Postgraduate Research Student Parental Leave Policy

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Alternative Format

If you require this Postgraduate Research Student Parental Leave Policy in an alternative format, please contact the Graduate School via email graduate-school@open.ac.uk.

Summary

This policy relates to Postgraduate Research students (PGRs) who might need support because they need to pause their studies in order to care for a newborn child or to care for newly adopted children.

This policy covers:

- University policy around pregnancy, maternity leave, paternity leave, adoption leave and shared parental leave;
- Guidance on the support available and how to arrange it;
- What PGR students must do so that the University can provide support;
- Health and Safety considerations to take into account.

Open University (OU) staff supporting PGRS, including but not limited to supervisors, postgraduate tutors/convenors, faculty administrative staff and faculty Directors of Research should familiarise themselves with this policy.

Scope

What this policy covers

This policy applies to all full-time and part-time Postgraduate Research students (PGRs) who are currently registered with the University.

It outlines the time that is available to PGR students to pause their studies during pregnancy and/or following the birth or adoption of a new child, including intended parents in ‘foster to adopt’ arrangements.

This policy applies regardless of family status, gender, gender expression, gender identity, gender reassignment, sexual orientation, disability or marital or civil partnership status.

What this policy does not cover

This policy does not cover undergraduate or taught postgraduate students. Please refer to the Changing Your Study Plans Policy for relevant guidance.

PGR students who are also members of OU staff should refer to the relevant staff policies for leave and pay.

This is also not applicable to non-UK Affiliated Research Centres. Please refer to your relevant Research Centre policy.

This policy does not outline any specifics on any funding available to cover the time on leave. The funding that is available is dependent on the type of studentship funding you may have and the length of time you have been registered. The Graduate School will be able to advise on the funding available for your specific circumstances.

Support and Information

How to contact us

Please contact the Graduate School by email on graduate-school@open.ac.uk or call on 01908 653806.

Policy

1. Policy Purpose

This policy provides information on the leave entitlement and support available during pregnancy and/or following the birth or adoption of a new child to allow PGR students take a break from their studies to care for a new child.

2. Policy Principles

2.1 Leave (Allocation)

The principle of leave allocation applies to all PGR students (full time and part time) taking Maternity, Partner's/Paternity, Adoption or Shared Parental leave.

There is no qualifying period for Maternity, Paternity, Adoption or Shared Parental leave in terms of your registration;

For International Students whose right to remain in the UK is by virtue of a Student Route Visa, the length of Maternity, Partner's/Paternity, Adoption or Shared Parental leave is subject to any restrictions on remaining in the UK, and payment of funding imposed by virtue of the legislation and guidance relating to the granting of the Student Route Visa.

Additional leave may be provided to cover specific instances where a PGR may be required to be absent from study due to e.g. pregnancy loss or baby loss (including stillbirth and neonatal death). Please contact the Graduate School by email on graduate-school@open.ac.uk for support in these instances.

2.2 Stipend Payments

Funding for parental leave will vary depending on the source of stipend funding and how long you have been registered for your doctoral studies.

The funded leave available for PGR students funded fully by the Open University, or fully or partly by UKRI is laid out in the UKRI training grant terms and conditions.

The funded leave available for PGR students funded by an external organisation such as an industry partner or third sector organisation will be laid out in the individual partnership arrangement.

Self-funded students are not entitled to paid leave but may take unpaid Maternity, Partner's/Paternity or Adoption leave. It is the student's responsibility to check if they are eligible for any other benefits or grants e.g. from the government.

Please contact the Graduate School by email on graduate-school@open.ac.uk to discuss your circumstances.

3. Maternity Leave

A student is eligible for Maternity leave if they are the birth parent of the child.

There is no qualifying registration period for Maternity leave. The due date must be within the registration period.

Registration end dates will be extended by the amount of Maternity leave taken.

The birth parent is entitled to 52 weeks (12 months) of Maternity leave so long as the expected week of childbirth occurs during the period of their registration. The birth parent must take at least two weeks of Maternity leave after the birth of their child before returning to study. Maternity leave can commence up to 11 weeks before the expected week of childbirth.

3.1 Neonatal leave

If the birth of the child is within the registration period and the child is receiving neonatal care in a hospital, one week of Neonatal Care Leave will be provided for each week or part-week in which the child is in neonatal care, up to a maximum of 12 weeks. This is additional to Maternity or Parental/Paternity Leave. Registration end dates will be extended to account for periods taken as Neonatal Leave.

3.2 Stipend payments (Maternity)

The amount of funded time for Maternity leave will vary depending on the source of stipend funding, the funder terms and conditions and how long you have been registered for your doctoral studies.

Please contact the Graduate School by email on graduate-school@open.ac.uk to discuss your circumstances.

4. Paternity/Partner Leave

Paternity/Partner leave is available to PGR students who are the father or non-birth parent of a child or the partner of the child's birth parent. For these purposes a partner is taken to mean a PGR who lives in an enduring relationship with but does not need to be married to or in a civil partnership with, the birth parent.

To be eligible for Paternity/Partner leave, the father or non-birth parent must have, or expect to have, the main responsibility (apart from any responsibility of the mother/birth parent) for the upbringing of the child. There is no qualifying period after registration for Paternity/Partner leave. To be eligible for Paternity/Partner leave the birth must be within the registration period.

A partner is eligible for leave on the same basis as the mother/birth parent or main adopter if the mother/birth parent or main adopter dies during or shortly before the period of Maternity or Adoption leave.

Registration end dates will be extended by the amount of Partner's/Paternity leave taken.

4.1 Leave Entitlement

Fathers or Partners are entitled to 2 weeks of Paternity/Partner leave following the birth of their child. Paternity/Partner leave cannot start before the birth and must be taken within 52 weeks of the birth.

Fathers or Partners may also be eligible for an extended period of Shared Parental leave - see the Shared Parental leave section below. This leave may be taken in up to three blocks of leave or all at once.

4.2 Stipend (Paternity/Partner Leave)

The amount of funded time for Paternity/Partner leave will vary depending on the source of stipend funding, the funder terms and conditions and how long you have been registered for your doctoral studies.

Please contact the Graduate School by email on graduate-school@open.ac.uk to discuss your circumstances.

5. Adoption/Surrogacy Leave

A PGR is eligible for Adoption/Surrogacy Leave if they have been newly matched with a child through an adoption agency, or if they have used a surrogate during their Studentship. Adoption/Surrogacy leave also covers intended parents in 'foster to adopt' arrangements.

There is no qualifying period post registration for Adoption/Surrogacy leave. The expected new placement needs to occur within the period of registration.

The leave available as a co-adopter or the partner of the main adopter of the child is commensurate with Paternity/Partner Leave. For these purposes a partner is taken to mean that the PGR lives in an enduring relationship with but does not need to be married to or in a civil partnership with, main adopter.

Adopters and intended parents in surrogacy arrangements have the same rights as other parents to Shared Parental leave (see below).

Registration end dates will be extended to account for the period of Adoption Leave taken.

5.1 Leave (Adoption)

The leave available for the main adopter is commensurate to Maternity Leave.

Leave during PGR registration for a main adopter of a child in the UK begins when the child's placement starts, or an agreed period of time before the child's placement starts to support preparation.

5.2 Stipend payments

The amount of funded time for Adoption leave will vary depending on the source of stipend funding, the funder terms and conditions and how long you have been registered for your doctoral studies.

Please contact the Graduate School by email on graduate-school@open.ac.uk to discuss your circumstances.

6. Shared Parental Leave

Shared Parental leave (SPL) allows eligible parents to be able to volunteer to end their Maternity or Adoption leave (and/or pay) early to create Shared Parental leave (and potential pay) which they can share with the child's father or their partner. SPL means that eligible fathers and partners will be able to request more leave in the first year following their child's birth or placement for adoption.

As it is shareable, there will also be cases where eligible mothers will return to study early because the child's father or their partner is taking leave in their place.

6.1 Leave (Shared)

Eligible parents can share up to 50 weeks of leave between them. Leave needs to be shared in the first year after the child is born or placed with your family. SPL can be used to take leave in blocks separated by periods of study or taken all in one go. Parents can choose to be off study together or to stagger the leave.

To access the shared leave, the mother/birth parent may have to give up some Maternity or Adoption leave allowance.

The entitlement to Paternity Leave is lost once any SPL is taken by eligible fathers or partners, so Paternity Leave should be taken first.

6.2 Stipend payments (Shared)

The amount of funded time for Shared Parental leave will vary depending on the source of stipend funding, the funder terms and conditions and how long you have been registered for your doctoral studies.

Please contact the Graduate School by email on graduate-school@open.ac.uk to discuss your circumstances.

Procedure

7. What to do when you become aware you/your partner are expecting a child or when you are nearing the adoption placement period

We encourage you to speak with your supervisors and the Graduate School as early as possible. They can make sure you have the right support in place, which includes:

- helping you arrange appropriate leave and supporting you to return
- carrying out a risk assessment if you are pregnant and ensuring your study environment is suitable.

Please ensure that all requests for leave are submitted with evidence through the PGR Manager system in plenty of time so that they can be processed in a timely manner.

7.1 While on leave

While you are on leave, you might like to consider Keeping In Touch (KIT) days, and you could plan these with your supervisors. KIT days are optional. Funded students may be eligible to be paid for these days – the Graduate School can advise.

You can use a KIT Day to stay connected with your research while on leave. This might include:

- attending a research seminar, supervision meeting, or training session
- participating in a group or departmental meeting to stay informed
- working on a specific aspect of your research project.

As your return date draws near, we recommend that you:

- Contact your supervisors at least one month before your return, to organise your first supervision meeting and discuss any support requirements that you have. The Graduate School may also be able to help with additional arrangements.

- If you are already registered with the Disability Support team, and feel your support needs have changed then please contact them to discuss any additional requirements that you may need

- Consider drafting your return-to-study risk assessment as a mother/birth parent:

    - if returning to studies while breastfeeding,

    - if you or your unborn child or baby are at increased risk, for example due to a pre-existing medical condition such as high blood pressure or a history of miscarriage.

    - if you are planning to return to study within six months of giving birth.

If you are not ready or able to return to your studies at the end of your leave, the Graduate School can advise on your options. You may be eligible to return to your studies part-time. If you feel that you cannot continue with your research degree, please discuss this with your supervisors or Graduate School team.

7.2 What to do on return to study

If you are a mother or birth parent, you must complete a risk assessment:

- if you are returning to studies while breastfeeding;

- if you or your child or baby are at increased risk, for example due to a pre-existing medical condition such as high blood pressure or a history of miscarriage;

- if you have returned to your studies within six months of giving birth.

Your supervisors are responsible for completing the risk assessment with you and monitoring your return to study.

7.2.1 Additional study support

If you fall behind with your studies for reasons relating to pregnancy or parental leave, please contact your supervisor in the first instance to discuss the possibilities of a study break.

7.2.2 Submission deadlines and special circumstances

If you are having difficulties with your submission deadline for your upgrade report or final thesis you must advise your supervisors as soon as this arises.

Depending on where you are with your studies you may be able to take a study break or extend your deadline. Please consult the Research Degree Regulations and discuss with your supervisor and/or the Graduate School team for advice.

To request a break, you will need to provide supporting documentary evidence which relates clearly to the period during which your performance was adversely affected, such as a letter from a GP, midwife, social worker or other appropriate professional. Extensions are only granted in exceptional circumstances.

Your request for special circumstances will be determined by the Progress Board which meets monthly.

If your special circumstances are approved, you may receive a study break or an extension which would extend your registration end date.

Please note that if you are a Student Route visa holder then the visa end date does not move in line with this agreement.

7.2.3 Exam (viva) arrangements

Arrangements for your viva can be made to accommodate your circumstances. Online vivas are available for all and should be noted on PGR Manager and any additional reasonable adjustments should be requested through PGR Manager. Please discuss any other reasonable adjustments with the Graduate School in the first instance.

7.2.4 Baby feeding, baby changing and rest facilities on campus

The university supports breastfeeding of infants on campus. Private breastfeeding facilities are available on campus for feeding your baby or expressing milk.

Please inform your supervisor of your need to feed your baby or express milk whilst on campus, this will ensure you can put in place the appropriate health and safety measures.

The staff guidance document is also applicable to PGR students.

Methods of appeal

We welcome your feedback, and in particular your suggestions for improving policy, guidance services and support.

If you have any suggestions about how we could improve our services, please leave your comments at graduate-school@open.ac.uk.

We use the Complaints and Appeals process to maintain standards and make improvements. If you feel that we have not met your expectations in terms of service and support, you can make a complaint using the University's formal Complaints and Appeals Procedure.

However, before doing so please contact the Graduate School to discuss your request.

Related Policies and Legislation

- UKRI training grant terms and conditions
- Open University People Services Policies and Procedures A-Z (for maternity, paternity and shared parental leave policies for members of OU staff)
- UK Equality Act 2010

About this version

Summary of Significant Changes since last version

The following changes have been made

- Restructuring
- Removal of duplicate information
- Removal of conflicting information about paid leave (which is dependent on individual circumstances including registration period and funding source)
- Updated definition of partners
- Addition of Shared Parental Leave

Policies superseded by this version

Student Maternity, Paternity, Adoption and Shared Leave Policy 2024/25

Version Information

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