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**Returning to work after parental leave:
An appreciative inquiry**

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Introduction

The current neo-liberal competitive demands of research, teaching, increased workload and meeting ranking expectations in careers within the higher education sector can create tension between attaining work goals and family responsibilities. This research aimed to address a gap and call for more research¹ on the careers of staff in higher education and in particular what it means for female academic and professional staff to have a dual role, as a primary caregiver and employee.

Despite the common assumption that meritocracy (career advancement and reward) depends on merit, Nikunen (2012)² states that individualisation and enterprise culture foster the meritocratic ideal. In academia, one's academic career and success are affected by more than just one's individual achievement^{3,4}. Past research has emphasized considerable strain and institutional biases for female academics balancing work and family, while research on male academics with young children is limited⁵. In relation to the gender gap in academia, Morley (1994)⁴ and Bagilhole and Goode (2001)⁶ claimed that it is easier for men to get recognised for their work productivity. Cooray, Verma et al (2014)⁷ examined the academic ranks and derived that men were more driven at Australian universities with males having a significant advantage in rank attainment and Arini, Collings et al. (2011)⁸ examined factors that have hindered women in their advancement in university leadership roles. Professional staff also appear to be affected by work/family conflict in higher education settings^{9,10}.

In regards to what could be done at an institutional level, research findings¹¹ have previously shown that leadership goals and intentions to seek promotion are not affected by parenthood. Parenthood itself does not affect ambition; ambition is influenced by the daily trade-offs of being a working parent and whether these are made easier or harder by the employing organisation.

Thus, maybe it is workplace culture that is the key driver, after resuming a position post maternity leave, in preserving and fostering ambition or promotion or leadership skills. Western can reinforce ambition in working parents, encouraging the visibility of academic parenting and lower the gender gap by creating a supportive culture for staff impacted by a career break. This research therefore aimed to explore the early parenting return to work experience of Western Sydney University staff which can contribute to improvements and promotion of a supportive and engaged culture. The research questions driving this project included investigating: what constitutes existing parenting support? what additional support is required by staff? what is the understanding of Western workplace culture? and what are parents career expectations at both the personal and workplace level?

Background

Returning to work after a career break can be tough, particularly if this occurs after the arrival of a child. The current neo-liberal competitive demands of research, teaching, increased workload and meeting expectations in an academic career, can create tension between attaining work goals and meeting family responsibilities¹². Many organisations are implementing practices and strategies to support and retain working parents. However, the question remains as to how employers can facilitate the transition and the impact that a career break, due to parental responsibilities, can have on their employees.

An emerging body of literature addresses the challenges of balancing an academic career with parenthood, documenting that it is the primary care givers in academia who have the lowest publication rates and are less likely to get promoted^{13,14}. This can lead to anxiety, particularly amongst female academics, as stated by Nikunen (2012 p.713)² who wrote that the tertiary education sector impression of “being an egalitarian and family friendly workplace” becomes “one of a competitive meritocracy with demands that are not easy to meet and which are unequal in terms of gender when the talk turns to careers.”

In academia, it is well known that rising career orientation can be highly competitive and challenging. However, returning to academia after taking a parental leave can be even more challenging when faced with gaps in publishing records, lost industry partnerships or outdated skills and knowledge in the latest research technology. This places female academics in a position of great disadvantage when it comes to career development¹⁵. In addition, research has shown that with the birth of the first child, returning mothers experience a significant juggle of family and work commitments which can create work-to-family conflict (WFC) and can lead to a major reassessment of work preferences among female employees¹⁶. Work-to-family conflict is typically defined as “conflict in which the role pressures from the work and family domains are mutually incompatible”. It is associated with a trajectory of mental health problems¹⁷ and may also impact children’s home environments. This can be via parenting behaviour and the parent couple relationship, particularly in the early years of parenting, when the care demands for young children are high¹⁸. On the other hand, work-to-family enrichment (WFE) occurs when work-related resources improve quality of life and functioning in the home domain¹⁶.

Providing an enriching and supportive work environment may be an important strategy for minimizing WFC, burnout and subsequent reduced career development in academia.

In recent years, academics have increasingly held negative perceptions of life in academia^{19,20}. This perception has been borne out of topics such as academic workload, work-life balance, parental leave and choices around having a family. Women tend to be affected to a greater extent than men in academia. Many years ago, Adrienne Rich (1979)²¹ highlighted this issue by suggesting that we have “man-centered universities...that prepares men to take up roles of power in a man-centered society....”. Despite this notion, in the last 10-15 years there has been a greater representation of females in higher levels of academia especially in Australia²². Together with this increase, there has also been an expansion of policies around equity and diversity as well as with family support²². Specifically, in Australia, the government has introduced a paid parental leave (PPL) policy which allows eligible employees, who are primary carers of a newborn, or an adopted child, up to 18 weeks' paid leave. In the university sector this could increase up to 52 weeks maternity/adoption leave²³. These strategies have been introduced to minimise the gender gap between women and men. In a paper assessing gender egalitarianism in Australian universities, Farrelly & Whitehouse (2013)²⁴ examine the prevalence and distribution of parental leave at 37 universities. They conclude that the university sector delivers generous PPL arrangements and allows for progress of gender equity. The increase in support in the form of PPL will expand opportunities for academics to remain in the workplace after starting a family, and behoves institutions to optimise the transition back to work in order to retain talented staff. However, despite the welcomed benefits of PPL, many key challenges remain in the transition of returning to work that are yet to be adequately addressed. Some of these issues include pressures and difficulties with work-life integration, negative workplace culture towards parental leave, unbalanced workloads, long work hours, rigid schedules, and dealing with feelings of exclusion, lower confidence or the need for re-validation^{1,25,26}. There is a significant gap in the literature¹ on the careers of staff in higher education and in particular what it means for female academic and professional staff to have a dual role, as a primary caregiver and employee.

Flexible working hours in academia have also been linked to increasing levels of autonomy¹², that can act as an important facilitator to improve work-family integration. However, female primary caregivers are often disadvantaged compared to males, as males who are not primary caregivers, for young children, can spend most of their free time writing and increasing their publication record, while females tend to use their free time to care for their children²⁷. This concept of time has been perceived differently for males and females. Icelandic scholars Rafnsdottir and Heijstra (2013)²⁷ highlighted, in their research, that men perceive time as a linear construct while women perceive time as a cyclical construct. This means that women are more task-oriented and tend to do several tasks at the same time²⁷. Another study found that working mothers experience extreme time pressures, perceiving time

poverty, time intensity and time density, that could lead to a distorted sense of time or a negative perception of the quality of time²⁸.

Although academics face a number of challenges unique to teaching and research, professional staff in higher education are not immune to work-family conflict, including pressures from an increasing workload, expectations that the "ideal worker" has limited commitments outside of work, and challenges of managing staff as well as meeting performance indicators²⁹⁻³¹. The increasing pressures on the higher education sector as a whole may translate to a negative impact on all staff employed in these institutions. However, overall there is little literature on work/family conflict amongst professional staff in higher education.

A number of universities in Australia have introduced the phased return to work scheme²³. In this scheme, academics return to full-time work but may be absent for up to 20% of their ordinary hours for 40 weeks following their return to work. Universities also provide childcare centres for employees and breastfeeding rooms for parents returning to work³². Irrespective of these initiatives, however, it appears staff returning to work following parental leave may be in need of additional supports. Existing initiatives at Western are limited to providing a Supporting Parents toolkit which details the initiatives available such as phased return to work, and 'Keep in Touch' Days. However, there are no existing programs at Western specifically designed to support both academic and professional staff in a successful return to work. Further, despite having policies and provisions in place for parental leave, little is known about how they are implemented across Western's various disciplines and campuses.

Study aims and objectives

The aim of this study was to explore the early parenting return to work experience for Western Sydney University staff.

Objectives:

- To understand 'what constitutes' parenting support at Western and what is currently available
- To explore what additional support Western staff would like when they return to work after the arrival of a child
- To explore the Western workplace culture around parenting and return to work
- To explore personal and workplace career expectations after returning to work from the birth of a baby.
- To understand career ambitions when returning to work after the birth of a baby, for both men and women

Method

Study design:

This qualitative study utilised an appreciative inquiry (AI) approach³³ to engage with parents who had returned to work or study after the arrival of a child. Appreciative inquiry is an approach first described by Cooperrider (1986)³⁴ as a method of facilitating change in organisations. It has since been adopted as a research method for shifting organisations, and groups, from the current status quo to a collective ideal. This approach encourages participants to explore the best of the current status quo and ‘brainstorm’ what would need to change to achieve the ideal. AI shifts the focus from problems to solutions³³. Appreciative Inquiry includes a 4 D cycle of discovery, dreaming, design and destiny³³. Carter (2006)³⁵ and Bushe (2011)³⁶ describe AI as shifting the mindset of individuals away from problems needing to be ‘fixed’ towards solutions which are collectively designed. As a research method AI aims to discover what is working well and build on or enhance that³⁶. AI is an exploratory and participatory process which generates high levels of interdisciplinary engagement and commitment to change³⁷. Participants were led through the four phases of AI discussion and planning: ‘discovery, dreaming, designing, and destiny’³⁴. This four phase AI cycle begins with the ‘discovery’ phase to explore what is currently working well. This study was conducted in two phases.

Phase one: Participants were asked to attend a focus group for approximately one and a half hours in duration, at a local campus venue or online using zoom. During the focus group participants were asked to share their views and experiences, with returning to work after parental leave, and the impact it had on their careers. The focus groups explored what was working well in the process of return to work and provided a clear indication of the current status quo.

Phase two: Following analysis of the data collected in phase one, participants were invited to attend a collaborative workshop for approximately three hours in duration, with refreshments included, at a local campus venue. During the workshop they were asked to generate strategies which would better support parents returning to work at Western Sydney University after parental leave.

Participant recruitment:

All professional and academic Western staff who had taken some form of parental leave in the last 3 years (including adoption leave) were eligible for the study. Potential participants were identified using the maternity leave and parental leave database at HR. An individual email was sent to parents to invite them to participate in the study. HR assisted the Engaged Parent Network (EPN) by sending out

the email to anyone who had parental or maternity leave in the last 3 years. The EPN did not have any access to the HR database. Additionally, posters were placed at the University Child Care Centres, on the University website and around the campuses. Participants were provided with a participant information sheet and had the opportunity to have questions answered before agreeing to participate. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants.

Data collection:

Phase one: Five face-to-face and video-conference facilitated (Zoom) focus groups were conducted to explore and investigate staff (both academic and professional) experiences at Western upon their return from parental leave. A total of seventeen participants attended the focus groups (9 professional staff, 8 academic staff; 15 women, 2 men). This formed the beginning of the discovery phase of AI. Participants had the opportunity to participate in mixed male and female focus groups or were offered individual interviews if preferred. The focus group sessions were digitally audio recorded and transcribed verbatim with names replaced by participant numbers.

Phase two: In phase two of the study, participants were invited to contribute to a three-hour collaborative workshop, at a local campus venue. A total of twelve participants attended the collaborative workshop (5 professional staff, 7 academic staff; 10 women, 2 men) some of whom had also participated in the focus groups (n=4). An experienced facilitator (EB) led the workshop alongside other research team members, assisting, observing and taking field notes. Participants were asked to listen without judgement and value diverse opinions. This workshop enabled participants to co-create a plan for enhancing the return to work experience of new parents at Western Sydney University. Using the four phases of AI participants worked together in small groups to consider the dream or 'blue sky vision' for the future. Collectively the collaborative workshop participants were encouraged to consider which short term, medium term and long-term strategies could be considered to improve the early parenting and return to work experience by enhancing existing Western strategies and resources. During the design phase the groups were brought back together and supported to reach consensus of what would be achievable. During the workshops, data was recorded on computers at each table. The final 'destiny' phase of AI will become the work of the Early Parenting Network where the co-created strategies are implemented to achieve the sustainable ideal.

Data analysis:

Once the data collection process was complete the research team managed the data using Quirkos 2.0 qualitative analysis software. The de-identified focus group transcripts were thematically analysed searching for common themes and areas of agreement.

Findings

Phase 1: Focus group findings (Discovery phase)

Five focus groups were held as part of this study, with a total of 17 participants. The focus groups comprised the discovery phase of AI. At the present stage of thematic analysis, the following themes have emerged:

The experience of returning to work varies across the University and is highly dependent on management

One of the salient themes arising from the focus group discussions was the high degree of variation in returning to work experiences. The implementation of parental leave and return to work policies and provisions appeared to be inconsistent across the University, with the quality of the participants' return to work experience being shaped by the nature of their position (academic or professional), role-specific factors, and was especially dependent on the attitudes, expectations and parental status of individual managers and co-workers. Experiences of returning to work ranged from very positive and supportive to less supportive work climates where participants felt management held negative attitudes towards parental leave, adversely affecting their return to work experience.

"I have a really great manager who's very supportive and very pro-life balance, so he's always - as long as I get my work done, he doesn't care what shape or form that looks like."

"But it's just that high level within our department, they don't - they grudgingly accept it [parental leave] and you can sense that."

Professional staff in customer-facing roles with mandatory core hours faced the least flexibility in being able to negotiate their return to work arrangements. Requests for flexible arrangements on returning to work were sometimes not able to be accommodated, due to difficulties in implementation based on incompatibility with business operations, with the application of flexible work arrangement policies being primarily left at the manager's discretion. Academic staff seemed to have greater inherent flexibility in their roles, however could experience other types of pressures and restrictions tied to research activities and teaching demands such as session schedules and unit coordination.

Regardless of the type of role or department however, there was an understanding that their support in returning to work ultimately hinged on their direct managers:

"I think even for someone who has a very, very supportive manager, ultimately any bigger [flexible work] arrangement - my happiness is very contingent on him remaining in that position."

In some cases, the return to work experience had been impacted by the University restructure, meaning some participants faced uncertainty about their position or were required to apply for new positions while on parental leave.

Lack of clarity and communication about parental leave and return to work options

Many participants identified a lack of clarity around the details of parental leave and the options available. Information on parental leave options were described as being not easily accessible and not consistently communicated by HR, leaving many to search for and interpret the information themselves. This resulted in some employees being unaware of the range of flexible options, supportive benefits, resources and opportunities for advancement related to their parental leave, that were seen to cause uncertainty and worry.

“That's where it gets difficult to manage. I'm coming up to the end of my phased return in a few weeks. I am panicking, because I'm like, what are my options? Can I ask to stay part-time? It's not very evident what is available...”

A chief concern was the absence of a primary contact within HR or another centralised department in the University that could provide advice and answer their queries about parental leave:

“A single point of contact. It doesn't have to be one person, but at least one area in there, who is fully up to speed with what all the different options are and can give you some advice on it too.”

Difficulties were also reported in the interpretation of parental leave entitlements and flexible work agreements due to non ‘user-friendly’ language. Participants emphasised the need to be provided with the range of possible flexible work options and the opportunity to discuss these options, entitlements and rights as employees with a dedicated representative that could ideally advocate for them. They also suggested that an information pack upon accessing parental leave would be highly beneficial and welcomed.

“There's a whole list of different flexible options out there, but unless you're in the know, they are just hidden behind either technical bureau speak or not very well articulated on the HR website. So if they could actually make a human-readable form of that, and actually actively pass that out to people, who they see. Because the parental leave is put into the HR system under a different code. That should be where they kind of go, oh, this person's taking leave, let's give them the information and not just the information, the most current and relevant information.”

Further, participants felt that while the policies for phased return were in place for employees, the practical aspects of implementation were lacking, including technical details such as building parental leave into the current HR electronic timesheet, and the absence of an official reporting system for monitoring their leave and phased return by HR. There was also concern regarding the lack of documentation of flexible work arrangements, indicating there was inadequate protection of these arrangements being honoured, particularly when there were changes in management.

A preference for greater communication from the University was expressed by the majority of participants, in a manner that could acknowledge and track their parental leave and return to work period.

“Yeah, and like just an email would be nice [laughs]. Like a few days before you return saying, we're aware that you're returning now. Do you need anything? Do you have any questions? Do you know what I mean?”

Invisibility of parenthood in the workplace

Several participants spoke about the low visibility of parenthood in the workplace. They described a work culture where it was difficult to be forthcoming about parental care responsibilities. In the transition of returning to work, there appeared to be a dissonance between the realities of parenthood and the expectations of their professional roles, with participants finding the merging of their dual roles as parents and workers difficult to manage due to this climate of low disclosure.

This invisibility of parenthood at work was seen to act as an additional obstacle in participants' return to work experiences, as many experienced stress, exhaustion and worry juggling the competing demands of caring duties and high workloads, while at the same time having the pressure to maintain an outward professional profile. This specifically posed problems in the early days of returning to work, where difficulties in re-engaging with their pre-parent professional roles and identities could be challenging to share with others and receive appropriate support. An emphasis on the need to normalise parenthood in the workplace was clearly highlighted, with many participants indicating that open acknowledgement of their parental status would go a long way towards providing a more supportive, family-friendly workplace.

The way some participants challenged this culture and increased the visibility of their parenting role included taking the initiative to bring their children to the workplace, while other participants suggested official University open days where children were welcomed on campus.

“I've brought my daughter on campus a few times, not because it's a kids' day but to a few events, and I've made a conscious effort to introduce her to my many bosses because they're interested, but also because it just demonstrates that this is real”.

Several female participants additionally commented that while there was support in place after a child is born, there was very little support in the early pregnancy stages when women experienced emotional pressures and anxieties in “keeping up appearances”, again due to the complications around disclosure. This was identified as an area where more support could be offered.

One other thing that I just wanted to say is like I was really unwell for the first probably 15 weeks of my pregnancy. That is hard to like keep up the pretence and especially when you feel like you don't want to say, because you don't know what's going to happen. But you're feeling awful. It's sitting through meetings or having to [unclear]. I struggled with that, but I don't know how it could necessarily be done differently.

Disconnect with workload expectations

Related to the low visibility of parenthood at work, participants often discussed the difficulties in adjusting to their workload in the initial phase of returning to work, and the lack of understanding from management and peers regarding workload expectations. The most common problem faced by participants was that their workload remained unchanged during their phased return period. Despite having their official day of leave, many participants felt they were required to condense five days of work into four. Although they appreciated their scheduled day to stay home with their children, this unchanging workload added pressure and anxiety about the build-up of work, or forced some participants to work from home on their leave day. The degree to which there were mismatches in workload expectations also appeared to be department-, management- and role- specific. Backfilling their leave day during phased return was cited as a prominent solution to this issue.

Another concern was the scheduling of meetings at times that clashed with phased return leave days or important parental care times such as evenings or school pick-up time. Several participants sensed that much of this disconnect could occur due to a lack of understanding from management and co-workers who did not themselves have children.

“Our manager is like a career manager. She's not married. She is married to her job. I don't think she has any knowledge of how hard it is, like some of the things, the expectations for meetings and things.”

“But I think for a lot of people, especially the people who don't themselves have kids or I hate to say the older men that maybe weren't as involved in the parenting, they don't seem to have the same understanding. Yeah, that's my experience.”

Further, there were expectations that their work output would be same as before having children, which conflicted with the realities of parental care duties. Some suggested educational modules as part of staff training to create awareness among supervisors and co-workers on the demands of parenting.

“..but again it comes back to that idea that the expectation is that I'll still function as well. I'm not saying I'm incompetent now that I'm back, but I'm more tired. I don't have the ability to work evenings or even do little bits and pieces on weekends like I used to be able to do.”

Participants expressed a greater need for recognition and understanding of the effect of parental responsibilities that could change work patterns and workloads in their transition.

Compromise and career progression

In their return to work, participants frequently described making compromises in their lives as parents, to balance work and family, that was seen to impact on career progression. Many of the participants we spoke to, especially women, made reference to the experience of having to continually choose between career and family, that was often accompanied by feelings of anxiety and guilt associated with those decisions. Participants explained the constant internal conflict they felt in having to re-evaluate priorities, and values, in weighing up their decisions, with the realisation that it was impossible to juggle all tasks both at home and work, and that they would undoubtedly need to miss out on one or the other.

“So for me it's a weird one, because the university couldn't offer me more benefits, my boss couldn't be more supportive, but there are - it's definitely a decision that's incumbent on me as to whether I want to miss out on things in my career or miss out on things at home. So there's no - as far as support goes, there's really no consideration about the mum life thing, it's just you make your mum life work around your work life..”

This often resulted in having to saying no to career opportunities, as one participant stated:

“I'm constantly making decisions about which am I going to let fall, so either I have to miss out on work meetings, or I can't take up - I got offered to go to a conference in Queensland earlier this year and I had to say no and I would have loved to have gone, I just couldn't.”

This extended to a sense of apprehension in applying for new roles, anticipating that the new position could cause significant disruption to their ability to plan and maintain their current childcare arrangements or insecurity about new manager expectations. One participant described the hesitancy they observed in their co-workers with children to take up career progression opportunities:

“To me, I'm a little bit like, come on, put your hand up for a project. Oh, no, I can't. I'm worried that if my kids get sick or with school requirements - they're not even then putting their hand up.”

Participants also shared experiences of promotions being affected by their phased return status (working 4 days a week), where to be considered for higher roles, full-time work hours were required or preferred.

“I know that if I hadn't chosen to come back to work full time, I would be in a very different place in my career than what I am, because I have prioritised my job over my family quite a few times, so that with the cost of guilt and everything else that comes with it, because I wanted that for myself”

Work flexibility is highly valued

Workplace flexibility was regarded as one of the most critical and valuable resources in supporting and facilitating return to work. Most participants reported satisfaction and appreciation for the flexibility offered in their roles upon returning to work and considered phased return very beneficial.

“I think the return to work scheme is phenomenal. When I came back it was still, I think, the 10 weeks, but I thought that was really good. It sort of allowed me, well it allowed me not to be so emotional coming back because I would have one day extra with my child”

Flexible work arrangements were also reported to minimise the stress associated with needing time away from work when children are sick:

“I found a lot of my work, particularly in that first year back, was I'd log on at night after I got the kids into bed, because it just meant I could leave earlier and get home to relieve babysitters and whatever, or pick them up with daycare, or be at home with them when they're sick, which is the constant source of trouble for all of us. But it meant that I could still - I don't have to take a sick day every time I'm home sick with them, I can do a work from home day”

The increasingly multi-campus nature of the University was found to contribute toward greater workplace flexibility, with the video conferencing platform Zoom identified as becoming more acceptable, further facilitating the ability to work off-campus and being supportive to the transition back to work.

“One thing that was really helpful is the flexibility of where I can work and going to various campuses has been very flexible as well. So I can do drop-offs in the morning or leave work early to do pick-ups and having remote access – we all just – we can all work from anywhere”.

One of the most important factors underpinning the value and satisfaction in work flexibility was the notion of autonomy and trust.

Western’s work culture is changing

The picture described by participants of Western’s work culture is one of change. Despite some remaining pockets of resistance to parental leave and some unsupportive attitudes, there appeared to be a definite shift toward greater acceptance, awareness and integration of professional and parental duties in Western’s work culture. However, despite the organisational-level family-friendly policies in place, the work culture does not appear to be uniform across the University, differing between departments and role types.

Some remaining concerns raised by participants regarding work culture were about how they were perceived professionally. Participants mentioned being worried over how parental leave and returning to work arrangements could affect their reputation, such that their credibility and commitment to work felt questioned in choosing a flexible work arrangement, appearing as though they were no longer serious about their careers.

“It’s not so much that the policy is not in place, it’s the is it worth it, is it worth the ramifications of the benefits for me or the way I look or my reputation at work or how much they trust me”.

Returning to work is a rewarding experience

While participants spoke about the various struggles and challenges in their experiences of returning to work, the majority also held positive reflections of their experiences, identifying many beneficial qualities. The journey back to work represented a therapeutic, meaningful event that they looked forward to. Some of these benefits included regaining their sense of personal and professional identity, personal space, social interaction, colleague support networks and mental stimulation. The presence

of a network of work peers, despite the difficulties that could be experienced adjusting to work, was seen to be one of the most satisfying, rewarding and supportive aspects.

“I was really happy to come back and get back into the routine. I didn't really have a problem with that transition, so I was really happy to come to work. It's my relaxing time”.

“I think the really cool thing about coming back to this place is because we're such a well-known employer, flexible working environment for women, you will often have teams - and men actually - you'll often have teams that are going through similar experiences to you and although it is manager dependent and position dependent and anxiety dependent, there is always - I've found in our office specifically, there's always support there, whether it's from your boss or not. There's a lot of shared experiences and shared sort of anxieties and concerns and guilt and support and encouragement – positive experience, support is there”.

Phase 2: Collaborative workshop findings

Twelve participants attended the collaborative workshop. Based on the themes developed from the focus groups in the first phase (discovery), participants were asked to help develop strategies for supporting staff who are returning to work at Western Sydney University after parental leave.

Dream phase

In response to being asked to 'dream' about and visualise the ideal world for working parents at Western, participants collectively agreed upon the following key areas of action: (1) resources, financial investment and policy change, (2) attitudinal/work culture changes (autonomy, respect, flexibility), (3) awareness and visibility, and (4) advocacy and policy communication.

Design phase

During the design phase, participants were encouraged to move from the dream phase to the design phase by considering strategies that could be implemented to achieve the ideal. The below table is a summary of the action plan collectively designed by the group and specific actionable strategies.

Table 1. Short term and medium-long term actions in the four key areas of change

	Short term actions	Medium-long term actions
1) Resources, financial investment and policy change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Policy change that ensure a return to work plan for all – job security for casuals • A guide on the rights of parents in the workplace • Review of policies for special needs caring (may need more support) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parent coaching sessions • Affordable creche set up on each campus/school- run by educator and staffed by students • Create kid friendly places (playground, library corners) • Vacation care, innovation campus – 1 week holiday camps, outsourced to third party providers • Review pricing for daycare - particularly international students (assist HDR students, link to multicultural theme) • Review of flexibility & parenting policies • Work with partners – Western Sydney Health Alliance City Deals, WSU branding increase campus visibility
2) Attitudinal/workplace culture change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Peer support parent yammer page (parenting workshops, mindfulness etc) • Raising the awareness among staff and employers of the availability of breastfeeding rooms • Creating a supportive message for students and staff with children- “you don’t have to put your career on hold” • Normalisation of parental status and care duties through acknowledgement, appreciation and awareness raising of parenthood in the workplace 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Training modules on parental leave and returning to work support for supervisors - mandatory my career training • VC award for most family friendly workplace • Executive level being accountable for parental leave cover- adequate funding to cover staff • Personal leave to attend assemblies- Easter hat parade, Mother’s day afternoon tea, Book week, OR flexibility to be able to accumulate time around these events

3) Awareness and visibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use of social media to show champions (Yammer – make parenting visible through kindness - #WSUWomenStandUnited & #WSUparenting) • Internal and outward promotion of Western as an engaged parent University • Identify Western parent champions to take kids to campus • Yearly parenting Christmas event • Regular campus-based mornings teas and other events for parents 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Daycare and crèche open day events on campus
4) Advocacy and policy communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hiring of advocate/parent support officer • Case studies on job sharing and strategies • One stop shop for policies and information 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Toolkit for how phased return works and clearer interpretation of flexibility from the EBA • HR template – returning to work welcome back pack

Conclusion

Our project aligned with the Gender Equality Strategy and Action Plan priority focus areas of developing and retaining a gender diverse workforce; and facilitating and promoting a flexible workplace which enables staff to balance work and responsibilities.

The findings from our 2019 gender equity research indicated Western staff who are parents are calling for greater support and a culture change. The study reveals that while there can be some negativity in the perception and attitudes towards parental leave, by management and peers, Western is currently engaging in a cultural shift towards increased support for working parents. Challenging non-supportive workplace culture has emerged as one of the key strategies to create a workplace that supports all staff in managing work-life integration in their return to work. This involves the normalisation of parenting by increasing the visibility of parental status in the workplace. It is also evident that in order to create supportive work environments for working parents, having the policies in place alone are not sufficient. Workplace policies require appropriate interpretation and equitable implementation across the many disciplines and campuses, acknowledging that the return to work experience is shaped by multiple factors such as department type, management, and role characteristics. Toolkits, information resources and advocacy are indicated to help improve the communication between HR, staff and their supervisors and enhance the return to work experience.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are suggested to improve the support provided to staff returning to work after parental leave:

- More frequent and clear communication from HR with staff members at each important phase of their parental leave and return to work, such as: an initial information kit upon application for parental leave, checking in during leave, approaching the end of leave and a welcome back pack upon returning to work
- Improving the practical aspects of parental leave and return to work documentation – ability to report and track leave and arrangements at a system level
- Reviewing of parental leave, return to work and flexible work arrangement policies and provisions, so that workloads and hours of work serve to support caregivers, strengthen families, and promote positive parenting and a healthy work-life balance
- Addressing work culture issues around parenting - increasing the visibility of parenthood in the workplace through awareness raising via social media, featuring parent champions, kids on campus events, regular parent networking events, provision of training for supervisors (to help

adopt a new frame of mind on their role in supervising and evaluating staff with parental responsibilities), and strategies to promote Western as a family-friendly employer of choice

- Resources and financial investment focused on the creation of greater flexibility and autonomy, that are helpful to staff in managing their work and personal responsibilities (time flexibility, location flexibility, breastfeeding support on campus, scheduling flexibility, appropriate funding to backfill positions during leave and phased return)
- Introduction of affordable 'drop-in' creche (occasional) style care on campuses and vacation care programs that would support WSU HDR students, casual staff and international students, enhance childcare support and expose children to the University in an age appropriate way and allows for the development of connection with the Western brand
- Hiring of a parent support officer that can advocate for Western parents and provide timely and accurate information on parental leave and return to work rights and entitlements

Outcomes to date

1. Presentation Poster at SAGE
2. Corpus Funding Application
3. Submission for the VC GEF 2020 scheme under the Engaged Parent Network umbrella. The network complements and assists SAGE, in improving overall Western culture for new parents and also links researchers across the university who share a passion for gender studies.

Next Steps

- Collaborating with another VC GEF team on extending current research. Grants were lodged for the Western VC GEF 2020 scheme to extend both projects.
- Cross-institutional comparative study as an invitation was received to share our findings with other universities in Australia who conducted similar research.
- Preparation of an ARC Linkage grant for 2021 after establishing a track record and narrowing down the tertiary education partner institution and industry.

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