

Helen Wilson- University College London

Return to work after maternity leave: departmental actions that eased the transition and therefore made retention so much more likely

I am a female mathematician working as a lecturer and researcher at University College London (UCL), one of the UK's top universities. Although my department was the first to have a female mathematics professor, women are terribly underrepresented on the academic staff of my department – currently around 10% – and I was the first academic staff member ever to take maternity leave. I now have two children.

My first child is now 4, and I am the only one of the 8 mothers from my antenatal class still working full-time at the same place they were when they became pregnant. To a large extent, this is because of the excellent policies (and informal practice) in my department and the university as a whole.

A few key policies stand out.

Research-focus on return to work

This is quite specific to academia, but the hardest thing to do after time off is catch up with the cutting edge of research that has been going on without you. UCL had a policy (at the time of my first leave) that a returning member of staff could apply for a "sabbatical" term with no teaching commitments for this purpose. I applied and was turned down; my department then essentially reversed this decision by giving me a single contact hour a week for my first term back. By the time I took leave for the second time, UCL's policy was to automatically grant the sabbatical.

Private office

This happened to me quite by chance – I have happened never to share an office as a lecturer. However, following from my comments about how helpful that was both during pregnancy (for a nap) and on return (for expressing) we now have a departmental policy that any member of academic staff, currently sharing an office, who becomes pregnant will immediately be assigned her own office.

Shared parental leave

By the time my second child was born, statutory maternity leave had been modified to pass to the father if the mother returned to work. As a result, I was able to return to work when she was only 8 months old and leave her with her father. This is not a UCL policy but a national initiative; nonetheless it made a huge difference to me as the length of time I was "out of action" was so much shorter than the first time. My husband loved it too.

Milk facilities

Returning to work earlier required a much greater effort to keep breastfeeding. I needed to express milk at lunchtime to take home for my husband to use the following day. To make this possible, in addition to the private office, and use of the fridge (which was already available), the department installed a microwave which allowed me to steam-sterilise the breast pump at work.

Flexibility

This is not an official policy, but it is the thing that has made the greatest difference to me. My first PhD student at UCL submitted his thesis just as my first child was due; I did not recruit another immediately when I returned. I next had the chance of a really good student just as I was going on leave (I left in May and returned the following January; he would start in October).

This student was offered funding through a departmental scheme that involves the student in a certain amount of teaching, usually in the second and third years of the four-year PhD programme. With due discussion ahead of time, my student "front-loaded" his teaching, and taught from October to December, meaning he suffered little from having an absent supervisor in his first term as he had no time for research either. Something as specific as this could never be departmental policy; but I was very impressed with how easily my colleagues adapted to my (reasonable, but highly unconventional) request.

As a result, in part at least, of these policies, I have returned to my work and to my research invigorated by my two spells of time off. Since the first maternity leave I have been appointed Deputy Head of Department; since the second, things have really taken off for me and I have been appointed to a surprising number of national and international bodies. There are times when the demands of two small children and a full-time job feel too much; but my institution is really doing its best to make things work for me.

