

Maternity cover fund



Supporting work-life balance for parents returning to work

In Queens University Belfast (QUB), all Schools have adopted the University return to work policies, and fund these from a combination of Schools' resources and central University resources. The policies cover the maternity period and the immediate return to work period. These policies aim to ensure that mothers-to-be can take their maternity leave without worrying about how their leave impacts on others.

Moreover, these policies ensure that mothers have time to readjust to work on their return and focus on research activities without teaching pressures. These policies also extend to female and male staff taking adoption leave.

Maternity Cover Fund and Return to Work policies

The Maternity Cover Fund was created following a recommendation in the Women's Forum Report on Gender Imbalance at Queens, in May 2000. It was implemented shortly thereafter and was first adopted by Queens University Belfast's Schools in the fields of Science, Engineering and Technology (SET).

The adoption of these policies has expanded ever since to now cover all Schools and Directorates (operational units) in the University. The measure also applies to postdoctoral researchers on contract, even if their funding grant does not take maternity leave into account.

The principle underpinning the Maternity Cover Fund is as follows:

In order to ensure there is consistency of approach throughout the University and that no member of staff is disadvantaged in the application of this policy, the following principle should apply:

- *Any monies provided from the Maternity Cover Fund must be used to allow women anxiety-free maternity leave so the cover provided should not have the effect of postponing work until the woman returns from maternity leave; particular specialisms and administrative loads should be catered for during the period of maternity leave.*

Maternity Cover Fund is comprised of money reclaimed through Statutory Pay Credits and a contribution from university funds. The fund provides assistance to Schools and Directorates to ensure that the essential work of all staff members who take maternity leave is covered so that they can enjoy an anxiety-free maternity leave.

The Maternity Cover Funds are administered and managed centrally by the Personnel Office. Claims can be made through an online application which is then reviewed by a Maternity Cover Fund Group. Replacement Teaching Costs are estimated at a faculty level and come out of Schools budgets.

The Fund enables women across the university, academics and professional/support staff, to take maternity leave without worry about work, and enables the manager/department head to apply for funds to employ substitutes to carry out the mother's work while she is on leave. The outcome of this Fund and policy is a 100 % maternity leave return rate for Queen University Belfast since 2011.

The Return to Work policy began in SET Schools in QUB and is now applied across the University and has the possibility to be replicated elsewhere. Essentially, this involves providing academic women with six months of protected research time on their return from maternity leave.

Their teaching and administrative duties – which were supported while they were on maternity leave – continue to be carried out by other staff employed to do so. The purpose of this policy is to enable returning mothers re-engage with their research activities or teams, produce publications, and apply for research grants.

In addition to this specific measure, all women returning from maternity leave can apply for staged return, gradually working up to full-time return. The proportion of return is negotiated between the returning mother and the Head of School, and typically sees the returning mother come back on a .6 basis initially, moving in agreed stages to full-time return. The six month protected research period is also applied pro-rata in these cases. These staged return policies do not restrict, or inhibit, the returning mother from applying for promotion during this period.

Return to Work policies framed within a wider gender equality work at Queens University Belfast

The Maternity Cover Fund and return to work policies in Queens University Belfast are situated in a wider gender equality work, including:

- The Athena SWAN awards which require the University as an institution along with each School to develop tailor-made gender equality action plans, and deliver on them over a three-year period.
- A top-down commitment to gender equality in the University, which is evidenced by an investment of over £2million in supporting the Queen's Gender Initiative (QGI) and its projects since the establishment of QGI in 2000.
- A dedicated Queen's Gender Initiative office, headed by a female academic with expertise in gender equality, and chaired by a female member of the University's Senate (the governing body). The QGI office is an autonomous unit focused on institutional actions, initiatives and projects directed at supporting the progression of gender equality. The QGI office works closely with the Equal Opportunities Unit, the Human Resources Directorate, Schools and University Executive Board in delivering gender equality, and provides in-house academic-led knowledge on gender equality in Higher Education. The QGI director reports directly to the Vice-Chancellor on gender equality issues.
- On-going supports for management and culture changes that create an environment where gender equality can flourish. At a management 'away day' in 2015, a significant discussion item was the University's plans for further progression of gender equality in the short-medium term.

Learning from the practice

This practice is clearly embedded in the organisation for more than a decade. It mainstreams annual budgeting for maternity leave cover in Schools.

These policies are enabling Queens University Belfast to have a 100 % maternity return to work rate since 2011. The Maternity Cover Fund has particular relevance to female researchers as they can focus on their research post-maternity leave for the first semester on return. Since December 2013, 162 maternity fund applications have been approved. The Maternity Cover Fund was evaluated in 2014, after which the application process and related forms were placed online.

Queens University Belfast's policies have the potential to be replicated elsewhere, as long as a budget can be made available for their implementation.

These policies have received very positive feedback and strong praise. For example:

"I received maternity cover funding from the university to fund a PDRA to continue my research during a period of maternity leave following the birth of my second child. I also benefitted from a reduced teaching load on return from maternity leave. Both these initiatives allowed me to maintain the momentum I was building in my research. In 2012 I was confirmed in post following an assessment of my contribution to research, teaching and administration on a pro rata basis".

- Lecturer, School of Planning, Architecture and Civil Engineering 2014.

A member of staff in the School of Psychology has benefited greatly from the School's policies around flexible return to work following maternity leave. Following an initial maternity leave in 2010, she returned to work part-time in a 4-year incremental plan and the School employed a teaching fellow with the remainder of her salary to deliver her lectures and tutorials. This allowed her to focus on her research, and she secured a major grant from the Research Councils UK in this period. With the support of the School, this member of staff successfully applied for promotion to Reader in 2014. She stated how beneficial this was:

"This arrangement was enormously beneficial allowing me to focus my limited working hours on administration (I was a Director of Research) and research (the extra time allowed me to apply for, and successfully secure a substantial RCUK grant. I believe this arrangement greatly reduced any stress associated with trying to balance childcare and part-time work, which, in most instances can amount to substantially more than part-time hours".

- Reader, School of Psychology 2013

Contacts/Further Information

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Further information

[Queens Gender Initiative](#)



[Maternity and Adoption Leave at Queen's University Belfast](#)



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