

Supporting carers in STEMM

Care responsibilities and academic careers often collide – this article highlights the structural barriers facing carers in STEMM and the policy changes needed to level the playing field.



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Academic research is often perceived as a flexible, self-managed working environment. However, this flexibility is offset by intense competition for publications and funding, alongside expectations of frequent relocation between institutions or countries, sometimes as a requirement for grant eligibility. These pressures can make academic careers particularly challenging for researchers with caring responsibilities, hindering their career progression.

The Carers in STEMM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics and Medicine) network was set-up by Professor Laura Carter, Dr Laura Pallett, and Dr Laura Wolz to advocate for researchers with caring responsibilities. Their recent survey examined the challenges of balancing the demands of academic travel and caregiving.¹ A key recommendation for academic institutions is to provide family-conscious grants that allow for the reimbursement of care-related costs with minimal administrative burden.

In this article, I highlight two further policy areas where changes could significantly improve the working conditions of researchers with childcare responsibilities.

Lack of childcare support for PhD students

PhD students are not eligible for any type of government childcare funding support. Childcare Grants of £199.62 per week² are available to students on undergraduate and postgraduate-taught courses. However, PhD students are excluded from this provision as they are postgraduate-research students.

The government provides 30 hours of funded childcare per week to working

parents. However, PhD students are also excluded from this support because they are not classed as employees, in contrast to many other European countries. Despite this, PhD students are typically expected to work around 40 hours a week and the UKRI tax-free stipend of £20,780 per year is roughly equivalent to the take-home pay from a full-time salary at the National Minimum Wage.

PhD students are central to the UK's research capacity and the development of a highly skilled workforce underpinning innovation and economic growth. The lack of childcare provision risks making doctoral study inaccessible to individuals with caring responsibilities, particularly those considering a return to education later in their careers.

Unequal parental leave

In the UK, statutory paternity leave is limited to only two weeks paid at £187.18 per week³, which is equivalent to £4.70 an hour or less than half of the National Minimum Wage. By comparison, other European countries have substantially reformed their parental leave policies in the last decade. In 2019, Spain extended paternity leave from 2 weeks to 16 weeks, fully matching maternity leave⁴. Similarly, Denmark increased paternity leave from 2 weeks to 24 weeks in 2022⁵.

Within the UK university sector, provision varies widely between institutions. This inconsistency is particularly concerning given that many researchers secure their own salaries through funding from competitive grants, such as those from UKRI. Despite this, their parental leave entitlements are determined by institutional policies, creating inequities between researchers doing similar work under different employers. For example, while the University of Essex⁶ provides

two weeks of paternity leave and pay, the University of Oxford⁷ offers 12 weeks of paternity leave with full pay. Shared parental leave options also exist, but they are not additional entitlements, as they require the mother to give up some of her own leave allowance⁸.

A report from the Office for National Statistics highlights that, on average, mothers lose more than £65,000 of earnings within five years of having their first child⁹. Equal parental leave is an essential requirement to ensure a fair distribution of caring responsibilities. Furthermore, more equitable parental leave has been shown to promote economic growth by helping mothers return to work and supporting their uninterrupted career progression¹⁰.

References

¹ www.carersinstemm.co.uk

² www.gov.uk/childcare-grant

³ www.gov.uk/paternity-pay-leave/pay

⁴ <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/businessreview/2025/07/23/well-designed-paternity-leave-makes-spain-a-model-of-success>

⁵ www.norden.org/en/info-norden/parental-benefit-denmark

⁶ www.essex.ac.uk/staff/taking-leave/paternity-leave-and-pay

⁷ <https://hr.admin.ox.ac.uk/paternity-leave>

⁸ www.gov.uk/shared-parental-leave-and-pay/what-youll-get

⁹ www.gov.uk/government/statistics/the-impact-of-motherhood-on-monthly-employee-earnings-and-employment-status-england-april-2014-to-december-2022

¹⁰ www.jrf.org.uk/work/improving-statutory-paternity-leave-would-benefit-families-and-the-economy