Framework for the management of family leave for research and academic staff

Background

1. The University’s staff benefits allow for employees to take extended periods away from the workplace for family reasons. For the purposes of this Framework, the term ‘family leave’ is used and intended to encompass maternity leave (up to 52 weeks), adoption leave (up to 52 weeks) and shared parental leave (up to 50 weeks)¹.

2. Whilst the extended absence of any member of staff creates difficulties within a workplace, there are particular financial, operational and contractual issues to consider in managing the absence of a researcher who has been engaged to work on a research project funded by an external sponsor, or of the principal investigator (PI) of such a project.

3. It is recognised that not every member of staff will wish to continue working after the birth or adoption of their child. It is also recognised that some research staff will be employed on projects which end during or soon after the family leave absence, making some of the provisions below irrelevant. This Framework focusses on arrangements for staff who will have an ongoing employment relationship with the University.

Aims and principles

4. The purpose of the Framework is to minimise the impact of an extended period of family leave on a research project and wider team, and to ensure that the University is able to deliver on its research and teaching commitments.

5. The University also recognises the importance of supporting the career progression needs of the member of staff taking family leave. It has addressed this through providing guidance on the issues to consider (www.admin.ox.ac.uk/personnel/during/family/piguide/) and establishing the Returning Carers’ Fund to support individual members of staff to re-establish their research following a period of family leave.

6. The University believes that all research and academic staff, regardless of their department or funder, should be treated equally in terms of the process that is followed to reach decisions about how the work they would otherwise have done is managed during a period of family leave. This Framework sets out that process.

7. The University recognises that each situation will be different and involve variables such as the rules of the funder, the size of the research group, the nature of the research and whether an individual’s skills are readily replaceable. However, it recommends that a cover post should be recruited or a contract extension equivalent to the period of leave taken be arranged where there is a clear operational need and it would be feasible to do so.

8. Decisions should not be influenced by financial considerations. Departments should contact their divisional office to discuss arrangements for meeting any additional costs.

¹ The University also offers paternity leave, but since this is limited to two weeks no special considerations or provisions are required.
Postdoctoral researchers and Research Fellows without direct reports

9. Planning for a period of family leave should begin at as early a stage as possible to allow time for recruitment of a replacement where this is the desirable outcome.

10. All decisions regarding whether to recruit a cover post or arrange a contract extension should be governed by operational need. The research programme, as agreed with the funding body, should be reviewed and a plan of the work that needs to be continued during the absence in order for the research to be completed as planned be drawn up. Factors to consider include:

- How long will the researcher be absent for?
- To what extent will their absence impact on the agreed timetable for the work?
- Do all aspects of their current work need to be continued or are some more critical than others?
- Can some or all of the work be redistributed without putting undue pressure on other members of the team?
- Is recruiting a replacement feasible in terms of likely availability of a researcher with suitable skills?
- Does a replacement need to be at the same grade or would a lower grade post be able to cover key aspects of the work?
- Would a contract extension for the post holder be appropriate?

11. All decisions should be made in close consultation with the individual going on leave to ensure the best possible outcome for all parties and where relevant include discussion with other members of the research team. Such discussions should be approached positively.

12. Responsibility for obtaining any necessary information on research funders’ rules and processes, and for finding solutions to any difficulties caused by an absence, lies with the PI, with support from their departmental HR officer, administrator and finance/grants manager. For further guidance, see paragraphs 21-24.

13. The University recognises that a period of absence impacts on the career of an individual. Every effort should be made to support the member of staff through thorough discussion and planning in advance of the leave period and adequate support on return to work. See the guidance document for managers and supervisors for a checklist of points to discuss.

Academic staff and Research Fellows with direct reports

14. Research funders rarely allow costs relating to the maternity leave of PIs to be reclaimed, although rules vary and some may make allowances on a case-by-case basis.

15. The absence of a PI can have a significant impact on their own research and the future careers of those they supervise. Staff on family leave are not permitted to work, unless using Keeping in Touch (KIT) or Shared Parental Leave in Touch (SPLIT) days. Many PIs choose to use these for the purposes of providing some ongoing supervision and support to their research group but frequently do not find these to be sufficient. It should be noted that
KIT and SPLIT days are optional and that there is no obligation for a member of staff to work during family leave if they do not wish to do so.

16. The individual going on leave is likely to be best placed to define what support is needed during their absence and return to work to keep their research on track. They should be allowed to guide decisions, with the support of their Head of Department or Faculty Chair.

17. It is unlikely to be possible to fund a like-for-like replacement but careful consideration should be given as to how to manage:

- The day-to-day administration of the research project, including meeting any reporting deadlines specified by the research funder;
- Management and direction of the research team;
- Supervision of DPhil students;
- Teaching responsibilities.

18. It is strongly recommended that wherever possible and desirable, some sort of cover is provided. This might include:

- Considering how the absence might act as a career development opportunity for others, e.g. allowing postdocs to gain experience of teaching or DPhil supervision;
- Paying one or more postdoc(s) an ‘acting up allowance’ to take on additional responsibilities;
- Asking another PI in the department to provide some mentoring for those taking on additional responsibilities;
- Recruiting a lower grade cover post to take on some of the responsibilities (to backfill either the PI or postdocs within the group who are ‘acting-up’).

19. Where cover is not possible, for example where an academic teaches a specialised subject, other solutions might include:

- Sharing responsibilities among colleagues (but only where this can be done equitably and without placing undue pressure on them; consider reducing their other responsibilities);
- Reducing other responsibilities (e.g. administrative duties) to allow a greater amount of teaching to be done before and/or after leave;
- Making use of existing mentoring arrangements to ensure that each member of the group has a source of personal support.

20. The PI should be mindful that other team members and students may be concerned about what will happened during their absence, and communicate with them clearly and regularly about the arrangements that are being put in place.

**Communicating with funders – advice for PIs**

21. Different funders have different approaches to family leave, funders vary their approach (and often have different rules for their different schemes), and funders’ rules frequently change. This being the case it is impossible to provide a clear and comprehensive overview of how our major funders treat family leave.
22. When a researcher on the grant informs you that they are expecting to take family leave you should contact the research funder to clarify their policy. While some funders request that you wait until the person returns from the absence, our advice is to contact the funder upfront to ensure that you understand all the options available for you to allow effective grant management.

23. Before contacting the funder you should go through the terms and conditions of your grant and/or associated award letter.

24. The following questions should be considered when looking at the terms and conditions and then clarified with the funder. Note: answers may be scheme-specific and some answers may be mutually exclusive for some funders.

- Can funding be used to meet net leave costs (the amount paid to the individual less the amount that can be recovered through Statutory Pay from HMRC)? If so, how should this be reported?
- Can the PI apply for additional funding to cover net leave costs? If so, when and how?
- Can the PI apply for a no-cost time extension where leave causes a delay in research? If so, when and how?
- Can funding be used to meet the costs of substitute appointments? If so, how should this be reported?
- Can the PI apply for additional funding to meet the costs of substitute appointments? If so, when and how?
- Does the grant need to be put into suspension? If so, when and how?
- What action can be taken if the post/project ends whilst the staff is on leave?
- How/whether to report leave and keep-in-touch days on timesheets (where relevant)?

Additional guidance and resources

- Guidance for employees ([www.admin.ox.ac.uk/personnel/during/family/framework/](http://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/personnel/during/family/framework/))
- Guidance for managers and supervisors ([www.admin.ox.ac.uk/personnel/during/family/framework/](http://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/personnel/during/family/framework/))
- The Returning Carers’ Fund ([www.admin.ox.ac.uk/eop/gender/carers-fund/](http://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/eop/gender/carers-fund/))