

Review of the Returning Carers' Fund

January 2016

1. Background

The Returning Carers' Fund was established in TT14 with £500,000: £400,000 from the VC's Diversity Fund and an additional £100,000 from the Oxford Biomedical Research Centre (BRC), ring-fenced for the support of women in MSD working under the BRC remit.

The stated purpose of the Returning Carers' Fund is to:

- a) Support those who have taken a break for caring responsibilities to re-establish their research careers.
- b) Increase the visibility of the University's support for carers, with a view to changing perceptions of balancing a research or academic career with caring responsibilities.

The Fund is based on a model piloted in MPLS in 2011/12. It is a small grants scheme open to academic and research staff who have taken a break of at least six months for caring responsibilities. Applicants determine what support would best meet their needs, which has included activities such as conference attendance, visits by research collaborators and short-term research assistance.

The initial intention was to run the scheme in the academic year 2014-15, and to evaluate it after this time to consider how the University might best support those who take a break for caring responsibilities. Funding has proven to be sufficient to continue to run the scheme in the academic year 2015-16.

In TT15 the Fund Advisory Group, comprising representatives from each Division and from the Equality & Diversity Unit (EDU), reviewed the functioning of the scheme. On the whole it was felt to have worked well and to have been well received by applicants. The criteria and guidance were amended slightly to provide additional clarity where it was felt to be needed and to address questions raised by applicants. The current criteria are given in Annex 1.

In December 2015 the EDU conducted an evaluation of the outcomes of the scheme. In doing so it drew of the following sources:

- Data on the careers of grant recipients under the pilot scheme in MPLS;
- Reports submitted by applicants awarded grants in the initial (MT14) round of the current scheme;
- Feedback from attendees at a networking tea held for grant recipients in September 2015; and
- Feedback provided by applicants in their application forms, which include a box for this purpose.

This paper provides background data on the number and value of awards made under the scheme; assesses the extent to which the Fund has achieved its objectives; outlines other issues that have been identified during the evaluation process; and makes recommendations on the University's future support in this area.

2. Applications and grants

To date there have been three rounds of the Returning Carers' Fund: in September 2014, February 2015 and November 2015; and 89 awards have been made (to 88 women and one man) to staff in 36 departments. The numbers of successful applicants are given below:

| | MT14 | HT15 | MT15 | average | total |
|--------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|----------------|--------------|
| Humanities | 5 | 4 | 3 | 4 (13%) | 12 |
| MPLS | 12 | 7 | 4 | 8 (27%) | 23 |
| MSD | 8 | 16 | 11 | 12 (40%) | 35 |
| SSD | 5 | 6 | 7 | 6 (20%) | 18 |
| OU DCE | | | 1 | | 1 |
| Total | 30 | 33 | 26 | 30 | 89 |

It is difficult to make direct comparisons with University data on the number of staff taking leave for caring purposes. However, by way of an approximate benchmark, over the last three years, 59% of maternity leavers in grades eligible for the Fund have been in MSD, 16% have been in MPLS, 16% have been in SSD and 8% have been in Humanities. Eighty-seven of the 89 awards have been made to women returning from maternity leave.

The value of awards has varied from £798 to the maximum (in exceptional cases) of £10,000, with an average of £4,566. This is in line with the normal expected maximum award of £5,000. The table below shows the value of awards by Division.

| | MT14 | HT15 | MT15 | average | total |
|--------------|-----------------|-----------------|----------------|----------------|-----------------|
| Humanities | £28,104 | £16,757 | £10,416 | £4,606 | £55,277 |
| MPLS | £57,130 | £30,295 | £15,725 | £4,485 | £103,150 |
| MSD | £29,659 | £60,708 | £35,514 | £3,597 | £125,881 |
| SSD | £24,575 | £31,254 | £23,575 | £4,411 | £79,404 |
| OU DCE | | | £2,580 | £2,580 | £2,580 |
| Total | £139,468 | £139,014 | £87,810 | | £366,382 |

Taking averages over the first three rounds of the scheme, it is estimated that it would cost the University approximately £300,000 per annum to permanently establish the scheme.

3. Review of the Fund

3.1. EPSRC grants

In 2011/12 MPLS launched a small grant scheme for researchers working in the EPSRC remit who had returned from maternity leave. Funded by the EPSRC Developing Future Leaders programme, it was designed specifically to address the issue of retention of women in science research careers after a career break.

In November 2011, 15 grants were disbursed. In September 2012, a further 15 awards were made, four to women who had been awarded grants in the first round.

An evaluation conducted at the time by the MPLS Divisional Office concluded that the grants appeared to have had a significant impact on the careers of researchers who had taken a career break:

- There had been some clear scientific outputs that would not have happened without the grants or would have taken longer to achieve.

- There were positive impacts on careers as evidenced by publications, presentation of papers, development of collaborations and work to underpin research development.
- There was significant and universal positive psychological impact on the confidence and re-engagement of those who had taken a career break.

In November 2015 the MPLS Athena SWAN Facilitator collected information on the posts that the 26 grant recipients now hold. All are still in research or academic roles: twenty are in academic or research posts at Oxford, three are in academic or research posts at other HEIs, two are in research posts at national research institutes and one is a consultant with Isis Innovation. Several have progressed to more senior positions, secured externally-funded fellowships and/or been awarded professorial title in the Recognition of Distinction exercise. Therefore, it would be reasonable to conclude that the grants have successfully contributed to retaining women in academic research careers, principally at Oxford, thereby increasing the pipeline of female academic and research staff in support of the University's equality objectives to appoint more women to senior academic posts.

3.2. Reports from MT14 round

All successful applicants to the Returning Carers' Fund are asked to complete a report within twelve months of receiving their award. Of the 30 awards made in MT14, 23 reports have been returned. Of the remaining seven, four applicants are yet to spend the grant in full.

Aim 1: Support those who have taken a break for caring responsibilities to re-establish their research careers

Applicants in the first round requested grants to fund conference attendance (nine applicants); research or administrative assistance (nine); teaching, college or NHS buy-out (eight); visits to or by research collaborators (seven), training courses (four); fieldwork visit (one); salary support (one); purchase of consumables (one); and a research group retreat (one). (Note that some applications covered more than one activity). They reported a wide range of outcomes directly linked to the funded activities, summarised in the table below and then described in more detail.

| | Career progression | Grant applications | Research outputs | Visibility of research | Networking and collaboration | Skills and knowledge |
|--------------|--------------------|--------------------|------------------|------------------------|------------------------------|----------------------|
| Applicant 1 | x | | x | | x | x |
| Applicant 2 | | | x | | x | x |
| Applicant 3 | | x | x | | x | |
| Applicant 4 | x | x | x | | | x |
| Applicant 5 | x | | x | | x | x |
| Applicant 6 | | x | x | | | |
| Applicant 7 | | | x | x | | |
| Applicant 8 | | | x | | x | |
| Applicant 9 | x | x | | | x | x |
| Applicant 10 | x | x | x | | x | |
| Applicant 11 | x | x | x | | | |
| Applicant 12 | | x | x | | | |
| Applicant 13 | x | x | x | x | | |
| Applicant 14 | x | | x | | x | x |
| Applicant 15 | | x | x | | x | x |
| Applicant 16 | x | x | | | x | x |
| Applicant 17 | | x | | x | | |
| Applicant 18 | | | x | | x | x |
| Applicant 19 | | x | x | x | | |
| Applicant 20 | | x | x | | | |
| Applicant 21 | | x | | | | |
| Applicant 22 | x | x | | x | x | |
| Applicant 23 | | | x | | | |

Career progression:

- Three applicants have secured fellowships; one directly attributed her success to the skills, confidence and networks she gained through being awarded the grant and believes she may otherwise have dropped out of academia.
- One applicant has secured a one-year extension to her contract.
- Two applicants believe that they will be well placed to secure a contract extension when their current contracts end.
- One applicant is intending to apply for accelerated probation.
- One applicant had been able to fundraise for a spin-out company, potentially worth £12m.
- One applicant mentioned that her successful grant applications have had a positive impact on the career progression of members of her research group.

Grant applications:

- Seven applicants had made successful grant applications. Four of these were over £1m in value.
- A further five applicants had submitted grant applications and were waiting to hear the outcomes.
- Four applicants mentioned that the Returning Carers' Fund was their first experience of applying for funding. It filled an important gap on their CV and gave them the confidence to apply for further grants in future.

Research outputs:

- Four applicants had papers accepted for publication.
- Nine applicants were preparing papers for publications.
- Five applicants had presented research findings at a conference.
- One applicant specifically mentioned that the grant had allowed her to secure a publication record that would make her eligible for the REF 2020.
- One applicant had developed a model that had influenced public and private sector discussions on climate change.
- Four applicants believed that the grants had helped them be more productive, work more intensively on producing research outcomes, and develop new lines of research. One applicant noted that being awarded the grant acted as an incentive to put in place a clear plan of action for her return to work which focused on her research.

Visibility of research:

- Three applicants had developed new websites to increase the profile of their research. One had received over 1,300 visitors to her site in the first six months. Another stated that grant reviewers had visited her site.
- One had set up a Twitter account, which had led to increased networking and greater visibility of her work.
- Two applicants were organising major conferences to showcase work in their fields; one of these would contribute directly to a publication.

Networking and collaboration:

- Nine applicants specifically mentioned that the grants had allowed them to make new contacts and explore opportunities for new research collaboration.
- One found that attending a conference had given her the opportunity to meet with other female researchers with children, who had motivated her to continue making grant applications and to stay in science.

New skills and knowledge:

- Eight applicants referred to having learnt new skills and gained knowledge that would help them develop their research.
- One mentioned that she would be able to pass on these skills to others in her team.
- One believed that her new skills had made a direct contribution to her ability to submit a fellowship application.
- One had gained a teaching qualification which would support her future career progression.

The reports clearly show that the grants have had a significant impact within a short period of time. Only one person reported that the grant had not supported her to further her career: this was a postdoc whose contract had not been renewed.

Aim 2: Increase the visibility of the University's support for carers, with a view to changing perceptions of balancing a research or academic career with caring responsibilities

Applicants greatly value the scheme and appreciate its flexibility and the simple application process. An overwhelming number of reports mentioned the confidence that the award had given them and the importance of the Returning Carers' Fund in signalling that the University recognises the challenges faced by those with caring responsibilities, as typified by this quote:

'The return from a very small amount of money can be really significant and make an important contribution to the ongoing career development of staff. Most people will have caring responsibilities at some point in their lives. This fund sends an important message that Oxford recognises the difficulties of balancing family and work but that the institution is willing to offer a little extra to enable staff to achieve that balance.'

Applicants talked about 'feeling valued' and 'motivated', of the grant giving them a 'morale boost', and of 'increased loyalty to the University'.

Unintended outcomes

As well as contributing to the two aims of the Fund, applicants reported unintended positive outcomes:

- **Impact beyond the applicant:** Two applicants who had used the funds to employ research assistants reported benefits for those individuals. One, who had previously been unsure of his career direction, had been inspired to continue to study for a PhD; the second had successfully applied for another post in the department.
- **Influencing other institutions:** One applicant had been interviewed for a post at Heriott Watt University. During the interview she had mentioned the scheme, and as a result the Head of Department had wanted to learn more about it.

3.3. Networking tea

In September 2015 all applicants were invited to a networking event during which they were asked for their feedback on the Returning Carers' Scheme. There were 18 participants, of whom six have subsequently returned formal reports.

Impact of the Fund

The attendees reinforced the key impacts described above: that the Fund gives researchers returning from a career break confidence and clear messages about the University's

commitment to their careers; and that it has led to tangible career development opportunities and outcomes.

Participants talked about the importance of the Fund in terms of giving them the time and space to reengage with and reinvigorate their research. For example, buy-outs provide valuable time to focus on data, produce results more quickly, write publications and apply for grants, while conference attendance and visits from research collaborators provide an opportunity to reconnect with colleagues following a time away from the office. There was considerable evidence that grant recipients can achieve significant results within a short period of time with a relatively small amount of money.

Application process

Participants valued the flexibility of the scheme and the straightforward application process. Their main point of criticism was that application deadlines had been irregular, meaning that support had not always been available at an optimum time. This is something that could be easily rectified if the Fund were established on a permanent basis.

It was noted that the levels of support offered by departments to those returning from a career break vary greatly, and that it was important for the Returning Carers' Fund to continue to be administered centrally to ensure equitable access to its benefits.

There was some nervousness among fixed-term contract holders around discussing their plans with their PI or Head of Department, which is a current requirement of the application process. Some postdocs felt that it was 'a bit risky' to have a child and that being critical or honest about the difficulties they experienced might be detrimental to their career. This echoes feedback related to disclosing personal circumstances for the REF, and points to a broader cultural issue that the University needs to address.

A final point of criticism was that the Fund was not yet sufficiently publicised: some departments systematically encouraged all eligible staff to apply whilst others didn't promote it very well. It is perhaps to be expected that this might be the case as the Fund is still in its early stages, but it is noticeable that there have not yet been any applications from a number of departments, particularly in Humanities and MSD.

Other issues raised

As well as discussing the benefits of the Fund, participants talked more broadly about the challenges relating to caring responsibilities:

- **Further support for career breaks:** The level of support offered by departments to those going on and returning from a career break varies greatly. It was felt that steps should be taken towards ensuring greater consistency of experience across the collegiate University. Notably, college-only staff are excluded from the scheme, and colleges should be encouraged to provide similar support. The networking tea was greeted positively as an opportunity to exchange experiences, and it was suggested that it might be built on, perhaps through a mentoring scheme or careers advice targeted specifically at those returning from a career break.
- **Vulnerability of contract researchers:** Fixed-term contract holders feel vulnerable in their employment and unable to raise issues with their department, for fear of impact on their future employment. Although the Fund has had a very positive impact on a number of postdocs, it was felt that there are many more who drop out of academia, either because their contract expires during maternity leave or because they struggle to balance work and family life following the birth of a child. It was felt that the availability of

bridging support would be particularly beneficial to those whose contracts expire either during or shortly after their return from leave.

- **Attitudes and beliefs towards career breaks:** The attitude that taking a career break is detrimental to a research career often prevails and puts pressures on postdocs when they consider starting a family. Some women expressed that they felt pressured to return to work early, either by colleagues or through a sense of responsibility towards their research group and/or PhD students.
- **Nursery provision:** Many participants expressed difficulties with obtaining a nursery place in a timely manner. This is an acknowledged issue and is being addressed by the Childcare Steering Group.

3.4. Feedback from applicants

Applicants are invited to contribute ideas and feedback in their forms. Three common concerns have emerged from these:

- A large number feel the need for better guidance, support and opportunities to share experience both before and on return from leave. Suggested mechanisms included a named point of contact in each department, mentoring, coaching and a support network.
- Some applicants noted the impact that a career break has on their career in terms of reduced research profile and outputs. It is felt that these are not sufficiently taken into account in grant application and recruitment processes, both internally and externally. It was suggested that the University should examine its own practices and use its position to influence others.
- Childcare for conference attendance was another common issue raised. Applicants would welcome the availability of additional funds to allow those travelling to conferences to take their children with them. They also encouraged the University to demonstrate good practice by providing crèche facilities at any conferences organised in Oxford.

Other feedback highlighted:

- The need for administrative and research support during maternity leave. This is the focus of a project being led by the EDU and others in Personnel Services.
- That it would be useful to run 'catch-up' courses for researchers working in fast-moving fields, to allow them to update their skills and knowledge quickly on return to work.
- That the University could provide better support to enable flexible working.
- The need for emergency childcare provisions.
- The need for improved careers advice for researchers on fixed-term contracts before they go on leave.
- The lack of opportunities for part-time working.
- The lack of facilities for breastfeeding mothers in some departments.

In addition to this direct feedback, the process of reading applications has given the EDU valuable insights into current practice at department level and where University policies might need to be reinforced.

4. Conclusions and recommendations

The purpose of this evaluation is to assess whether the Returning Carers' Fund has been successful in meeting its goals. The sources of evidence analysed above show that it:

- Provides an important indication that the University is serious about supporting the careers of those with caring responsibilities.
- Has improved the University's profile as an institution committed to investing in and supporting its academic and research staff.
- Has had a demonstrable impact on the careers of many staff returning from a period of leave for caring responsibilities.
- Offers good value for money.
- Has led to unintended positive outcomes.
- Provides valuable feedback about the ways in which the University can further improve its policies, procedures and practices.
- Does not provide a complete solution to the difficulties experienced by staff taking leave for caring responsibilities.

Therefore, we recommend that:

1. The Fund should be continued in its current format.
 - a. It has had a major impact on applicants' perceptions of the University as a supportive employer. To discontinue the Fund would be a retrograde step, potentially damaging the University's reputation and its chances of applying successfully for a Silver Athena SWAN institutional award in 2017. It should be noted that many of Oxford's competitor institutions offer similar schemes.
 - b. It is important that the Fund continue to be a central scheme to safeguard this level and type of support for all eligible staff.
 - c. Applicants appreciate the quick and flexible application process, and the opportunity to determine for themselves what will best support their return to research.
2. The Fund's Advisory Group should consider how better to promote the Fund, and ensure that all eligible staff are aware of it. Grant recipients have offered useful suggestions as to how this might be done.
3. Although some applicants have expressed nervousness about discussing their application with their PI or Head of Department, we believe this to be an appropriate part of the application process and recommend that it continues. These views are, however, indicative of a wider need to build a supportive culture and harness a positive attitude towards those taking career breaks. The University should continue to define and implement actions in this regard.
4. The University will renew its institutional Athena SWAN application in April 2017 and the self-assessment process will begin in TT16. As part of this process, a working group should be set up to systematically explore all of the additional issues raised in this paper and make concrete proposals for action where necessary.

EDU, January 2016

Returning Carers' Scheme: Criteria and Application Form

1. Applications are invited from academic and research staff for funding to support the development of their research career following a break in their career or a period of leave for caring responsibilities. This can include maternity, adoption and shared parental leave, or leave to care for an ill, disabled or elderly family member.
2. Applications should be submitted to your divisional contact by **4 March 2016**:
 - Humanities: Catherine McKiernan (catherine.mckiernan@humanities.ox.ac.uk)
 - Mathematical, Physical and Life Sciences: Daisy Hung (daisy.hung@mpls.ox.ac.uk)
 - Medical Sciences: Bríd Cronin (brid.cronin@medsci.ox.ac.uk)
 - Social Sciences: Tanya Baldwin (tanya.baldwin@socsci.ox.ac.uk)

Scope

3. Funding can be requested for any legitimate purpose identified by the applicant that addresses a clearly identified barrier to return to research and demonstrates a link to career development in research. Support could include, but is not limited to:
 - teaching buy-out to enable you to concentrate on research;
 - training or professional development;
 - short-term secondments to 'get up to speed' with recent research developments;
 - conference attendance to enable you to re-establish your profile;
 - short-term research or administrative assistance;
 - small scale lab equipment purchase;
 - visits to Oxford by your research collaborator(s).
4. Childcare-related expenses over and above a staff member's usual childcare costs are eligible if requested as part of an application for 'work related training' (which includes conference attendance and research visits). The existing financial limit will still apply.
5. The costs of providing a maternity cover post or other support during the leave period are not permitted. These should be discussed with and considered by the applicant's department, e.g. as part of the process of agreeing a maternity leave plan.

Funding

6. Awards will normally be up to a maximum of £5,000.
7. Larger amounts may be awarded, up to an absolute maximum of £10,000, where it can be demonstrated that the costs of the proposed activity cannot be broken down or reduced without affecting the impact of the activity, e.g. travel to a high-cost region.
8. Retrospective payments are not permitted. If you wish to apply for funding for an activity requiring expenditure before the application deadline, please speak to your divisional contact.

Eligibility

9. The scheme is open to all members of academic and research staff employed by the University, including those holding joint appointments, but excluding those who have

achieved full professorial title or who hold statutory chairs. The scheme is not open to members of staff with college-only contracts.

10. The scheme is open to all those who, at the closing date for applications:

- are currently on leave for a minimum of six months;
- have returned from a break of at least six months within the last two years; or
- have returned from two breaks each of at least six months within the last five years.

A break may comprise two or more discontinuous periods of leave totalling at least six months provided that they relate to a single life event, e.g. as part of a shared parental leave arrangement.

11. Only one application may be made per career break, as defined in paragraph 10.

12. Those on a fixed-term contract should hold a contract of employment for a sufficient period beyond the date of their application to permit the grant to be spent and to have an impact that increases the likelihood of them securing a new contract; they should also give evidence of being on a research or academic career trajectory (for example, with evidence of establishing research independence).

13. Applications must be signed by the staff member's supervisor, Head of Department or Faculty Board Chair and by their Departmental or Faculty Administrator to indicate that a) the department/faculty supports the application, and b) the applicant is eligible for funding, as per the above criteria

Administration

14. Please submit the attached application form to your divisional contact, who will:

- confirm that your bid is eligible for support, consulting your Departmental or Faculty Administrator as necessary; and
- submit a priority list of divisional bids for funding to the scheme's Advisory Group.

15. The Advisory Group will make decisions on funding, ensuring consistency across Divisions. The Group may approve a lesser amount if the case for funding is not deemed strong enough. Should applications received be greater than the amount of funding available in the scheme, the priority list from each Division and the strength of individual applications for funding will be taken into account.

16. You can expect to receive a decision on your bid by the end of Hilary term. There will be no appeal against the Group's decision. Applications will primarily be judged against the likelihood of delivering benefits that would enable the applicant to remain in an academic or research career, taking into account their career stage.

17. You will be required to produce a one page report on your use of the funds within 12 months of receipt of the funds. This will detail items such as:

- any research outputs, as evidenced by publications, presentation of papers, development of collaborations or submission of grant proposals;
- any career development, as evidenced by attendance at conferences or participation in training or development; and
- any other identified benefits to your career.