only address the issues that this paper identifies but also help our universities become attractive employers, and have a positive impact on recruitment, retention and productivity.

Differing attitudes towards women and men as parents and carers

A combination of unsupportive policy frameworks and deep-seated cultural norms result in women frequently carrying a greater burden of caring responsibilities than men. Academia is no less affected by gendered social norms than other sectors. Academic success, particularly at research-intensive universities, is often measured in terms of productivity, external recognition and success in gaining grant income, which drives a long-hours culture. This is detrimental to anyone who wants a life outside of work, but particularly impacts on parents and carers.

However, motherhood is often seen as a barrier to success in academia in a way that fatherhood is not. There is a common perception that women who chose to have children are 'not committed' to their career, and therefore that being a mother and having an academic career are incompatible. Such perceptions lead to self-doubt and concern among women as well as to 'bias acceptance' – women choosing to leave academia because they anticipate discrimination and a lack of support. They can also lead to bias (whether implicit or otherwise) in our universities among those recruiting and employing researchers.

The paper outlines steps that universities can take to break down stereotypes around family leave and caring responsibilities, promote the positive aspects of parenthood, minimise bias and build institutions where combining work and family is normalised for all.

Management of family leave

Problems can arise due to misunderstandings and unintentional poor management of family leave. Expectant parents and their managers alike may be unaware of their rights and entitlements, confused by the rules of funding bodies and unsure about who to ask for support.

Researchers on fixed-term contracts are in an especially vulnerable situation when they go on family leave, particularly if their contract is due to end during or shortly after the leave period. A frequently expressed anxiety is that researchers on fixed-term contracts 'miss out' on time by taking family leave, and that this makes it difficult for them to demonstrate productivity and secure a new post.

These are areas where universities should take steps to ensure that processes run as smoothly as possible and to mitigate negative impacts. However, there is no 'one size fits all' approach and universities should take a flexible approach to managing family leave (within the boundaries of their national legislation) and work hard to respect the needs and concerns of each individual.

Management of research and workload

Negative attitudes towards family leave – and maternity leave in particular – can be caused by fears about the potential impact of an absence from the workplace on a team's ability to complete a research project to schedule. However, despite the risks, universities do not systematically employ a temporary replacement or extend the contract of the staff member going on leave. Decisions about covering the work of a researcher during family leave are based on many factors but are often influenced by financial considerations: a large majority of LERU (and other) universities incur additional costs, above those of a single salary, if they backfill the duties of a member of staff during family leave. While some research funders recognise these additional costs and make extra funding available, many still do not.

Minimising impact on careers

Staff taking family leave are often fearful of the impact that their absence will have on their career. The paper explores some of those concerns, and the ways in which they can be addressed, including being mindful not to exclude men from support measures and thus reinforce stereotypes around caring; provision of support on return to work; measures to maintain visibility, including support for conference attendance; making allowances for reduced outputs in recruitment and promotion processes; supporting a range of career paths; and facilitating flexible and part-time working.

Conclusions and recommendations

Family leave for researchers is a complex issue, which has been shown to potentially impact researchers' careers in significant ways. Despite national and institutional differences, LERU universities have discovered common challenges and have identified various ways in which organisations can support researchers going on family leave. In addition to the good practice illustrated in the paper, it is possible to formulate the following recommendations.

Universities should:

1. Ensure that clear information about rights and entitlements in relation to family leave and pay is easily available and regularly communicated to all staff, including at induction, and that managers have access to training and specialist HR support to manage family leave positively and effectively.
2. Ensure that discussions and agreements between expectant parents and their supervisors are properly documented, and that a plan for the return from leave is documented and signed before leave commences.
3. Put in place and publicise policies and schemes that demonstrate the institution's support for staff to combine work and family, and which minimise the impact of family leave on career progression.
4. Ensure that the costs of implementing support measures such as contract extensions and teaching cover are built into budgets and that decisions about the provision of such support are decoupled from financial considerations so as to be fair and transparent.
5. Review recruitment and promotions procedures to eliminate bias:
 - Take steps to ensure that decisions are not influenced by a candidate's actual or perceived family status.
 - Take account of career breaks when assessing productivity and focus on the quality rather than the quantity of research.
6. Counteract the stereotype of women as caregivers through measures such as encouraging men to take parental leave and promoting flexible working for both men and women, thinking about images (on websites, etc.) and language, publishing case studies of male carers.
7. Publicise positive role models to encourage a healthy work-life balance and alternative career paths, and show that it is possible to have a successful academic career and a family.
8. Ensure that managers and leaders encourage discussion of work-life balance, and challenge negative stereotypes about the impact of caring on careers.
9. Ensure that all staff have regular, documented and signed appraisal interviews before and on return from leave, and that job descriptions are in place, to avoid misunderstandings about performance, and to facilitate a smooth return to work.
10. Support networking and peer support mechanisms for parents and carers.
11. Offer appropriate part-time and flexible working options for all staff.
12. Take steps to minimise expectations of a long-hours culture.

We also urge all research funders to recognise that failing to make additional funding available to cover the additional costs of family leave has a detrimental effect on gender equality.

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LERU was founded in 2002 as an association of research-intensive universities sharing the values of high-quality teaching in an environment of internationally competitive research. The League is committed to: education through an awareness of the frontiers of human understanding; the creation of new knowledge through basic research, which is the ultimate source of innovation in society; the promotion of research across a broad front, which creates a unique capacity to reconfigure activities in response to new opportunities and problems. The purpose of the League is to advocate these values, to influence policy in Europe and to develop best practice through mutual exchange of experience.

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LERU Office

Minderbroedersstraat 8
3000 Leuven
Belgium

tel +32 16 32 99 71
info@leru.org
www.leru.org

 @LERUnews