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Gender, academic careers and the sabbatical: a New Zealand case study

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ABSTRACT
This article examines academics’ access to and perceptions of sabbaticals at a research-intensive university in New Zealand. Statistical and inductive analysis of survey data from 915 academics (47% of all academics employed) revealed inequalities in access to and experience of sabbaticals, and highlighted academic, personal and gender issues. Men and women were generally united in their views on how family circumstances, children, childcare, partners, unfairness, inequity, transparency and finances, affected ability to take sabbatical leave, and that lack of transparency and gatekeeping were barriers to access. Yet, women indicated greater concern than men about the application process, adequacy of leave and the role of the Head of Department in accessing sabbaticals. Women were also significantly more likely to be ineligible for sabbaticals owing to casual employment status, and women who were eligible tended to take fewer, shorter sabbaticals. Academics view sabbaticals as vital for career progression and the findings highlight the need to facilitate equitable access to sabbatical leave across an institution. Universities need to audit the uptake of sabbaticals by eligible academics and review the processes associated with application, approval and support for sabbatical leave.

Introduction

With roots in the Hebrew verb shabath, meaning ‘to rest from labour’, the concept of the ‘sabbatical’ is initially given in Mosaic law, defined as one year in seven when the land was to lie fallow, allowing rest and revitalisation for all those who worked the land. To some extent, the connotations and temporality of this original definition are retained in the modern usage of the term in university systems where, as Brewer’s dictionary (Evans, 1981, p. 979) describes, ‘sabbatical year’ refers to ‘a specified period of freedom from academic duties, during which time a professor or lecturer is released to study or travel’. In many universities, academics are able to apply for sabbatical after six to eight years of continuous service. Introduced in southern hemisphere universities as early as the 1860s, the modern sabbatical was first introduced in the USA at Harvard University in 1880 and the policy was gradually adopted across North American and, in the 1920s, British universities (Eells, 1962; Kimball, 1978; Pietsch, 2011).
In the contemporary era of the corporate university, the work of university teaching is increasingly divided up between permanently employed academics, who engage in teaching and research, and casually employed academics or ‘contingent faculty’ (Bradley, 2004, p. 1) who undertake university teaching but without the benefit of access to sabbatical and other benefits enjoyed by their colleagues in secure employment (e.g., Beaton & Gilbert, 2013; May, Strachan, & Peetz, 2013; Sima, 2000). Writing in the Australian context, Pietsch (2011, n.p.) observes, ‘As universities across the country managerialise, fewer and fewer maintain an entitlement to sabbatical leave’. In a full departure from the Mosaic conception of shabath as for all, the contemporary academic sabbatical is not equally available to all those engaged in academic labour.

Sabbaticals are a vital yet underexamined part of academic careers. There is, however, a lack of empirical data concerning equity and issues of access to what increasingly appears to be the ‘privilege’ of the sabbatical. In this article, we take up the question of equity, drawing on empirical data from our case study of a New Zealand university in order to investigate academics’ access to sabbatical leave and their perceptions and experiences of sabbaticals. We address the question of equity in terms of the divide between contingent and permanent faculty, while also addressing the question of equity among academics who are permanently employed.

Restructuring of the New Zealand tertiary sector in the 1980s has entrenched what is known variously as the ‘neoliberal university’ and ‘corporate university’. Universities are increasingly conducted as corporations, unable to rely solely on government funding as they were in the past (Blackmore, 2002). In the user-pays, quality-audit climate, the means to financial security for New Zealand universities is to grow student numbers and enhance research reputation. This has resulted in increased competitiveness among the universities and heightened pressure on academics to ‘perform’ as researchers, with both of these effects institutionalised in 2003 with the introduction of the Performance Based Research Fund (PBRF). The PBRF is a compulsory and individualised quality audit measure that particularly values research that is esteemed internationally. A number of scholars have established that in the PBRF context, gendered inequalities in the academy are maintained and indeed intensified, situating academic women at considerable disadvantage (e.g., Baker, 2009a, 2009b; Curtis & Phibbs, 2006). To the extent that sabbaticals provide a period of time for concentrated research and the potential for international travel and networking, they accrue new value in the PBRF context, alongside their abiding significance for academic promotion, which is similarly oriented to rewarding strong research performance. In view of this, the questions of access to and experiences of sabbaticals that we address here have acquired considerable urgency.

Most scholarship on the sabbatical originates from North America, and for this reason, there is a noticeable socio-geographic inflection to the emphases and findings. Reviews of sabbatical literature by Boening and Miller (1997), Kang and Miller (1999) and Sima (2000) elucidate the history, trends, and controversies surrounding the sabbatical in the USA and indicate that much of the literature is based on personal narratives, case studies and ‘broad descriptions of views on the sabbatical’ (Boening & Miller, 1997, p. 2). Drawing on the literature, they enumerate a wide range of identified benefits of the sabbatical for individuals and institutions, including: professional development; intellectual rejuvenation; increased morale; maintaining research productivity; improved and updated teaching; strengthened loyalty to the tertiary institution; strengthened academic
networks and service to one’s discipline; increased job satisfaction, and staving off job burnout. Complementing this, a recent study by Davidson and colleagues (2010) measured the restorative effects of sabbaticals, showing that sabbatics benefited from increased personal resources, decreased stress, a reduction in burnout and an increase in life satisfaction. Boening and Miller (1997), Kang and Miller (1999) and Sima (2000) also address controversies surrounding the sabbatical following claims that it is a paid vacation (Lively, 1994). They argue that increased transparency will minimise controversy and encourage recognition of the purpose and benefits of sabbatical.

Mamiseishvili and Miller (2010) have also argued for heightened transparency, but for different reasons. Their concern is that access to sabbaticals increasingly is a political matter, amidst the trend towards granting sabbaticals not as tools for the development of faculty, but as rewards for academics who attract external research funds and are already performing strongly as researchers. Also concerned with the dynamics of privilege and inequality, Eastal and Westmarland (2010) have pointed out that differential access among academics is an area of sabbatical research that has been underresearched and undertheorised. While there is ample research examining inequality among academics in many areas of their working lives – from factors such as mentoring, pay, promotion and publication through to divisions of labour at work and in the domestic sphere – there is a lack of empirical data examining the award and uptake of the sabbatical.

Informed by this literature, and responding in particular to the call for sabbatical research addressed to questions of equity and privilege, our study sought to determine:

- academics’ perspectives on the significance of sabbaticals in the context of their careers and
- personal, departmental and institutional factors that have enabled or hindered their access to sabbaticals.

Research approach and methods

Participants

As part of the case study, an online survey was administered in November 2010 at a research-intensive university in New Zealand. Invitations were emailed to all 1954 academic staff at the target university, of whom 915 (47%) responded. Of the responding participants, 13 did not declare their gender, 412 were male (45%) and 490 female (54%). A large proportion of participants were full-time ‘confirmed’ academics (41%, \(n = 338\)), of which 61% \((n = 205)\) were men and 39% \((n = 133)\) women. Academics new to the university are placed on a ‘confirmation path’ similar to a tenure-track process. After three to five years, assuming satisfactory performance in research and teaching, academics get confirmed into permanent positions. More women than men were on casual and fixed-term contracts and similar proportions held confirmed part-time positions (note that many academics have joint clinical appointments, so are only part-time for the university) (Figure 1). Many participants had either lived in New Zealand for 20+ years (32%, \(n = 285\)) or always (37.2%, \(n = 37.2\)); were heterosexual (89.7%, \(n = 809\)), and had a spouse/partner (85%, \(n = 740\)) who was in paid full-time work (48%, \(n = 421\)). Age, expressed in five decade categories, ranging from 20–29 to 60+ years, was most commonly 40–49 years (33%, \(n = 297\)).
The survey tool

The online survey consisted of 63 multiple response and/or free-form questions exploring factors that influence work and career development of academics. The questions sought details about demographic characteristics, domestic and other duties, household members and their care, qualifications, employment history, current employment status, career planning, sabbatical and university systems of confirmation, progression and promotion, responses to much of which will form the basis for ensuing articles. This article focuses on participants’ views regarding the importance of sabbaticals in career progression; whether their career had included sabbaticals; whether they considered access to sabbaticals adequate; how many times they had accessed sabbaticals and for how long each time. A further series of questions sought to identify factors that affect ability to take sabbatical leave. After each question, participants were invited to supplement their answers with comments. The last question pertaining to sabbaticals requested comments generally about sabbaticals and academic life at the university.

Data analyses

 Responses were counted and percent response calculated. In some cases, multiple responses were possible. Quantitative data were tabulated, graphed and analysed to determine whether distributions were significantly different using the chi-square and ANOVA tests as appropriate. Thomas’ (2006) general inductive approach was used to identify themes in the qualitative data from the free-form survey comments.

The context for sabbatical

In the university for our case study, ‘sabbaticals’ are referred to as ‘Research and Study Leave’ (hereafter, RSL). RSL enables an academic to follow an approved research
programme abroad, or in special cases, domestically, and is available to full- and part-time academics provided they hold an appropriate rank and appointment type, that is, Lecturer through to Professor. Research-only academics may also be eligible if they are employed at least at the rank of Research Fellow and have served for more than four years continuously on the Research scale (in practice, this is rare as many research-only academics are employed on fixed-term, grant-funded contracts). Teaching Fellows, Senior Teaching Fellows, Professional Practice Fellows and general staff are not eligible.

During the leave period, the academic is released from usual teaching and administrative duties, provided that satisfactory arrangements are made to ensure that these activities can continue during their absence. However, the university only provides temporary replacements for academics on RSL in exceptional circumstances. In all other cases, teaching and administrative duties must be covered by colleagues. It is a requirement that the proposed research programme will improve the quality of work of the university and extend the knowledge and teaching, research or clinical skills of the leave-taker.

Under the 2008 policy, a recipient of RSL was entitled to accrue $1300 for every year of service up to a maximum of $9100 for seven years (on a pro-rata basis for eligible part-time academics). Moreover, academics could be awarded a further $2000 in supplementary financial assistance, and they remain on full pay during their RSL. Under the 2008 policy, periods of parental leave were not considered as service contributing to eligibility for RSL, which is now permitted under the current policy.

Findings

As expected, our findings show that contract type and role affect access to RSL for men and women academics. These contractual effects are addressed in separate forthcoming papers focused on contractual segregation by gender, and gender in relation to part-time academic work. For those who are eligible for RSL, however, we found considerable agreement between the opinions of men and women on characteristics of RSL, their concerns about access to RSL and issues associated with taking such leave.

The importance of RSL

RSL was considered the second most important factor affecting career progression (Figure 2). Only success in grant applications was considered more important. While there was general agreement that RSL was an important factor, 75% (n = 501) of participants viewed RSL as important or vital to progression, and women placed slightly greater emphasis on the importance of RSL than did men (38%, n = 135, of women rated RSL as vital compared to 32%, n = 100, of men). The positive and helpful influence of RSL on academic work was affirmed in 24% of the 187 comments. For example:

RSL for me has provided the best time for reading, researching and more especially writing up of large publications like books. It’s saved me from giving up on academia, and sustained my spirit in this place. (Male Professor)

Only nine participants negated the importance of RSL, or commented that they did not need it, while a further six respondents stated that they did not know much about it.
Access to RSL

There were differences in access to RSL between men and women ($\chi^2 = 30.36, p \leq .001$), highlighting disparities in the contractual terms on which men and women are employed. Of the 915 academics completing the survey, 649 (83%) were in positions eligible for RSL, and of the 649, roughly half were men (322) and half were women (327). Confirming our supposition that contractual segregation by gender would affect access to RSL, we found that women were overrepresented at 76% (105) in positions that had no eligibility for RSL.

Among those eligible for RSL, one area where opinions were divided by gender was on the adequacy of access to RSL. Overall, the majority of men (56%, $n = 177$) reported that their access to RSL was adequate, while 47% of women indicated that access was inadequate ($n = 150; \chi^2 = 35.14, p \leq .001$). Differences in view about adequacy may be reflected in the pattern of leave taking (Figure 3). Given the balanced ratio of males and females eligible for RSL, we would reasonably expect that the proportions of men and women taking leave would be the same if there were no differences in uptake and duration of RSL being taken. Instead, it was notable that the duration of RSL taken by men and women for their first and second RSL periods differed ($F_{1,327} = 10.07, p \leq .01; F_{1,327} = 34.12, p \leq .001$ respectively), with women tending on average to take RSL periods 1.3 and 1.2 months shorter than men. Only three women had taken more than three RSLs compared to 28 men (Figure 3(d)–(e)). Comments indicated

![Figure 2. Importance of factors affecting career progression (5 is very important; 1 is not important) arranged in order of importance and indicating where differences between men and women were found. *p < .05; **p < .001.](image-url)
that the challenges of RSL included issues such as ineligibility, middle management, staffing and departmental issues, finance, family circumstances, and unfair, unfriendly and unaccountable processes (Figure 4). Notwithstanding the gender differences in eligibility for and duration of RSL just identified, not all of the challenges posed by RSL show significant gender differences.

**Staffing and departmental issues**

Although similar numbers of men and women considered a Head of Department (HoD) to have both positive and negative influences on ability to take RSL (35%, \( n = 117 \)), more men (51%, \( n = 97 \)) attributed positive influences to the HoD than women (41%, \( n = 61 \), \( \chi^2 = 13.02, p \leq .001 \); Figure 5). Moreover, more women (28%, \( n = 41 \)) than men (12%, \( n = 23 \)) attributed negative influences to the HoD. Seven participants also commented...
that their HoD (or other management) had constrained their access to RSL. Two comments with contrasting views illustrate the issue:

Department and HoD are always supportive of RSLs, but the access to RSL does rely on a number of factors (which could play both negative and positive factors to the final decision – where, when, and for how long). (Male Senior Lecturer)

I applied for RSL in March 2009 and it was approved in August 2009, but the [senior leader] refused to sign off on it until April 28 2010, 13 months later, and only 2 months before I was due to leave. The [senior leader] cited the reason for the refusal to sign off on it, [was] that there were insufficient PBRF outcomes. (Female Senior Lecturer)

Departmental flexibility, department-specific workplace factors and the influence of colleagues were also explored in relation to access to RSL, but the views did not differ

![Figure 4. Influences (positive, negative and mixed) on ability to take sabbaticals.](image)

**Figure 4.** Influences (positive, negative and mixed) on ability to take sabbaticals.

**Figure 5.** Perceptions of the HoD’s influence and the transparency of application process on ability to take sabbaticals.
between men and women. Departmental inflexibility was perceived to have a purely negative influence on ability to take RSL by 37% \((n = 144)\) and both a negative and positive influence by a further 39%. ‘Workplace factors’ generally were considered a negative influence \((57\%, \ n = 183)\). Comments reveal that the need to cover one’s absence, a heavy workload and/or unique/specialised work commitments \((15\%, \ n = 44)\) constrained their ability to take RSL. For example:

With a heavy workload spread throughout the year it has been difficult to identify a period where I could take RSL. The workload includes covering for other academics taking RSL and leaving (moving to other universities) and sometimes this happens without warning so I have extra teaching/coordination responsibilities. (Female Senior Lecturer)

Comment was also made that teaching commitments constrained ability to take RSL, and that teaching cover should be funded \((13\%, \ n = 38)\).

Seven per cent of respondents \((n = 20)\) indicated that RSL would be difficult to take because of medical, clinical or joint District Health Board appointments and 6% \((n = 18)\) indicated that other departmental factors constrained their ability to take RSL:

[A] small department with many vacancies and lots of demands. Hard for anyone to take RSL except for HoDs and lecturers threatening to sue for not reaching confirmation. (Male Senior Lecturer)

Men and women shared the view that colleagues had both positive and negative \((58\%, \ n = 172)\) effects on ability to take RSL. For example, 17% \((n = 51)\) indicated that colleagues had a purely negative effect, while 25% \((n = 74)\) of respondents said that they had a purely positive effect \((\chi^2 = 1.72, \text{NS})\). A few volunteered negative comments highlighted perceived inequity such as ‘RSL is taken by many senior staff (more than 25% of the department) every year leaving the rest of us to run the Department’ (Male Senior Lecturer).

**Family circumstances**

The impacts of family flexibility on ability to take RSL were similar for both men and women \((\chi^2 = 0.50, \text{NS})\). Family flexibility was both a positive and negative influence \((40\%, \ n = 116)\), while an additional 30% \((n = 88)\) perceived family flexibility to be purely positive, and 30% \((n = 87)\), a negative influence only. For the respondents who commented that it was difficult to arrange RSL due to family commitments \((11\%, \ n = 34)\), this was true for both sexes. In different ways, the following comments indicate that family responsibilities and the international travel component of RSL do not mix well:

RSL for me was a nightmare to organise because of having to take children out of school and sporting activities. The first three months of my first RSL, my husband could not be there so I had to organise everything and settle the children into schooling etc. – so the whole leave was not very productive. The second leave I took mainly in [place of work] because of the expense and hassle of finding a suitable base overseas. (Female Professor)

Family issues were always my problem with leave as well as the expense. Twice I took leave and left my wife and daughter in NZ. That was very hard and not good for me or my family. I would not recommend doing this. We felt it necessary for me to do this to advance my career. (Male Professor)

Men and women had similar views about the influence of children on ability to take RSL \((\chi^2 = 1.41, \text{NS})\). Children were overwhelmingly viewed as having a purely negative (48%,
n = 109) rather than a positive (7%, n = 16) influence, although almost as many participants felt that children exerted both positive and negative effects (45%, n = 102).

The impact of childcare on ability to take RSL was also viewed similarly by men and women ($\chi^2 = 1.16$, NS). For the majority of participants (58%, n = 93), childcare exerted a negative effect. Few participants indicated that childcare affected RSL positively (5%, n = 8), but 37% (n = 59) acknowledged both positive and negative influences. One respondent noted:

Re childcare this was a major barrier to [my] ability to make the most of my first period of RSL. For example, places in childcare at my institution [previous employer] were highly competitive and to take kids out I had to pay full fees for up to six months and then half fees for rest of period. Thus my RSL grant would have gone before even getting an airfare! (Female Associate Professor)

The influence of parents (as, e.g., sources of childcare support, or as requiring care) on ability to take RSL was viewed similarly by both men and women ($\chi^2 = 2.54$, NS). Parents were judged generally as exerting a purely positive influence (38%, n = 23) or both positive and negative influences (38%, n = 23), while only 23% (n = 14) viewed parents as entirely a negative influence. The influence of parental support is illustrated by this comment:

It was fun having my ten-year old daughter with me on my only child-accompanied trip but I could park her with my parents when I went off on my paper-giving jaunts, so she did not have much impact on my work one way or the other. Being able to use my parents’ house as a base of operations has been very useful to me, as has having a partner who was willing to put up with two month absences. (Male Associate Professor)

Men and women also had similar views on how caring for parents affected ability to take RSL ($\chi^2 = 0.01$, NS). A majority (55%, n = 33) felt that parental care negatively affected ability to take RSL, 38% (n = 23) that it had both positive and negative effects, and 7% (n = 4), a positive effect.

Men and women also held similar positions regarding their partners’ influence on ability to take RSL ($\chi^2 = 0.06$, NS). Partners were often viewed as a positive influence (46%, n = 121), with a similar proportion of participants indicating that their partners had both positive and negative influences (41%, 108). Few participants considered their partners a purely negative influence (13%, n = 35).

Unfair, unfriendly and unaccountable application process

Women expressed greater dissatisfaction with the application process than did men ($\chi^2 = 6.78$, p ≤ .05), with 78% of women indicating that the process had either negative or both a positive and negative effect on ability to take RSL, compared to 61% of men:

The main barrier to me taking RSL when I first applied was being told I couldn’t take it until I finished my PhD. That turned out not to be correct information as another colleague was allowed to take RSL and used it to complete her PhD – something I might have been able to do. (Female Senior Lecturer)

The comments highlighted an expectation that academics will be encouraged to apply for RSL should they be eligible, and there was uncertainty about how the process worked. Of
the 187 further comments about RSL, 16% \((n = 30)\) indicated that the system lacks transparency, and/or is perceived to be administered unfairly. Both men and women \((\chi^2 = 2.99, \text{NS})\) overwhelmingly considered a lack of transparency to negatively \((74\%, n = 98)\), and both positively and negatively \((24\%, n = 32)\), influence RSL. Respondents considered: they were denied RSL where their colleagues were able to take it under equivalent circumstances; the application process was too bureaucratic or lacked transparency; gatekeepers behaved unfairly or were nepotistic and the criteria were unrealistic or corrupt. Inequality affected men and women similarly \((\chi^2 = 0.85, \text{NS})\), with the majority \((66\%, n = 80)\) considering inequality a negative influence, although 34\% \((n = 41)\) perceived that inequality affected them in both positive and negative ways (possibly a reflection of individual resilience and response).

**Finances**

Men and women held similar views on how funding affected their ability to take RSL \((\chi^2 = 5.32, \text{NS})\). A majority of participants \((52\%, n = 198)\) identified funding as a negative influence. A further 26\% \((n = 100)\) considered funding to influence both negatively and positively and 22\% \((n = 83)\) positively. There were particularly strong views regarding the provision of funds. Twelve respondents suggested that more adequate provision was needed for an international RSL, and 10 respondents indicated a desire for better resourcing for academics with families. Four respondents stated that funding provisions were unfair for part-timers, two desired provisions for academics’ teaching to be covered, and three simply stated that the funding for RSL was inadequate. The following comment is indicative of the concerns raised here:

For my first study leave, on a lecturer’s salary, with young children and no external funding, overseas study leave was limited (unless I wanted to take on debt, which I did not). For my second study leave period, I had an Associate Professor salary, external funding and hence could take the family for an extended overseas visit. The funding available from [the university] alone makes travel with family virtually impossible, and external funding is usually limited for early career lecturers. (Male Associate Professor)

**Discussion and conclusions**

Our study aimed to explore academics’ perspectives on the importance of sabbaticals for career progression, and whether there were any issues that hindered provision and implementation of sabbaticals. A strength of our study is the large sample size for the survey – 915 or 47\% of academics at the university – and the fact men and women were quite evenly represented.

Academics at this research-intensive university placed great importance on sabbaticals, with 75\% seeing it as important to their career progression. A key issue, however, is the inequality of access to sabbaticals. At this university, and indeed at many others, only confirmed and confirmation-path academics and permanent research academics are able to access sabbaticals. Fixed-term and non-confirmation-path academics are already an academic underclass, enjoying fewer job benefits, and comprise a relatively invisible set of workers with little job security (e.g., Bradley, 2004; May, Peetz & Strachan, 2013; Wilson, Marks, Noone, & Hamilton-Mackenzie, 2010). A large proportion of ‘contingent faculty’ (Bradley, 2004, p. 1) are women (see Bryson, 2004). Contractual segregation
within the university means that many academic women are prevented from enjoying the institutional perks their permanently employed peers receive. Sabbaticals are among these job benefits, and it is one that is widely considered to facilitate career progression. It has the potential to act as a pathway to get the academic underclass into better-paid, secure positions with rewards and esteem. So, the very system that relies on an underclass to perform instrumental, but less prestigious academic labour, also ensures that those who undertake it (significantly, mostly women) remain second-class citizens of the university.

Men and women were generally united in their views on how family circumstances, children, childcare, partners, unfairness, inequity, transparency and finances, affected ability to take sabbaticals. However, women were more concerned about the application process and adequacy of leave. Moreover, women tended to consider the HoD more of a barrier to sabbaticals than their male colleagues. Both men and women were in agreement that lack of transparency and gatekeeping were barriers to access, and therefore of concern. Women tended to take fewer, shorter sabbaticals.

Among academics eligible to apply for sabbatical, a number of circumstances curtail or prevent sabbatical uptake. One of the primary impediments to arranging sabbatical appears to be the requirement to ensure that one’s teaching and administrative workload are covered during one’s absence. When a department is small, colleagues may be unable or reluctant to adopt extra teaching or administrative tasks. In highly specialised subjects, replacement teaching may be impossible to arrange. Joint clinical staff face the difficulty of arranging cover for both hospital and university duties. Thus, the RSL policy requirement that workload is redistributed is manageable for some academics, compromised for others, and completely impossible for others still.

Financial support is another area of sabbatical inequality. Many participants reported that funding was inadequate, affecting duration of and locations for sabbatical, with airfares and living expenses prohibitively high for many northern hemisphere destinations. Consequently, many participants felt that to take their sabbatical abroad would mean taking on the burden of considerable personal debt, and so sabbaticals were transformed into a career move that some would rather forego completely. Such loss of opportunity has a cost for the individual, the department and the university.

Application of sabbatical policy was an area where policy revision, review and training are likely to further equity of access. The sabbatical policy can disadvantage or fail to empower those whose ability to arrange work cover is severely constrained; those in specialist areas of research and teaching; and those who work in smaller departments or sections.

Family considerations were related to financial constraints. Academics with loved ones, be they parents, spouses/partners, and dependents, are faced with choosing among three sabbatical options. Some choose to leave their families to undertake a national or international sabbatical. As Baker (2010) comments, academic mothers are often reluctant to do this. Yet, many comments from academic fathers in our survey indicate that they too find this option unpalatable. Nonetheless, academic men are often better situated to reconcile work and family conflicts than women (e.g., van Anders, 2004). For example, Australian women academics are far more likely than men to be working a second shift as primary caregivers for children (Currie, Harris, & Thiele, 2000).

The second option is the ‘family sabbatical’, which brings additional costs particularly for international destinations. The family sabbatical entails different accommodation requirements due to the presence of a partner and/or children and may also depend on
ability to arrange childcare. Where the academic’s partner is in paid employment, a family sabbatical may also depend on whether partners are able to take leave. This also applies to those in relationships but without family. In both cases, cost structures and demands are inherently different depending on circumstances. A family sabbatical is likely to be personally more expensive for most academics. The third option, and an increasingly attractive one for academics with families and other commitments, is the domestic sabbatical, whereby leave is taken in the hometown, avoiding the expense of going abroad and the difficulty of leaving family. A significant disadvantage of the domestic sabbatical, however, is that one forgoes international networking. International sabbaticals contribute to development of international esteem and networks, an important consideration for promotion, especially at the professorial level. Some participants also commented that a domestic sabbatical was unequal to an international one, as they were not fully relieved of on-campus duties, and were ‘unduly’ called onto campus during their leave.

Sabbatical leave provisions, therefore, appear to be an area in which family and work do not mesh well. This conflict can be linked to what Williams (2000, p. 1) calls the ‘ideal worker norm’. The ideal worker norm is an assumption that the most valuable worker is one who prioritises work over everything else in life, works 40 plus hours per week and is unencumbered by the demands of childbearing and -rearing. Commonly, the ideal worker is a gendered worker. Domestic and family commitments default to women in most cases, and the ideal of work under market capitalism was historically (and remains) tailored around the conventions and conveniences of men’s lives. In the university sector under neoliberalism, we see evidence of the ‘ideal’ worker focus in the sabbatical policy. The sabbatical policy theoretically would work best for academic men, who, if they have dependent family members, are more able to leave them in the care of a spouse or partner for several months at a time. This ‘ideal’ sabbatical recipient is then better situated to undertake and publish research, and be rewarded in terms of pay, promotion and PBRF score. Yet, our findings show that even male academics are not necessarily conforming to this traditional ideal.

Ultimately, at many universities, approval of an application for sabbatical depends on whether the applicant has authorisation from their HoD. While the criteria for sabbaticals seem, on one hand, clear (if not fair), our analysis suggests that some academics do not have faith that the systems and procedures for allocating sabbaticals are fair and equal. HoDs, senior management and in the case of joint clinical staff, the District Health Board all serve as gatekeepers to sabbaticals. Some participants reported that they were unhappy about the lack of support from these authorities, with a perception that HoDs are giving priority to some academics’ applications over others. For example, some participants reported that their departments encouraged short summer sabbaticals only, outside of the teaching period, which put them at a disadvantage relative to academics in more supportive and/or larger departments. A number of respondents in joint clinical positions suggested that the Health Board was not amenable to applications for sabbatical at all.

More men than women considered the HoD and the application process to have a positive effect on their ability to take sabbatical, indicating a possible bias towards men. Such a bias is consistent with theories of a homosocial culture in university management where managers mentor and encourage others most like themselves (Bagilhole & White, 2008). In the context of gender-segregated institutions, homosociality refers to the preference of one gender to work with people of the same gender, especially in male-dominated
academic management (Lipman-Blumen, 1976, pp. 15–16). Consequently, perceptions of HoDs having a negative effect on access to sabbaticals may also reflect the underrepresentation of women in middle and senior management at the university and/or HoDs’ failure to progress sabbatical applications at the departmental level.

With the potential for so many vectors of inequality to influence access to sabbatical (e.g., between men and women, contingent and confirmed or confirmation-path academics, those with caregiving responsibilities and those without, those with clinical duties, second jobs or specialist courses to teach and those for whom absence is more easily covered, those in favour with middle management and those out of favour), we must ask: how is career progression solely a question of merit? For universities to facilitate equal opportunity career progression and equal opportunity for all academics then, provision of, and access to, sabbatical must be fair.

Universities should reconsider who has access to sabbatical, bearing in mind contractual employment and the gendered nature of such work. Moreover, universities could improve access to sabbaticals and perception of fairness by: reviewing the information provided to those applying for sabbatical with a view to improving ease of application and transparency of the process; providing a means for academics to obtain temporary support in order to facilitate access to sabbatical; lobbying health boards to encourage clinical staff to take sabbatical and to facilitate cover during their absence; and by providing financial support adequate for families and to cover living costs internationally as appropriate. To avoid the perception of uneven access to sabbatical, universities should also train gatekeepers such as HoDs to ensure that sabbatical regulations and assessments are being uniformly applied across the institution. More active intervention and monitoring of sabbaticals by universities would also improve academics’ access to sabbatical, to the benefit of both academics and their institutions.

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