



Sleepless in Academia

aims to contribute to the development of inclusive care and team friendly policies across Utrecht University. The project focuses on the experiences of academics who have recently become a parent, or as we call them, the “sleepless in academia”.

WHY?

The challenge of combining care duties and employment has become increasingly evident in the past years. This goes for parents in general as well as academics working at UU. First, the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the need for employers to step up and support working parents when they were faced with sudden closures of schools and daycare. More recently, the personnel shortages at daycare centers and schools have increased waiting lists, limited the amount of hours children can use these facilities, and normalized sudden cancellation of school or daycare days. In fact, teacher shortages in primary education are currently 9700 FTE, amounting to almost 10% of the total workforce. Personnel shortages in daycare are expected to skyrocket from 5000 FTE in 2022 to 29.000 FTE in 2031 when daycare will be almost fully government subsidized. These structural problems are not likely to be resolved any time soon.

As a result, working parents will continue to be challenged in balancing work tasks with uncertain care situations. Therefore, in light of these structural issues, we call upon UU to better address these structural challenges of (new) parents with care responsibilities in its HR and diversity policies.

HOW?

We explored the diverse set of challenges new academic parents face in different areas of their professional life, related to the transition back to work and work-life balance, and the extent to which there are mechanisms in place within UU to support them in addressing these challenges.

We made an inventory of existing family-friendly policies at Utrecht University and an assessment to which extent these meet the needs of parents and caregivers. In the past year, we have done desk research, conducted dialogue sessions with colleagues and in-depth interviews with HR representatives from different faculties. By mirroring the experiences of new academic parents to available policies and programs across different faculties, we gained an overview of the current state of affairs and identified ways to create a more supporting work environment for all.

As a result of our efforts, we propose two changes of perspective on who the ‘Sleepless in academia’ are, and how they can be better supported:

1. A focus on life course and career stages in addition to group-based policies.

Care-friendly policies and provisions of UU usually focus on mothers as primary caregivers. They indeed experience the most conflict in combining work with care duties and they are more likely to leave academia for reasons of work-life balance. While targeting parents, policies can benefit from an additional focus on life course and career stages. Care duties evolve and are most prominent in certain life stages: new parents, but also colleagues with ageing parents for example. New parents are often in an early career stage as a PhD student, postdoc, lecturer or assistant professor. This stage is characterized by temporary contracts and pressures to apply for funding or a tenure track to gain a permanent position.








Recognizing precarities of this career stage, allows for developing policies and provisions which better meet their needs. Research and teaching time compensation schemes for colleagues returning from maternity leave and extension schemes for funding applications are examples of best practices.

2. Towards team friendly policies: Supporting new parents requires supporting the team.

Care duties of working parents do not only affect the parents themselves, but impact the teams they are working in. When a colleague needs to step out due to care duties, team members need to step in and take on extra tasks on top of their regular responsibilities. Having a good team spirit and supporting each other is important, however, this support does not need to remain uncompensated when this is unequally distributed between colleagues with care duties. Acknowledging that pressure on caregivers translates to pressure on all colleagues is of great significance. This allows for provisions to compensate colleagues who step in, for example to have back up teaching staff or to make co-teaching the norm. These practices and provision currently differ between faculties and faculties can learn from best practices as well.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE:

We came up with a set of recommendations for policy and practice for creating a supportive working environment:

-  1. Open and immediate communication about the available support for expecting and new parents.
-  2. Fair contract extensions in case of parental leave
-  3. Support to academics returning from maternity leave to make up for losses in research and teaching time
-  4. Actual reduction in workload for nursing employees and provision of easy-access and well-equipped nursing facilities in all UU office buildings
-  5. Respect colleagues' working hours and time-off, and limit work activities to times when formal care is available
-  6. Institutionalize peer-support for new parents within and across faculties
-  7. Flexible arrangements to address specific needs

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