A Tale of Two Universities: Primary Carers Working in Australian Universities

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ABSTRACT:

Returning to work after a career break can be challenging, accordingly employers implement a range of policies, practices and strategies to support and retain working parents. This paper analyses the work-family policies at two universities in the Australian university sector, through the eyes of academic parents. Grounding the discussion in the Australian industrial relations system, we examine the lived experience of academic parents drawing on two separate qualitative studies at two different Australian Universities. Initiatives in place to enhance career progression for academic parents, are tested against lived experience. The authors find that policies and strategies need to be overhauled and suggest more feasible ones that universities can implement to enable the academic parent, who is juggling an academic career with parenting, to succeed in the post COVID uncertainty faced by the Higher Education sector.

Keywords: Career Breaks, Academic Parenting, Gender Equity, Athena Swan, Carers, ROPE, Policy, Leximancer, STEMM

INTRODUCTION:

Returning to work after a career break in any occupation, including academia, can be challenging. Employers implement a range of policies, practices, and strategies to support and retain working parents. The question however remains as to how employers can facilitate the transition and mitigate the impact that a career break has on their employees. Our research examines the institutional framework in place at two separate Australian universities to support academic parents to identify whether these policies effectively assist university staff to achieve a work-life balance.

Australian universities are at the forefront of implementing gender equity policies and supports, including parental leave, phased-return-to-work, on-campus childcare facilities, flexible working practices, and family leave (Marchant and Wallace 2016; WGEA 2018). These policies and supports apply both to mothers and fathers, and are designed to keep

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careers on track while parents make time for new children or other family obligations (Roberat and Erskine, 2005); work-related resources enable work-to-family enrichment and improve quality of life and functioning in the home domain. Providing an enriching and supportive work environment may be an important strategy for minimizing work-family conflict (WFC), burnout, and subsequent reduced career development in academia.

Although universities are leaders in implementing policies to support academic parents, there is evidence that formalized institutional support (re)creates gender inequities (Marsh, 2015), and is sometimes ineffective or not accessed (Roberat and Erskine, 2005; Armenti, 2004). The COVID pandemic has already impacted career cycles, progression, and work practice in Higher Education globally, and there is a need for the Sector to fully acknowledge that it has also intensified gender inequities (Malisch et al. 2020; Willey 2020).

This paper sets out to examine the work-family policies implemented in Australian universities through an analysis of the policies of two universities, through the eyes of academic parents. After summarising the literature and the industrial relations framework that applies to Australian universities we will examine the lived experience of academic parents as identified in two separate research projects at two different Australian Universities. The initiatives at these universities to enhance career progression for academic parents, who are predominantly mothers, are examined against lived experience as reported by participants in the study. We will suggest how policies could be adapted to the post-pandemic era so that universities can proactively engage in and navigate the pandemic consequences to sustain their future competitiveness and retain their workforce. We identify policies and strategies that need to be reviewed and more feasible ones implemented so that the academic parent who is juggling an academic career with parenting can succeed in the uncertain times that the Higher Education sector faces post-COVID.

BACKGROUND

There is a substantial body of literature regarding the effect of the "motherhood penalty" on careers (Pepping and Maniam, 2020), particularly relative to child-free women (Baker, 2010, Budig et al. 2012). The effects range from the application process (Correll et al, 2017) to retirement (Austen et al, 2015). This includes the effect of career interruptions for childbirth but continues after the mother returns to work, with reduced workforce participation through part-time work and carer responsibilities. Lost wages from motherhood tend to be highest for high-earning women, regardless of whether their work record is more continuous than less highly-paid women (England et al 2016). The phenomenon is observed in developed economies where women are participating in the paid labor market, although cultural norms and policies contribute to the extent of family wage gaps in different countries (Cukrowska-Torzewska and Lovasz, 2020).

Within this body of literature, there is a stream that addresses the challenges of balancing an academic career with parenthood, concluding that the primary caregivers in academia have lower publication rates and are less likely to get promoted (Kennelly and Spalter-Roth, 2006, Huopalainen 2019, Cohen 2020). The academic primary carer is typically a woman who struggles post-parental leave to meet performance expectations of self, supervisors,

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colleagues, and other stakeholders (McDermott, 2020) and to safeguard their professional identity (Van Engen, 2019). Nikunen (2012, p.713) observes that the tertiary education sector's 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 turn to careers".

Academic mothers have concerns about the consequences of accessing institutional support, such as being considered less serious about their work (Drago and Walliams, 2000; Heijstra et al, 2017) while male academics are reluctant to take parental or family leave, or use such leave to engage in writing and research (Marsh, 2015; Armenti 2004).

Pandemic experiences reported to date call for an examination of existing policies that focus on support to parents in organizations. The pandemic has impacted career cycles, progression, and work practice throughout the global knowledge industries, and has had a particular impact on Higher Education. It has spotlighted the importance of workplace gender policies in academia and the Higher Education sector needs to fully acknowledge gender inequities as they are being intensified by the pandemic (Malisch et al. 2020; Willey 2020).

Teaching academics were required to transform their teaching strategies to remote learning, in a very short period (Casacchia et al, 2021; Watermeyer et al 2020) and researchers had to change focus, and methods, or defer projects. Early research has shown a reduction in research outputs by women compared with men, largely because women disproportionately shouldered the responsibility for home learning of children and other care responsibilities (Wright et al, 2020; Bowyer et al, 2021; Statti et al, 2021; Guy & Arthur 2021).

Inequalities in women's and men's academic careers existed well before COVID-19 (Monroe et al, 2008; Valian 2005). In normal times women in academia publish less, are subject to interrupted careers, and achieve higher positions less frequently than men (Oleschuk, 2020). Under the emotional stress of the pandemic, it has been documented that female academics submitted fewer manuscripts for publication and tweeted fewer work-related messages than men (Dolan and Lawless 2020; Amano-Patiño et al, 2020K; Kim and Patterson, 2020). Mothers of young children were forced to reorganize their job priorities during the global pandemic while women's care responsibilities for their families also increased and took precedence (Chemaly, 2020; Faherty 2020; Alon et al. 2020; Boncori 2020; Costa 2020; Crook, 2020; Minello 2020; Pettit 2020; Staniscuaski et al. 2020; Willey 2020).

Universities have increasingly adopted flexible work practices in work organization and enabling parents in the workplace (Anderson, 2008; Knights and Clarke, 2014; Nikunen, 2014). Perversely, enhanced access to flexible work conditions and parental leave can negatively affect career progression. This dilemma is not unique to academic parents: it is experienced by parents in many professions and is being noted in the post-COVID workplace (Deloitte, 2020). The particular challenge for academics and researchers is how a career break affects the pipelines that govern academic and research careers. Research projects take time to establish, complete and publish; taking time out of the academic workforce can reduce outputs when the academic parent is under pressure to show their merit relative to their peers.

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Universities can reinforce ambition in working parents (post-pandemic more than ever), encouraging the visibility of *academic parenting* and minimizing the gender inequity gap by creating the right culture for staff impacted by a career break.

This paper adds to the literature by exploring the effects of caring obligations, the "motherhood penalty" and resulting career breaks on academic parents, the majority of whom are women, through the lived experience of parents employed at two different universities. We specifically interrogate the effects of the institutional settings and relevant policies adopted by universities in the Australian Higher Education sector for staff returning to work after a career break. The aim is to showcase, compare and contrast the implemented policies and lived-experience pre-pandemic at two Australian institutions.

Industrial Relations Framework

The Australian industrial relations framework allows organizations to enter into employment agreements with employees, subject to overarching legislation and compliance with specified minimum National Employment Standards (NES). Each university in Australia operates under an Enterprise Agreement specific to that university, reflecting local and strategic differences.

The NES require that all employers in Australia allow 12 months unpaid leave concerning the birth or adoption of a child to an employee with more than 12 months service and the employee is entitled to return to the same, or an equivalent, position. The parent of a child under school age also has the right to request flexible working hours, which can only be refused on "reasonable business grounds". An employer may exceed the standard, often by providing paid leave within the prescribed 12-month period or extending the unpaid leave entitlement.

The Higher Education sector exceeds the minimum parental leave requirements under the Act although the conditions for leave above the NES vary between institutions. The average duration of paid parental leave entitlement across the higher education sector is 16.1 weeks, compared to 10.9 weeks of paid leave across all industries (WGEA n.d.).

Regardless of any entitlement to leave under an employment agreement, an eligible employee who earns less than $150,000 pa may be entitled to a Federal Government income support payment (Paid Parental Leave Act, (Cth) 2010) that is equivalent to the minimum wage for up to 18 weeks in respect of a primary carer, and two weeks for a secondary carer. This leave can be taken flexibly: the first 12 weeks must be taken in a block during the first 12 months, with the balance able to be taken flexibly within 24 months of birth or adoption of a child. In contrast, not all university Enterprise Agreements allow flexibility in paid leave entitlements.

However, the availability of longer parental leave has highlighted risks for parents who find that when they take a significant break from their workplace their career trajectory can stall (Oleschuk, 2020). For an academic, the career interruption can result in a year or more of limited outputs while their contemporaries are building their academic and research portfolio.

The NES allow "Keeping in Touch Days" allowing an employee to work for up to ten days a year during their parental leave period, to "keep in touch with his or her employment to

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facilitate a return to that employment after the end of the period of leave" (*Fair Work Act* 2009, s.79A). For an academic parent, these "keeping in touch days" could be used to maintain research or specialized teaching activities, however, some university Enterprise Agreements do not acknowledge the right to access keeping in touch days, and the right is not well known or understood by parents or their line managers.

Progress in respect of gender equality in Australian workplaces is monitored by the Workplace Gender Equality Agency (WGEA) with the principal objects of the organization being to promote gender equality and remove barriers to equal participation in employment and the workforce, including family and caring responsibilities.

Employers with more than 100 employees, including universities, are required to report to WGEA on a range of gender equality indicators, with the data then published by WGEA. Data extracted from WGEA in respect of the Higher Education sector shows that, as a class, the Higher Education sector has appropriate policies and procedures in place to provide and evaluate flexible working and parental leave (WGEA n.d.).

Career Progression in the Higher Education Sector
Universities have recognized that women in non-traditional fields of research (STEM or STEMM[1]) face particular challenges. The data, set out in Figure 1, show that across the university sector the proportion of women employed at each level of academic achievement reduces significantly as the academic level increases[2]. The proportion of male academics increases above Level C whereas the proportion of female academics decreases.

Figure 1: Proportion of Female to Male Academic Staff, Australia, 2019 to 2021

Figure 1 here

Source: Author calculations from Department of Education, Skills and Employment: Selected Higher Education Statistics – 2021 Staff data

Women are also more likely than men to be employed on a fractional full-time or a part-time basis. Table 1 shows that although 58% of employees are female, in 2021, nearly three times as many women as men were employed on a fractional full-time basis.

Table 1: Higher Education Sector Employees by Gender and Full/Part-time Employment

Full-time (by headcount)	Fractional Full-time (by headcount)	Total #

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[1] STEM includes Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics; STEMM includes Medicine.
[2] In the Australian academic structure Level A (associate lecturer) is the lowest level and Level E (Professor) is the highest level.

Males	Females	Persons	Males	Females	Persons	Males	Females	Persons
42,990	49,742	96,506	7,440	21,064	28,552	50,430	70,806	121364
35.4%	41%	76.7%	6.1%	17.4%	23.5%	41.6%	58.3%	100.0%

 # The data exclude casual staff, however, estimates of casual staff employed during the 2021 year show a reduction of 15.2% between 2020 and 2021 compared to a reduction of 7.0% for full-time staff and 6.2% for fractional full-time staff, presumably as a result of the COVID pandemic.

Source: Department of Education, Skills and Employment: 2021 Staff full-time equivalence, Table 1.1 Accessed 19/05/2022.

Athena Swan

The Athena Swan accreditation framework is a gender equity and diversity framework launched in the UK in 2005. The Australian program commenced with a pilot in 2015, and the first Bronze level accreditations were awarded in 2018. In order to achieve accreditation, each university was required to develop a Gender and Diversity Action Plan from an audit of the institution against the SAGE framework for gender equity, diversity, and inclusion. To progress to Silver status each subscriber must be able to show progress and impact against five Key Priority Areas that the subscriber has identified (SAGE, 2020). However, there is concern emerging that the Athena Swan project may not be considered a priority by universities at a time of constrained budgets, resulting in a lack of action in implementing policy changes (de Aguiar et al, 2022).

Research Grant Success

Data collected by the Australian Research Council (ARC) shows a significant difference in the outcomes for male and female researchers. Data collected about the research workforce as part of the Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) evaluation in 2015 and 2018 included a gender analysis (ARC 2019, ARC 2016). These data show that although in 2018 women made up 44% of the research workforce, the distribution across disciplines is uneven. Women made up fewer than half of the researchers in the STEMM disciplines. Although 52% of researchers in Medical and Health Sciences are female, when disaggregated, female researchers only predominate in Public Health and Health Sciences, Nursing, and Paediatrics and Reproductive Medicine (ARC, 2019).

The report also shows that female researchers were significantly underrepresented at senior levels, with only 36% of researchers at level D and 25% of researchers at level E being female. Even in those Fields of Research where there are more female than male researchers, at level E there are more male (58%) than female (42%) researchers (ARC, 2019).

Both the Australian Research Council (ARC) and the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) have adopted the Research Opportunity and Performance Evidence

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(ROPE) principles (ARC 2020)and the "Eligibility and Career Interruptions Statement" (ARC 2019) (NHMRC 2020) to support researchers resuming a career after an interruption when they apply for grants or fellowships. The career interruptions identified in the policies include parental leave and carer responsibilities. In addition, if a researcher takes a career break while they hold a fellowship or Early Career Researcher Award the grant will be extended for the duration of parental leave.

However, universities are increasingly engaging in demand-driven research governed by a commercial contract which may include timelines that cannot be deferred as a consequence of a researcher taking parental leave. In such cases, another researcher may need to be allocated to the project and the original researcher may find their role in the project redundant. In addition to reduced research outputs when excluded from the project, pipeline effects are multiplied if relationships with research partners are not maintained.

Researchers on fixed-term contracts are at a particular disadvantage. If tied to funding for a particular project they are likely to lose their role on that project if they take parental leave, and if their contract expires while on leave the university does not have any obligation to find them another position.

THE CASE STUDIES

Research Design
This empirically designed scoping study used a case study methodology to investigate the phenomenon (Yazan, 2015; Yin 2003) of workplace support, culture, and return to work policies at two Australian tertiary institutions, University A and University B. The collaboration arose after the researchers, examining institutional policies around academics returning to work after career breaks within their own universities, identified the overlap of their respective projects on different sides of the country and decided to compare results.

Both researchers examined the parental leave and workplace flexibility policies for their universities via document analysis and combined it with empirical evidence to inform the lived experiences of parents before, during, and on returning to work post parental leave. The overarching research question aiming to explore the lived experiences of post-career break of academic and professional staff at both institutions was similar enough to combine the data sets and report on the findings.

The data collection at both institutions focused on employees' work history and career breaks, the support received during their career breaks, their experiences on returning to work, and their familiarity and access to policy documentation. Each researcher aimed to identify career breaks' effects on staff and examine their University's policies and practices, and the similarity in their investigative approach led to this collaborative study. The combined findings inform this paper to make appropriate policy recommendations to address the negative effects of career breaks while encouraging Academic career progression.

The chosen investigative lens of academic parenthood experiences reflects Rubin (2012) as "qualitative research is not simply learning about a topic, but also learning what is important to those being studied" (p. 15). Triangulating and comparing the data sources used in each

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case study provided the researchers with sufficient compelling evidence to ensure the robustness of the narrative to tell the *tale of the two universities*.

Case Context: Introducing the two Universities:

The two universities that are the focus of this study are based on the opposite sides of Australia on the West and East Coast respectively. Both Universities have Bronze level membership of Athena Swan and report data on workplace gender equality to WGEA. Females outnumber males at both universities as they do in the High Education sector overall. The gender composition at both universities is very similar, with an approximate 60 to 40 female ratio. Table 2 compares some of the key features of the respective universities:

Table 2: Characteristics of the Two Universities

	University A:	University B:
Location	West Coast	East Coast
Multi-Campus	Yes	Yes
Gender ratios	60.4% female and 39.6% male	62.3% female and 37.7% male
Parental Leave	A primary caregiver is entitled to 26 weeks of paid parental leave on the birth or adoption of a child that may be taken at half pay with a further 26 weeks of unpaid leave (52 weeks total). This may be extended to up to two years without pay, Leave must be taken in a continuous block. Any unused leave is lost when the parent returns to work. A non-primary carer is entitled to 15 days of paid leave. The Enterprise Agreement allows staff to purchase extra leave days.	Paid maternity leave is 20 weeks or it can be taken at half the base rate of pay for up to 40 weeks. An employee (including a casual employee) who becomes pregnant is entitled to up to 52 weeks of maternity leave. The agreement allows staff to apply for leave without pay and other leave entitlements for a total of 104 weeks. This leave may be taken in several separate periods during the total leave period.
Academic Roles	Research only; Teaching only Teaching and Research	Teaching and Research only

Source: WGEA report and Enterprise Agreements for each university

Data Collection

Data were collected at each university before the disruption caused in the Australian academic sector by COVID-19 in 2020/21. The two data sets, Policy data and Experience data were analyzed separately using the Leximancer 4.51 qualitative data mining software to map the individual data sets to assist with the central themes and concepts extraction process (Smith and Humphreys, 2006, Angus et al., 2013). Excel was used to tabulate the Qualtrics survey and the reported facts from the WGEA report section. This approach facilitated a multi-source cross-institutional comparative consideration of meaningful insights into workplace gender policies at both institutions. Leximancer 4.51, a Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS), does not operate as a substitute for the researcher's immersion in, or interpretation of the data but enriches the research process (Crofts and Bisman; 2010 p.197) and enhances credibility (Lemon et al, 2020). In this study, semantic and relational analysis through Leximancer identified and provided a visual representation of word occurrences, patterns, and the key concepts that made up the themes assisting our chosen interpretative paradigm. Following the Leximancer analysis of the combined qualitative data sets and documents, the researchers reengaged directly with the data to explore and interpret its meanings.

The first stage of the research for both researchers was to review the policy data (Policy) obtained from their institutions' Enterprise Agreements and the policies and practices established to regulate parental leave. Policy data establishes the priorities of each university in respect of their public commitment to removing barriers experienced by academic parents and facilitated cross-institutional comparison. This stage of the investigation aimed to evaluate and review the workplace gender policy details of flexible work arrangements, leave provision (length and accessibility), return to work arrangements, childminding facilities, and other work-to-family enrichment support offered to parents.

The selected three documents for in-depth textual content analysis, using Leximancer 4.51 qualitative data mining software for each of the two universities were as follows:

1) the clauses within each institution's Enterprise agreement that address parental leave and flexible work arrangement policies;
2) the submitted and publicly available WGEA compliance reports (2018/19), specifically Gender Work/Life Balance (indicator 4) and workforce gender composition; and
3) Athena Bronze SWAN Institution Application documentation: "Supporting and Advancing Women's Careers", section 5, Career Development.

Experience data consisted of staff perceptions at each university on the topic of career breaks. At University A ethics approval[3] was obtained for a mixed-method methodology. A Qualtrics survey was disseminated among university staff through internal communications inviting responses from staff who had taken at least one career break of at least one month, asking them about their experience before, during, and after the leave. Over three months 65 complete responses were received; 86% female. Twenty-six percent were professional staff

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[3] HRE2019-0596 Exploring Strategies to Support Career Progression During and After Career Breaks

and 74% were academic staff. Participants in the survey were invited to self-nominate to participate in a series of focus groups and meetings to discuss in detail the themes raised in the survey. A total of twenty staff members participated in this stage through three focus groups and eight individual interviews.

More than half of the responses identified parental leave as the reason for the career break. Other reasons included personal illness; caring for another person; secondments outside academia, and utilising accrued leave however the numbers in each category were insufficient to allow useful analysis.

At University B, a purely qualitative methodology was followed. In accordance with ethics approval[4] the themes for discussion were developed through round table discussions and an in-house seminar session centering around the policies, provisions, and lived experiences of carers returning to work. This informed the follow-up data collection by way of interviews and focus groups. An overall participant recruitment email was sent out through the university's Engaged Parent Network with an open invitation to join the study by participating in focus groups or individual interviews. The selection criteria required the participants to: (1) be either professional staff or academics holding teaching or research active roles (2) be employed by the university full-time or part-time, (3) have returned to work post parental career break within the past 48 months.

The data extracted to inform the findings for this study was derived predominantly from the focus groups and interviews across both universities. The interview protocol at both institutions comprised semi-structured questions focussing on a) reflections on parental leave experiences before, during, and upon return to work and b) their level of awareness, uptake, and hindrances regarding institutional support strategies available to retain working parents.

Hence, the combined data that tells the *'tale of the two universities'* consists of the responses of n=40 participants (21 at University A and 19 at University B) (see Table 3). The participant sample at University A consisted of nineteen academic and two professional staff members, including two males. At University B ten were professional staff and nine were academic staff, including three males. Academic staff at University A were evenly split between research-only and combined teaching and research (T&R) roles. All academic staff at University B hold teaching and research positions.

Table 3: Participant Profile

Type of Interview	University A	University B
Focus Groups participants	13	15
Individual interview	8	4
Gender:		

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[4] HREA approval H13283 Project on the Impact of Parenting on Careers

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Female	19	16
Male	2	3
Employment Type		
Professional	2	10
Teaching & Research	9	9
Research Only	8	N/A. All academic positions are classified as Teaching and Research
Teaching Only	2	

The focus groups and interviews were recorded, transcribed, and examined thematically using Leximancer software package 4.51.

Data Analysis

Findings: The people experience & workplace support
Consistent with the evidence discussed in the literature, findings from the Experience data set confirm that in Australia, academic women undertake a larger share of parenting responsibilities than their male colleagues, even where the criteria for accessing workplace support are not gendered. The Leximancer conceptual map identifies 'female' and 'women's role as the caregiver' as key themes in this study. Additional themes relating to the effects of career breaks were the management of work, research progression, and identity. Notable concepts pointed towards the 'struggle', the 'career', the 'workload', and the 'progression'; linked to the 'role' of a woman in providing care whilst aspiring to return to work.

Figure 2: Conceptual Map of themes that emerged in Focus Group Discussion

Insert Figure 2 here

Alongside the recognition of participants about various struggles and challenges in their experiences of returning to work, the majority also held positive reflections on their experiences. The lived experiences conferred in our *tale of two universities*, assist us in rethinking the available policies essential for a post-pandemic cultural shift to balance work and family/caring commitments, standardize the lived experience of the progressive, family-friendly policies of the universities, and assist parents to resume career and professional identity in light of the teaching, research and professional duties in modern universities.

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Work Culture & Carer Responsibilities

Participants acknowledged the flexibility and available parental support schemes at both institutions; nevertheless, they admitted that parents, especially women, make constant trade-offs juggling their work-life balance.

> I had six months' leave in a teaching and research role. And yes, the kind of dynamic in terms of returning and trying to get momentum up is so hard to achieve. Since I am back, it's been really hard. The caring responsibilities never stop. I kind of also take care of my mother and my grandfather. So it is just a never-ending role. (A1)

Many participants identified a lack of clarity around the details of parental leave and the options available. Difficulties were reported in the interpretation of parental leave entitlements and flexible work agreements due to the language used.

> It was always me looking up all the information, looking up the workplace agreements, and telling my supervisor and also HR, this is what I'm going to do. This is what my rights are. No one actually said to me that these are your options, which would suit you best Or none wanted to sit down and discuss it with me. (B4)

A preference for broader communication and simpler terminology used in parental leave and return to work policies at both institutions would assist with consistency in interpretation.

> The wording is so technical. It is all very legal language. I had to read it like three times, and I had to confirm it with somebody else. (A6)

Policy implementation is inconsistent and dependent on whether senior colleagues and supervisors understand the complexity of carers' responsibilities.

> I don't have any brothers or sisters or family around here or anyone to be able to draw on. So I can empathize about not having people around you, some sort of community to do that. (A7)

Driven by financial and career considerations, staff sometimes cannot afford to remain on a career break, and the lack of appropriate childminding options is a further limitation.

> I really wanted to extend my leave because I didn't feel ready to come back and I was not sure what I come back to. However, we had no choice because of our financial situation. We made the choice that I had to come back and then we were confronted with the lack of childcare availability (A2)

> I brought my children in - probably I should not have - but I brought them in for the first two weeks because I had no options. Like I had to be here to meet students and meet people, and the daycare hadn't started yet. (A 3)

Hence, the participants referred to a need for increased visibility of the universities to become more family-friendly work environments.

> I was told you can't bring children into the workplace. I said, well, the day care's not open, I don't know what you want me to do. I was told I had to take the day as leave or

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find someone to look after the children. This was completely unsympathetic, and I was so stressed from trying to do it, I was trying to juggle a baby while I was on a telephone, and I gave myself a neck strain that was so bad that I couldn't move my arm, or my neck for about a week. The physio said, this isn't a strain, you're just incredibly stressed. It was really terrible. (A12)

Finally, participants stated that supervisors ought to recognize and understand the need for flexibility for parents.

My kids are five and seven now, and I remember those years, …I think the further I get away from it, the less you kind of remember really how difficult it was. And that is what makes it hard for me to relate to my staff. (A2)

At both institutions, participants appreciated that as employers the universities have policies allowing flexible work opportunities and supporting career progression, and this does reduce the stress of balancing work and caring commitments. Nevertheless, the interviews showed that participants, predominantly women, need more support at an institutional level to deal with childcare issues, caring responsibilities, and a more structured return to work post-career break to achieve a work-life balance and experience greater job satisfaction.

Findings indicate that having an existing support network in place for women at various levels of their careers such as the University B 'Engaged Parent Network' to provide personal support could be beneficial for resuming work post-career break more positively.

Career Progression Implications

Interviewees at both universities agreed that initiatives for return post-career break and employee engagement are provided to retain personnel. Nevertheless, most academic staff rated the effect of the career break on their career progression as unfavorable, with staff engaged in both teaching and research (T&R) staff reporting the most negative outcomes.

The survey at University A showed that universities' policies to support researchers seemed to be moderately effective, with research staff consistently being more satisfied with keeping-in-touch measures, coverage of usual duties, ongoing engagement with long-term projects, and return to work measures. Conversely, teaching and research (T&R) staff were dissatisfied across all these areas. Participants voiced a call for a more structured phased return back.

I suppose initially when you're away for a year- it's a long time. When you come back I was apprehensive, is it going to be the same dynamic, is it going to be the same? What have I missed? What do I need to catch up with so that I can resume where I left off? Is it even possible to do so? (B6)

A review of the duration of parental leave reported in the University A survey showed that academic staff take significantly shorter periods of parental leave than professional staff and are less likely to take unpaid parental leave.

I returned much sooner than I wanted to. I had no choice as my replacement was leaving, and I had to resume my teaching and research responsibilities. In hindsight, I

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should have stayed away longer. But here I thought the longer I am away the harder it will be to resume where I left off. (B5)

The female academic participants justified the earlier return to work as necessary to maintain career progression and not lose what they referred to as their professional identity. They also reported completing projects while on parental leave.

My field moves pretty fast, I was right in the middle of a really major science project when I went on maternity leave, and I had to come back and finish that, there was no question of coming back part-time. …. I had to make a conscious decision - I had to set up a lot of things myself to make sure that it wouldn't be too hard later on. (B3)

I did have a grant during my first maternity leave. It went completely pear-shaped when I was on maternity leave, so I was very conscious not to apply for another one, I wanted to have another child. So my publications are really good, but it's my grants and my HDR (Higher Degree(Research)) completions that suffered. (A4)

Both researchers heard women voice the anxiety arising from the struggle of keeping a mentally and physically sound work-life balance and wanting to enjoy their time away from the workplace. They could not relax in their carer roles due to constant qualms and worries about their academic future and career progression. Participants sought increased transparency and consistency in policies to reduce worrying, allowing them to appreciate their career break and experience a better return to work.

I struggled and almost had an identity crisis- I am now a new Mum and I am also a researcher. So what does this mean? I quite liked having that dual identity, that I'm more than one thing. I felt that the university expected more from me than I could immediately give back, but I tried my hardest to get back into it. Having this new dual role was far more difficult than doing what was expected before I had children. (B14)

Jakubiec (2015) acknowledges this anxiety in individual female research-active staff to hurry back to academic work, stating that "some women, even while on maternity leave, felt pressure to be engaged and remain active in faculty life and academic tasks (p.46)." Gaio Santos and Cabral-Cardoso (2008) found that women felt "pressured" to return to work soon after childbirth…and having children is regarded as a lack of commitment to academic work and ultimately could be detrimental to the career. Thus, the organizational culture seems to implicitly "condemn…having children" (p.452).

In our tale of lived experiences, the respondents, primarily women, noted that they cannot focus on resuming and maintaining their professional identity while feeling that they must continually choose between career and family and even family formation, accompanied by feelings of anxiety and guilt associated with those decisions. Women reported delaying having a family in the hope of achieving a permanent appointment first or giving up on the possibility of a permanent position to have children.

I'm kind of going through a certain stage in my life where I tell myself, do it now and have kids or never. It's more for my partner because he really wants to have kids. But

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we're in a situation where we can't manage that. I've always been the breadwinner. The one with the highest income. (A17)

The findings support Wolf-Wendel and Ward (2006) that while the gendered split of academic work exists at both universities; women in higher education experience a happier sense of professional identity when the value of the more 'feminine' teaching duties is recognized. The commercialization of institutions and the pressure to publish, adopting more 'masculine' academic work patterns to re-immerse themselves in research, create stress amongst academic mothers struggling to maintain a work-life balance. To embrace a return to work post-career break a more rewarding and positive experience is needed for women. Support schemes need to reflect an institutional understanding of the female role and compartmentalized struggles of being a carer. After all, the role of the mother continues past infancy and still has a central role post-childbirth in balancing caring and work obligations.

I still have my phasing back to work day off. My smallest one is so attached to me that after the weekend she doesn't like me leaving. …to switch on and off from the child screaming at home and getting to sit down and to think about my students, do everything, doing lectures, teaching, research – let me tell you, it's really hard. (B7)

Our 'tale' thus reinforces the criticisms of the neoliberal agenda of contemporary institutions and the masculine model of the 'ideal worker'. The female's role as a carer requires more recognition. Furthermore, the findings highlight the need for institutions to change policy and cultural attitudes to assist women with maintaining their professional identity and drive; in particular, we call for such change and address this in the next section and recommendations in a post-COVID environment.

Policy: Rhetoric v Reality

Findings: University Commitments to Academic Parents
Now that we have set out how academic parents experience their job, we examine whether the policies that the universities are putting in place are working. The analysis of the Enterprise Agreements and the WGEA reports that were included in the Policy Data set (Figure 3A) showed that these documents were more concerned with the structure of formal leave entitlements in respect of parental leave that staff members were entitled to take, with a lesser of focus on flexible work arrangements that would be facilitated under the policy. Notably, these documents tended to be gender blind, with female and gender not appearing in the conceptual map generated by Leximancer.

In contrast the conceptual map for the Athena Swan documentation (Figure 4) identified work and family balance as an issue experienced predominantly by females, and the processes that need to be in place to support work-family balance.

Figure 3: Conceptual Maps of Policy Documents at University A & B:

Insert Figure 3A here

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Figure 3A: Parental Leave and Flexibility Clauses in Enterprise Agreements: University A and B

Insert Figure 4 here

Figure 4: Conceptual Maps of Policy Documents (Policies)

Challenges of Flexible Work

Universities, including those in this study, score very highly in the WGEA data set (WGEA n.d.) in respect of flexible work, and having a formal policy to support carers. They have relatively generous paid parental leave provisions and are more likely than not to have childcare services available on campus.

This support was recognised by the parents who participated in this research although parents do face challenges in relation to how these policies are applied in practice. They told us that flexible work arrangements were not being observed with parents working during their parental leave as well as on days that they were not scheduled to work. Researchers who were supervising research students tended to maintain that supervision during periods of leave, largely from a sense of obligation to the student; but also to ensure that they were the supervisor of record when the student completed.

> I had my work performance and planning review straight after I got back because of the timing. So I got in, and I said, I'm very proud of what I accomplished last year, here are all the things that I did while I was **not** on leave, and here are all the things I did while I was **on** leave. So my manager said, oh, you can't talk about any of the stuff you did on leave. We don't want you to put that in anything written down because it would imply that the university is making you work. (B5)

> Psychologically it was really frustrating to be minimizing those accomplishments, which I was very proud of. I did a conference talk a week after giving birth, the second child. I was proud of that, and they're like, no, no, you can't say that. Well, I'm still here, aren't I? I'm proud of it. (A9)

Administrative duties were frequently dealt with on a non-working day. Deadlines for information and student concerns would need to be attended to regardless of the agreed working schedule:

> I'm the type of person that if you get an email, and if I check it, if it's a quick thing, I can do it quickly, and I'd prefer to do that than to come in on a Monday morning and have 20, 30 things to respond to. (B2)

The administrative issues around demand and the operational requirements of the child care service, including the Commonwealth Funding model, can make it difficult to access the campus-based childcare service.

> Yeah, I'm not at (campus-based childcare service), because I found it very inflexible … I choose to have one closer to home...(B3)

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(M University) one I'm told basically goes, student or staff member? When you say, staff member, they go, oh sorry, we're prioritizing students with kids, which - okay, fair enough, but surely that just means you need more capacity because you can't just sort of offer half a service, really. (A5)

Policies around flexible work can be incompatible with timetabling requirements. Timetabling all classes across a university is a major logistical undertaking, and there is an expectation that academics are available during core teaching hours for example from 8 am to 6 pm. The right to flexible hours conflicts with the timetabling processes of the university, particularly where childcare centers have strict policies around drop-off and pick-up times:

So my wife and I just put our days in that we wanted the kids in daycare and crossed our fingers and hoped that the two days off we were having did not align exactly with the dates that I would be required to teach; …had that not happened, I would have had to either make the decision to not take that time off or somehow swap my teaching with someone else at the last minute. (B12)

Timetabling challenges can be difficult to resolve where an academic parent is a leader in an area of particular expertise, making it more difficult to substitute a colleague as the teacher of that class.

The policies in place around flexible hours and timetabling work most effectively where there is a champion who was prepared to advocate for the parent, or where there is a substitution that could be arranged internally:

…it expected that there are particular days that you know are unavailable ahead of time. We get to communicate that to the head of school and then he advocates if there's a scheduling conflict. So I feel that that the support is there and that's genuine. (A6)

The higher rate of dissatisfaction among teaching and research (T&R) staff shown in the survey at University A suggests that the juggle of career and family becomes even more challenging when juggling the already disparate requirements of classroom teaching and research outputs with family.

Participants from University B positively referred to the 'Engaged Parent Network (EPN)' which operates as a staff networking platform to support a positive, collaborative, inclusive, and family-friendly culture within the university. Over the years with the support of the research leadership, the EPN has provided coaching and collaborative activities to support parents and carers, as well as providing opportunities for staff to connect around shared experiences.

The EPN has established itself as an inclusive network in terms of what can be done to better assist parents upon their return from maternity and parental leave and is open to the wider university community of academics, professional staff, students (Research, Undergraduate, and Postgraduate) and overall Mothers, Fathers, and Carers. (B5)

The EPN has become a proactive hub for several important interdisciplinary gender equity research projects and has facilitated the establishment of the Student Parents Network (SPU)

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to provide student-parents with a similar effective and safe space for social support, career and educational mentoring, and academic pathway advice. Through COVID-19, both the SPU and the EPN led discussions on gender equity and the way forward, organizing multiple coaching sessions to support staff working from home; and providing support to students to continue their studies in such difficult uncertain times.

Recognising Career Interruptions in a Research Trajectory

Much of the work to date on the challenges faced by academic parents prioritized research over teaching challenges. Many researchers delay having a family until after completing a PhD and juggling post-doctoral positions with family formation.

The ROPE policy discussed earlier is supposed to address this hurdle by ensuring that career breaks are taken into account. Those participants who had engaged with the ARC on ROPE guidelines generally found that university support was forthcoming.

> I took my Future Fellowship from the beginning as point 8 (FTE). So it was five years instead of four years, and I was on that, probably the same as you, trying to extend it as long as you can because you didn't have a continuing position at the end. The ARC was great for that in that's a standard thing that the ARC does, and so no universities can say, no, you can't do that. (A9)

> I think, well, both of my children were on my DECRA[5]. The DECRA, like any ARC grant, any fellowship from the ARC, they're very clear saying, you can take it part-time - so the DECRA was three years - or up to six years part-time. So I had a plan in my head, okay, I'm going to take six months off, then I'm going to go part-time, then hopefully, have another child, six more months off. And I kind of planned, for me, it worked in a good place, that I managed to do a five-year DECRA instead of a three-year. (A4)

However in respect of the assessment of grant applications, there is still a degree of skepticism that the ROPE principles are being applied, and there are still misunderstandings as to how the ROPE principles apply for promotion within each University:

> So you go to a conference or something, and you meet someone who is on the College of Experts, or who's in your field, a very important person, and basically said to me, oh, yeah, you can write that you've had six months off, but at the end of the day, we look at how many papers you've got, how many citations you've got and all of that, and if you're not as good as somebody else, it doesn't matter that you've worked part-time and they've worked full-time, they'll give the grant to this person. (A8)

> As I said, when I went for a promotion this year, and I had my meeting with my PVC, he misdefined the relative-to-opportunity policy. He said that I still had to achieve the same as everybody else, even though I was part-time and had two career breaks, and only had 20 percent research, was expected to have six-figure grant, have a research

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[5] Discovery Early Career Research Award sponsored by the Australian Research Council

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team running underneath me, and have had multiple HDR completions. I challenged him on that, and he wasn't backing down. He commended me on what I had achieved, said it was quite amazing given that I've had two career breaks and had been part-time, but it wasn't sufficient for him to support me for associate professor. (A10)

A career interruption has a long-term effect on a researcher's output. ROPE principles alone do not address career interruptions, and research careers are becoming more precarious as universities rely more heavily on industry-funded research partnerships.

THE COVID PANDEMIC

The data from the two projects described in this article was collected before the COVID pandemic. While the effect of the pandemic is not a theme of this research, the evidence emerging from the higher education sector is that remote working has exacerbated the issues raised in our research.

Although academics have traditionally had more autonomy over their working conditions than other workers the evidence and narratives of academics that emerged from the pandemic have highlighted the challenges, as they detail some of their experiences balancing care and work (Boncori, 2020; Statti et al, 2021; Abdellatif, 2020). Teachers were forced to rapidly adapt to new technologies and teaching systems (Casacchia et al, 2021; Watermeyer et al 2020) while home-schooling children (Guy and Arthur, 2021).

Researchers faced similar challenges: research plans and agendas that could not be adapted to the remote work environment faced delays or cancellations. There is now a solid evidence base showing a reduction in research outputs by women compared with men, largely because the responsibility for home learning of children and other care responsibilities was disproportionately shouldered by women (Wright et al, 2020; Viglione 2020; Bowyer et al, 2021; Statti et al, 2021). Notably, women could not devote time to writing up the results of their research (Peetz et al, 2022).

During the pandemic, Australian universities cut staff (Universities Australia 2020), were less flexible in respect of leave, and provided less information on balancing care responsibilities with remote work than their international counterparts (Nash and Churchill, 2020). This may have been because universities focussed on the remote learning experience for international and domestic students without adequate appreciation of the pressure this placed on staff.

CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

In the studies discussed in this paper initiatives currently in place at two Australian universities to enhance career progression were tested against the lived experience of academic parents, who are predominantly mothers.

Our analysis of the policies that universities are implementing shows that the higher education sector is well aware of the challenges that academic parents face. Although universities have a high proportion of female employees they are more likely to be working part-time and in non-managerial positions than their male counterparts (DESE, 2022).

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The results point toward Higher Education Institutions needing to do more to embed a culture of care within their organizational culture. Ambition is influenced by the daily trade-offs of being a working parent and whether these are made easier or harder by an employing organization, not by parenthood itself, (Abouzahr et al, 2017). Thus, culture plays a major role in preserving and fostering ambition and promotion of leadership after parental leave.

While the university sector has adopted policies to support gender equity, the lived experience of academic parents, predominantly female, shows that implementation of these policies can be patchy. Universities are complex organizations where expectations and cultures differ across faculties and disciplines. The needs of an academic parent may not be easily accommodated within the localized culture, even if within university policies.

This is the strength of programs like Athena Swan and the ROPE principles, in identifying where work is needed to address areas of concern and developing specific responses. However, these programs are regarded with skepticism if not implemented consistently. Managers must understand the policies that are available to provide support; which must be applied consistently across the university.

Communication and access to resources is essential. We strongly recommend that the relevant policies and procedures are made readily available, in plain English, to all staff including applicants and line managers. Human resource specialists should be available to mediate and work out a plan that suits the needs of the staff member. Where a plan has been developed for leave, return to work, flexible work, or teaching availability there must be mechanisms for the staff member to ensure that the plan is followed by all parties, without the line manager placing pressure on the staff member to work outside the agreed parameters.

This study recommends that universities provide support to parenting networks that can facilitate access to information as well as sharing experiences, providing personal support and well-being and resilience programs for those parents who choose this assistance. The EPN experience shows that an in-house parent support group is worth the investment of time and resources as it does improve working conditions for parents. It has become an outlet for parents to voice their views about work policies or concerns over incidents, and share parenting advice as they juggle work-life commitments. Such networks provide visibility of parenthood in the workplace and can assist with a needed cultural shift of making care within academic institutions more visible.

The natural experiment in working flexibly that was forced on the global community by COVID has also exposed the challenges that accompany flexible working (Deloitte, 2020 Peetz et al, 2022). Although working parents have the flexibility to shape their working hours to accommodate work-family balance, the worker may feel unable to disconnect from the workplace. True flexibility recognizes when a person is not expected to be working and recognizes the right to switch off.

Parenting is not the only reason for career interruptions. It is known that women take on a significant burden of care for other family members, and older women are frequently the primary carer. In 2018 data showed that more than twice as many women as men aged 55 to 64 are the primary carer for a person with a disability (ABS, 2018). These carers are less

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visible in the workplace although many juggle the carer role with employment. This needs to be explored further: is the lack of visibility because there are few policies to assist this cohort, or are there few policies because of their lack of visibility?

Ultimately, although universities are implementing policies and strategies to support academic and professional parents, it is clear that academic parents still experience challenges in managing the demands of work and family at a time when they need to build their careers. These policies and strategies must be made fit for purpose in the post-COVID workplace so that the academic parent who is juggling an academic career with parenting has an equal opportunity to succeed.

Women are the majority of staff at universities and they still carry the highest parenting load. They also are a visible example to undergraduate and postgraduate students. Until universities develop policies that reflect the needs of academic parents, women will continue to be underrepresented at senior academic levels.

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A Tale of Two Universities: Primary Carers Working in Australian Universities

KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Athena Swan: The Athena Swan is an accreditation framework for gender equity and diversity and recognizes the advancement of gender equality in higher education. It was launched in the UK in 2005.

Conceptual Map: A Leximancer concept map illustrated the 'Theme', a group or cluster of related concepts. It assists in the thematic and relational analysis of qualitative data.

Leximancer: A computer software developed in Australia in 2006 at the University of Queensland by Dr Andrew Smith, that allows the conduct of quantitative content analysis using a machine learning technique.

ROPE: Research Opportunity and Performance Evidence. A Statement that researchers write as part of a funding or promotion application. This statement includes additional information about a researcher's achievements to date in the context of part-time work and career breaks.

STEMM: Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics, and Medicine are disciplines where women are underrepresented.

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