

## Handling career interruptions

### What

Clear and comprehensive guidelines on how to administratively handle career interruptions and returns is part and parcel of an Academic work place and contributes to a culture of equality and transparency.

### Why? – Gender perspective

Academia is known to be an opaque and difficult milieu to enter – especially for those who do not perceive themselves to have a good fit with the male dominated academic culture in STEM. Any process which makes the rules, conventions, norms and traditions more transparent, enables and empowers people to concentrate on furthering their interests and careers. The gender perspective here is that women – especially at the early stages of their academic career – often feel intimidated and flounder trying to navigate implicit rules and norms. Recommendations are designed to make the process of handling career interruptions easy and transparent.

### Recommendations for good practice

#### *Parental policy / parental leave*

Parental leave policy and planning: In Sweden, employment on a doctoral studentship is the most common way of financing third-cycle studies. A person employed on a doctoral studentship has the same rights to parental leave as all other employees.

An example from Uppsala University of how to manage and support parental leave is the university's "Parental Policy" (see [http://regler.uu.se/digitalAssets/14/14391\\_3parental-policy.pdf](http://regler.uu.se/digitalAssets/14/14391_3parental-policy.pdf)). It states that directors should always view positively that parents, regardless of gender, make use of opportunities for parental leave and leave for care of children. Moreover, it states that postgraduate students should be afforded an additional tutor discussion/planning discussion in order to plan the research break concerning the leave.

Moreover, doctorate students at the Faculty of Science and Technology at Uppsala University are entitled to up to three months extension of their postgraduate appointment as compensation for the time taken to start up research after a longer period (min. 4 continuous months) of parental leave of absence.

#### *Career interruptions guidelines*

Guidelines for leave of absence planning: This guide was developed at the Faculty of Science, University of Melbourne (Courtesy of the Chair of the Faculty staff equal opportunity committee). It is presented here as inspiration, it should be adapted to fit the specific situation and context, if it is to be used.

#### Guidelines:

The key to handling the successful negotiation of a career interruption is an open, consultative and collaborative conversation with the supervisor and/or Head of School/Department. The timeline for this notification and conversation depends on the nature of the 'interruption'. In the case of maternity/parental leave the advice is that the staff member holds a conversation with the supervisor as early as possible

(ideally at least 6 months prior to the actual break, to allow some time for the School/Department to make alternative arrangements, for example regarding teaching load and student supervision).

While it is reasonable to expect that in the case of an unplanned break, such as to care for someone with a short-term illness, the supervisor has to be notified as soon as possible, it is understood that the level of planning cannot be as detailed as in the case of maternity/parental leave. Also, it is understood that it is not always known to the staff member at the time of the conversation how long exactly the interruption will be, but any changes in the plan should be discussed with the supervisor and/or Head of School/Department as soon as practicable.

The following checklist is designed for academic staff. It provides an overview of issues to be considered during discussions with the supervisor regarding planned and unplanned leaves of absence. The guidelines aim not only to assist work units to develop the capability to meet current and future needs and assist staff members in planning their academic career, but also to clarify responsibilities in managing all stages of a leave of absence. A flow chart that summarizes the various steps is detailed below.

It is recommended that the outcome of the discussions will be documented and copies remain with the staff member and Head of School/Department.

It should be noted that the University does not have an expectation of work during staff members' leave of absence. The staff members' "involvement" in work-related tasks (such as student supervision, exam marking, responding to emails, etc.) during their leave of absence is undertaken on an entirely voluntary basis.

- **Supervision of students (if applicable):**

- Has an "interim" principal supervisor for the time of the staff members absence been nominated in consultation with the student(s)?
- If necessary, can students be remotely supervised? Have arrangements been made regarding frequency of meetings?
- Has a clear working plan between student/staff member/co-supervisor/Head of School/Department been finalized, which includes milestones and timelines?
- Has a handover meeting been arranged?
- Can staff member during his/her absence recruit new students, if the absence is only a fraction of the student's candidature? For example Honours: less than 6 months; Master: less than 12 months; PhD: less than 18 months. (Note that individual schools/departments may have different policies).
- If the staff member is on the advisory panel of PhD students, has it been discussed how this will be managed during the time of absence (usually, the supervisor of the PhD student will nominate a replacement)?

- **Research**

- During the lead up to the period of absence, has there been any planning (e.g., data collected, sections written for co-authored papers...) to enable collaborators to progress during the absence (if applicable)?
- Similarly, have plans been established to help the staff member 'spin up' their research program on their return (for example, identification of a series of smaller, more achievable pieces of work that will aid in the transition back to work).
- How engaged does the staff member intend to be in their research projects during the leave of absence?
- How will authorship on publications be handles that arise during the leave of absence?
- What support can be provided to enable the submission of grant applications during their leave and upon return to work?
- Do they have live projects? If so, how will these be managed in their absence? To what extent do they wish to be involved? Ensure that responsibilities are clarified? E.g., can a Research Assistant (RA) be appointed to cover absence? Who will supervise the RA?
- If a change in student supervision arises from the absence, have variations to grant agreements been put in place?

- **Fellowships and Grants (if applicable):**

- Seek advice from the Faculty Agreement Administrator as to wether a variation to the grant is required and to arrange changes in the contract with the funding body.

- **Teaching responsibilities (if applicable):**

- Have arrangements been made with the colleague(s) to cover teaching responsibilities during the staff member's absence, in particular provision of teaching material?
- If the staff member plans to return on a part-time basis, has it been discussed how to align teaching/contact hours (request changes from University timetabling)?

- **Administrative responsibilities (if applicable):**

- Membership on committees: Has the committee chair been informed? If it is a Faculty/University committee, is a temporary "replacement" from the same School/Department/Faculty required?
- Have key contacts been advised that the staff member is going on leave and an alternative contact person nominated?

- **Clarify the staff member's wishes during their period of leave:**

- School/Department: Does the staff member wish to be included on all school/departmental, faculty and group communication during her/his leave of absence?
- School/Department: Does the staff member wish to be considered and consulted in any decision making related to her/his work?

- Does the staff member wish to negotiate and develop a plan for how they will keep in touch with her/his research students and if so, how often? If appropriate, agree in advance on work place visits.
  
- **Planning the transition back to work:**
  - Has the time fraction on staff members return been discussed (this may not be know at the time of the conversation).
  - If coming back from parental leave, has the Return-to-work bonus been considered
  - Is it possible to apply for a Career Interruption grant?
  - Has it been discussed how the School/Department could support the staff member when she/he comes back to work? For example:
    - Teaching allocations – if possible (and if timetabling allows), the lectures should be the same as before the absence to avoid preparation of new teaching material on a very short timescale
    - Grant applications (see also “Research”)
    - Project management e.g. Research Assistant support
    - Consider having a buddy for six months after staff member return
    - PDF process/promotion application – will performance be measured relative to opportunity? Will the PDF review date shift due to length of absence?
    - If part-time: are responsibilities (in particular teaching loads and administrative responsibilities) reduced by the same fraction?
    - Will meetings be arranged at times that allow part-time staff members and staff members with carers responsibility to attend?

Further resources

<http://policy.unimelb.edu.au/MPF1139>

For more information on flexible work arrangements see

<http://hr.unimelb.edu.au/advice/toolkits/equity-diversity/toolkits/flexibility>

### From literature and other sources

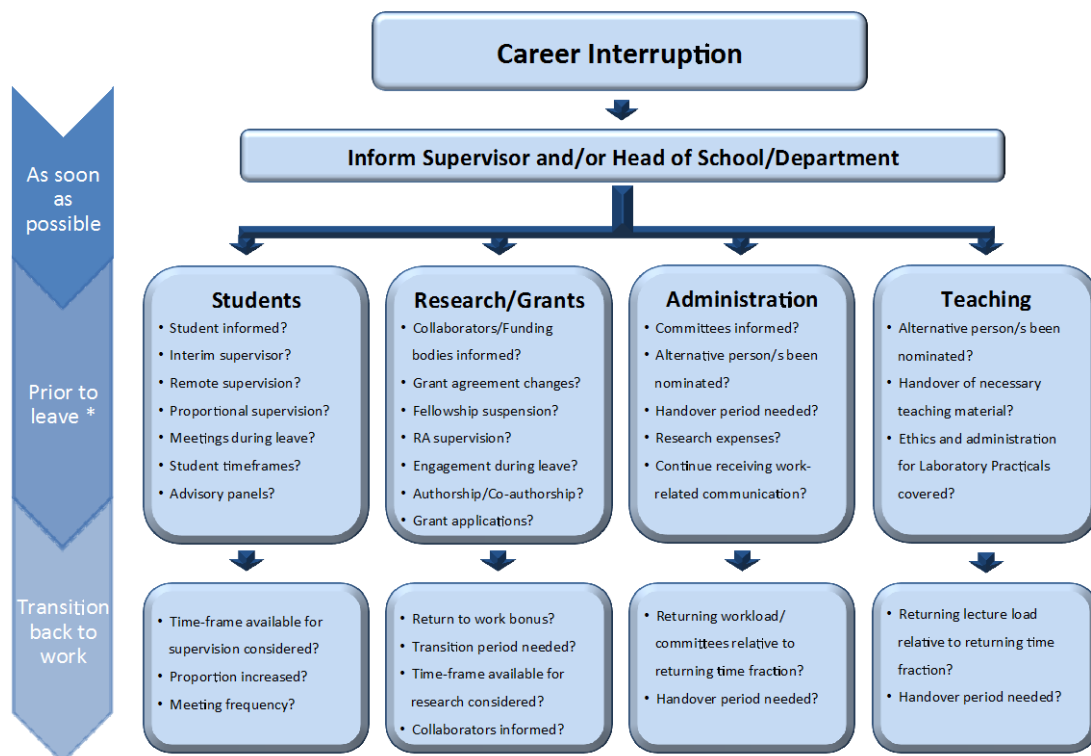
At various times in their careers, staff will need planned or unplanned career breaks or require work flexibility in order to accommodate a range of personal or professional demands. Career interruptions often occur in the early career stages, since these years typically coincide with the years of childbirth and parental and carer (for example for elderly family members) responsibilities. These early years are possibly the most crucial years for the development of an independent academic career.

Career interruptions, such as maternal or paternal leave, can often have a severe impact on young scientists' future careers. There is evidence that biases concerning familial obligations for women are widespread (Coate and Howson, 2014; O'Connor and O'Hagan, 2015). This seems to be internalized in both young women and men, with the result that ideas or conceptions of what is and is not possible go unchecked.

Ensuring transparency in how to plan and prepare for leaves of absence, and returns after leave of absence is an important step towards equality. This can be done administratively and here we present practices that we find useful. They each represent an established practice that is well adapted to the local context. If you feel inspired by this, please make sure that you adapt to your local context and specific situation before implementing it as a measure.

Coate, K. & Howson, C. K. (2014): 'Indicators of esteem: gender and prestige in academic work' *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, Published online 30 September 2014. DOI: 10.1080/01425692.2014355082

O'Connor, P. & O'Hagan, C. (2015) Excellence in university academic staff evaluation: A problematic reality? *Studies in Higher Education*. DOI:10.1080/03075079.2014.1000292



Checklist of possible tasks to complete prior to, and following a career interruption. \* Some of the tasks may (if the staff member wishes) also relate to the period of time during leave.