



# Access to and experiences of parental and associated leaves for university employees

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FINAL REPORT



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# Report Summary

At universities in the UK, women and minority ethnic staff are underrepresented in senior positions and overrepresented in fixed-term and part-time contracts (Advance HE 2022). When combined with parenthood, especially for mothers, these differences are exacerbated (Gheyoh Ndzi 2023; Eren 2020). Parental leave for mothers and fathers is one mechanism by which such gendered disparities may be overcome (Patnaik 2019; The European Parliament and The Council of the European Union 2019; Andersen 2018). In this study, we collaborated with UCL HR colleagues to understand the implementation and experience of parental leave at UCL. Different forms of leave for parents have different associated intentions. Maternity leave is primarily for the mother to recuperate from the birth and to support early nurturing of the baby and breastfeeding (if she chooses to feed in that way) while maintaining her job. Paternity/Partner's Leave is for the father or the mother's partner and happens around the time of the birth. Usually, this is a short leave – in the UK, just two weeks long – and is primarily designed so that the father or partner can support the mother at the time of birth. Some countries also offer 'parental leave' that is available for either parent to take, usually after the maternity and Paternity/Partner's Leave period is over. Its purpose is to allow parents to take time out of employment and care for their child(ren). Typically, women take the bulk of leave, whether that be maternity (which is usually longer than paternity/partner's leave) or parental leave (Chanfreau et al. 2011b; Department for Business, 2023). Here, we use the term 'parental leave' as a catch-all phrase in discussing the gamut of parent-related leaves. Recent increases in men's access to parental leave, such as via Shared Parental Leave, aim to encourage men to take on care work, thereby shifting gendered norms around who should care for a child while also enabling women's engagement in employment. However, parental leave policies are subject to various eligibility rules, which may pose challenges in accessing the entitlements, particularly for those who are in non-standard or temporary contracts. The report examines the barriers and facilitators to the take up of parenting leaves and how parents and colleagues experience these leaves at UCL.

Taking an organisational culture perspective (Haas and Hwang 2007), the report presents a mixed-method study, including a documentary analysis of available leave policies (maternity, paternity/partner, shared parental, returners' sabbatical) and

associated procedures; an analysis of HR records to understand who took various forms of parenting leaves in the last five years; a survey of UCL employees who became parents in the last five years; and qualitative interviews with 19 employees across the university varying by their demographic and employment characteristics, as well as by the type of leave taken. The analysed data are based on employees who have taken any of these leaves since 2018. This corresponds to 2,199 individuals recorded in the HR data, of whom 417 were participants of the supplementary survey, 19 of whom were interviewed.

The evidence is strictly about the employees who took some form of leave. To reserve anonymity, we have only reported on women taking maternity or adoption leave and men taking paternity leave or SPL only (i.e. where a man is the primary parent taking maternity or adoption leave, we have not included data, nor where the paternity/partner leave taker is a woman, since there were very few cases reported). Among the leave takers, the main differences in the duration of leaves are related to gender, their job grade and the type of role they are undertaking. As expected, mothers take longer leaves than fathers. There is a negative association between mothers' seniority at work and the duration of their leave. Fathers tend to take four weeks of paid paternity leave. However, the uptake of shared parental leave (SPL) remains limited. Coupled with intra-couple financial dynamics and the design of SPL, fathers' leave duration remains significantly lower than mothers.

The interview data revealed confusion around access to different forms of leave, particularly SPL and returners' sabbatical leave, and unevenness in how university policies are applied across the university. Throughout the interviews, the differences between employees in academic roles and employees in administrative roles became increasingly evident. Despite working in the same workplace setting, the experiences varied widely, which highlights the complexities within workplaces. Academic staff's flexible working hours and an 'ideal worker' cultural norm influenced leave length and take up, particularly in departments with a higher proportion of male employees (Atkinson 2023; Acker 1990). Academic mothers and fathers sought to limit time away from work, citing work responsibilities, while non-academic parents more easily facilitated an absence from work. Academic mothers also reported working while on leave. These data also indicated the importance of administrative support in the departments and line managers' attitudes towards leave-taking. The more

knowledgeable HR support is present at the department level, the better understanding of the leave entitlements influencing informed decision-making.

The report is the result of collaboration between academic colleagues in the UCL Social Research Institute and professional service staff in the university's Human Resources team.



## Background

Higher education in the UK has long been characterised as a male-dominated sector. University jobs are segregated by gender, with men occupying the higher level positions and a persisting gender pay gap (Woodhams, Trojanowski, and Wilkinson 2022). Across the UK, men are overrepresented in academic management, senior official, and director positions (55.3%), and women are more likely to occupy professional and support staff roles (53.6%). Notably, female staff are disproportionately represented in secretarial positions (78.9%), while male staff are more likely to be employed in skilled trade occupations (79.6%), such as electricians and building inspectors (Advance HE 2022). When combined with minority ethnic status and parenthood, the career and pay gap between male and female staff is exacerbated. Previous research studies highlighted differences in men's and women's strategies in career progression in academia, resulting in faster advancement for men and more stagnant careers for women (Krefting 2003; Blackaby, Booth, and Frank 2005). These gaps often widen after the transition to parenthood (Killewald 2013; Budig and England 2001).

Parental leave policies are designed to address these issues by giving both parents time to take leave to care for their newborn and secure their return to employment. The policy has potential benefits for employers in increasing employee engagement and retention (Brenøe et al. 2023). It facilitates employees' return to work after becoming parents and potentially easing the division of care labour in the household (Duvander and Johansson 2018; Andersen 2018). As such, men's access and take-up of parental leave are considered key policy areas for promoting gender equality (Gornick and Meyers 2008).

Father-specific parenting leaves and the expansion of policies in this regard have been on the supranational policy agenda since the mid-1990s. The emphasis on the matter has been strengthened since the release of the most recent work-life balance directives of the European Commission. Similarly, the International Labour Organisation (ILO, 2009) passed a resolution on gender equality, calling for governments to develop policies that include paternity and parental leave, with incentives for men to use them. Such policies are argued to encourage men to take on care work and enable women's engagement in employment.

In short, there is a global interest in recognising men's parenting duties at home and the workplace. Research demonstrates that extending leave alone to fathers promotes their involvement in childcare and housework, which in turn has a positive influence on the mother's career progression (Schober 2014; Tanaka and Waldfogel 2007; Kotsadam and Finseraas 2011).

However, research also shows that having policies alone is not sufficient to increase fathers' engagement with children, make them use parental leave and meet the gender equality goals of the policy (Haas and Hwang 2019a). The regulations at the workplace, the workplace culture, and collegial attitudes were repeatedly found significant in influencing fathers' leave take-up behaviours (Haas and Hwang 2019b; Amjahad, Valentova, and Maas 2022; Valentova, Amjahad, and Genevois 2022; Bygren and Duvander 2006; Kaufman and Almqvist 2017; Lappegård 2012). With their structure, policies and institutional-level commitments, workplaces act like "living organisms" (Uzunalioglu 2023). They are also "critical locations for the investigation of the continuous creation of complex inequalities because much societal inequality originates in such organisations" (Acker, 2016:441).

Over the past three decades, parental leave literature has repeatedly provided evidence of the role of workplace characteristics in shaping employees' leave-taking (Atkinson 2021). First, the type of employer institution is influential, including the size, sector, type of work, and workforce composition. For example, working in small workplaces is found to be associated with lower parental leave take-up as opposed to large workplaces (Valentova, Amjahad, and Genevois 2022). Parental leave take-up tends to be more prevalent among public sector employees than private sector ones (Geisler and Kreyenfeld 2018). This can also be associated with other employment characteristics and the culture at the workplace, such as competitiveness and job security.

Quantifying workplace culture is often a challenge. However, studies with qualitative evidence and some survey-based research suggest that collegial and managerial attitudes or commitment to family-friendly policies are critical (Haas, Allard, and Hwang 2002; Haas and Hwang 1995). Line managers and colleagues can play a crucial role in discouraging parental leave take-up through their expressed negative attitudes towards colleagues who take leave, active blocking and lack of role models (ibid). As

Acker (1990) argued, the dominant culture at the workplace is often masculine, consequently shaping the experiences from a masculine, traditionally gendered lens.

A university is a complex organisation with central management faculty and departments, each functioning with varying degrees of autonomy. From the type of work undertaken to the type of management or the size, each faculty and the departments underneath are likely to be significantly different from another. However, despite the heterogeneity in the field, workforce composition and operations, each department abides by the central university regulations. This peculiar nature of the university presents an opportunity to study the variations and mechanisms behind these variations in the use of parenting-related leaves among university staff.

Against this backdrop, this report presents a case study of UCL. As of 2023, UCL has 11 faculties with approximately 16,000 employees. The representation of different sexes appears balanced by the type of job held except for NHS-related jobs, of which 88% are held by women; manual jobs are performed predominantly by men (85%); and administrative roles, which are mainly held by women (65%). There appears to be some variation in the representation of ethnicity, but the data is incomplete since many employees do not record their ethnicity. Nearly half of all UCL employees (49%) are white, 18% are from a minority ethnic<sup>1</sup> background, and one-third (33%) of staff withheld their ethnicity (Table 1).

Table 1 Representation of different ethnicities by the type of role

	White	Minority Ethnic	Withheld
Academic	71.48%	14.55%	13.97%
Research	48.56%	18.43%	33.02%
Teaching	40.22%	13.54%	46.24%
Administrative/managerial	55.03%	22.90%	22.07%

Source: Equality, Diversity, Inclusion Report 2023

<sup>1</sup> These broad-based categorisations are applied by UCL in an effort to ‘identify patterns of marginalisation and segregation caused by attitudes toward an individual’s ethnicity.’ (Page 6). For more details see: [https://www.ucl.ac.uk/human-resources/sites/human\\_resources/files/october\\_2022\\_1\\_staff\\_numbers\\_by\\_ethnicity\\_staff\\_group\\_and\\_faculty\\_area.pdf](https://www.ucl.ac.uk/human-resources/sites/human_resources/files/october_2022_1_staff_numbers_by_ethnicity_staff_group_and_faculty_area.pdf)

With its volume, reputation and ambitions, UCL offers a range of work-life reconciliation policies to support employees with caregiving duties. This report focuses on parenting-related leaves. The scope of the analyses is limited to maternity, paternity/partner's leave, shared parental and returners' sabbatical leaves. Below, we start by explaining the leaves available.

## Parenting-related Leaves

### The UK Context

In the UK, the statutory entitlements for parenting-related leaves are clustered as maternity, paternity/partner's leave, shared parental, unpaid parental and adoption leave. Here, we set adoption leave aside and briefly summarise the rest. The UK and UCL comparisons are also provided in Table 2 below.

Maternity leave allows mothers to take 52 weeks of leave. Mothers can start this leave 11 weeks preceding childbirth. The leave is paid for the 33 weeks at a flat rate of £172.48 per week, which is low by international standards and is also estimated to be half of the UK's 'living wage' (TUC, 2017). At UCL, the first 18 weeks are paid at the occupational pay level, and from the 18th week to the 33rd week, mothers receive the statutory flat rate payment.

Paternity leave is one or two weeks, depending on the number of days an individual works normally in a week. The same flat-rate payment of weekly £172.48 applies to paternity leave. In the case of UCL, fathers have access to four weeks of paternity leave paid at their regular occupational pay rate.

There is an unpaid, 18-week parental leave. For each calendar year, parents could use four weeks of parental leave per child. Additionally, there is shared parental leave (SPL). Since 2015, mothers have the right to transfer some of their maternity leave to their partners. Excluding the compulsory first two weeks, mothers can transfer the remaining 50 weeks to their partners—depending on the amount that they want to share. In a way, SPL is a derivative of maternity leave. Consequently, the maternity pay scheme applies to SPL. UCL also offers SPL as a statutory entitlement, with enhanced pay for the first 18 weeks, as offered in the case of maternity leave. The set-up of SPL is found to be problematic as it is grounded in a structure of maternal gatekeeping since mothers 'own' the leave, which can then be transferred. Moreover,

the parental leave literature has now established that having the leave as an individual entitlement increases paternal involvement contrary to shared leaves, e.g. see Javornik and Kurowska (2017); O'Brien, Brandth, and Kvande (2007). A UK study based on the data collected prior to the introduction of SPL estimated that 28% of employers top-up maternity leave pay and 20 % of paternity leave pay (Chanfreau et al. 2011a).

At UCL, there is an additional leave specifically addressing academic parents. Known as returners' sabbatical leave, it is a unique university policy to protect and boost academics' career progress. This leave is designed for academic parents who have had at least three months of parental leave. The leave recognises the demands on academic scholarship and allows these parents to get back on track with their research. In other words, during this returners' sabbatical leave, academic parents are freed from their administrative and teaching duties. Given that it is mostly mothers who opt for longer periods of parenting-related leaves, this leave could also be interpreted as a pro-gender-equality policy. In short, UCL offers some extended and relatively more generous leave options to parents when compared to the statutory entitlements, which are insufficient by international comparison. However, some other Russell Group Universities have better leave provisions, as shown in Table 3.

Table 2 Statutory parenting-related leaves available in the UK and UCL

	<b>UK context</b>	<b>UCL</b>
<b>Maternity leave</b>	52 weeks, paid 90% first six weeks; flat-rate payment of ~£170 to 39 weeks; remaining 13 weeks are unpaid	52 weeks Occupational pay for the first 18 weeks, statutory pay between 18 and 39 weeks, last 13 weeks are unpaid
<b>Paternity leave</b>	2 weeks with mother, flat rate payment ~£170 per week	4 weeks of fully paid paternity leave
<b>Shared parental leave (SPL)</b>	(April 2015-) Mother can transfer leave to partner from 2 weeks – paid at ~£170 a week until 39 weeks.	Occupational maternity / adoption pay transferred to partner or father – 16 weeks fully paid
<b>Unpaid parental leave</b>	Four weeks a year for each parent of each child, until the child reaches 18 (max of 18 weeks each) Unpaid	No enhancement
<b>Adoption leave and pay</b>	52 weeks Payment same as maternity leave	52 weeks Payment same as maternity leave
<b>Returns' sabbatical leave</b>	N/A	One term where research active academics are relieved of teaching and administrative responsibilities. Only available after min. 3 months of parenting-related or extended carers' leave

Table 3 Comparison of maternity and paternity/partner’s leave provision at UCL and Russell Group Universities, brief illustration of the variety of packages offered.

University	Maternity		Paternity/partner leave
	Full pay (weeks)	Matched SPL	Full pay (weeks)
Cambridge	18	Yes	2
Imperial College	18	Yes	2
KCL	18	Yes	6
LSE	22	Yes	4
Oxford	26	Yes	2
UCL	18	Yes	4

Source: Rebecca Allen (2023), survey of Russell Group university maternity and paternity/partner leave offering

## Research on leave take-up in the UK

The usual parental leave pattern in the UK is that women take 9-12 months of maternity leave, and fathers take two weeks of paternity leave (Chanfreau et al. 2011a). In 2023, a new evaluation of SPL was published (Department for Business and Trade 2023). These reports highlight the fact that maternity and paternity leaves are widely taken by parents who meet the eligibility criteria, 89% for maternity pay recipients and 91% for paternity leave takers. However, the take-up of SPL remains at the 1% level for eligible mothers and the 5% level for eligible fathers.

A discrepancy among the profiles of eligible parents who opted for this leave is observed. The study found that individuals who took SPL were predominantly white, highly skilled, and high-earning employees working in large organisations with progressive gender-equal attitudes (Department for Business and Trade 2023). Minoritised and lower-educated individuals are more likely to be working in precarious jobs with non-standard contracts (EIGE 2020). An analysis made in recent years showed that 16% of employed mothers and 27% of employed fathers who have had a child in the previous year were found not to be eligible for paid maternity or paternity leave (O’Brien, Aldrich, Connolly, Cook and Speight, 2017). Ineligibility was primarily due to not meeting the continuous pre-birth employment condition, self-employment status or prior earnings falling below the economic activity test earnings threshold. This is in line with a survey conducted with expectant mothers in England, which found that white, highly educated individuals were more likely to know about and be eligible for SPL (Twamley and Schober 2019).

Research on the take-up of paternity leave (the two weeks available to UK fathers/partners at the time of birth or adoption) shows that when employers provide additional compensation on top of the statutory pay, men are more likely to take the full two weeks (Hobson, Lewis, and Siim 2002).

Providing enhanced remuneration for parenting leaves not only makes it more affordable for fathers but also demonstrates the organisations' commitment to enabling their employees' capacity to avail of it. Barriers to the take-up of SPL are parents' lack of knowledge of eligibility, financial constraints, and worries about the impact on men's careers (Twamley and Schober, 2019; BIS, 2015). Qualitative research on couples' decision-making around men's take-up of leave reveals that parents worry that men will face greater career penalties for taking leave than women, thus encouraging women to take more or all leave available (Kaufman, 2017). The latter is likely exacerbated by the structure of SPL in which women must 'give up' maternity leave in order for men to take SPL. Evidence from other countries suggests high remuneration and 'use-it-or-lose-it' policies are the most effective in promoting fathers' take-up of leave (Deven and Moss 2002).

In the following, we describe the methodology, discuss the findings and conclude by highlighting the areas where there appears to be room for improvement, as suggested by the study participants.



# Methods and Analytical Strategy

The empirical strategy of the study draws on the literature stressing the role of workplaces on parents' leave-taking behaviours, particularly Acker (1990) and Haas and Hwang, (2007). Inspired by Acker's (1990) gendered organisations theory to understand the factors that shape employees' behaviours in leave-taking, whether their work environment was a promoter, an enabler, or an obstacle in coming to their final decisions on leave constitutes the core of this study.

We have used a mixed methods approach to get a comprehensive picture of leave-taking at UCL. Three data sources were used: HR records, an online survey, and in-depth semi-structured interviews with leave-taking parents. The HR records cover a five-year period between 2018 (including) and 2022 and contain information regarding the types of parenting-related leaves taken by UCL employees across faculties, roles and grades. The online survey supplements the HR records by asking questions about partners' leave take-up behaviours and the use of returners' sabbatical leave, information that was not found in the HR records. This survey also was used to recruit parents to interview about their leave take-up experiences. Below, we first describe the data sources and then present the findings.

## HR Records

For the profiling of leave-taking employees' behaviours at UCL, the HR records are analysed. The data set included the details of leaves taken between 2018 and 2022 and information regarding the employees' department, role, grade, and the beginning and end of each leave. The data contained only information about the leave-taking employees and did not have information regarding children's birth dates. Hence, the data would solely enable descriptive profiling of the leave-taking employees at UCL without making any comparative analysis further examining whether the leave-taking behaviours among different employee groups are significantly different (for example, to see whether some men did not take paternity leave after the birth of a child). Since it is mandatory for mothers to take at least two weeks of maternity leave in the UK, we can be sure we have captured all mothers' maternity leave experiences during this period. This descriptive quantitative analysis portrays the profiles of UCL employees who opted for maternity, paternity/partner or parental leave within the past five years of their employment at UCL and the lengths of these leaves.

## **Online survey**

Although the HR data was based on the full population of leave-taking employees of UCL for the period between 2018 and 2022, the data had some issues, which required additional data collection. For example, the HR data did not record the leave take-up status of the employees' partners. Furthermore, the HR records did not have any information on whether academic staff opted for returners' sabbatical leave, which was a point of interest for this study. To this end, we designed a short survey to be distributed through HR channels across UCL. The survey repeated the leave take-up questions with additional details regarding different types of parenting-related leaves available at UCL. The online questionnaire also asked about their partners' leave take-up status as well as whether they would be interested in taking part in an interview to share their experiences of parenting-related leaves. There were 417 respondents to this survey.

## **Interviews**

To complement and enhance the analysis that we conducted based on the HR records and online survey, a series of in-depth interviews with employees were conducted. Nearly half of the online survey participants (N=205) indicated their interest in participating in an interview. We sampled a diverse group of 19 interviewees from these volunteers. We aimed to get diversity in terms of job role, faculty, sex, grade, ethnicity and leave experience. Participants were academics, researchers, teachers and administrative employees across STEM, non-STEM and professional departments and from grades 6 to 9 (Table 4). There is a variation in the role, grades, affiliated faculties and types of leaves taken. The majority of the interview participants (42%) are in STEM departments and are not of a visible minority ethnic background (61%), which is aligned with the case university profile.

Table 4 Profiles of interview participants

Pseu.	Sex	Pat. leave	Mat. leave	SPL	Ret.	Sabbatical	Role	Faculty	Contract	Grade	Ethnicity	# child
Tiwa	Female	NA	Yes	No	NA		Professional	STEM	Fixed-term	7	ME	4
Lurdes	Female	NA	Yes	No	NA		Professional	Professional	Open-ended	8	White	2
Caroline	Female	NA	Yes	No	No		Academic	STEM	Open-ended	8	ME	1
Sade	Female	NA	Yes	No	NA		Professional	STEM	Open-ended	7	ME	2
Aisling	Female	NA	Yes	Yes	Yes		Academic	Non-STEM	Open-ended	9	White	1
Laura	Female	NA	Yes	Yes	NA		Professional	STEM	Fixed-term	7	White	1
Sophie	Female	NA	Yes	No	NA		Professional	Non-STEM	Open-ended	9	White	1
Ella	Female	NA	Yes	No	Yes		Academic	STEM	Open-ended	8	White	1
Fiona	Female	NA	Yes	Yes	NA		Research	Non-STEM	Fixed-term	8	White	2
Naureen	Female	NA	Yes	Yes	NA		Teaching	Non-STEM	Open-ended	6	ME	1
Emily	Female	NA	Yes	Yes	NA		Professional	Professional	Open-ended	8	White	1
Petra	Female	NA	Yes	No	Yes		Academic	STEM	Open-ended	8	White	1
Monica	Female	NA	Yes	Yes	Yes		Academic	Non-STEM	Open-ended	9	White	1

Tony	Male	Yes	NA	Yes	NA	Professional	Professional	Open-ended	6	White	1
Obi	Male	Yes	NA	No	NA	Teaching	STEM	Open-ended	8	ME	4
George	Male	Yes	NA	No	NA	Professional	Professional	Open-ended	6	White	1
Dan	Male	Yes	NA	Yes	NA	Academic	Non-STEM	Open-ended	9	White	2
Neal	Male	Yes	NA	Yes	NA	Professional	Professional	Open-ended	9	ME	3
Vikram	Male	Yes	NA	No	NA	Teaching	STEM	Open-ended	8	ME	1

# Findings

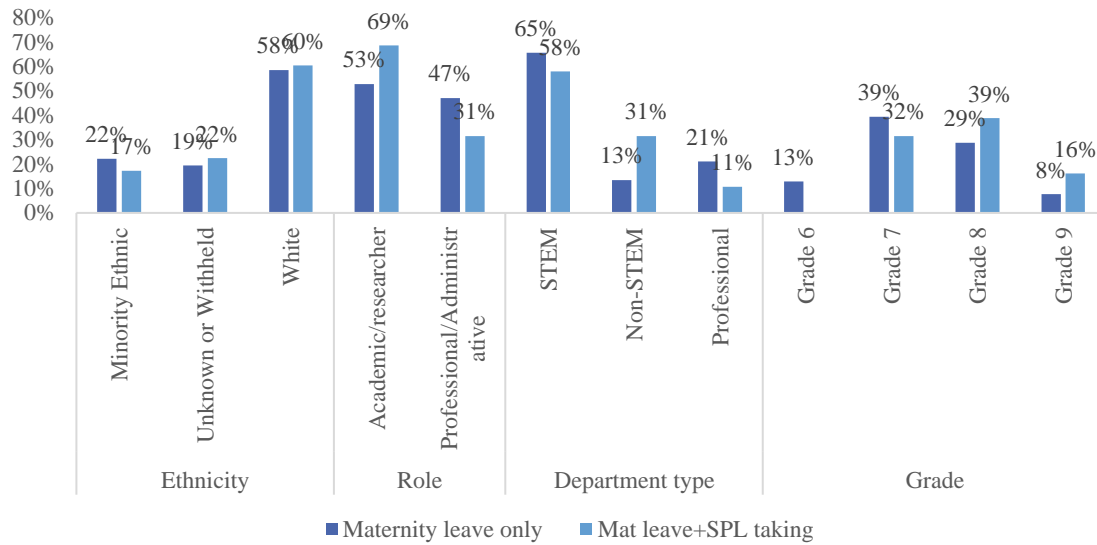
Drawing on the HR records and online survey, we present the profiles of leave-taking parent employees at UCL. The HR records only contain information on those who had taken some form of leave. The children's birthdate data is not recorded by the HR based on the data protection regulations. Therefore, the report does not provide a more granular contextual background regarding the eligibility rates or overall leave take-up rates by different groups or types of leaves available. The quantitative data used exhibits a snapshot of the leave-taking parents. Later, this is contextualised and further nuanced by drawing on the interview data interplaying issues on ethnicity, seniority and sex.

## Profiles of Leave Takers

### Maternity leave and SPL

The HR records show that there were 1,218 mothers who took some type of parenting leave between 2018 and 2022. Some of these mothers took only maternity or adoption leave (henceforth referred to as 'maternity leave') and some indicated transferring some of their leaves to their partners, i.e., taking shared parental leave. The figure below provides a comparative picture of different sub-groups of mothers by their ethnicity, role at the university, department and grade. The data presented in the figure suggests that leave-taking practices vary by the type of role, the department in which they are working, and their employment grade. The mothers most likely to opt for SPL are those in academic contracts, non-STEM departments, and at higher grade levels (eight or nine).

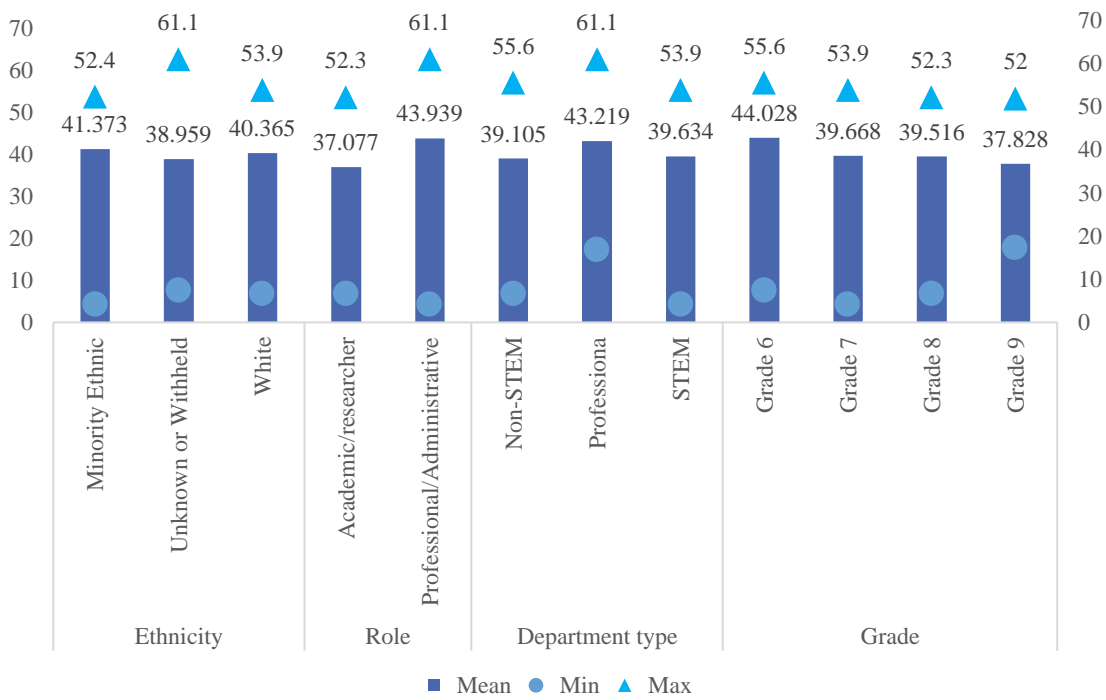
Figure 1 Profiles of leave-taking mothers



Source: HR Records (2018-2022) N = 1,218

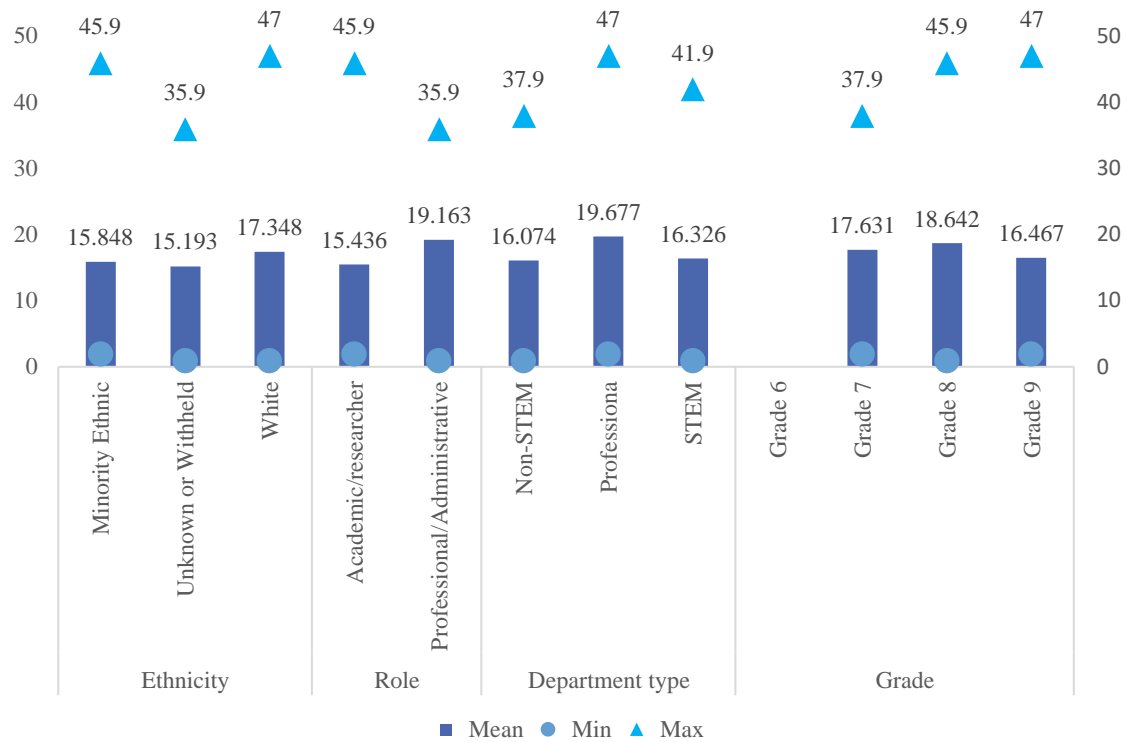
Consistent with this figure, when looking at the duration of maternity leave, it appears that the mothers who only took maternity leave are the ones taking longer leaves. The average duration of maternity leave for mothers who only took maternity leave is reported as 40.3 weeks, which coincides with the 39 weeks of paid statutory maternity leave period (Figure 2). A statistically significant difference concerning the duration of leave was found between two categories: type of job and grade. On average, mothers who are employed in administrative roles take 6.8 weeks longer maternity leave compared to academic/researcher mothers. Mothers who work in professional departments take, on average, 3.5 and 4.1 weeks longer maternity leave than mothers in STEM and non-STEM departments, respectively. Mothers in Grade 6 take an average of 4.3, 4.5 and 6.2 weeks longer maternity leaves than mothers in Grades 7, 8 and 9, respectively.

Figure 2 Duration of maternity leave



The duration of maternity leave is shorter among mothers who transferred some of their leaves to their partners compared to mothers who only took maternity leave. The average duration of their total leave becomes 16.6 weeks, with a maximum of 47 weeks (Figure 3). The average length of leave is 19.1 weeks for mothers in administrative roles and 15.4 weeks for academic/researcher mothers. A similar pattern is observed among mothers who work in professional departments (average duration of 19.6 weeks) and mothers in STEM and non-STEM departments (average of 16.3 and 16 weeks, respectively). Mothers in Grade 8 take an average of 18.6 weeks long week, two weeks more than mothers in Grade 9 and one week more than Grade 7 mothers. The just above and below 18-week long maternity leave of SPL-giving mothers overlaps with 18 weeks of fully paid maternity leave entitlement that is provided at UCL, which might be taken as an indication of the importance of foregone income and level of leave compensation when deciding the duration of the leave. Except for the ethnicity comparison, the within-group comparisons, i.e., by role, grade, and department, suggested that these differences were statistically significantly different, as presented in the Appendix.

Figure 3 Duration of maternity leave for SPL-giving mothers

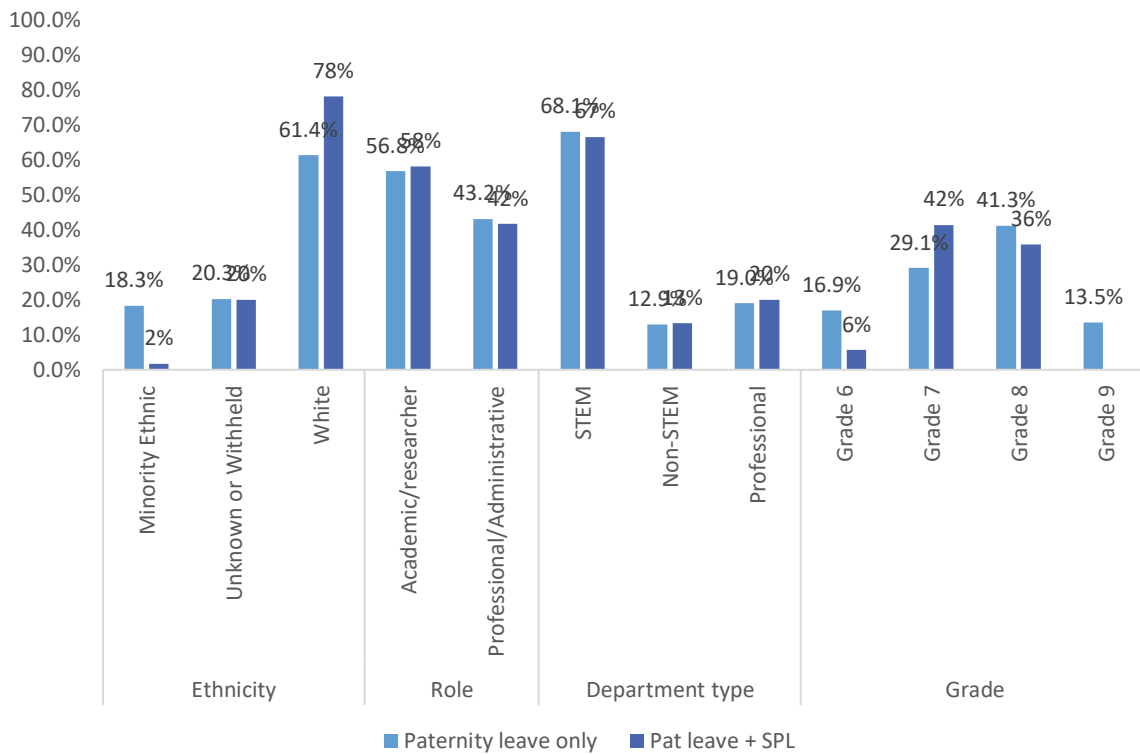


### Paternity leave and SPL

During 2018 and 2022, there were 971 men who took some parenting-related leave across UCL. A great majority of these, 808, opted for paternity leave only. The remainder of them taking SPL (a small number reported only taking SPL which may be a reporting error or fathers who started at UCL after their paternity leave over). As illustrated in Figure 4, leave take-up is more common among fathers who are white, those in academic roles working in STEM departments and Grade 8. However, additional statistical tests we ran suggested no statistically significant differences in paternity leave take-up behaviours of fathers by their role, department or grade. The sample sizes were too small to run this test for the SPL-taking fathers. However, there was only one minority ethnic father in this sample who took both SPL and paternity leave.



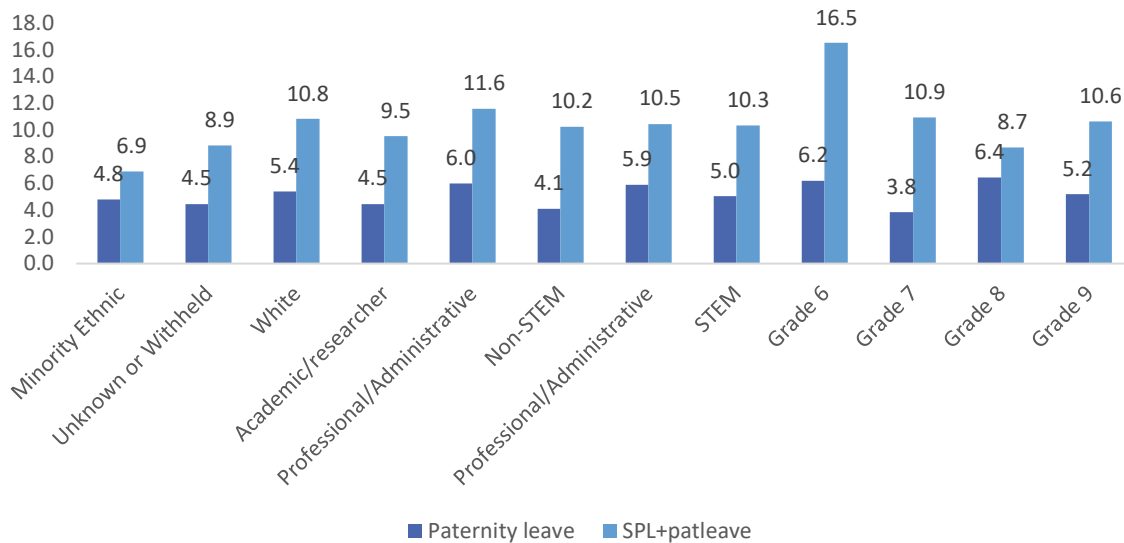
Figure 4 Profiles of leave-taking fathers



Source: HR Records (2018-2022) N = 971

Similar to the case of mothers, there are differences in the duration of the leave of fathers who solely took paternity leave and fathers who used SPL. The average duration of paternity leave among paternity leave-taking fathers is reported as around 4 weeks, ranging from 3.8 weeks to 6.4 weeks (Figure 5), indicating a high take-up of the enhanced UCL paternity leave. These numbers indicate some additional potential reporting errors, given that paternity leave at UCL does not exceed 4 weeks. Some degree of statistical significance was only found among fathers of different grades. There was no statistically significant difference across groups except for the grades. According to the HR records, fathers in higher grades tend to take longer weeks of leave compared to fathers in lower grades. The structure of the data indicated that not all fathers were taking their four weeks at one instance. There were some spreading their leave over time. This was later seconded by some of the interview participants. Their narratives demonstrated their efforts in navigating their leave with their workloads, despite taking significantly fewer weeks than mothers.

Figure 5 Average duration of paternity leave and SPL taken by fathers (in weeks)



Source: HR Records (N=808 for paternity leave only, 60 PL+SPL takers)

As became evident in the interviews, the leave entries were not always systematically done. Hence, it is likely that not all leaves are recorded correctly. The issue is more complex for SPL. The HR records do not keep a record of the employment status of the partner. Hence, the data does not tell how many of these fathers who did not opt for SPL were actually eligible for SPL (since if the mother/partner was not in paid employment, for example, the father is not eligible to take SPL). In the nationally representative survey data, 275,000 men reported that their partners were in paid employment, meaning they were likely to be eligible for SPL (Department for Business and Trade 2023). Moreover, nationally, 49% of mothers with children under the age of one are reported to be in full-time employment (ONS 2022). Overall, the employment rate of mothers with youngest children aged 0-2 is estimated to be 66.1%—potentially making the same proportion of fathers eligible for SPL at UCL (OECD 2022). This indicates that it is likely that very few eligible fathers at UCL are taking SPL.

### **Returners' sabbatical leave**

Returners' sabbatical leave is different from maternity, paternity and shared parental leaves as it is not a statutory entitlement offered by the state. Moreover, this leave is not a care leave. However, it is a leave that recognises the employees' parenting duties and acknowledges that the individual may possibly need some adjustment time

upon returning to work from a long break. The returner sabbatical is administrated at the department level. Therefore, at the moment, it is not recorded centrally in the university. The information regarding the returners' sabbatical leave was collected through an online survey, with the purpose of profiling the characteristics of returner sabbatical leave-taking academic parents at UCL.

There were 83 respondents on academic contracts, of whom 16, all women, requested to take returners' sabbatical leave, and 14 of them took it. Twelve of these 14 mothers are in non-STEM departments. This can partly be explained by the overall over-representation of non-STEM academic mothers in the survey (75%). The average duration of this sabbatical is 13 weeks, varying between eight and 32 weeks. Of the 30 academic fathers who responded to the online survey, 13 of them reported that they took a parenting leave longer than three months. One of them reported that he took returners' sabbatical leave for 12 weeks. Thus, it appears that the majority of men and women who are eligible for returners' sabbatical at UCL are not taking it.

## **Factors influencing leave take-up, length and experiences**

The profiling exercise provided a basis to understand whether there are differences in employees' leave-taking behaviours according to the type of leave they have taken and by the type of jobs that they have been doing or their role, grade and department. These analyses show that mothers in academic-related roles and based at an academic-related department take shorter leaves than those in an administrative/professional role and based at an administrative/professional department. Similarly, mothers in higher grades take shorter leaves than mothers in lower grades. Relatedly, mothers in higher grades and in academic-related roles are more likely to share part of their leave with partners than mothers in lower grades and in professional roles. Amongst fathers, using their paternity leave is common. However, few mothers transfer part of their leave (via SPL), and few fathers report taking SPL themselves. Overall, the picture is one of low uptake of extended leave by fathers. Given the high uptake of the four weeks of paternity leave, however, it appears there is an appetite amongst UCL fathers to take leave when individually entitled and well paid.

Three key aspects of the leave-taking experience were addressed in the interviews: the decision to leave, the leave experience, and the return to work. Except for some probing and clarification questions, the interviews were conducted in a narrative format where participants talked about their experiences with little or no interruption. Below are the key findings grouped as facilitators and barriers to leave take-up. In most of the cases, we observed that facilitators and barriers to leave take-up mirrored each other.

The interviews with mothers and fathers supported the existing evidence suggesting that mothers' leave-taking is considered a default status. In contrast, fathers' leave take-up beyond paternity leave is treated as exceptional (Twamley, Forthcoming 2024). There are two distinct mechanisms behind this observation. One is the policy design. Because SPL is a form of the transfer of maternity leave, fathers' access to leave depends on mothers' willingness to share, and thereby potentially reduce their maternity leave. Secondly, family circumstances, as well as co-parental employment situations, have been shaping these decisions and consecutive behaviours.

There is a convergence between our study's findings and the wider evidence from the UK, as well as other studies covering other countries and employment sectors. That

is about the growing trend and interest in involved fathering, yet the inadequacy of support to facilitate this in the workplace (Gatrell, Ladge, and Powell 2021; Özbilgin et al. 2010; Atkinson 2023).

Here, we discuss the factors that inhibit and encourage the take-up of leave and the number of weeks parents take.

## **Eligibility**

Lack of eligibility for leave or paid leave impacted parents' leave practices. This especially became apparent for fathers and their SPL-taking. At UCL, both paternity/partner leave and SPL are day-one rights.<sup>2</sup> However, SPL functions as a transferred leave; men do not have independent access to it. Given that eligibility for SPL is mediated through mothers' eligibility, access to SPL was not always straightforward for fathers. The dependency on mothers' eligibility and willingness to transfer their leave to fathers has been found to be a puzzling, rather odd aspect of the government legislation of SPL.

There has been general dissatisfaction among participants in the study. Their vocalised dissatisfaction about the formulation of SPL is not a UCL-unique experience. Such a reaction coincides with the findings of another UK study Twamley (2021). One mother, in an administrative role at a STEM department, in the study described the transferability component as being "robbed" and said:

"When I realised he was taking my leave, I was just really angry. It is like he is not taking leave; he is robbing your [my] leave, basically."

This was a common experience among mothers who participated in the study. In part this reflects low awareness of SPL amongst colleagues prior to pregnancy (see also Twamley and Schober 2019) as well as the historical norm of 12 months of maternity leave which women have come to expect as 'belonging' to the mother alone (Twamley 2024; O'Brien and Twamley 2017).

## **Awareness**

While colleagues have a good understanding of maternity and paternity leave availability and processes, several participants reported a prior lack of awareness or understanding of SPL and returners' sabbatical leave. In one example, one academic father said that he took unpaid leave because he failed to meet the eligibility criteria

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/human-resources/shared-parental-leave-and-pay-policy#entitlement%20to%20leave>

for SPL as he was a new member of staff when he wished to take SPL. Since SPL is day one right at UCL, it is unclear whether he misunderstood the information or was misinformed by colleagues. Other participants directly reported confusion and a lack of awareness amongst line managers and colleagues about SPL, meaning they were then unable to support the participant as they attempted to arrange their leave.

Similarly a lack of awareness and departmental communication about returners' sabbatical leave was reported by some participants. The evidence from our survey data, where few eligible participants took returners' sabbatical leave, suggests that the implementation of this leave has been sporadic. As it is administrated at the department level, this leave appears to depend more on the line managers' or department heads' awareness of this entitlement. In some cases, parents found themselves informing their departments about this leave and their rights. This was later lamented by colleagues who greatly appreciate the opportunity to take returners' sabbatical, which is considered a novel and generous institutional offering:

“I wish that someone had informed me of that [returners' sabbatical leave] sooner, [be]cause we would have planned [it]..” (Academic, Non-STEM, open-ended, Grade 9, mother)

During the sabbatical period colleagues are exempt from teaching and administrative responsibilities, thus facilitating knowledge production responsibilities to resume. Since many academic parents reported that during 'usual' term time they felt unable to meet the multiple demands of an academic role without working during evenings and weekends, in particular writing publications, this was highly valued.

The findings indicate that there is a discernible lack of comprehension regarding the benefits of taking leave beyond the standard maternity and paternity leaves. The newer (and more complicated) SPL and the UCL-specific returners' sabbatical<sup>3</sup> may require more streamlining around processes and information provided.

## **Affordability**

Irrespective of the type of role, faculty affiliation, contract, grade and ethnicity, financial constraints were discussed by interviewees as the most prominent determinant behind parents' leave strategies. This finding is aligned with the parental leave literature,

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<sup>3</sup> A version of returners' sabbatical leave is also available at University of Cambridge, see <https://www.hr.admin.cam.ac.uk/policies-procedures/returning-carers-scheme>.

suggesting that leave take-up is higher when the leave is generously compensated, especially amongst fathers (Patnaik 2019; O'Brien, Brandth, and Kvande 2007). In making decisions around leave, mothers' level of income compared to their husbands' earnings and their seniority at work were reported as primary determining factors. This was equivalently observed among fathers in the study: Their partners' earnings played a role in their leave take-up behaviours and whether they opted for SPL. For example, the analysis of the quantitative data showed that mothers in lower grades (5-7) took longer leaves than mothers in higher grades. This finding was supported by the interviews. The mothers in these grades reported earning relatively lower salaries than their partners. Since their partners' earnings constituted the majority of the total income for their family, the concern was not to lose the main income for the leave. Accordingly, for them, it was financially more viable to take maternity leave for an extended period and refrain from transferring any leave to their higher-earning partners. Consequently, in these types of families, women tended to take as much maternity leave as they could, usually the paid part (33 weeks). The decisions were driven by their financial situation as well as the potential costs of hiring a nanny or sending the newborn to a daycare centre. In such cases, taking maternity leave as long as possible appeared to be the most plausible solution that the participants opted for.

Here is a telling example from a Grade 6 mother on a teaching contract explaining the logic behind her maternity leave duration:

“I think a big factor was that we wouldn't go over the 39 weeks because we couldn't afford for one of us to have no salary, but [with] the statutory we could kind of cope with. So, we wanted to take the maximum of that.”

(Naureen, teaching, non-STEM, open-ended, Grade 6, mother)

Contrarily, there were a few cases where the mothers were the main earners in the family. As per the quantitative data, these are mothers in Grades 8 and 9 who tend to take shorter maternity leaves—repeating the financial sustainability logic that took place in the families where the pay gap was to the detriment of mothers. In these families, higher-earning mothers kept their leave shorter and returned to work faster. They were also the mothers who opted for SPL, meaning that they transferred some of their leave to their partners, such as a Grade 9 mother:

“The decision to take up shared parental leave was also informed by the fact that I earn more than him, which is, I think, unusual that the woman in her heterosexual relationship is earning more than the man. We were lucky that my son’s birth fell on the half-term. So, he took a couple of weeks of unpaid leave, but he was very keen to have like a period of time to look after our baby. So initially, I was just going to do a standard year maternity leave, and then four or five months into the pregnancy, we decided to do shared parental leave.” (Aisling, Academic, Non-STEM, open-ended, Grade 9, mother)

As demonstrated in this example, the decision to share the leave is informed by the parents’ relative earnings and the fathers’ motivation to be involved in parenting (returned to below).

Being on paid leave appeared to be crucial for parents. In order to extend their leave and maintain some level of income at the same time, parents invented creative solutions. A common strategy was to use their annual leaves as an extension of their parental leaves. This behaviour indicates that parents often had the desire to use their parenting-related leaves. However, the financial burden was often strongly present. Utilising annual leave as an extension of a parenting-related leave appeared as the most easily conceivable solution to their needs. While some of the mothers took the accumulated annual leave in blocks, some spread their leaves over time and reduced their work week to four days without losing any pay. Below is an example of a mother in an administrative role explaining how she made use of her accumulated annual leaves as parenting leave:

“I wanted to take as long as possible because I wanted to enjoy the babies as long as possible, so I took the whole year and what I did [be]cause, you know that as time goes by, you get paid less and less, so, towards the end, I took the annual leave I had accumulated. So that meant I was paid during the last month.” (Lurdes, Admin, Professional department, open-ended, Grade 8, mother)

Similar behaviours were also observed among fathers, but rather sporadically. In the cases when this happened, it was as a result of absolute necessity, such as the mother’s physical recovery or the presence of multiple young children in the family.



UCL offers 18 weeks of full pay for mothers on maternity leave and four weeks for fathers or partners on paternity leave. While this is more than the statutory entitlement in the UK, for many participants, it still fell short of their expectations. For example, an academic mother whose partner is also an academic but working for another university compared the two universities and said, “Other universities are more generous than ours.” A survey of other Russell Group (RG) universities (Allen 2023) shows that UCL’s maternity leave offer is not the most competitive. Nine offer the same number of fully paid maternity leave weeks; two offer fewer; and 12 offer more full paid maternity leave weeks. However, the paternity leave offer is more generous at UCL than most other RG universities: Few offer more than two weeks of fully paid paternity leave (Allen, 2024). Another participant, who is a father on a teaching contract, compared the parental leave offerings between the university and other industries. He mentioned his friends who work in the private sector and their substantially longer and better-paid leave entitlements. He also noted how surprised he was to see that “paternity leave was not generous compared to maternity leave”. These responses support the evidence of people’s lack of knowledge around the scope of the leave entitlements and represent the mismatch between parents’ expectations around leave, particularly fathers’ leave, and the wider UK policy landscape, in which fathers have little access to independent forms of parental leave. Within this context, UCL’s offering of four weeks of fully paid paternity/partner leave is relatively generous but still does not meet participants’ perspectives on what fathers should receive.

As other research has shown, a perceived low remuneration for leave can be interpreted by parents as low institutional support for leave-taking (Hobson 2002). In addition to issues of affordability, this may go some way to explaining why such few fathers take SPL. Even if the parents have signalled gender-equal ideals and their preferences for symmetrical sharing of parenting responsibilities, the transferability of SPL, inadequate funding, and the earnings gap within the couple often force them to abide by the traditional gender division of labour.

### **Institutional support**

Once the leave take-up decision is made, the operationalisation of the leave process is inaugurated. This phase involves institutional engagement through line managers or department heads and HR systems locally and centrally. One aspect of the leave request is about communicating the intention to take the leave with managers, and the

other aspect concerns the administration of the leave by filling out the official forms to be processed by HR.

As identified in other research, more complex systems to take leave necessitate greater determination and motivation from employees (Atkinson 2023) meaning that some employees will be put off by overly complex or difficult processes. The interviews suggested the logistics of leave requests were 'straightforward' and 'easy' in the cases of paternity and maternity leaves, whereas more complications were involved with SPL requests. The critical issue was associated with the calculation of the leave compensation. In such situations, the presence of an informed HR professional was seen as the key intervention to resolve the issues. In the example below, the mother signals to be well prepared for her leave; however, the HR support was necessary, and she delivers her experience with appreciation:

“Especially calculating your leave and calculating your entitlements and stuff was complicated. I found all the information, wrote a plan, and then the HR administrator was very good. She checked it for me and said that she thought it looked OK, and then she communicated with central HR for me. And that all got approved.” (Ella, Academic, STEM, open-ended Grade 8, mother)

A self-driven effort to find relevant information was common among parents. On the one hand, this behaviour signals a preparation for the leave and its requirements. On the other hand, it also indicates that there is room for interpretation, which might lead to heterogeneity in the information received. In other words, not everyone may end up finding the information that they are looking for, especially if they have a special case. Participants often mentioned that although the information was available on the university's website, it was not always easy to interpret, which made them appreciate having institutional support:

“There are quite a lot of forms that you have to fill in. One is the spreadsheet where you put all your dates that you want to take leave, then the maternity leave, and then the annual leave. And then, if your husband is also sharing the leave with you, you have to put his entire entitlement there as well. Then you have different Word documents where you have to sign and put the dates and the leave again, and the same for your husband. So, as I said, having this departmental HR

person was really key to that being really easy because I feel it worked out. She had a look, and if there was something wrong or something missing or not, actually you have to put these dates or these other because whatever policy rules the government.” (Laura, Admin, STEM, fixed-term, Grade 7, mother)

The complications regarding the leave arrangements were discussed within the scope of leave payments and calculating the date of return to work. Similar confusion and difficulties around SPL have been reported elsewhere by parents and HR staff (Birkett and Forbes 2018) and may contribute to lower take-up rates among parents (Twamley and Schober 2019).

### **Lack of care support**

Financial constraints and the existence, or rather absence, of a care support network shaped the return-to-work strategies of parents. Throughout the interviews, the high costs of childcare services were repeatedly mentioned. The high cost of childcare services left parents in a puzzling state where they had to decide between returning to work earlier and starting to pay for childcare or postponing their return to work at the expense of losing their salary for longer periods of time. To offset these costs, some participants receive support from grandparents. Their examples included (grand)parents coming in one day per week or staying with them for a few weeks or months in the early months after childbirth. Some other participants who do not have family members in the country mentioned the lack of support they have and the difficulty in making decisions between work responsibilities and care responsibilities and making ends meet with their resources. In one case, a participant mentioned that she was leaving her job and moving back to her home country because of the current cost of living and high costs of childcare in the UK.

Consequently, parents have adopted several strategies to ease the financial pressure while reconciling care and work responsibilities upon their return to work. As mentioned earlier, using accumulated annual leave to extend the leave period is a common strategy across all types of groups of parents working at the university. Their comments signalled that financial constraints were the underlying reasons behind this. In one case, a mother in an administrative role shared that she and her partner reduced their working hours to reduce childcare costs. She said, “I dropped down to four days a week working after I came back with the first one, and my husband also

did the same.” Another mother, who had two babies in the past five years, said she “came back part-time in both cases.” She said,

“One of the reasons I'm doing part-time [is be]cause there's no point of doing full time. I'm paying more than half of my salary to the childcare provider. [I] rather do it myself and spend time with my children.” (Lurdes, Admin, Professional, open-ended, Grade 8, mother)

Therefore, the ability to return to work part-time was important to parents, particularly mothers who hold the bulk of childcare responsibilities. Unfortunately, part-time work has been shown to slow career progression (Meara, Pastore, and Webster 2019; Weeden, Cha, and Bucca 2016), which is a major factor in explaining the gender wage gap (Goldin 2014). Further research at UCL should be conducted to assess whether and how part-time work impacts career progression amongst colleagues.

### **Job characteristics**

As illustrated in the earlier figures using the HR records, the key differences in leave-taking were observed by the type of role that parents work in and their level of seniority (grade) at work. These variations became evident in the interviews between mothers in academic-related roles and mothers in non-academic roles. The key difference stemmed from the autonomous nature of academic roles and the more structured working hours of administrative roles. The academic and research-related employees had greater independence in arranging their time. However, they were under constant pressure with their workloads and commitments and often felt unable to take long periods of leave. Longer absences from work for them was a risk that could result in negative consequences for their careers, the interviews suggested. Contrarily, those in administrative roles had more distinctive work-life boundaries and, accordingly, had clearer leave periods. These variations mainly concerned mothers, who were often the parents taking longer periods of leave.

The HR records did not indicate a similar distinction among fathers of different job categories, which is predominantly driven by the shorter leave period that they are entitled to and little variation in leave durations. The mothers who are not in academic jobs but married to academic fathers shared similar experiences of their partners' work situations, resembling the academic mothers in the study. In a similar vein, these mothers reported that their partners could not take longer leaves, given their work commitments.

The job characteristics affected the experience of leave. For example, some academic mothers, especially with heavy teaching loads, discussed that the leave was sometimes considered a time to progress in their publications in a rather ironic way. A mother said,

“I remember one of my colleagues joking like ‘the only way for people with high teaching loads to write a book is to have a baby and then have your returners leave’. So that’s kind of one of the narratives that, particularly for women, if you have a baby, then you get your study leave. You know, as a joke, but also kind of true.” (Monica, Academic, non-STEM, open-ended, Grade 9, mother)

This quote demonstrates the intensity of academic jobs. With some irony in her tone, the participant shared that being on returners’ leave enabled her to complete some of her academic role tasks. The interviews also revealed how heavy workloads challenge these mothers’ leave take-up behaviours and negotiations with their colleagues. In fact, one of the academic mothers mentioned how she had to hand over her different tasks to different people, “I had two colleagues doing a job share, doing the programme needed post. Another colleague covered my module”. This situation also signals a lack of organisational readiness for her absence and the department not being able to hire a cover for the entire period to undertake all of her tasks. In another example, the mother’s tasks were distributed among multiple colleagues of hers. Her expression below suggested that some of her duties were passed on to her line manager, creating more pressure on the manager and leaving her in a state of discomfort. She said:

“So, one of my colleagues had an increase in his FT, and then someone else was hired to teach a couple of courses. So, that was handed over. But you know, I think probably one of the things that was problematic and how that was arranged is that none of the ... You know, the more like heavy responsibility aspects of my job ended up falling on my line manager. I don’t think she was very well supported in the period where I was on leave. It was more like they plugged the gaps of the teaching, but they didn’t really plug any of the more like infrastructural gaps in an adequate way.”

The excerpt above signals a lack of organisation in preparing for the absence of a colleague. In another case, a father in a non-academic role shared that he was scheduled on long hours of consecutive shifts. His interpretation of the situation was resentment from his line managers, and he was treated as if he were on holiday, not a parenting leave. He was told, "You've just had seven weeks off. You should be fine." Heavy workloads and associated pressures were repeated across academic mothers, particularly those in higher grades. For example, an academic mother in a STEM department said, "To be honest, at the PI level, it's going to be very tricky to fully delegate your work to somebody else." As such, it was not uncommon for academic mothers to find it difficult to remain out of reach during their leave. In another case, a mother in a teaching-intensive role mentioned:

"I felt like I was using my maternity leave to write and to do research... We've got in a way that I hadn't had time to do before. So, it's kind of ironic almost that that's when you feel that you've got the most time to do something." (Naureen, teaching, non-STEM, open-ended, Grade 6, mother)

These comments relate to the work culture and how demanding academic jobs are to the extent that people, especially mothers, feel the need to use the time on leave to progress with their work while responding to their young children's needs. In contrast, women working in professional services did not report conducting paid work during their leave and rather described a smooth process of covering for their time on leave. For example, Laura, a Grade 7 mother in a professional role at a STEM department, said, "I had prepared a handover document, which was handy."

The attitudes of colleagues and line managers towards mothers and fathers showed some degree of variation. In general, the experiences remained in a gender-normative understanding where fathers were being treated as substitute parents. As shared by one of the fathers in the study, being on parenting leave for seven weeks was considered out of the norm. For another father in the study, his return to work was rather smooth because of the short duration of the leave. He said:

"It's probably not long enough to be off to feel really disconnected when you return, and it was pretty smooth going back into the role."

The differences in the duration of maternity and paternity leaves for mothers and fathers influence their return-to-work experience. For fathers, a four-week-long absence was not considered a significant threat to the ongoing workflow at work. However, a few months of absenteeism of mothers on parenting leave requires a serious commitment and rearranging of duties for the department. At the personal level, motherhood guilt was also mentioned. For one mother, Chidi, this guilt was experienced since pregnancy. Even though she mentioned that she was happy to have taken the full year of maternity leave, she also said, "I think a lot of people don't realise that pregnant people actually feel guilty a lot." Similarly, another mother in an admin role, Lurdes, also said:

"I guess as a woman and as a mother, you always feel guilty, don't you? You always feel that you're never going, that you cannot do anything else. And I mean, I guess I like, you know that I'm working in an organisation that I understand that this thing happens. My colleagues, my manager, obviously they were absolutely fine with it. But you do feel guilty that you've got the stuff pending that you have not been able to do. But you know, at the end of the day they manage and that's the most important thing so."

This experience above also reflects the roles of managers, colleagues, and the work environment. As demonstrated in this experience, even though the environment is portrayed to be supportive, the actual experience, due to long periods of absence and pressing care-giving responsibilities, might be different.

The interviews highlighted variances in leave experiences, especially by the type of role, with close dependency on the managers' attitudes. The experiences were often individualised, such as in the example above, where an employee took the initiative to prepare a handover document for the person who was going to be her replacement during her leave period. There was not a systematic approach to preparing oneself or their replacement for the expectations of the role. As mentioned in a previous example above, in some cases, the hiring process was delayed, or other times, the person attended the hiring interview while her leave was already started. The decentralised implementation of parenting-related leaves became most apparent in these experiences.

# Conclusion

This report provides an overview of parenting-related leave experiences across UCL in the past five years. Using multiple data sources, the findings suggested that despite progressive leave provision, there is evidence of uneven take-up of leave according to sex, grade and type of job. Moreover, the qualitative evidence demonstrates the frustrations and difficulties that some employees encounter in trying to arrange leave, being on leave (particularly for academic staff with high workloads) and their return to work.

The findings highlighted two distinctive areas that have been discussed in previous research studies, too. One aspect that became evident is the diversity of the jobs in a university environment. Both in the HR records and significantly in interviews, academic and non-academic parents' experiences appeared to be different from one another. One key mechanism that mobilised this was the disparity between the nature of their work as well as their approaches to work. The phenomenon of a career as a calling for academics was obvious (Ward and Wolf-Wendel 2004). Having more autonomy over their time, in most cases, translated into a penalisation, leaving them under pressures of work responsibilities and care-giving duties. Employees in administrative roles had a more structured distinction between work and life. Even though they also faced struggles, the issues mentioned were more extensively rooted in extrinsic causes when compared to academic parents.

The second aspect that was discernible was the disparities in the experiences of fathers and mothers. The design of the policy and norms around care-giving and parenting was where these differences were stemming from. The longer duration of maternity leave combined with the absence of paid parental leave targeting fathers left mothers as the primary care-givers. This evidence is in alignment with the literature documenting the double pressure that mothers are experiencing at work and at home (Schober 2013; Altintas and Sullivan 2016).

As some of the fathers in the study mentioned, their leave was not long enough to cause any apparent disruptions in the workflow. In contrast, mothers' leave-taking involved greater organisational readiness and competency at the management level. The failure of this showed itself in the form of maternal guilt in some cases.



This study of UCL experiences and processes builds on wider parental leave literature in multiple ways. One set of evidence that emerged is an addition to the parental leave literature. That is, the financial aspect of the leave remains to be one, if not the only, of the most important determinants in leave-taking. Second, the qualitative evidence also supported the relative resources-bargaining power literature. In all of the cases, the parent with greater financial capacity had a greater say in leave take-up decisions. It was particularly evident for higher-earning mothers. Their partners were taking longer leaves (through the use of SPL) compared to lower-earning mothers.

Additionally, this study offers new evidence on the importance of managers and workplace culture in leave-taking behaviours and experiences. Workplace norms are considered among the crucial determinants of parental leave take-up behaviours. However, this concept is not always covered in quantitative studies due to data limitations. The novelty of the current study is bringing new evidence from an overlooked sector. University is a complex workplace. The faculties and departments often act like independent entities. Despite a uniform policy offered by the university, the implementation is heterogeneous, as this study documented.

The key insight from this study points out the variability of experiences and departmental discrepancies. The employees' experiences are closely affected by the degree of difficulty that they face before, during and after the leave. The variations in experiences suggest that despite some tougher experiences, there are some good examples, too. A body of literature associates the family friendliness of workplaces with improved worker productivity, longer retention and low turnover rates (Ko 2022; Harter, Schmidt, and Keyes 2003; Kim et al. 2019). In other words, enabling not only a supportive but also a promotive environment is likely to be a key to increasing employee wellbeing, productivity and organisational commitment.

This study also revealed that there are critical issues regarding the way the employee records are documented. The current data records do not allow us to scrutinise the mechanisms of leave-taking quantitatively. For a comprehensive and precise analysis of leave take-up behaviours and consequences, understanding the behaviours of those who were eligible yet did not take the leave is needed. In the current version, the study lacks this information from a counterfactual group. One solution would be to include the childbirth information for each employee in the staff records. Should the information be completed, it will be possible to highlight the strengths and weaknesses

of the current leave policies at UCL. Similarly, it is likely that some of the ethnicity-related differences will become visible with improved data. This study should be taken as a starting point for the refinement of existing leave policy implementation.

## **Outcomes of the study**

In June 2024, the project team circulated an interim report of findings and met with key stakeholders to discuss recommendations for next steps. Here we give a brief summary of these recommendations – the first section outlines those which have already been implemented by the UCL HR team and the second section those recommendations which require longer term investment.

### **Changes already implemented**

- Local/Department HR staff now receive copies of online parental application forms as well as the Line Manager to improve communication between the different staff which support colleagues when they are preparing to go on parental leave.
- The Shared Parental Leave (SPL) policy was reviewed and restructured by the HR Employment Policy Team, and points of confusion were clarified, especially around entitlement to occupational pay and how SPL occupational pay may be impacted by sharing.
- The HR Policy team now conduct mandatory Shared Parental Leave consultations to help staff navigate policy and their options, working with an interactive planner
- Training was implemented for HR Services and One Desk on Shared Parental Leave
- To improve the visibility and consistency of information around the Returners Sabbatical Leave, an application form was added to the Sabbatical policy; and signposting to the sabbatical leave was increased in the in the Maternity, Adoption and Shared Parental Leave policies, including another link to the application form

## Areas for future work

- Investment in longer remunerated paternity leave: At UCL women take much longer leaves than men. But, men's take up of the full four weeks of paternity leave was high, and SPL take up by men was higher at UCL than national average. This shows an appetite for leave-taking among male colleagues, as well as support among female colleagues for men's leave. Still, men's longer leave is dependent in part on mothers' higher earner status and parents were unenthusiastic about SPL as a policy, due to the transfer mechanism. Colleagues also perceive the relative offer between what mothers and fathers are offered as unfair or disappointing, and the relative offer of UCL to other employers. The research suggested that fathers/partners will take up well-paid paternity leave – the take up for the four weeks of paternity was very high at UCL. Increasing this leave should be a priority if budget allows since wider evidence suggests that this would improve gender equality and staff morale.
- Training for line managers: Despite the university being one institution, each faculty and department has its own way of operating. The experiences shared by the participants indicated a discrepancy in practices. As the first point of contact, line managers appeared as key actors and their knowledge, awareness, and willingness shape parents' leave behaviours and experiences. To homogenise the leave experiences for the better, a suggestion is to provide training to line managers and department heads about leave entitlements and how to deal with leave requests when they come in. This would particularly make a difference in arranging a cover person for the leave time and easing the workload upon return from the leave.
- Processes around cover for SPL and RSL: At the stakeholder meeting, colleagues proposed that one element which may be inhibiting further take up of RSL and SPL amongst colleagues, and which may explain differing support for leave across departments, may be the difficulties in arranging cover. More thought into how cover may be organised for shorter leave periods (fathers typically take around three months). The following suggestions were made:

- For academics a central budget for PGTAs to cover teaching gaps from leave; for professional services potentially secondments / temporary agency covers.
  - Whether RSL be included in mat leave / SPL cover (so that whoever covers the mat leave / SPL will also cover the RSL)?
  - Trialled in different ways in different faculties/ departments to find best practice.
- 
- Childcare support: In close association with leave compensation and duration, a childcare support mechanism could alleviate the pressure that parents experience at the end of their parental leaves and when they start work again. Here colleagues suggested subsidised nursery care and/or an employer childcare voucher scheme, beyond that already available at UCL.
  
  - Record-keeping: Presently the data around parental leave take-up are incomplete, making a more thorough analysis of parental leave take-up difficult to undertake. As a starting point, all forms of parental leave should be recorded when taken. If added to processes and line manager training, the recording of data should improve.

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# Appendix

Table 5 Statistical testing of the mean differences in groups (mothers)

		Maternity leave (n=1151)		
		Contrast	Tukey	
			P >  t	95 % CI
<b>Ethnicity</b>				
Unknown or Withheld vs Minority Ethnic		-2.6	0.058	[-5.27, .066]
White vs Minority Ethnic		-0.803	0.652	[-2.94, 1.33]
White vs Unknown or Withheld		1.801	0.146	[-.450, 4.05]
<b>Role</b>				
Professional/Administrative Academic/research	vs	7.46	0.000***	[6.086, 8.83]
<b>Faculty</b>				
Non-STEM vs STEM		-2.51	0.046*	[-4.99, -0.035]
Professional vs STEM		3.75	0.000***	[1.61, 5.907]
Professional vs Non-STEM		6.27	0.000***	[3.35, 9.19]
<b>Grade</b>				
Grade 7 vs Grade 6		-5.2	0.001**	[-8.91, -1.48]
Grade 8 vs Grade 6		-5.829	0.000***	[-9.69, -1.96]
Grade 9 vs Grade 6		-7.89	0.000***	[-13.04, -2.74]
Contrast represents mean difference. * p<0.05 **p<0.01 *** p<0.001				
Data source: HR Records (2023)				

Table 6 Statistical testing of the mean differences in groups (fathers)

	Paternity leave and SPL (n=971)		
	Contrast	Tukey	
		P >  t	95 % CI
<b>Ethnicity</b>			
Unknown or Withheld vs Minority Ethnic	-0.19	0.545	[-.615, .235]
White vs Minority Ethnic	-0.012	0.996	[-.36, .338]
White vs Unknown or Withheld	0.177	0.434	[-.160, .515]
<b>Role</b>			
Professional/Administrative Academic/research	vs -0.166	0.143	[-.388, .056]
<b>Faculty</b>			
Non-STEM vs STEM	0.293	0.291	[-.16, .75]
Professional vs STEM	-0.113	0.691	[-.438, .211]
Professional vs Non-STEM	-0.406	0.153	[-.921, .108]
<b>Grade</b>			
Grade 8 vs Grade 7	-0.546	0.002	[-.971, -.12]
Grade 9 vs Grade 7	-0.589	0.041	[-1.16, -.011]

Contrast represents mean difference. \* p<0.05 \*\*p<0.01 \*\*\* p<0.001

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