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Lord, JD and Joel, AA

978-0-9956413-2-7

Title	Organisational support throughout the maternity journey : the perceptions of female academics in UK Universities
Authors	Lord, JD and Joel, AA
Type	Conference or Workshop Item
URL	This version is available at: http://usir.salford.ac.uk/id/eprint/51805/
Published Date	2019

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BAM 2019 Conference

Track 7: Human Resource Management

*Organisational support throughout the maternity journey:
The perceptions of female academics in UK Universities*

Dr Jonathan Lord

Senior Lecturer in HRM & Employment Law

Salford Business School

Room 334, Maxwell Building, University of Salford, Salford, Manchester, M5 4WT,

UK

j.d.lord@salford.ac.uk

Dr Anna Joel

Lecturer in HRM

Salford Business School

Room 333, Maxwell Building , University of Salford, M5 4WT,

UK

A.A.Joel2@salford.ac.uk

Abbreviation

HE	Higher Education
UK	United Kingdom
POS	Perceived Organisational Support
HR	Human Resources
PND	Post-natal depression
RAE	Research Assessment Exercise
REF	Research Excellence Framework
TEF	Teaching Excellence Framework
HRM	Human Resource Management
HEIS	Higher Education Institutions
LMS	Line Managers

Abstract

Females represent nearly half of all Higher Education (HE) academic staff but they continue to be significantly underrepresented within more senior academic positions, in particular professorial roles. With this in mind, the workplace barriers that this group face in pursuing a traditionally successful academic career have been analysed in depth revealing that the decision to have children can act as the primary barrier for career progression.

This paper seeks to address the gap by gaining an insightful understanding of organisational support throughout women's maternity journey through the analysis of narrative interviews with twenty-six female academics who have had children, followed by interviews with various key actors working in HE with experience of managing maternity for academics. The research involves four levels of analysis; the pregnancy and maternity leave stage, the transitioning stage from maternity leave back to work, experiences soon after return to work, and the gradual career progression experience.

The first part of the narrative interviews with academic mothers explored their perceptions of organisational support whilst they were pregnant at work, and took maternity leave. The participants revealed that they had experienced unfair treatment for being pregnant or taking adoption leave, and experienced difficulty due a lack of maternity cover arrangements. Additional, interviews with line managers and HR practitioners in HE linked restricted maternity support with both organisational and government wide policies. Women academic's narratives further revealed that difficulties were experienced during the transitory period post-maternity leave. This included a lack of organisational adjustment upon return, in particular phased return. The overall experience of return depended predominantly on the type of line manager, and the expectation of a supportive HR department that was mainly administrative. In the interviews with HR professionals in university, they explained that their role was simply 'advisory', and the line manager holds all the responsibility, whilst the line managers contested that it was unfair for HR to sub-contract their responsibility on the line managers, and that HR should play a more active role. Thus, revealing contrasting expectations of the role each party should play in the return to work transition.

The third stage of women's narratives revealed that there was a lack of awareness for psychological support required after return to work from maternity, and both HR professionals and line managers agreed. This concept was particularly lacking in related literature. Finally, in the fourth stage women's narratives, highlighted that their experiences of gradual career progression post maternity were difficult for two reasons; organisational rigidity with flexible working, and lack of promotional opportunities for part-time working mothers. In the follow up interviews, HR professionals and line managers admitted that certain organisational structures restricted career progression for academic mothers.

The evidence derived from the four different stages shows that organisational support throughout an academic's maternity journey remains lacking and underdeveloped. The issue under consideration thus requires further attention, both in theory and practice in order to ensure more suitable support is extended to working mothers in academia.

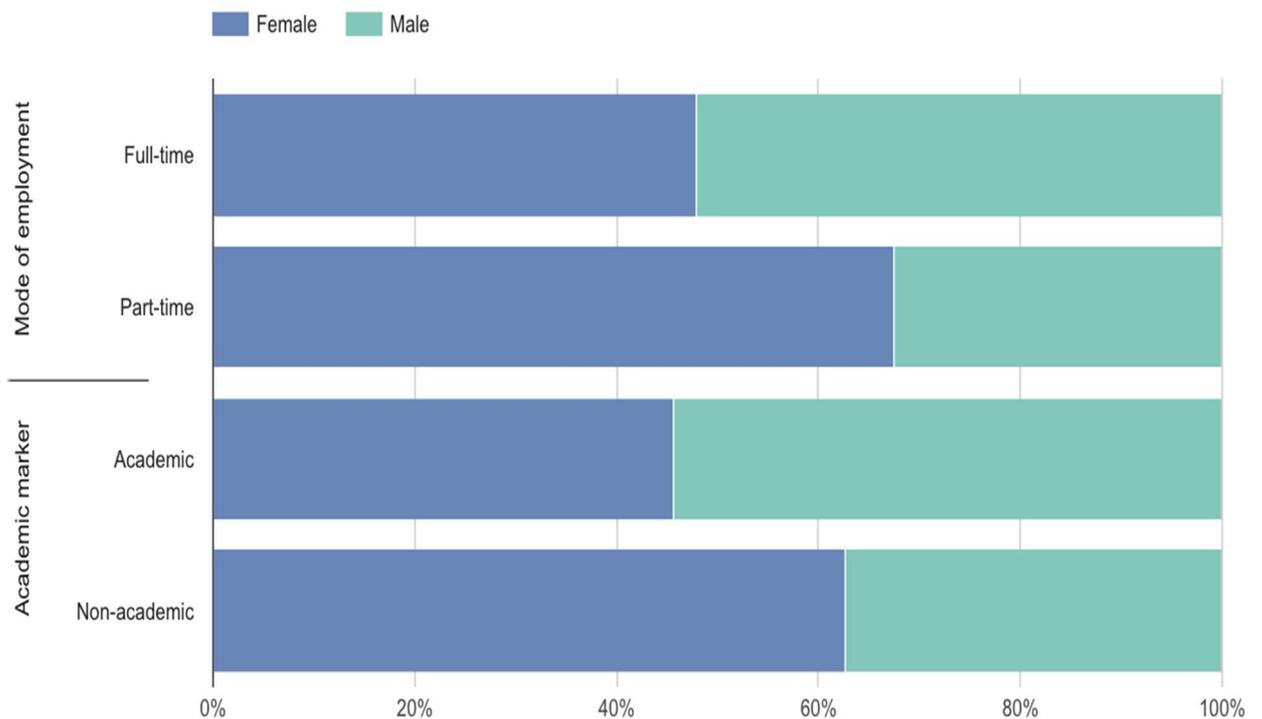
- **The development of women’s workforce and how this reflects in contemporary HE sector**

The HE sector has undergone many changes since the time of the Platonic Academy and other early ancient Greek universities. Notably, since the end of World War II, the academic world has flourished and increased in size dramatically, both in terms of student numbers as well as many new universities and colleges being established in the UK, and the rest of the world. Despite such tremendous growth, women still make up a very small percentage of academics who hold senior academic positions in HE (Ledwith and Manfredi, 2000; HESA, 2018).

The focus of this study is on female academics contractually employed in the UK HE sector across all levels of HE institutions, specially **to investigate the perceived support afforded to female academics throughout their maternity journey in selected UK universities.**

The latest break down by HESA data on differences between sex in academic contracts reveals that there are relatively less female academics as full-time staff at 47%, and significantly more on part-time contracts at 67%, in 2016-2017 as shown in figure 1.

Figure 1. Staff by mode of employment, academic marker and sex 2016/17



(Source: Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2018)

Figure 1 displays that in 2016/17, 48% of full-time staff and 68% of part-time staff were female. In the same year, there were more male academic staff (54%) than female academic staff (46%). More HE statistics, presented in table 2.1 below, show that 77% of academic staff (158,375) are financed by their HE provider, and the remainder have other monetary sources, such as research councils or multinational companies, etc. In 2016, 48% (100,165) of academic staff were employed on contracts, described as having a teaching and research function. The percentage of academic staff who were teaching was only 27%. The most shocking of these statistics however, was that there were 20,550 academic staff employed on a contract basis described as a professor in 2016/17, and of these staff, only 25% (5,050) were female compared to 75% (15,500) male professors [highlighted in yellow in Table 1. A further 6,050 academic staff were employed on other senior academic contracts, of which only 36% (2,175) were female (HESA, 2018).

Table 1. Academic staff by employment conditions 2016/2017

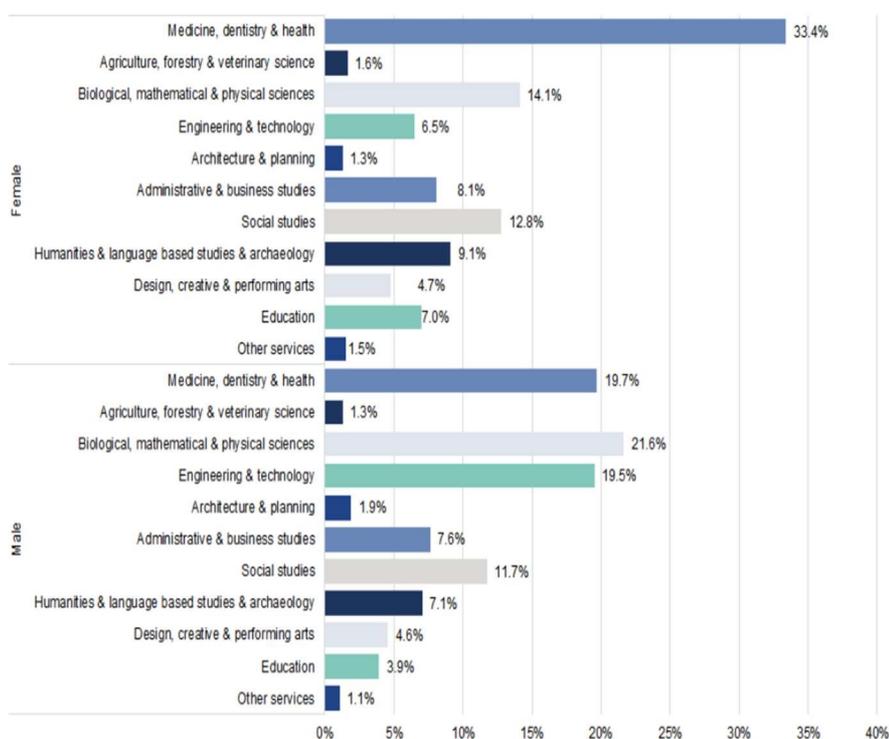
Mode of employment	Female	Male	Total
Source of basic salary			
Wholly general financed by the HE provider	71,830	86,545	158,375
Other sources of finance	22,645	25,850	48,495
Academic employment function			
Teaching only	29,425	26,705	56,130
Teaching and research	41,145	59,020	100,165
Research only	23,205	25,880	49,085
Neither teaching nor research	700	790	1,490
Contract level			
Professor	5,050	15,500	20,550
Other senior academic	2,175	3,875	6,050
Other contract level	87,250	93,020	180,270
Terms of employment			
Open-ended/permanent	60,355	76,670	137,025
Fixed-term contract	34,120	35,730	69,850
Total academic staff	94,475	112,395	206,870

(Source:HESA, 2018)

It is clear from this data that although females make up almost half of all academics in UK HE, and are widely represented in part-time contracts and on non-academic positions, as academic positions become more senior, the proportion of women declines significantly, with only 36% of senior academic positions occupied by females and just 25% of professors being females. On one hand, this is a significant improvement from the situation around 20 years ago, demonstrating that female representation included only 4% of professors and 11% of senior lecturers or readers (Cully, Oreilly and Dix, 1999; Booth, Burton and Mumford, 2000). Over the past 20 years, such statistics have improved for several reasons including: culturally changed perceptions of working women, women’s increased participation in the workforce and numerous policies to support work-family balance. However, women are still underrepresented in senior academic positions in UK universities.

In addition, there are also significant gender differences across the type of subject groups in universities. The male and female representation in those subject groups is displayed Figure 2.

Figure 2. Distribution of female and male full-time academic staff by generic subject areas 2016/17



(Source: HESA, 2018)

A majority of female full-time academic staff over a third (33.4%), were employed within medicine, dentistry and health cost centre subject groups, compared to just under a fifth (19.7%) of males. In contrast, over three times the proportion of males (19.5%) than females (6.5%) were employed in engineering & technology cost centre subject groups.

It is therefore evident that despite women making up half of the workforce on academic contracts, they continue to be under-represented in senior positions and they are even less represented in male-dominated subject areas (Wolf-Wendel and Ward, 2014). According to Savigny (2014), women in HE in the UK have a lesser chance of advancing their careers. Those who do succeed are often paid less than their male counterparts of the same position and rank. On the other hand, one may suggest that women in academic positions are privileged in comparison to women in other sectors because of the prestige, autonomy and flexibility that is associated with the profession. However, there is a clear career disparity between men and women within HE, where women are at a disadvantaged position (Baker, 2016; Liza HoweWalsh and Turnbull, 2016; Ashencaen and Shiel, 2018).

Over the last decade, the opportunities for women to get promoted have changed very little or not at all in some cases. In almost all the universities across the UK, women academics comprise a small minority across all strata of available positions (Forster, 2001). It is acknowledged that women are marginalised and are not treated like their male colleagues either in terms of salary or career progression (Thomas and Davies, 2002). This caters to why women are under-represented in senior positions within HE. The available evidence shows that women in academia still face barriers to advancement and there is still a considerable way to go before they achieve parity with their male colleagues (Forster, 2001; Baker, 2016, Howe-Walsh and Turnbull, 2016). A major factor for this issue, acknowledged in related literature, is women academics decision to have children and take time off for childbirth, and the struggle of workfamily balance following that (Donovan et al., 2005; Duxbury, L. and Higgins, 2005; Hoskins, 2010; Coleman, 2011; Bueskens and Toffoletti, 2018; Huopalainen and Satama, 2018). Given that family planning is one of the biggest factors catering to barriers in advancement for women in academia, it is evident from these findings that children create a pause and/or delay in one's career progression, which may also cater to the marginalism against women as suggested by Thomas and Davies (2002). It then becomes more accessible for men to progress farther and quicker, being more represented in senior positions. The unequal ratio of this progression has been longstanding over the years, making norms such as marginalism and other forms of discrimination more ingrained. And owing to this, as other scholars (e.g. Forster, 2001, Baker, 2016, Howe-Walsh and Turnbull, 2016) suggest, there is considerable

time before such barriers are eliminated which challenge longstanding customs of this sector. The issue of women academic's under-representation in senior positions has also been explored through a discussion around gender inequality and intersectionality.

Similar research by Blackmore (2014) argued that universities face an ageing academic workforce with implications of a shrinking pool from which to recruit managerial and research leaders. This is exacerbated by the mobility of early career researchers and lack of employment security which further impacts the pool of leadership talent. Blackmore also insisted that leadership for early career female academics may be a preferred, but not a possible option, due to structural difficulties in the overall HE system and academic career ladder (see section 2.4.3). Therefore, the pool of aspirant leaders and women will not expand as the sector expands.

There are further claims that young mothers are not perceived as focused academics, nor is their work or career given as much attention, for the very fact that they took a career break to have children (Ledwith & Manfredi, 2000). Those who are highly motivated individual women, who try to, and do manage as academics and as young mothers concurrently, often face their own set of challenges. As Gatrell (2013) put it in her title to a research paper: 'little has changed: the conflict between "public" and "private" mothering remains in place'. Extending this further, Savigny (2014, p. 797) wrote 'Women know your limits'; she explained how others in academia asked her during her research, "why anyone would really be interested in listening to a load of middle class women whinging", and her response was, "why should female academics be subject to the levels of sexism that are apparent within the profession?". Whilst these explanations are a portion of the reason for women's under-representation, there is a different argument that it is in fact women's choice [to be under-represented]. In which case, the system has not completely failed in delivering equal opportunities to both sexes overtime, but it has been a matter of choice – which has been treated as a culture as it remains to be a popular choice. Hence, why, women are consistently under-represented till date. HE as a sector has recognised the issue of women's under-representation in senior positions and has introduced a programme to help support women in HE.

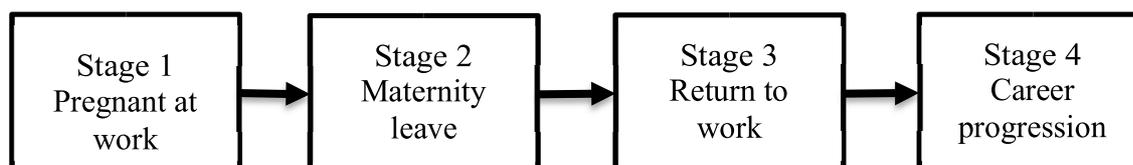
- **Methodological approach**

The researchers received an overwhelming number of emails from female academics expressing both an interest to take part and an interest in the research area in general. After interviewing twenty-six female academics, the researchers had accumulated extensive, in-depth, and rich data.

Once the data from female academics was collected and analysed, the findings were presented to a small group of 5 HR professionals and 3 Line Managers (LMs), also from University A. Both groups had experience managing an academics maternity process.

The researchers therefore conceptualised the maternity journey as consisting of four sequential stages: announcement and pregnancy at work, maternity leave, return to work, and eventual career progression. These stages are depicted in Figure 3.

Figure 3. The maternity process



The four stages provide a framework for the narrative interview. Previously, Miller et al., (1996) had conceptualised the four sequential stages of maternity as; announcement, preparation for leave taking, leave, and preparation for return and re-entry. The four stages in this study are similar to Miller's framework but differ in that Miller concentrates more heavily on individual 'preparation' for leave-taking and for return. Conversely, the focus of this study is on the organisation and support provided at each important stage. Furthermore, whilst Miller's framework stops at re-entry, this research takes it a step further and looks at gradual career progression post re-entry.

- **The Women's Narratives- female academics accounts of support before, during and after maternity**

Using narrative enquiry, the second objective was achieved through an investigation with twenty-six female academics that had experienced the maternity process in a UK university. The detailed narratives of women's experiences and perceived support throughout four stages of their maternity journey are considered in turn in this section.

- Stage one: Concluding female academics' perceived organisational support during Pregnancy and Maternity leave

Findings in the first stage revealed perceptions among women of direct and indirect discrimination against being pregnant. This supports existing literature which claims there is persistent discrimination in the workplace (Gatrell, 2013; House of Commons, 2016; Vonts et al., 2018), especially in universities (Thornton, 2003; Gatrell, 2013). There was a general lack of knowledge and negative perceptions towards taking adoption leave (Creedy, 2001) and many women experienced difficulties due to a lack of maternity cover arrangements (James, 2007). Research also shows that colleagues typically cover work during maternity leave (Williams, 2004) and that a lack of maternity cover may reinforce gender divisions (Patrice, Buzzanell and Liu, 2005; Mihailia, 2018). There were also issues around communication during maternity leave, even though it is often contested in the literature that women should be able to negotiate the level of communication they engage in throughout their maternity leave (James, 2007).

- Stage two: Concluding female academic's perceived organisational support when returning back to work from maternity leave

The second stage of the maternity journey revealed that the return to work experience was heavily dependent on the immediate organisational context, including the 'ideal academic baby' phenomenon. This finding contradicts previous literature that identified the 'May baby phenomenon' (Wilson, 1999; Armenti, 2004) whereby May is presented as the ideal time to give birth because it was less disruptive to the academic calendar and to colleagues. However, the findings of these studies focused on academia as the priority, whereas this study focused on women's needs as the priority. The nature of line managers also emerged as a critical contributor to the experience of support when returning to work. Overall, the findings revealed two dominant types of LMs that were based on characteristics and attributes that affect the support women perceive they receive. This accords with research that argues a manager's gender and personal beliefs (e.g. feminists/ family-friendly, etc) affects how they manage and how others then respond to their management (Winter, 2009; Deem and Brehony, 2003).

The organisational culture in a university is structured at the departmental level (McAleer and McHigh, 1994; Floyd, 2016). This study revealed that experiences in female dominated departments were generally perceived as positive (Sheppard and Aquino, 2017). while experiences in male dominated departments were generally perceived as negative. However, there were also instances of 'Queen Bees' (Staines et al., 1974)- female colleagues who were perceived as 'honorary men' and unsupportive (Bagihole and Goode, 2001). This research has found that this informal culture acts both favourably (female department) and

unfavourably (male department) for women returning to work from maternity leave. Additionally, the involvement of HR in maternity was perceived as insufficient and minimal; administrative rather than supportive; and as implementing ineffective policies or policies that existed on paper which perished in practice. These findings contradicted claims in the literature that HR's role was that of 'understanding' and 'effectively' managing individuals in the workplace (Schaper, 2004), primarily because it was the line managers who managed, not HR. It also contradicts Bratton and Gold's (2017) claim that HR professionals work to replace older, mainly administration-based personnel management functions so that they can identify the most appropriate culture for their workplace. Although this was the hope expressed by women in this study, their experiences were of the opposite scenario.

- Stage three: Concluding female academic's perceived organisational support after return to work from maternity

The findings in stage three focused on the perceived and tangible support required in relation to physical and psychological needs. The absence of breastfeeding facilities was a compelling concern. Breastfeeding facilities were perceived as impractical, lacking privacy, and of a low standard. This strengthens the claim that women's return to work can be a significant barrier to continued breastfeeding (Wallace, 2006; Daud et al, 2017;). Employers are therefore urged to do more to support breastfeeding by implementing policies and practices that promote continued support (Weber et al., 2011; Hardy et al., 2018). Moreover, this study uncovered perceptions around the difficulty and lack of support experienced whenever children (specifically young nursery-going children) fell ill. This agrees with reports which shows that working parents suffer when their children fall ill (Phillips, 2004) and the burden of inadequate paid sick leave falls heaviest on mothers (Lovell, 2004).

This study found there was a substantial unmet need for leave to care for ill children. Furthermore, attendance at conferences and general work-related travel was also perceived as lacking organisational support and an impediment to career progression (Lipton, 2018, Calisi, 2018). This strengthens Ramirez et al.'s (2013) claim that the conference arena is a genderneutral space where the specific needs of women as consumers are not well recognised (Fetterolf and Rudman, 2014). Childcare in general was problematic. This is reflective of a widely expressed concern that childcare costs in the UK are unbelievably expensive (Ronzulli, 2014; Del Boca, 2015; de Muizon, 2018).), and that childcare is positioned as a woman's rather than a parent's issue (Savigny, 2014; Andringa et al., 2015). This study therefore contributed

to the literature, particularly in an HE context, by exposing women's disappointment that childcare was not recognised as a timetabling constraint, and that on-campus childcare needed to be of a high standard and practically accessible.

Regarding the psychological aspects of women's experiences of returning to work, childbirth and motherhood have been identified as potentially vulnerable periods for women in terms of their mental health (Cust, 2016; Williams, 2013; Carter et al., 2018). These included feelings that motherhood was invisible (Bagihole, 1993; Akass & Duthie, 2016) and of isolation after return to work. There was also a strong desire among women for a support network (Bagihole, 2007) to overcome such isolation. There was also a lack of support for post-natal depression (PND) after a return to work, even though PND is identified as a major public health concern (Royal College of Midwives, 2015). Similarly, although miscarriage is recognised as a life-altering event for a mother (Hazen, 2003; Moulder, 2016), and its psychological effects are recognised as similar to the bereavement process (Conway, 1995; Hutti, 2005; Evans, 2012), there was a general lack of awareness and overall support for this issue. Winegar (2016) argued that there is societal and organisational silence on the reality of miscarriage and organisations need to do more to provide support in this area (Hazen, 2003; Winegar, 2016; Porshitz and Siler, 2017).

- Stage four: Concluding female academic's perceived organisational support in gradual career progression with motherhood

The fourth stage of the maternity journey revealed that motherhood inevitably influenced career progression among female academics (Cheung, 2014; Kinman, 2016). This is due to the impractical management of flexibility and the existence of a strong presentism culture (Henderson et al., 2016). Furthermore, various organisational factors also hinder academic career progression for mothers, including part-time working, publications, and workload allocation. Flexibility appeared to be 'double edged' in that, while it had the potential to be the best part of an academic's job, it also had negative connotations (Williams, 2004). Academic time is reported as being almost infinitely malleable and infinitely extensible (Crang, 2007; Sang et al, 2015); therefore, the privilege of working from home is argued instead to be a 'Trojan horse' that allows the demands of academia to impinge on private time (Crang, 2007).

The lack of female role models in senior academic positions was also a source of discouragement. This is reflective of broader HE statistics which show that the proportion of

women in academic roles declines significantly as positions become more senior. Indeed, only 25% of professors are female (HESA, 2018). To address the issue of female academics' underrepresentation in senior positions, the Athena SWAN agenda was established to support equality and diversity among staff (ECU, 2016). There are debates as to whether such awards help the gender equality agenda or are merely a 'tick box' exercise (Cheung, 2014). Nevertheless, although there are arguments for and against the effectiveness of Athena SWAN (Dickinson, 2013; ECU, 2015), the findings of this research suggested that it does seem to encourage HE institutions to open conversations relating to gender concerns, although its impact is yet to be seen in full.

Furthermore, there is widespread recognition that an academic career is demanding (Bailyn, 2003; Henderson et al, 2016). The findings of this research revealed that the 'biological-clock' and the 'career-clock' seem to be set against each other at the same time, and that working in the evenings and weekends was problematic for mothers with childcare responsibilities. It has been argued that a system which relies on allocating work that cannot be completed within working hours may tend to facilitate inequalities in career progression with specific groups, such as women and carers, who are therefore more vulnerable as a result (Barrett and Barrett, 2011; Lillis & Curry, 2018). Furthermore, when women narrated their experiences of progressing in their academic careers, research publications were a primary concern. The general academic mind-set is one that perceives academic success as determined by the number of research papers published. However, the women in this study wished for a more balanced career where their teaching was also rewarded. There has been considerable debate about the relationship between being a successful researcher and being a successful teacher (Euwals and Ward, 2005). Research and teaching are often pitted against each other, with research emerging on top (Raey, 2000). There have been several reforms on this front, such as the introduction of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) in 2016 (Office for Students, 2018); however, as of yet, there is limited evidence as to its impact (Gillard, 2018).

Women in this study also questioned the idea of a 'free-willed' choice with respect to combining an academic career with motherhood, as incompatible organisational circumstances render this anything but. This view aligns with critics of Hakim's theory (e.g., Broadbridge, 2010; Kumra and Vinnicombe, 2010; Lewis and Simpson, 2015) who question its applicability and the idea that women have a completely 'free' choice with respect to their career life or their home life. They argued that women were unable to make real choices because they were

constrained by childcare difficulties, social forces, and institutional factors (Ginn, 1996). This appeared to hold true for the women in this study.

Another organisational barrier identified in the literature is the premise that trading down hours can mean trading down status (Equal Opportunities Review, 2014; Eagan Jr, Grantham, 2015). The perceptions in this study revealed that working part-time had a substantially negative impact on academic mothers. Working part-time meant working fulltime but on part-time pay. The workload was unmanageable and there was a lack of support or initiatives to support career progression when working part-time (Deianna, 2013). This is in line with Barrett and Barrett's (2011) view that a lack of transparency in universities allows cases of—often unwitting—discrimination to go undetected through the skewed allocation of different types of work, which is strongly associated with promotion. These findings shed light on the 'firewall' metaphor (Bendl and Schmidt, 2010) which presents an image of discrimination as 'virtual flexible spaces' whose boundaries are devised intentionally based on personal and organisational interests and managed through structural characteristics (Bendl and Schmidt, 2010). The 'firewall' was evident in the findings of this research. The next section outlines the findings relevant to achieving Objective 3.

- **Towards an Evaluation and an alternative course of action**

On the basis of the outcomes of the first two objectives, it was possible to develop ten conclusions, each of which are now presented in turn.

1. Managerial attitudes and non-verbal communications were key elements of perceived support

There was an attitude among managers that pregnancy can lead to incompetence and that the arrangement of maternity cover is not a valuable business expense. Women perceived the unfavourable attitude of pregnancy by supervisors (or colleagues) as an indication that the organisation disfavoured them (Eisenberger et al., 1986). Notably, there was a strong emphasis on the disfavoured non-verbal communication or attitude of managers. Consequently, female academics experienced guilt and perceived both discrimination and a lack of organisational support at the micro-level. This aligns with POS theory, in that favourable discretionary treatment, effectively communicated support from upper management, supervisory support, and monitored procedural justice are the main factors that contribute to perceived support.

Specifically, the current research contributes to POS theory by showing that it is the attitudes towards maternity rather than procedures that have a greater impact on perceived support. Procedures may simply be the by-product of attitudes, and positive attitudes towards pregnancy and maternity leave can drive improvements in organisational support.

2. Making reasonable organisational adjustments when managing maternity was a crucial aspect of perceived support

The theoretical implications of the ‘ideal time to have a baby’ phenomenon are deeply embedded in the concept of the gendered institution (Acker, 1992). This is because something as natural as childbirth, which has existed since time immemorial, is still not a norm; in fact, it is often seen as an inconvenience to the academic calendar. Moreover, it strengthens the ideal worker norm (Acker, 1990) because an academic returner wanting a phased return is not somebody who is devoting their life to work, and the experiences reported in this study showed that having family responsibilities and needing an adjustment were not generally supported. The public-private dichotomy also seemed to be at play here, as the organisational norms maintained an illusion of the workplace as asexual (Meyerson and Ely, 2000); the findings showed there was organisational silence on the requirements for reasonable adjustments postmaternity- such needs are almost non-existent in the illusion of an asexual world.

There was also a narrative around the requirement to be more involved in maternity cover arrangements. The implications of this narrative are that women wish to be involved and to negotiate choices around their individual needs during pregnancy and maternity. Moreover, workplace pregnancies are a natural occurrence that might involve temporary forms of accommodation; organisations should therefore not find themselves in opposition with feminine interests by positioning workplace pregnancies and maternity leave as abnormal events (Liu and Buzzanell, 2004).

3. The autonomous position of line managers on managing maternity exacerbated chances of unfairness

The gender, overall characteristics, and personal experiences of line managers seemed to influence the nature of the support afforded to women. For instance, there were male and female dominated departments that afforded differing levels of support to mothers, confirming the strong contribution of colleague support to POS theory.

In line with POS theory, managerial support was also a crucial factor informing the perception of organisational support among female academics. POS theory is also extended with the addition of ‘types of manager,’ who expressed different attitudes towards supporting maternity that were influenced by their gender and personal characteristics. Deem and Brehony (2003) agree and have questioned whether ‘new managerialism’ was simply a gender-specific set of practices influenced by dominant masculinities and created and implemented by male managers. They found that male managers preferred their own professional identity and self-regulation to institutional or HR policies (Winter, 2009). For these managers, their personal managerial decisions were grounded in their disciplines and their overarching biases, which often overrode the commitments of their organisation to equality of opportunity.

This discussion is relevant to Acker’s mechanism for maintaining or creating a gendered institution through interactional processes or ‘doing gender’ (Acker, 1992), which suggests that institutional settings can create gender differences and may inadvertently disadvantage one group in favour of the other. In this case, female academics returning to work after maternity leave have had an experience their male-counterparts would not have had and thus they were inadvertently disadvantaged, resulting in unfavourable (or favourable if they work in a supportive female department) treatment.

Being at ‘the mercy of line managers’ also meant that the women academics in this study experienced unfair practices when returning to work from maternity leave. Those who had supportive managers experienced an unfair advantage, and those who had unsupportive managers experienced an unfair disadvantage. The LM’s gender, personal life style choices, and characteristics were said to influence their support towards maternity management, albeit not exclusively. The research literature and interviews with HR revealed that universities are heading towards more controlled and autonomous systems of New Managerialism, although it was recognised there may be issues with this. Previous research suggests that Line Managers should be more comprehensively trained to eradicate unfair practices. By contrast, in this study Line Managers insisted that the university and HR should reconsider giving them this type of exclusive responsibility because, as academic-managers, they are unique, atypical managers and their demands are more complicated.

This finding aligns with and validates and strengthens POS theory, specifically the theory of ‘justice’ (Rawls, 1999) which enshrines the belief that fairness contributes strongly to perceived support among employees. In particular, it relates to interactional justice which argues that the perceived fairness with which decisions are enacted by authority figures should be fostered by

dignified and respectful treatment. It is further added that those in positions of responsibility should ideally offer honest and adequate explanations to those around them (Bies and Moag, 1986; Bies, 2001). The current research goes some way to challenge the assumptions underlying this narrative. For instance, for some women, HR managers- the ‘authority figures’, were themselves discriminatory (by ending a fixed-term contract before the due date because of pregnancy). This raises two main concerns: 1) how (and why) can ‘authority figures’ be honest, informative, and explain their decisions when they are the ones being discriminatory? 2) When the authority figures are dishonest and discriminatory, whose role/ responsibility is it to provide dignified, respectful, and honest explanations to employees? Therefore, to increase interactional justice and, ultimately, organisational support, the system whereby authority figures hold exclusive autonomy requires reconsideration.

4. The gendered divide of departments influences perceived support

The findings align with POS theory’s assumptions that the culture and perceptions of colleagues are an important contributor to perceived support; however, this finding also goes some way to highlight the important and potential influence on perceived organisational support of the dominant gender in the department. Although this research cannot be generalised, the fact that the women in this study who belonged to a female oriented department generally experienced support while women who belonged to a male dominated department experienced a lack of support, or even discrimination, indicates that the gender of the department (or colleagues) can contribute to the level of perceived support. This suggests that female academics returning to work after maternity leave in male dominated departments may require additional support to facilitate a smoother return. This strengthens the argument that a lack of accountability within universities gives departments and individual academics a degree of autonomy that leads to a pervasive and powerful informal culture that can act against women’s interests.

5. Lack of communication and transparency between the three parties (HR/LMs/Women) leads to different expectations regarding each other’s role in managing the maternity process

Notably, women academics were disappointed with HR’s role in the maternity process. They perceived HR as reactive rather than proactive, and as both administrative and inefficient. HR viewed their role as advisory and expected LMs to manage maternity. By contrast, LMs

believed it was unfair to delegate this responsibility to them because they are not as familiar with the expertise of the legal framework as HR professionals are, and they are academic managers who cannot be compared to more typical types of managers. Although they believed that training is crucial in eradicating the impact of individual managerial differences on women's experiences of returning to work, LMs explained that it is more important to reconsider the entire delegation of responsibility as the combined workload pressures on both managers and academics prevent them from being sufficiently supportive.

However, this raises an important question in that, if HR believe it is LM's responsibility to provide support for returning academic mothers, and LMs believe they are not resourced or equipped to provide that support due to other demands- who will support the returning mothers? HE institutions therefore need to work towards decreasing gender differences by providing quality support to those who may suffer due to gendered circumstances such as motherhood. This overview therefore contributes to POS theory by showing that 'managing role expectations' and communicating clear boundaries between each party's role in the maternity process can contribute strongly to perceived support. This is a recurrent theme in the 'blame-game' that arises between the two parties and is problematic for women going through maternity. Also important was the issue of different expectations regarding the amount of communication that should take place between the manager and the woman on maternity leave.

This strengthens the previous argument that a lack of accountability within universities gives a degree of autonomy to departments and individual academics that leads to a pervasive and powerful informal culture that can act against women's interests (Bagihole, 1993). POS theory is also related to psychological contracts in which employees and employers have a mutual expectation of inputs and outputs. Thus, if the employee believes that their loyalty and effort towards the organisation is higher than that given by the organisation towards them, this could lead to a negative perception of the organisation that results in dissatisfaction and/or a lower level of performance (Aselage and Eisenberger, 2003).

6. A high standard of physical facilities that are meaningful, practical and accessible is required after return from maternity leave

Tangible support for physical facilities includes on-campus childcare and breastfeeding facilities. This is rooted in the theoretical implications of the gendered institution with respect

to an ideal worker. Gender is ever present in the process, practices, images, and ideologies of the organisation (Acker, 1992), and this finding extends POS theory by highlighting the fact that even when formal systems are in place (e.g. on-campus nursery) to support mothers, their quality and accessibility is essential for increased perceived support. The overall finding regarding women's experiences of tangible support (or physical facilities) revealed that women not only considered it important that the university provided such facilities (e.g. for breastfeeding and childcare), but that these facilities should be practically accessible, of a high standard, and fit for purpose. Moreover, it was important that managers were aware and acknowledged women's needs for reasonable adjustments following their return from maternity leave. However, HR and LMs placed the responsibility for managing physical resources on each other, and the lack of such facilities on organisational and governmental policies.

7. Acknowledgement and awareness of psychological support following return from maternity leave was a significant element of perceived support

Support related to the psychological aspects of women's return to work was not extensively reviewed in the literature. The findings of this research revealed that there is a lack of awareness and acknowledgement from the organisation regarding the psychological aspects of support required by women after their return. Additionally, the views of HR and LMs on this issue showed the importance of formulating macro-level and meso-level policies to support women's psychological needs post return. There is also a need to instigate change in the cultural stigma attached to events during maternity that may not go to plan. This finding is deeply rooted in the gendered institution concept where women feel 'left out' because the experiences attached to their psychological needs post maternity are still not considered the norm. Moreover, it highlights the importance of addressing a returning mother's psychological needs in terms of organisational support. According to female returners, such support was either not experienced at all or experienced to a poor standard. Intangible support (or awareness of psychological needs) included experiences of post-natal depression and sadly, miscarriage, and there was an overall lack of awareness, acknowledgement, or mechanisms in place to support the vast array of mental health-related experiences related to post childbirth or a traumatic childbirth experience. Such experiences were rarely discussed or acknowledged by the organisation.

The notion of invisible motherhood is thus embedded in the gendered institution, the private-public dichotomy, and the ideal worker concept. It is a gender-specific experience and

an important factor for mothers in this study. This extends POS theory by showing that an environment where women feel comfortable and confident discussing the motherhood aspect of their lives without fear of being perceived as less competent is a significant contributor to perceived organisational support. Academic mothers expressed a need for support networks to help with feelings of isolation after returning to work. This research contributes to this discussion in two ways. Firstly, it contributes theoretically by showing that, as well as the antecedents outlined by POS theory (colleague, supervisory, HR support, and fairness) having 'representation' and a 'sense of belonging' to a group of people who have had similar experiences is an essential contributor to perceived organisational support. Secondly this research contributes practically because the researchers have founded and implemented a 'Women's Voice' support network in her own university which has been running successfully for over a year; this has acted as a strong agent of support for academic and professional women in the researcher's base university.

The findings of this study also showed that there was either no allocated body for women to speak to regarding post-natal depression at work or, if there was, it was unclear whom women could speak to. Furthermore, women expressed a preference for such organisations to proactively 'step-in' and check up on them. Thus, acknowledgement, awareness, and proactive support mechanisms for women returners who may have experienced miscarriage, or any other traumatic birth experience, are a crucial requirement of organisations. Findings relating to the need for psychological support have further highlighted the fact that post-natal depression (PND) is a difficult issue for returning mothers; it therefore requires additional acknowledgement and support from the organisation. The theoretical contribution this makes is that POS theory does not accommodate mental health issues, specifically PND, as an essential factor for perceived organisational support. It is vital for organisations to provide additional support for returning mothers who might be experiencing mental health issues, such as through supervisors and colleagues.

There was also a need to acknowledge the psychological support required for returning mothers who may have experienced a miscarriage. Consciously and pro-actively acknowledging and spreading awareness of the need to support such female staff members is an integral part of supporting returning mothers. The practical implication of this finding is rooted in the need to move away from two organisational assumptions; a) that the organisation's responsibility is only to support a working mother in balancing her work and family life, and b) the assumption that when a woman returns from maternity leave everything has gone

smoothly and to plan. This finding has revealed that a returning mother could be suffering from a traumatic experience relating to her pregnancy, such as miscarriage, which affects her wellbeing at work after her return. Therefore, it is crucial for the organisation (university) to acknowledge this and have support mechanisms in place to ease the transition and gradually settle women back into work after they return from maternity leave. This will benefit the returning mother's well-being and overall work performance.

8. A gender considerate view of influential organisational elements is required to support the balance between an academic career and motherhood

Another reoccurring theme was reflected in the unanimous agreement among women that specific organisational practices such as an emphasis on research publications, the unmanageable workload associated with balancing work and family, and the disadvantages attached to part-time working, all hinder the career progression of academic mothers. These findings are embedded in the theoretical constructs that formulate organisational practices as gendered and penalise women for motherhood. This study has highlighted the various organisational nuances that can impact an academic career after becoming a mother.

This not only emphasises the narrative of 'gendered institutions' in this research, it also broadens understanding of the fact that universities must pay attention to inconsistencies in formalising or informalising flexible working arrangements that inevitably lead to experiences of unfairness and discrimination. Ultimately, at the core of the flexibility discussion lies a consideration of how meaningful and practical this will be for mothers. Overall, this discussion has revealed that while flexibility in the academic profession is supposedly positive, it has negative aspects that inadvertently impact academic mothers. Whilst HR posits that it is the LM's responsibility to manage flexibility, LMs have explained that organisational structures restrict them from supporting flexibility. The implication of this is that meaningful and practical flexibility is key in supporting career progression among academic mothers.

This research has shown that motherhood inevitably impacts academic career progression. This can be attributed to the micro-level, personal attributes of female academics; however, it is mainly an amalgamation of various organisational structures and practices that hinder mothers. This is embedded in the claim that institutions are gendered, which has led to investigations into how organisational structures have discriminated against women and

perpetuated a male-dominated culture (Ackers, 1990). Initiatives such as the Athena SWAN agenda are a step in the right direction in terms of supporting career progression among academic mothers; however, its long-term effects are yet to be seen.

9. Childcare is still seen as a ‘woman’s problem’

There were several micro-level personal issues that arose which were related to career progression, such as feeling tired all the time which made it difficult to manage, and constantly feeling working mother’s guilt. However, female academics were primarily disadvantaged by societal and organisational beliefs around motherhood. Childcare responsibilities were persistently seen as a woman’s concern. It has been extensively reported that women-mothers in particular-tend to shoulder the bulk of childcare and domestic work, and this was also the case for female academics in this study. This inevitably gives women less time to pursue fulltime careers and/or gain promotion. Furthermore, maternity and parenthood provide acute productivity shocks through sleep deprivation and an increased propensity for illness in the household; these may reduce the time and mental space required for concentration. Mothers may also invest differently in household production, resulting for example in career interruptions. Additionally, there is also the influence of macro level policies.

10. Certain aspects of organisational support were dependent on broader governmental policies

It was noted that indirect pregnancy discrimination persisted despite macro-level legal policies and that HR was not a key player in this respect and admitted to having inefficient policies. At the macro level, governmental policies were described as incompatible with organisational practices, such as the adoption leave framework. Consequently, there were insufficient HR policies at the meso-level to support pregnancy discrimination claims and adoption leave.

There was discussion around the need for more precise governmental policies at a broader macro-level, such as a policy that allows women time-off to look after a sick child, unfortunate experiences of miscarriage, or policies to support those up taking adoption leave. Such policies would empower the organisation, especially HR, by providing the backing of a legal framework for improving support to returning mothers. Furthermore, there was also a recognition that the

university needs to put policies in place to support mothers and enhance overall gender equality, for example by providing childcare facilities at conferences.

- **Implications for the HE sector**

The findings have several implications for universities and key organisational actors regarding improvements in support for the management of maternity. Firstly, at the macro-level, it is important that policies must support the maternity needs of working women. This includes understanding the national framework in which the adoption system operates, and how nurseries respond towards casual sickness in children. It is important that policies are written with an understanding of the contexts in which they are to be implemented to allow for adoption leave or sickness in nursery-going children at a local level.

Universities and other organisations should also proactively and consciously make necessary and reasonable adjustments when managing maternity throughout each of the four stages. This includes providing a high standard of physical facilities for specific needs such as on-campus childcare and breastfeeding, and to ensure these facilities are practically accessible. A large-scale campaign is also needed to raise awareness and organisational acknowledgement of the potential psychological needs of returning mothers. Overall, universities should prioritise gender considerations when creating and implementing policies and practices so that women's, especially mother's, specific needs are accommodated, thus advancing their academic careers. As a direct implication of the findings from this study, a women's voice support network group has been founded and successfully set up by the researchers in their own university.

Another implication for universities is that they should also consider implementing a practice of continued three-way communication between the female academic who has announced her pregnancy, a delegated HR representative, and the line manager. A three-way meeting at the beginning of the maternity journey (when a woman announces her pregnancy) should be held which will provide an opportunity for open communication and questioning regarding each parties' role in the maternity management process. This will be beneficial in numerous ways; first, it clarifies what each party can expect from each other throughout the maternity journey, it shows the woman going on maternity leave that she is receiving both care and attention from the organisation, it curtails any concerns she may have, and she will feel that she can more readily contact the line manager or HR representative for any further assistance required. Additionally, universities should ensure that a HR representative is continually

involved in the maternity process with the line manager and the woman going on maternity, even if this is simply in the form of a “light touch”. For instance, the delegated HR representative can check in with the line manager and the woman fortnightly via phone or email. This will help reduce the risk of unfairness and will ensure that policies are implemented.

- **Conclusions**

This paper has attempted to make a valuable contribution to an area of knowledge in the field of gender and employment. Through applying a narrative approach to data collection across a number of university sites in the UK, and including HR employers and managers in the sample, the study explored women’s experiences of organisational support throughout their maternity journeys in academia. The key findings that emerged related to the lack of understanding and support of the needs of expecting and new mothers. It further came to the researcher’s attention that this was crucial given that understanding sat at the crux of any support offered. This highlights the importance of understanding and how organisational support can contribute to a more pleasant and less traumatic maternity experience as well as increase perceived support for women in academia. Women who felt understood, subsequently felt supported; this would then mean that they perceived the organisation as supportive, and it shaped a better experience to continue to progress along the career ladder.

As well as the need for an overall awareness and acknowledgement of women’s organisational support needs throughout the maternity journey, the findings also shed light on the various organisational elements that require further attention to improve perceived organisational support at different stages of the maternity journey. Moreover, this study has highlighted policy and practice-related implications which can equip UK universities to strengthen their support for mothers in academia.

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