Good Practice Guide: 
Principle 5
Flexible working

Flexible approaches and provisions that enable individuals, at all career and life stages, to optimise their contribution to their department, their institution and to SET.

Support and promote flexible-working practices
Demonstrate how the head of department supports flexible and part-time working, that policies are consistently applied and the benefits are promoted. Provide explicit support for those returning from career breaks and encourage take-up of paternity and/or caring leave. Demonstrate how this has helped effect departmental culture change and how these processes will remain in place as senior management changes. Where there are university-wide policies, demonstrate and give examples of how they are used across the department or school.

• The university provides flexible-working guidelines that cover: unpaid leave, reduced hours working, seasonal hours (i.e. term-time-only working), staggered hours, flexitime, job share, compressed hours and homeworking. All requests for flexible working are dealt with on an individual basis (but adhering to a given framework) through the immediate line manager. Employees and managers work together to achieve the best outcome from any request for flexibility, and should both understand and consider the likely impact on the department/university. All staff have the right to request flexible working. The department of physics currently has a male member of academic staff working 50% of full-time, as a result of a request to work fewer hours to pursue other interests. One female postdoctoral research assistant also works part-time due to family commitments.

• Career breaks and flexible working: the progress in this domain has been very positive with an increase of male (zero to four) and female (four to six) staff taking up part-time work. Surveys indicate that all academic staff work flexible hours. The head of department encourages this as best practice. We have 100% take-up of paternity leave, of return-to-work fellowships and of an equivalent scheme set up for female research assistants returning after maternity leave. The latter has been adopted across the university as an area of best practice.

• Opportunities for flexible and part-time working are well embedded within the university regulations and procedures. In addition to these formal arrangements, academic staff members have considerable choice in their work schedules, except of course in cases where they are teaching. Even with teaching, the university has a policy of allowing academic staff to request certain teaching times and, as long as the member of staff has acceptable reasons, an effort will be made to accommodate the request. Acceptable reasons include caring responsibilities.

• All departmental meetings are held during the main part of the working day (10.00 a.m. to 4.00 p.m.); termly staff meetings are held at 3.00 p.m. to ensure that we can include those with childcare/carer commitments.

• The university has a widely advertised policy that flexible and part-time working will be accommodated when possible, and the department supports this fully. In recent years, we have had academic and research staff on part-time contracts, on job-share arrangements and on career breaks, which have been arranged to meet the personal circumstances or career development of individuals.
Staff returning from career breaks have a meeting with the head of department to discuss arrangements for re-integrating into the department, which also gives an opportunity for the staff member to be updated on any significant developments that have occurred while they were absent (however, it is common practice to maintain staff on e-mail lists during absences so that they can keep up to date with things if they wish). In addition to these more structured ways of helping, the department practice is to manage carefully the teaching timetable to provide a better pattern of work. Formal university arrangements enable us to block out a teaching-free day for research and to accommodate issues such as childcare arrangements. Within the department we go further in accommodating periods for research activities and arranging terms relatively free of teaching.

Particular examples of paternity leave in the department are: Dr -- (research fellow) has taken paternity leave and used flexible working hours to help care for his children. Mr -- (technical support staff) has taken one-week’s leave and paternity leave. Dr -- (new lecturer) took two weeks’ paternity leave (January 2010). Dr -- (senior lecturer) took two weeks’ paternity leave. Mr -- (technical support staff) took two weeks’ paternity leave and three months’ unpaid leave. Reduced teaching load was agreed with a member of staff with demanding weekend care responsibilities for an elderly relative.

The school has developed and implemented a formal return to work policy for individuals returning-to-work after a career break and/or extended period of leave, including maternity or paternity leave. Academic staff members returning to work have a period of two years over which they build up again to a full teaching load. Administrative responsibilities are also minimised to enable the staff member to focus on their research.

Over the past three years, there have been six members of staff (all research staff) who have taken paternity leave. The paternity forms and guidelines are accessible from the departmental website and all staff used the university-approved procedure. In a focus group with research staff in the department, the ease and openness of paternity leave was mentioned, as well as the flexibility around needing to take time off at short notice for children for a variety of reasons, including illness, dropping them off/picking them up from school.

The university’s policy for flexible working is well advertised; a link to the university human resource site is posted on the website to remind staff that the department recognises the many forms of flexible working and to provide guidelines on how to obtain a suitable flexible-working arrangement. We plan to raise awareness of our flexible-working policy, in particular through the “Families at the Lab” website.

The department has assigned a maternity mentor (female) who discusses pre- and post-maternity arrangements with individuals requesting maternity leave. The department accommodates requests, consistent with our child policy, such as provision of breast-feeding/expressing facilities and keeping-in-touch days. The maternity mentor provides further support prior to maternity leave and during the return-to-work period.

As we are a large department, the policy is that the teaching load for female academic staff taking maternity leave is covered by other staff in their absence; arrangements for research responsibilities are covered by individual research groups. On return from maternity leave, female academics are relieved from lectures in the first term and no new lecture courses are assigned in the first 12 months. For those research associates/fellows employed on Research Council/Royal Society funding, the tenure of the appointment is extended accordingly; for non-Research Council Research associates, maternity leave is given according to the terms of the employment.

All staff have good access to childcare through the university nurseries (one located adjacent to the department) and the university play scheme, which runs during the school holidays. The university also runs a returning carers scheme that provides teaching “buy-out” or covers the cost of a family member/nanny to accompany new mothers to conferences, and a salary sacrifice scheme, which, in effect, provides tax-free nursery provision. We will continue to monitor maternity and paternity leave rates, and account for leave in the workload model.

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