



SAGE Cygnet Award Application

Name of Institution	University of the Sunshine Coast
Date of Application	31 October 2025
Contact for Application	Elvessa Marshall, Program Manager – Athena Swan
Email	emarsha1@usc.edu.au
Telephone No.	07 5459 4716

Acknowledgement of Country

UniSC acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the land on which we work and live, and recognise their continuing connection to land, water, and community. We pay our respects to Elders past, present, and emerging. UniSC deeply values and seeks to uplift, empower, and give a voice to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and perspectives.

Acknowledgement of Country

UniSC is a place where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's perspectives, culture and knowledge is acknowledged, valued, and respected. We share deep pride in, and seek to uplift, empower, and give a voice to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and perspectives.

If you are an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person, we encourage you to join the long tradition of trailblazers at UniSC, impacting our University and our world.

We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the land on which we work and live, and recognise their continuing connection to land, water, and community. We pay our respects to Elders past, present and emerging.



Artwork

Knowledge is Sacred
Lyndon Davis





UniSC
Australia

UniSC: SAGE Cygnet 2

	✓	Barrier • List the Barrier addressed in this Cygnet • List the Barrier for Cygnets already submitted
Institution-wide barrier		Academic Promotion
Institution-wide barrier	✓	Parents and Carers
Institution-wide barrier		Career Support & Development (under review)
[Please select] Institution-wide/Sub-group barrier		
[Please select] Institution-wide/Sub-group barrier		

A note on data

The University's current data systems categorise gender as 'F', 'M', and 'X'. In instances where data relating to non-binary or gender-diverse individuals has not been captured, either due to system constraints or the absence of respondents identifying as such, the 'X' category has been excluded from analysis. In recognition of gender diversity, this report uses the terms 'women' and 'men' rather than 'female' and 'male' throughout.

Glossary

AS	Athena Swan
ASIC	Athena Swan Implementation Committee
AS Survey	UniSC Athena Swan staff opinion survey 2018
AS Consultations	UniSC Athena Swan staff consultations held 2022 and 2025
CFO	Chief Financial Officer
DEI Survey	UniSC Diversity, Equity Inclusion Survey 2025
Department	All other areas of UniSC not listed as School or Research Centre/Institute
DVC (A)	Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic)
DVC (R&I)	Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Research & Innovation)
EBA	Enterprise Bargaining Agreement
LGBTIQ+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, Queer
MyUniSC	UniSC staff intranet
Non-STEMM	At UniSC, all other Schools and Research Centres not included in the definition of STEMM
PDC	Performance and Development Cycle
P&C	People & Culture
Research C&Is	Research Centres & Institutes
SAGE	Science in Australia Gender Equality
SBCI	School of Business & Creative Industries
SETA	School of Education & Tertiary Access
SHSS	School of Health
Law & Society	School of Law & Society
SSTE	School of Science, Technology and Engineering
STEMM	Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics and Medicine: At UniSC, this includes School of Science Technology & Engineering, School of Health, Research Centres:
TF	Teaching Focused
T&R	Teaching and Research
UniSC	University of the Sunshine Coast
VCP	Vice-Chancellor and President
WG	Working Group

1. KEY BARRIER

Balancing work and caring responsibilities is essential for many UniSC staff, yet earlier policies and practices did not provide consistent or comprehensive support. Staff taking extended parental leave often faced difficulties preparing for leave, staying connected while away, and reintegrating on return. Those with ongoing caring responsibilities encountered barriers to flexible work and tailored support. The following sub-barriers have been identified:

1.1 Decentralised budget and gendered policy

Without a centralised leave budget, parental leave costs were charged to individual departments, placing disproportionate strain on smaller schools and research groups. This created structural inequities and, in some cases, a potential bias against recruiting people, particularly women of reproductive age, into contracted research roles, as leave taken was deducted directly from project funds. Furthermore, policy documents used gendered language, such as “maternity leave,” which failed to reflect the diversity of all parents and carers.

1.2 Limited awareness of policies and supports

Many staff with caring responsibilities were unaware of their entitlements or where to access clear, reliable information. This lack of visibility limited equitable access to leave, flexible work options, and other supports, leaving some staff unsure of how to navigate available processes.

1.3 Inconsistent supervisor practices and inadequate provisions

Experiences of staff with caring responsibilities varied significantly depending on their manager. While some supervisors provided strong encouragement and advocated for flexible arrangements, others had limited understanding of policy or applied support inconsistently. Existing carers leave provisions were also often viewed as inadequate or inflexible.

1.4 Impact of extended leave on research track record

Extended periods of parental leave disrupt research momentum for academic staff, making it difficult to maintain competitive track records, secure funding, and meet performance expectations. Without targeted mechanisms to support re-engagement, these disruptions can have lasting effects on career progression and retention, with women and primary carers disproportionately affected.

2. EVIDENCE OF BARRIER

The barriers identified were informed by multiple data sources, including the 2018 Athena Swan staff survey (AS Survey 2018), analysis of leave data from 2015–2017, and targeted staff consultations held in 2019 as part of the 2019 Bronze Award application.

The AS survey 2018, with a 28% response rate across all staff, with balanced participation across professional (49.6%) and academic (50.4%) staff. Of respondents, 73% identified as women (compared with 63% of staff overall), 23% as men, and 4% preferred not to disclose their gender.

In April 2019, the Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Academic (who was at that time, also the Chair of the Athena Swan Implementation Committee) hosted a targeted consultation forum to further explore staff experiences of balancing work and caring responsibilities. Invitations were extended to staff who had accessed extended parental leave (three months or more) since 2018 and returned to work, as well inviting staff with broader caring responsibilities. Thirty-five participants (34 women and one man) shared experiences contributed rich qualitative feedback, identifying structural, procedural, and cultural barriers impacting their experiences.

2.1 Decentralised budget and gendered policy

UniSC operated under a decentralised parental leave funding model, where the cost of parental leave was absorbed by individual schools, departments, or research groups. This structure created significant inequities, particularly for smaller units that lacked the resources to cover extended absences. Positions were frequently not backfilled, leading to colleagues absorbing additional workload and creating pressure for staff returning from leave to “catch up” on missed responsibilities. Figure 1 presents selected staff comments from the AS survey 2018 illustrating how decentralised parental-leave budgets created inconsistent and, at times, inequitable experiences across organisational units.

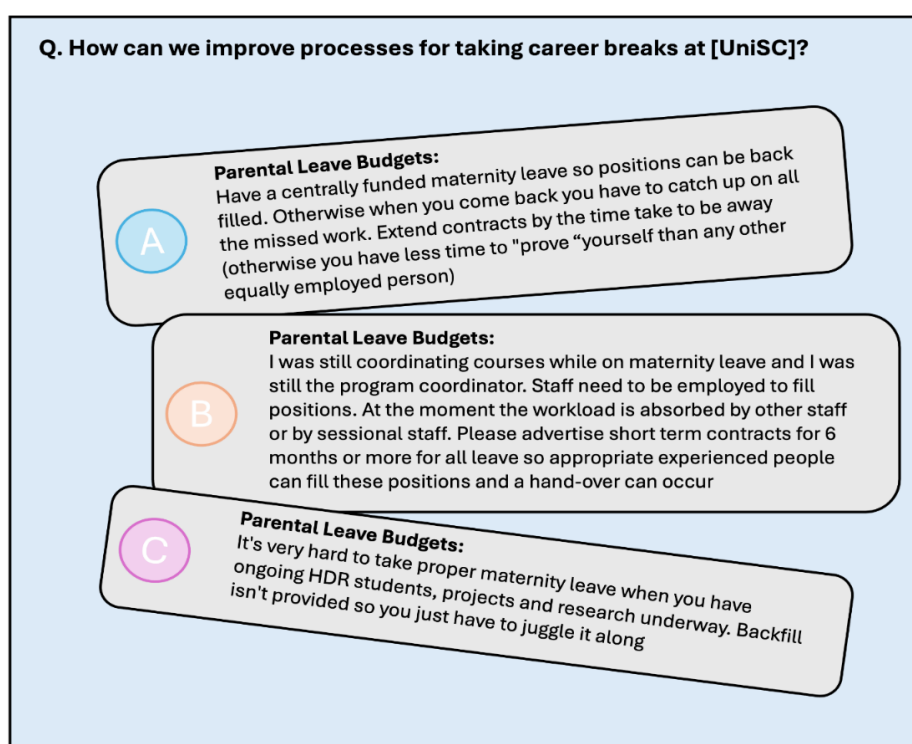


Figure 1. Selected feedback from the AS survey (2018) highlighting barriers caused by decentralised parental leave budgets through staff experiences.

This funding model also negatively impacted recruitment of fixed-term research staff, particularly women of reproductive age. Under this funding model, parental leave taken during a fixed-term contract was deducted directly from project funding, creating a potential bias against hiring researchers likely to need parental leave.

This challenge is observed internationally. Lee et al. identified significant challenges for early career researchers, particularly women, when leave entitlements are drawn from research grants.¹ When leave funding is decentralised and tied to smaller school, departmental or research budgets, it creates an inherent bias against staff of reproductive age and those with caring responsibilities, disproportionately affecting women.

In addition, policy documents were not inclusive and used gendered terms such as “maternity” leave. This lack of inclusivity was reflected in UniSC leave data, which showed that no men accessed extended parental leave during the Bronze reference period (2015-2017). Further evidence of this barrier emerged from the AS Survey (2018) whereby only half of the academic men at the time felt supported in taking leave for caring responsibilities. Qualitative feedback highlighted the persistence of these gendered assumptions (Figure 2).

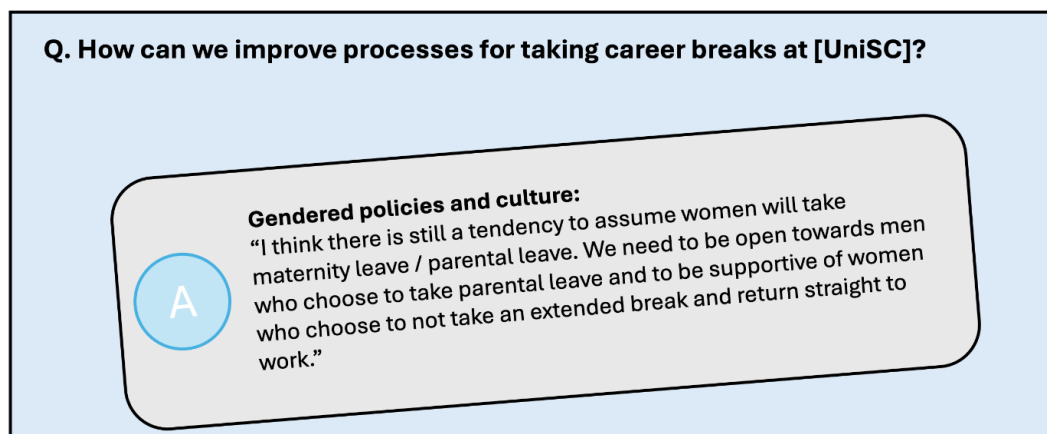


Figure 2. Selected feedback from the AS survey (2018) highlighting barriers caused by gendered policies and culture.

2.2 Limited awareness of policies and supports

The AS Survey (2018) also revealed that 48% of respondents had caring responsibilities, yet around half were unaware of the support available to them. Key themes emerging from survey feedback included confusion about what carers leave could and could not be used for, difficulty finding clear information about entitlements and processes on the University’s website and lack of visible, centralised resources to guide both staff and supervisors (Figure 3).

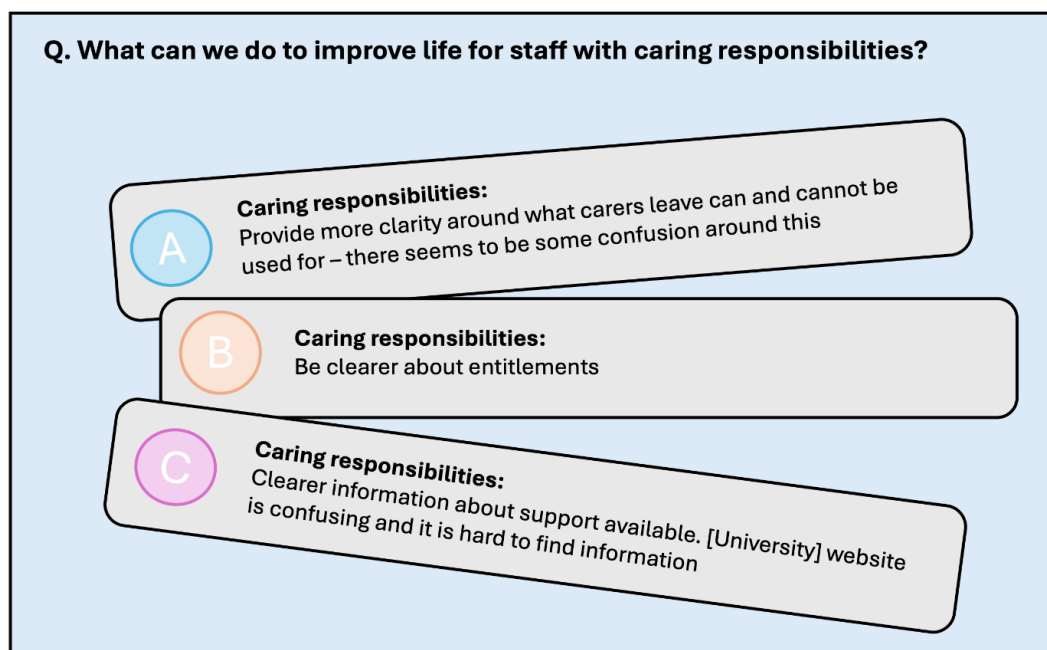


Figure 3. Selected feedback from the AS survey (2018) highlighting that access to information about entitlements and provisions was unclear, through staff lived experiences.

In April 2019, the Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Academic (then Chair of the Athena Swan Committee) hosted a targeted consultation forum to explore staff experiences of balancing work and caring responsibilities. Feedback confirmed significant gaps in awareness, highlighted inconsistent supervisor practices, and identified the need for tailored resources and coordinated communication to support staff before, during, and after leave.

2.3 Inconsistent supervisor practices and inadequate provisions

Support for staff taking parental leave varied greatly depending on their supervisor. Feedback from the AS Survey (2018) highlighted that line managers' planning for staff parental leave was often insufficient and inconsistent. Among respondents who had taken parental leave of six months or more at UniSC, only 59% felt the level of support provided during leave was adequate, and just 54% believed the level of contact during leave was appropriate.

Staff experiences varied significantly between groups, while professional staff generally felt their supervisors were supportive with no gender differences reported, academic staff were less positive. Among academic respondents, only 38% believed the level of support was adequate, 23% felt the level of contact was appropriate. Qualitative survey feedback underscored the wide variation in supervisory practices (Figure 4).

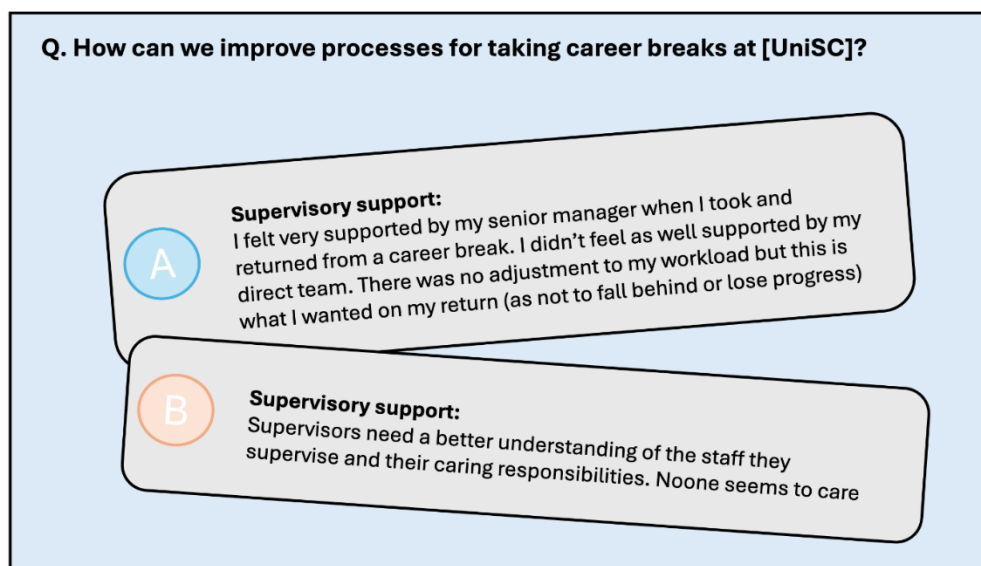


Figure 4. Selected feedback from the AS survey (2018) highlighting inconsistencies between supervisors in terms of providing support to staff preparing for, taking, or returning from parental care, through staff lived experiences.

While 82% of all staff respondents with caring responsibilities agreed that their supervisor was responsive to their needs and 75% agreed that leave arrangements were sufficiently flexible to enable them to handle important caring issues, these figures dropped for academic staff (71% and 64% respectively) with only half of the academic men respondents feeling supported in taking leave for caring responsibilities.

Further feedback highlighted that, even where staff felt supported and able to access flexible arrangements, existing carers leave entitlements were insufficient for those managing complex or ongoing responsibilities, such as caring for children with disabilities or ageing parents (Figure 5).

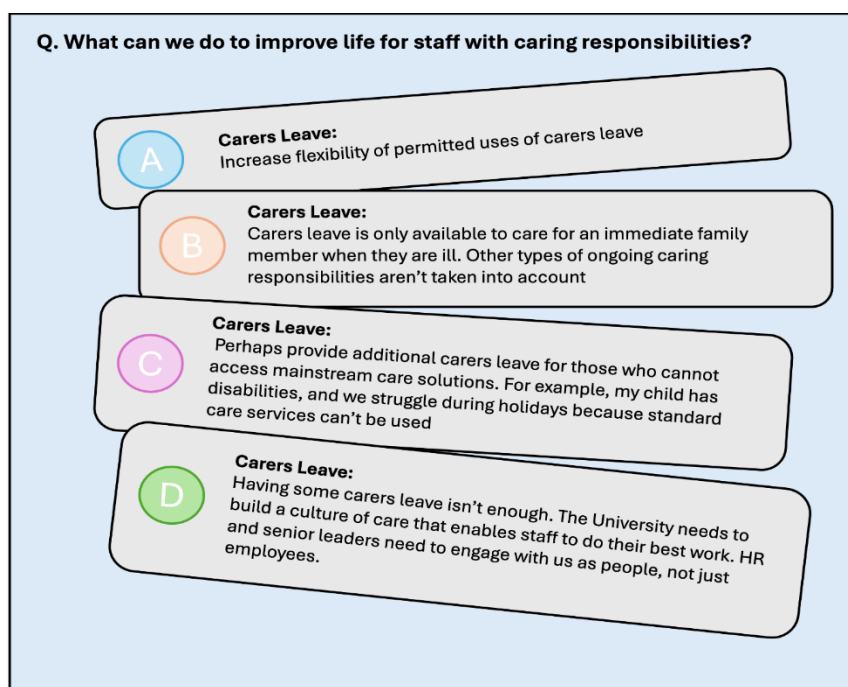


Figure 5. Selected feedback from the AS survey (2018) highlighting inadequacies of leave and support systems available for staff with parenting and caring responsibilities, reported as lived experiences.

2.4 Impact of extended leave on research track record

Extended periods of parental leave affect academic staff, particularly women and primary carers, by disrupting research momentum and limiting competitiveness in grant funding, publications, and career progression. Without targeted mechanisms for re-engagement, these effects compound over time.

The AS Survey (2018), targeted staff consultations and focus group discussions revealed that many academics experienced anxiety and uncertainty about their ability to “catch up” after parental leave, with some considering leaving academia altogether (Figure 6).



Figure 6. Selected feedback from the AS survey (2018) highlighting additional barriers for women of reproductive age at UniSC at that time, reported through lived experiences.

These experiences reflect broader, systemic challenges across the sector where career breaks disproportionately affect women's research competitiveness, particularly in disciplines reliant on continuous external funding and high publication outputs.

Historically, there were no formal, institution-wide mechanisms to support academics in rebuilding their research capacity after extended leave. Academic staff were often expected to return to pre-leave workloads immediately, with limited flexibility to prioritise research recovery or rebuild competitive track records. This was especially challenging for early and mid-career academics seeking to establish research leadership and secure major external grants (Figure 7).



Figure 7. Selected feedback from the AS survey (2018) highlighting additional barriers for women with caring responsibilities UniSC at that time, reported through lived experiences.

Learnings from pilot support for research active academics in STEMM after extended periods of parental leave

During 2017 to 2019, the University conducted three case studies, in which additional research support was provided to research active academics in STEMM returning to work following extended periods of parental leave.

Case study 1:

Staff member 1 had completed an international research trip prior to taking parental leave. Following parental leave, they were offered another research opportunity in the same region, funded internationally. Their mentor encouraged them to reach-out to University Management to negotiate how to facilitate taking on the new opportunity and supported those discussions. Staff member 1 had returned to work on a 1.0 FTE basis and the University allowed them to use some of the research funding they had obtained to 'buy-out' a portion of their (0.4 FTE) teaching workload. They also allowed them to maintain some of the funding in a research account to support their research activities.

Specific feedback from Staff member 1 included:

"Because of this support I was able to develop strong partnerships with colleagues through in-person visits and collaborative research/engagement activities and attend relevant conferences and workshops. Having a reduced teaching load also made an immense difference in how I was able to commit to the contract research project. This resulted in a very successful project, and I still collaborate with [international funding organisation] today. ...having a mentor who was willing to set up and facilitate those discussions and [the University] seeing the potential of this support. I still consider this one of the key times in my career as I'm sure that had I not had the personal and financial support that I did then, that I wouldn't be where I am today."

Case study 2:

Staff member 2 had a number of active research projects underway when they needed to take parental leave and were concerned about the continuation of those projects in their absence. After direct consultation with Staff member 2, the University agreed to support their research projects during their career break, by providing funding for a Research Assistant to work on the projects one day per week (0.2 FTE) for the duration of the parental leave period (26 weeks). Staff member 2 maintained contact with the Research Assistant during their parental leave to ensure that work was progressing appropriately.

Specific feedback from Staff member 2 included:

"Without this support, my research projects would have died".

Case study 3:

Staff member 3 was provided with funding (\$10,000) for teaching relief to allow for them to focus on research for one semester after returning from parental leave. Staff member 3 negotiated this with then faculty Dean and DVCRI prior to commencing parental leave. This support enabled them to develop and write two research fellowship proposals in the first six months after returning from parental leave, while working at 0.6 FTE. Both applications were successful.

Specific feedback from Staff member 3 included:

“Thanks to the support of UniSC, I had the time and flexibility I needed to write these proposals while also caring for my young [child] as primary caregiver. This has had a tremendous impact on my career, allowing for me to publish in high-impact journals, present at international conferences and workshops, and graduate several highly successful HDR candidates. These successes would not have been possible without the support of UniSC in that critical time after returning from parental leave, while I was primary caregiver to a pre-school aged child and working at reduced FTE.”

While these outcomes demonstrated the value of structured reengagement support, the pilot was limited in scope and dependent on individual advocacy. Without a University-wide framework, access remained inequitable and inconsistent, leaving many academics without similar opportunities.

3. PROGRESS (ACTIONS AND OUTPUTS)

Between 2018 and 2025, UniSC implemented reforms to strengthen equity, consistency, and inclusivity for staff with parental and caring responsibilities. Key achievements include adopting gender-neutral policy language, centralising parental leave budgets, and enhancing supervisor capability through targeted training and resources, introducing the SPARK Career Interruption Grant Scheme. Updated policies, toolkits, and pilot initiatives, such as the Parental Leave Buddy System have improved staff experiences of leave, flexibility, and reintegration. While progress has been substantial, continued focus is needed to address intersectional experiences and embed upcoming policy enhancements through the 2026 Enterprise Bargaining Agreement. Figure 8, provides a chronological snapshot of key initiatives, while Table 1 provides a more detailed overview of actions undertaken to address specific sub-barriers.

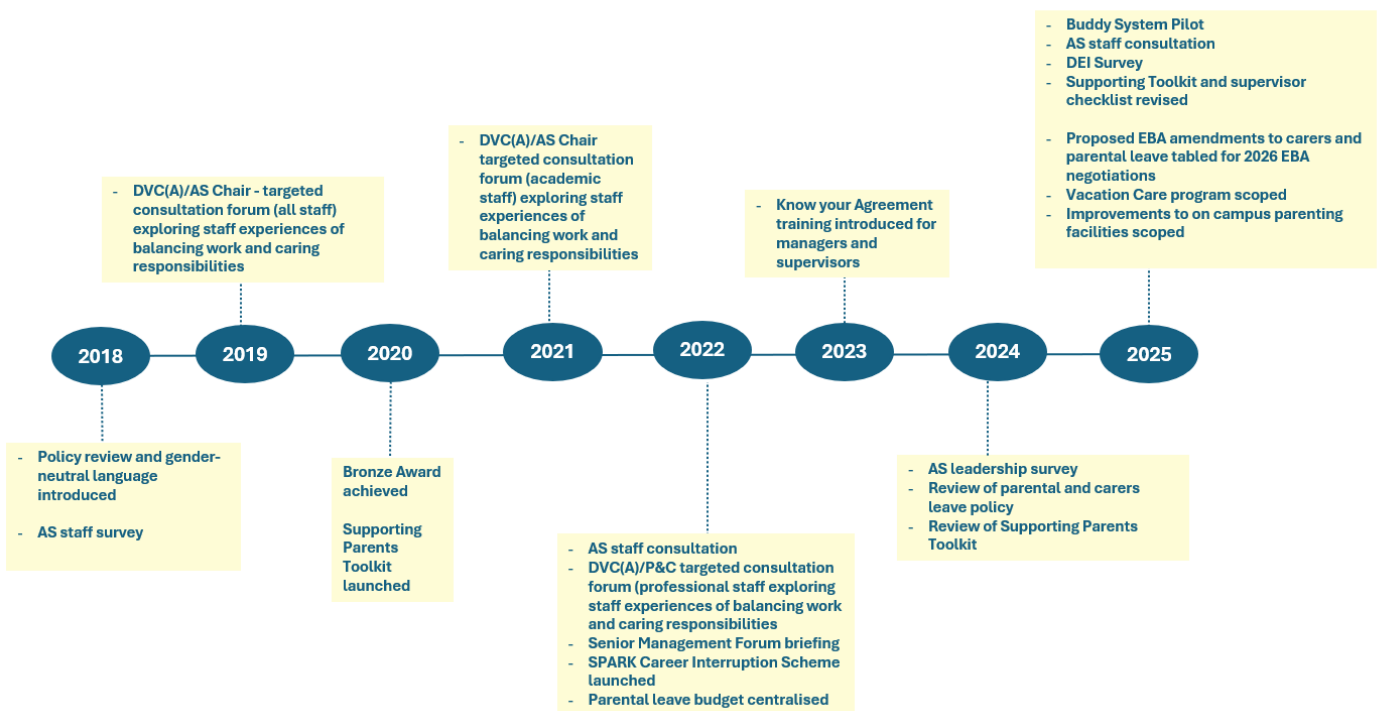


Figure 8: Timeline of UniSC initiatives to support parentals and carers, 2018-2025.

Table 1. Summary of actions to support parents and carers at UniSC (2018–2025)

Year	Action	Identified at Bronze or post-Bronze	Sub-barriers	Objectives	Activities	Outputs	Responsibility
2018	Parental leave policy review and gender-neutral language introduced	Identified at Bronze	1.1 Decentralised budget and gendered policies	Create inclusive and equitable policies that support all staff	Policy review Policy updates	Gender-neutral terminology adopted; 'maternity leave' replaced with 'parental leave'	P&C
2020	Supporting Parents toolkit launched	Identified at Bronze	1.2 Limited awareness of policies and supports 1.3 Inconsistent supervisor practices	Improve awareness and navigation of parental leave processes	Developed comprehensive toolkit for staff and supervisors, including checklists	Toolkit published on MyUniSC; promoted via P&C communications	P&C
2022	Centralisation of parental leave budgets	Identified at Bronze	1.1 Decentralised budget and gendered policies	Remove financial barriers to backfilling positions	Realignment of leave budgets to central funding pool	Institutional-level budget changes Consistent, equitable funding model across all Schools/dept/research centres	Executive CFO
2022	Launch of SPARK Career Interruption Scheme	Identified at Bronze	1.4 Impact of extended leave on research careers	Support research recovery following extended leave	Developed internal grant program, up to \$10,000 per award	22 grants awarded, total \$223K	DVCR&I, Research Office
2023	“Know your Agreement” training	Identified after Bronze – following new EBA.	1.2 Limited awareness 1.3 Inconsistent supervisor practices	Improve standard and consistency of Supervisor support at UniSC	Development and rollout of training for supervisors and managers, which includes coverage of leave entitlements (including parental leave).	300+ leaders have attended sessions	P&C

Year	Action	Identified at Bronze or post-Bronze	Sub-barriers	Objectives	Activities	Outputs	Responsibility
2024	Parental Leave Policy review	Identified after Bronze – Parental leave policy review cycle	1.1 Decentralised budget and gendered policies	Make parental leave more inclusive, equitable and accessible	Policy review	Awaiting EBA bargaining (2026)	P&C
2024	Review of parental leave toolkit	Identified after Bronze – Identified at AS consultation	1.2 Limited awareness 1.3 Inconsistent supervisor practices	Ensure relevance and clarity of resources	Policy review	Approved and published October 2025	P&C
2025	Buddy System Pilot	Identified after Bronze – Identified at AS consultation	1.2 Limited awareness 1.3 Inconsistent supervisor practices 1.4 Impact of extended leave on research careers	Provide peer to peer support for staff preparing for, on, or returning from leave	Paired participants with experienced colleagues	4 buddy pairs piloted; evaluation survey underway	P&C, AS Cygnnet WG
2025	Draft EBA amendments for changes to leave allocations relating to parenting and caring	Identified after Bronze – Identified at AS consultation	1.1 Decentralised budget and gendered policies	Make parental and carers leave more inclusive, equitable and accessible by expanding carers leave and improving flexibility of parental leave	Consultation with staff and supervisors (2024 & 2025) Recommendations made during Parental Leave Policy Review and directly to P&C in 2025	Items tabled for 2026 EBA negotiations	P&C
2026 (planned)	University-wide Buddy System rollout	Identified after Bronze – Identified at AS consultation	1.2 Limited awareness 1.3 Inconsistent supervisor practices 1.4 Impact of extended leave on research careers	Provide peer to peer support for staff preparing for, on, or returning from leave	Expand buddy program across all Schools	University-wide participation Evaluation of impact	P&C, AS Cygnnet WG

3.1 Centralisation of parental leave budgets and inclusive policy language

In 2018, UniSC undertook an audit of parental leave policy documents to identify gender specific terms and replace them with gender neutral language; for example, changing references from “maternity leave” to “parental leave.” The audit included a review of policy wording and resulted in recommendations that were implemented to make the documents more visibly inclusive. The revised policies explicitly state that parental leave is available to staff of all genders and relationships.

In 2021, a feasibility review was undertaken to assess the viability of centralising parental leave budgets. This reform was implemented in 2022, with all parental leave costs moved to a central budget. The change addressed structural inequities by ensuring that all areas of the University could access consistent funding to backfill positions. It also reduced unintended bias in recruitment decisions, and enabled staff returning from leave to reintegrate more smoothly into their roles.

3.2 Improving awareness of policies and building consistent and supportive supervisory practices

In 2020, UniSC developed a Supporting Parents Toolkit to help navigate and standardise the parental leave process (Figure 9). The focus of this toolkit is to provide a practical resource for new and expecting parents and their supervisors to manage parental leave and the transition to new parental responsibilities. This toolkit includes staff and supervisor parental leave checklists to provide guidance to both staff and supervisors who are navigating the parental leave process.

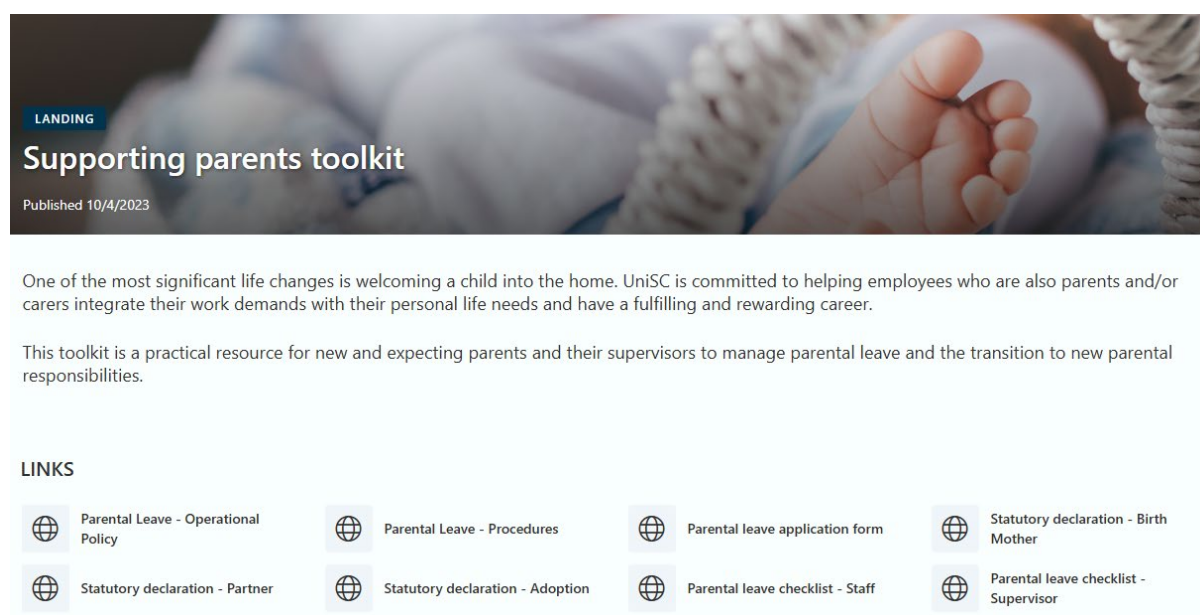


Figure 9: Supporting parents toolkit located on UniSC staff intranet (MyUniSC).

Despite progress, feedback from the Athena Swan (AS) Parental and Caring (targeted) Consultation Forum (December 2021) revealed low awareness among staff of parental and carer leave entitlements, ‘Keeping in Touch’ (KIT) days, and the Supporting Parents Toolkit. Staff requested clearer, tailored guidance on fractional return-to-work options, maintaining contact during leave, permissible activities while on leave, and re-entry processes such as workload allocation and timetabling. Workload expectations and pressure to maintain pre-leave productivity were commonly cited challenges.

Subsequent AS consultation forums (2022 and 2025) reaffirmed limited awareness of the Toolkit and identified the need for resources to be tailored to academic staff. In response, the Toolkit was again reviewed and updated in 2025 to include guidance on, expectations around teaching allocations, research planning, and “Keeping in Touch” (KIT) days. The Parental Leave Supervisor Checklist was also revised to assist supervisors in supporting academic staff through the leave and re-entry process, ensuring clarity around contact expectations, workload, and project continuity.

Training for new staff in supervisory roles, was strengthened to include content relating to UniSC’s parental and caring policies responsibilities of supervisors, and available supports. This information is reinforced through the *Know Your Agreement* training delivered upon implementation of each new EBA. This training was designed to improve the standard and consistency of Supervisor support at UniSC. The *Know Your Agreement* training is undertaken by supervisors and managers. It addresses a range of leave entitlements including parental and carers leave. To date, more than 300 leaders have attended *Know Your Agreement* training sessions.

In 2025, a Parental Leave Buddy System pilot was launched, pairing staff preparing for, in the middle of or returning from parental leave with a buddy from UniSC, who had recent experience taking and returning from parental leave. The pilots aims to (i) provide peer support to staff who are preparing for taking or recently returned from parental leave; (ii) reduce the burden on supervisors by directly educating staff about relevant policies, procedures, and supports for parenting and caring responsibilities; and (iii) obtain feedback and experience that will be incorporated into a proposal for a University-wide initiative in 2026. The pilot is running until December 2025.

3.3 Supporting research recovery through SPARK

UniSC launched the SPARK Career Interruption Scheme in 2022, as part of the University’s suite of newly introduced internal grant programs, managed by the Office of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Research & Innovation)/DVC(R&I)).

The scheme was identified in UniSC’s Athena Swan Bronze Action Plan and championed by the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic) (DVC(A)), who was at that time, also the Chair of the Athena Swan Implementation Committee. In its inaugural year (2022), the DVC(A) provided funding to pilot the initiative and demonstrate its value in supporting research recovery following extended leave. In this first round, grants of up to \$10,000 were available to support individual research activity for up to 12 months, with a total funding pool of \$75,000 allocated.

SPARK funding is designed to be flexible and responsive, enabling recipients to tailor support to their individual circumstances. Eligible uses include hiring research assistants, covering travel and accommodation for research activities, providing childcare support for fieldwork or conferences, and other activities that help rebuild research capacity. Applications for SPARK are submitted through UniSC’s internal research funding portal and assessed via a competitive process. Applicants are required to outline the nature of their career interruption, the proposed use of funds, and how the support will contribute to research recovery. Applications are reviewed by a panel convened by the DVC(R&I), with decisions based on alignment with scheme objectives, feasibility, and potential impact. By positioning SPARK within UniSC’s internal grants portfolio from the outset, the scheme was embedded into the University’s research strategy and governance processes, ensuring sustainability and alignment with other internal funding mechanisms, reinforcing UniSC’s institutional commitment to equity in research careers.

4. OUTCOMES

Measures implemented across 2018–2025 have initiated reductions in systemic barriers and improvements in the experiences of staff with parental and caring responsibilities. Evidence from UniSC’s 2025 Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) Survey, Athena Swan (AS) consultations, 2024 (AS) Leadership Survey, and SPARK evaluation data demonstrates meaningful progress. While further work is required to fully embed these changes, early results indicate a positive cultural and structural shift.

4.1 Centralised budgets and inclusive policies

The centralisation of parental leave budgets in 2022 has removed significant structural inequities. Schools, Departments and Research Centres now have consistent access to resources to backfill roles, reduced unintended bias in recruitment decisions, reducing workload pressure on colleagues and ensuring returning staff are better supported.

Staff feedback during the 2025 AS consultation forums demonstrated strong approval and appreciation of this reform, with several participants describing it as “a really positive” and “long-overdue change.” Others emphasised the need for greater visibility and communication, noting that several people didn’t know this change had been made.

The shift to gender-neutral policy language has also encouraged broader uptake of parental leave by men. During the Bronze reference period (2015–2017), no men accessed extended parental leave. Between 2018 to 2024, 14% of all extended parental leave applications were from men (Table 2), signalling early progress towards normalising caring responsibilities for all genders. While this reflects a positive cultural shift, continued effort is required to challenge gendered norms that position women as primary caregivers (Further Action 1).

Table 2: Parental Leave, 2018-2024

	Women		Men		Total
Academic	54	86%	9	14%	63
LA	12	92%	1	8%	13
LB	32	89%	4	11%	36
LC	10	83%	2	17%	12
LD	0	0%	2	100%	2
Professional	130	87%	20	13%	150
L4	17	89%	2	11%	19
L5	22	88%	3	12%	25
L6	40	95%	2	5%	42
L7	25	76%	8	24%	33
L8	20	95%	1	5%	21
L9	5	56%	4	44%	9
L10	1	100%	0	0%	1
Total	184	86%	29	14%	213

4.2 Perceptions among staff with caring responsibilities

Findings from the recent DEI Survey (2025) highlight differences in perceptions of inclusion, voice, and diversity of UniSC staff with caring responsibilities. Table 3 presents factor favourability scores, which represent the percentage of respondents who gave positive responses to grouped survey items under each theme (or factor), such as Inclusion, Voice, Diversity. According to the survey platform CultureAmp, a difference of ± 5 percentage points is considered statistically significant.

The data revealed women with primary caring responsibilities for children (<18 years) rated 'voice' statements significantly more favourably than women overall (42 vs 49; diff +7). This suggests that women with primary caring responsibilities for children feel heard, valued, and considered in decision-making, and that they can have honest, two-way conversations and share diverse perspectives without fear of negative consequences. However, the same could not be said for UniSC women with primary caring responsibilities for adults (>18 years) as these participants rated 'voice' items significantly less favourably than women overall (42 vs 25; diff -17). Further, statements relating to diversity, which included "UniSC values diversity", "I am comfortable sharing my personal background and experiences at UniSC", and "UniSC builds teams that are diverse", were rated significantly less favourably by women who were primary carers for adults (61 vs 56; diff -5). These findings highlight a need for Carer's leave to be normalised beyond requirements for young children, recognising that more staff are managing ageing parents and partner health matters (Further Action 7).

Table 3: DEI Survey (2025) factor favourability scores (%) for UniSC women with and without carer responsibilities

Factor	Women Overall n=230	Women + Primary carer of child (<18yrs) n=103	Women + Primary carer of adult (18+yrs) n=21
Inclusion	66	70	63
Equity	64	63	60
Diversity	61	59	56*
Growth	55	55	55
Voice	42	49*	25*

* Significant difference (i.e., +/- 5)

While results for UniSC women with primary caring responsibilities for children (<18) were encouraging, men with primary caring responsibilities reported a more negative experience, rating all survey factors less favourably than UniSC men overall (Table 4).

Table 4: DEI Survey (2025) Factor favourability scores for UniSC men with and without carer responsibilities

Factor	Men Overall n=89	Men + Carer responsibilities n=29
Inclusion	65	48*
Equity	64	46*
Diversity	61	56*
Growth	57	38*
Voice	41	27*

* Significant difference (i.e., +/- 5)

4.3 Confidence among supervisors

In the AS consultation (December 2021), staff noted the absence of formal frameworks for pre-, during, and post-leave planning, and described line-manager support as frequently inadequate or inconsistent. Advice provided by People and Culture (P&C) was also described as varied and sometimes inaccurate, particularly concerning partner leave. Additionally, some staff experienced inadequate support and inappropriate contact while on leave. Similarly, staff in the 2025 AS consultation reported that their supervisors lacked awareness of UniSC's parental leave structures and supports, which would have assisted them when preparing for, taking, or returning from extended leave for parenting or caring.

The 2024 (AS) Leadership Survey, distributed to Deans, Directors of Research Centres and Institutes, and Discipline Leads, received thirty-four responses (19 women, 15 men), representing the majority of the targeted leadership cohort. Findings revealed that 68% of participants either strongly or somewhat agreed with the statement that they felt confident supporting staff who are preparing for, taking, or returning from extended leave relating to their parental or caring responsibilities. While no participants strongly disagreed with the statement, 20% somewhat disagreed, and 12% remained neutral, indicating that while most leaders feel equipped to provide support, further development and consistency are needed across the University (Figure 10).

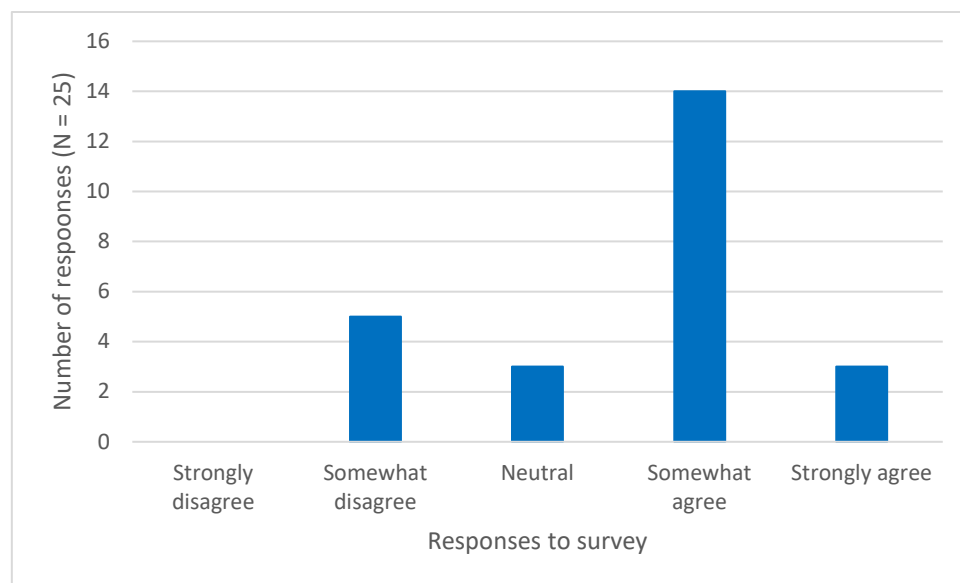


Figure 10. 2024 (AS) Leadership Survey - Frequency of responses to survey question #51, “I feel confident supporting staff who are preparing for, taking or returning from extended leave relating to their parental or caring responsibilities.”, with a total of 25 responses and 3 participants who missed this question.

Leaders were also asked what would help them to support their team members during extended leave related to their parental or caring responsibilities (Figure 11). Most participants indicated that a dedicated webpage would be useful (58%), followed by having a dedicated staff member within the School/Centre/Discipline (50%), and additional training (31%). Other support (15%) requested by leaders related to informational support from P&C, peer support, and assistance replacing staff on leave.

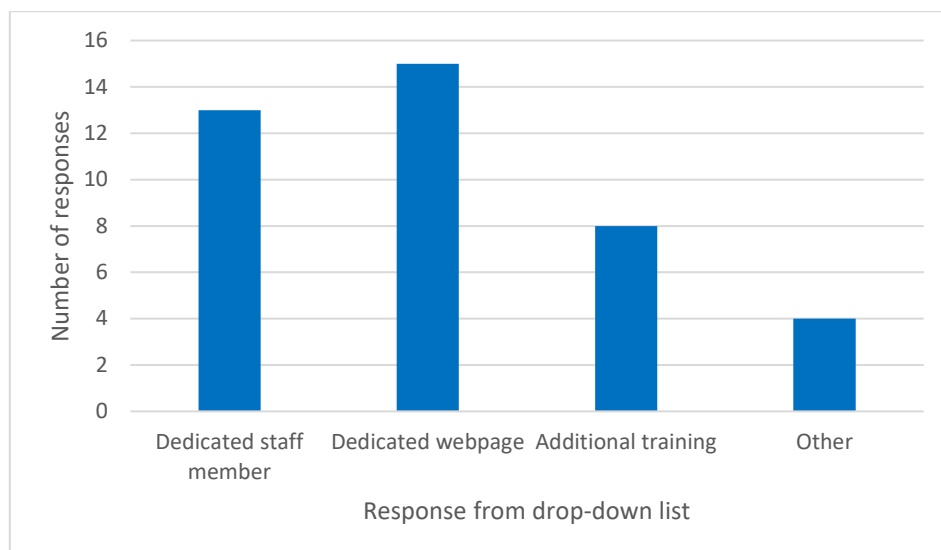


Figure 11. Frequency of choice of options in a drop-down list in response to Q. 55 “What would help you support your team members during extended leave related to their parental or caring responsibilities”

4.4 Supporting research recovery through SPARK

Since the launch of the SPARK career interruption scheme in 2022, a total of 25 grants have been awarded, providing \$223,086 in targeted support to researchers balancing caring responsibilities and academic careers.

Although applications have been open to all genders, 88% of recipients have been women (22 out of 25), reflecting ongoing gendered patterns in career interruption and caring responsibilities within academia. This trend aligns with broader institutional data, where only 14% of extended parental leave applications between 2018 and 2024 were submitted by men (see Table 2).

Across December 2024 and January 2025 feedback was gathered from participants who have received SPARK funding aiming to understand participants’ experiences of the initiative, to reflect on its perceived value, and to provide suggestions for potential areas for enhancement.

Seventeen SPARK recipients provided feedback via an online survey. Participants were asked to rate their agreement from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree) with statements relating to:

- The extent to which SPARK contributed to their confidence and capacity to apply for external funding
- Whether SPARK assisted them in maintaining or re-establishing research momentum during or following a career interruption; and
- The degree to which SPARK helped to reduce the overall impact of career interruption and enabled engagement with research opportunities.

Overall, participants expressed strong appreciation for the SPARK initiative (Figure 12). Participants described the scheme as supportive, timely, and confidence-building. The initiative was seen as an important mechanism for maintaining connection with research activity, and that the initiative signalled institutional recognition of the challenges faced by individuals balancing caring responsibilities with academic careers. Respondents noted that SPARK funding provided tangible benefits such as enabling publication submission, supporting collaboration, and assisting with data analysis and grant preparation.

Participants offered a small number of practical suggestions to strengthen SPARK’s impact. These included: increasing support/awareness of the initiative at time of carer leave application/planning, greater flexibility in the timing and use of funding to suit individualised return to work plans, and expanding eligible costs (Further Action 6)

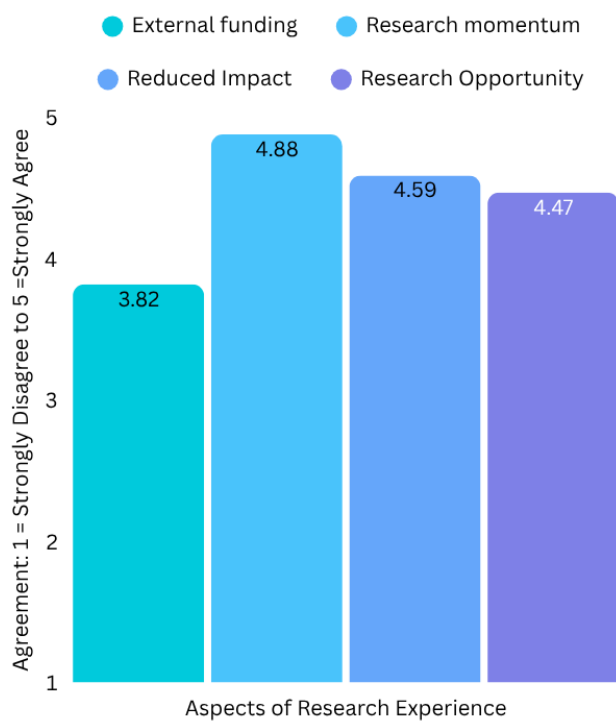


Figure 12. SPARK Evaluation Summary – Responses Collected December 2024/January 2025

4.5 Early success of the Buddy System Pilot

The 2025 Buddy System Pilot provided peer-to-peer support for staff navigating parental leave. This pilot paired buddies who met roughly monthly to provide peer support for staff preparing for, on, or recently returned from parental leave. Informal feedback from the initial four pairs has been overwhelmingly positive: participants valued connecting with experienced peers during this career interruption, and the experience highlighted the need for flexible approaches and structures. The sessions also doubled as valuable networking and support opportunities.

Formal evaluation of the pilot is in progress and will conclude in December 2025, informing decisions on university-wide rollout in 2026.

5. IMPACT

The reforms introduced between 2018 and 2025 have catalysed change, improving the experiences of staff with parental and caring responsibilities while laying the foundation for further progress. Feedback from 2025 AS consultation forums, the 2025 Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) Survey, the 2024 AS Leadership Survey, and the evaluation of the SPARK Career Interruption Scheme demonstrate a shift towards a more supportive, equitable culture. While some barriers remain, these initiatives have improved how staff experience parental leave, research recovery, and reintegration into the workplace.

Feedback was gathered using a mixed-methods approach, including surveys, consultation forums, and program evaluations. Table 5 summarises participation across key data collection activities, disaggregated by gender, staff type, and caring responsibilities where available.

Table 5. Disaggregated Headcount Data by method and sub-groups

Method	Total n=	Women	Men	Non-binary or not disclosed	Academic Staff	Professional Staff	Identify as parents and/or carers
2025 Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) Survey	370 (15.8% all staff) 24.6% ongoing staff	62%	24%	1.5% non-binary and other terms 20% chose not to say	135	225	37% children under 18 7% carer adults
2024 AS Leadership Survey	34	56%	44%	Not collected	34	0	Not collected
AS consultation (2022)	56	89%	11%	Not collected	43	13	Total numbers not collected
AS consultation (2025)	51	100%	0%	Not collected	16	35	Total numbers not collected
SPARK evaluation	17	Not collected	Not collected	Not collected	Not collected	N/A	100%

5.1 Centralised budgets and inclusive policies

Since centralising the parental leave budget, experiences at UniSC have improved markedly, with positive feedback reflected in staff consultations (Figure 13).

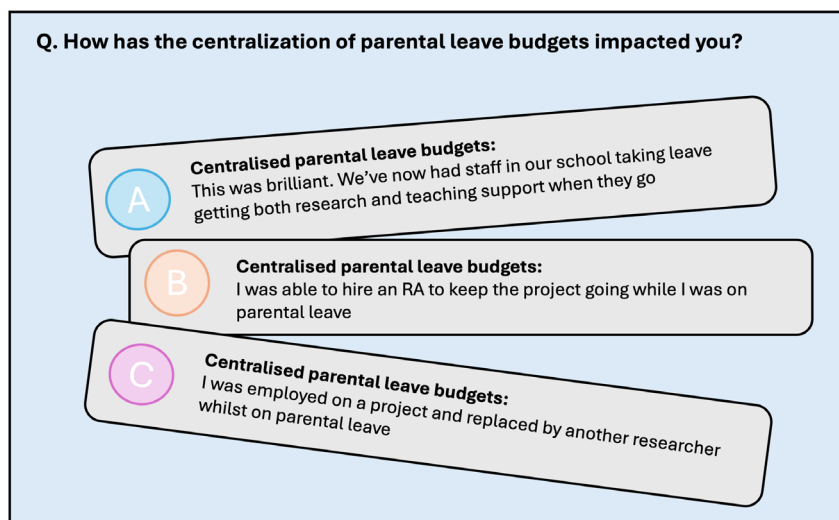


Figure 13. Selected feedback from AS consultations in 2025 and informal support sessions with buddy pilot participants (2025) highlighting positive impacts of centralised parental leave budgets at UniSC.

AS consultations (2025) and focus group discussions (e.g., buddy pilot participants) revealed that many staff were unaware of this change and questioned supervisors' awareness. This was reflected in instances where positions were not backfilled during parental leave, highlighting ongoing inconsistencies to address.

Despite the success and positive impact of centralising leave budgets, consultations have also highlighted the need for flexibility. For example, some academic staff indicated that they prefer to take 1.0 FTE leave during parental leave periods, whereas others prefer to keep working at some capacity. For example, one staff member negotiated with her team prior to taking parental leave, to hire a Research Assistant rather than a 'replacement' postdoctoral research associate. In this case, this flexible arrangement allowed project timelines to remain unchanged despite their parental leave, provided opportunities for the staff member on leave to remain in touch with the project and to benefit from its outputs, thus maintaining career trajectory.

More inclusive policy documents have likely contributed to an increase in men taking parental leave at UniSC. Normalising men's leave is a crucial step in shifting societal expectations of care, supporting gender equity, and, over time, improving our institutional culture. Recent consultations (2025) underscored the need to normalise men's parental leave (Figure 14).

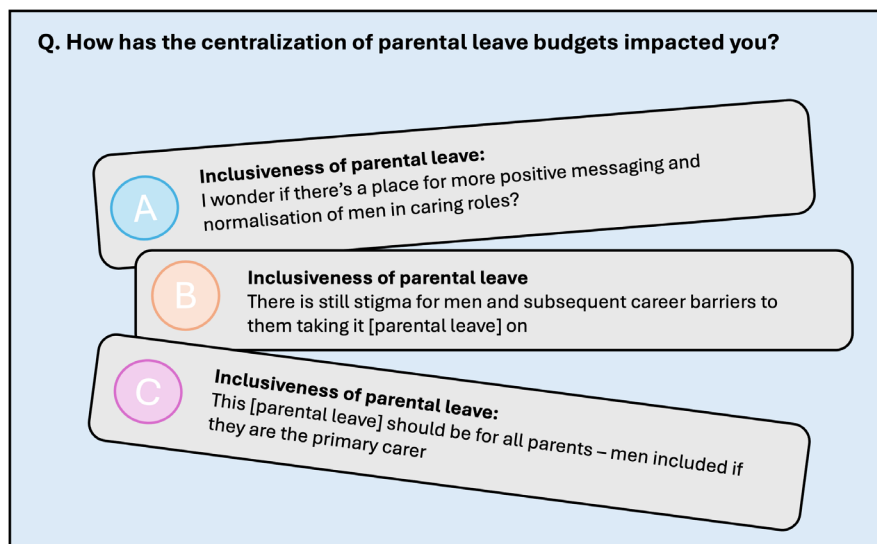


Figure 14. Selected feedback from AS consultations in 2025 highlighting the ongoing need for UniSC to cultivate an inclusive culture that actively supports and normalises parental leave for all parents, regardless of gender or role

5.2 Improving awareness of policies and building consistent and supportive supervisory practices

While recent consultations indicate ongoing inconsistencies, both in staff awareness of available supports and in supervisors' knowledge of policies, procedures, and responsibilities, the changes implemented are already improving experiences for women with children under 18 (DEI Survey, 2025 (Table 3). Moreover, in the AS Leadership Survey (2024), many managers described approaches that were thorough, human-centred, flexible, personalised, and aligned with UniSC policies (Figure 15). Other responses demonstrated ongoing inconsistencies in approaches of supervisors. Additional questions explored their level of understanding of responsibilities, policies, procedures and provisions available at UniSC for staff with caring responsibilities and responses reflected similar patterns to this question.

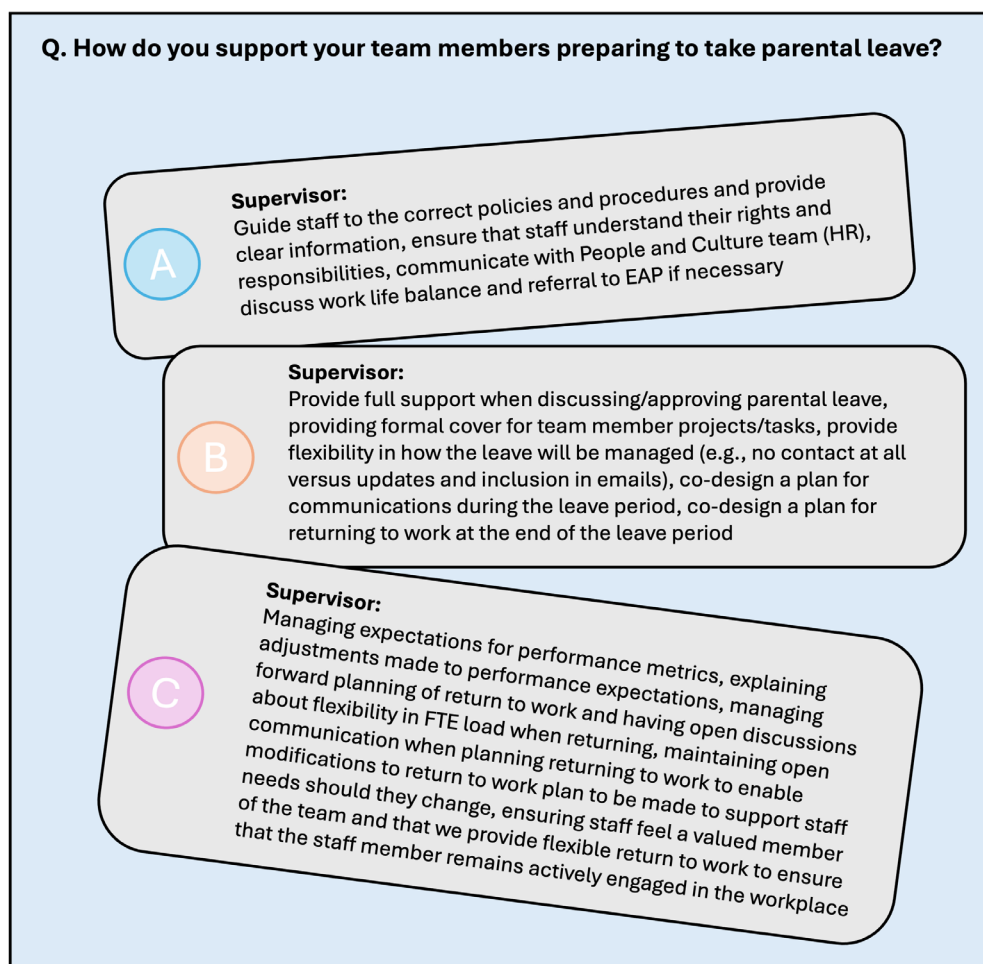


Figure 15. Selected feedback from Leaders survey (2024), wherein supervisors were asked about how they support team members preparing for parental leave, demonstrating a high standard of practice.

While many staff reported strong supervisor support when preparing for parental leave, some supervisors noted they had not yet completed formal training nor prior experience in this area, suggesting their staff may not have had similarly positive experiences. Recent actions, including further updates to the Parental Leave Toolkit in 2025 and Supervisor’s checklist and introduction of “Know Your Agreement” training for managers (Table 1), should address this finding. Furthermore, University-wide roll-out of the buddy system (Further Action 3) will provide further support for staff with parental and caring responsibilities, whilst supervisors undertake training.

The 2025 buddy-system pilot gave staff preparing for or on parental leave an additional avenue for support and help accessing UniSC policies and provisions. Early feedback was positive (Figure 15), and AS consultations in 2025 were overwhelmingly supportive of the approach.

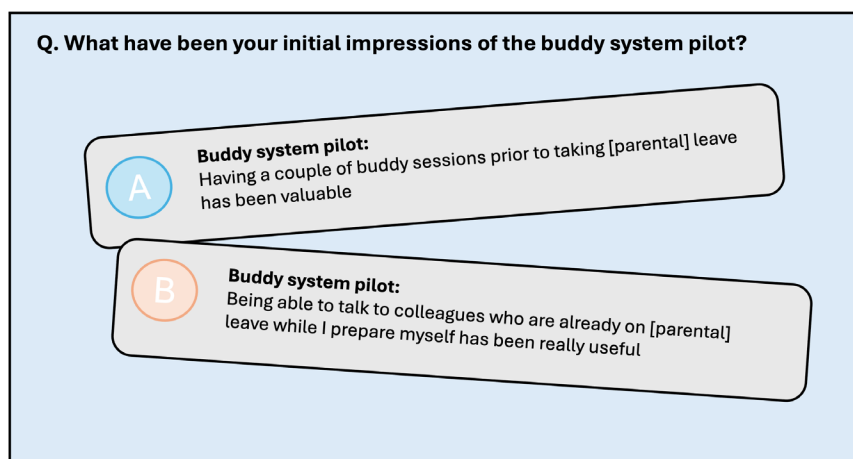


Figure 16. Selected feedback formal consultations with participants of the buddy pilot system during 2025, reflecting positive early feedback from this initiative.

5.4 Supporting research recovery through SPARK

As part of the 2024-2025 SPARK evaluation, participants were invited to provide open-text responses describing how the scheme had supported their careers. Feedback indicated that receiving a SPARK grant enabled participants to: (i) maintain momentum on existing projects and maximise the capacity to produce quality research outputs (ii) focus on developing new skills to remain competitive in the research environment, and (iii) dedicate time to making new connections and following new opportunities (Figure 17).

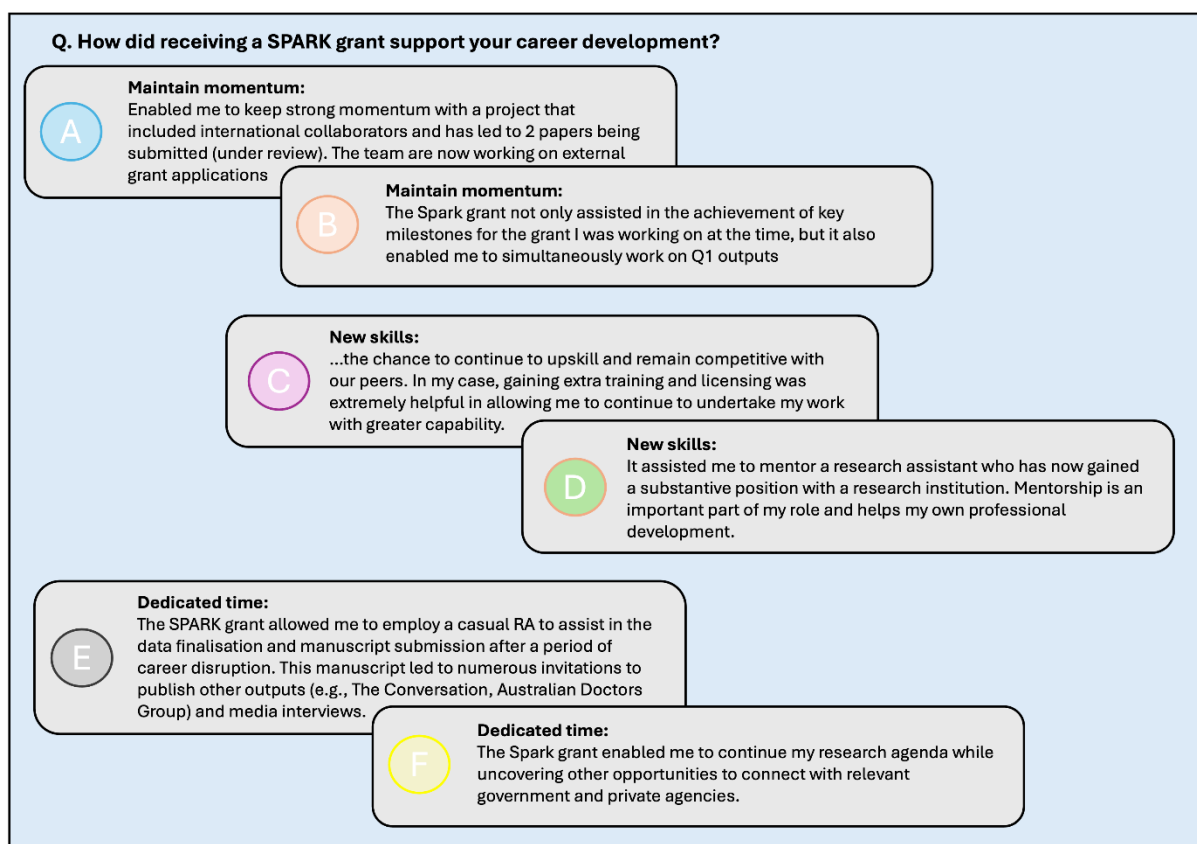


Figure 17. Selected feedback from SPARK recipient survey (2025), demonstrating diverse and important positive impacts of the scheme on the experience of staff with caring responsibilities, following their return to work.

6. FURTHER ACTION

Earlier structures, policies, and practices provided variable access to leave and reintegration support, with the greatest impacts for those with young children and for staff managing complex or ongoing caring responsibilities. Through targeted consultations, surveys, and review of existing supports, UniSC implemented multiple initiatives to improve equity and inclusion for carers. These included structural and systemic reform (e.g. centralised parental leave budgets), the development of a Parenting Toolkit, and the SPARK research recovery fund.

Outcomes include improved consistency of entitlements, more inclusive language in policy frameworks, and positive staff feedback on flexibility and supervisor support. However, further action is needed to embed these gains and address remaining and emerging gaps, particularly for men who are carers, better understanding and responding to how intersectionality affects needs specific to staff with parental and caring responsibilities at UniSC and campus infrastructure.

From 2026, proposals include pilot trialling on-campus vacation care at Moreton Bay, extending SPARK eligibility, co-designing enhanced lactation and parenting facilities, and evolving the Buddy System into a broader “UniSC Caring Network”, which will incorporate diverse forms of caring, and be co-designed through an intersectional lens.

#	Rationale / Evidence	Actions & Outputs	Timeframe (start & end)	Person / Group Responsible for Implementation	Senior Leader Accountable	Desired Outcomes / Success Indicators
1	The 2025 DEI Survey revealed that men with primary caring responsibilities for children under 18 reported significantly lower experiences of inclusion, equity, and growth compared to other men.	Conduct targeted consultations with men who identify as carers to explore barriers and cultural perceptions of caring responsibilities. Develop communication and engagement strategies to promote shared parenting and normalise flexible work uptake among men.	2026	P&C - Diversity & Inclusion Manager Athena Swan Committee	Executive/ Athena Swan Chair	Improved inclusion scores among men staff with primary caring responsibilities. Increased uptake of flexible work, parental and carer leave by men.
2	Consultations (2021, 2022, 2025) highlighted the lack of onsite vacation care as a persistent barrier for staff and students with caring responsibilities.	Develop and present a Discussion Paper to University Executive proposing a pilot on-campus Outside School Hours Care (OSHC) and Vacation Care program at Moreton Bay campus, with evaluation and recommendations for expansion.	2025–2026	Athena Swan Committee	COO Athena Swan Chair	OSHC/Vacation Care pilot implemented and evaluated. Executive endorsement secured for expansion to additional campuses.
3	Early feedback from the 2025 Buddy System pilot suggests peer pairing alone may not provide sufficient connection or flexibility for carers.	Develop a proposal to transition the Buddy System into a “UniSC Caring Network” to connect staff with shared experiences and support needs, aligned with UniSC’s “People First” strategy.	2026	Athena Swan Committee P&C - Diversity & Inclusion Manager	DVC(R&I) Athena Swan Chair	Network launched with active membership across campuses. Positive feedback from carers regarding connectedness and inclusivity.
4	Data limitations restrict understanding of intersectional caring experiences (e.g., disability, elder care, cultural obligations).	Design and implement targeted consultation and qualitative interviews to capture intersectional caring experiences while maintaining anonymity.	2026-2027	Athena Swan Committee P&C (Diversity & Inclusion Manager)	COO Athena Swan Chair	Comprehensive understanding of diverse caring contexts integrated into future policy and program design.

#	Rationale / Evidence	Actions & Outputs	Timeframe (start & end)	Person / Group Responsible for Implementation	Senior Leader Accountable	Desired Outcomes / Success Indicators
5	Consultations revealed that existing lactation and parenting facilities vary in quality and accessibility across campuses.	Develop and present a Discussion Paper to University Executive proposing a co-design upgraded lactation and parenting spaces with input from Nursing and Midwifery academics, student bodies, and Facilities Management. Pilot at Moreton Bay in 2026-2027 before wider rollout pending evaluation.	2025–2027	Athena Swan Committee Facilities Management & Student Services	COO Athena Swan Chair	New facilities operational at Moreton Bay by 2027. Positive satisfaction ratings from staff and students. Expansion plan approved for all campuses.
6	SPARK research recovery scheme supports staff post-leave, but awareness and flexibility remain limited.	Update SPARK guidelines to include carers beyond parents, allow coverage of care-related costs, and promote at point of leave application.	2026	DVC (R&I)	DVC (R&I)	Increased uptake of SPARK grants. Positive feedback on relevance and flexibility.
7	Consultations revealed ongoing inconsistencies in support and leave entitlements for staff with caring responsibilities.	Review UniSC's Enterprise Agreement and propose amendments to: (a) reduce teaching workload post-leave; (b) enable earlier access to parental/carers leave for new staff; and (c) increase Carers Leave entitlements for staff with significant caring duties. Submit proposed changes to NTEU during next bargaining round.	2025–2027	AS Committee P&C (Workplace relations)	COO	Proposed EA amendments endorsed. Improved consistency, equity, and transparency in support for staff with caring responsibilities.
8	Consultation methods revealed challenges associated with assessing how intersectionality affects needs specific to staff with parental and caring responsibilities at UniSC.	Hold focused design sessions with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, LGBTQI+ or CALD staff who also have parental and caring responsibilities to identify needs and priorities and seek engagement for co-design of new initiatives	2026-2027	AS Committee P&C	Athena Swan Chair	Improved understanding and equity in support of staff with caring responsibilities.

#	Rationale / Evidence	Actions & Outputs	Timeframe (start & end)	Person / Group Responsible for Implementation	Senior Leader Accountable	Desired Outcomes / Success Indicators
9	Feedback and reporting on Athena Swan barriers and initiatives are fragmented across multiple sources, and subgroup data (gender, area, discipline, disability etc) are inconsistent captured. This limits longitudinal analysis and makes it difficult to track issues and outcomes	Develop and implement an Athena Swan data collection strategy	2027	AS Committee	Athena Swan Chair	Consistent, privacy-safe intersectional data across key processes, barrier trends and outcomes