

 **WE ARE
ALL EQUAL**

BEING A PARENT AT UW

A SUMMARY REPORT

OF QUALITATIVE AND QUANTITATIVE RESEARCH
CARRIED OUT BETWEEN 2022 AND 2023



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UNIVERSITY
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Introduction

The University of Warsaw - the largest university in Poland - is a place of study and work for thousands of people with diverse life experiences. Parents are an important group. The experience of parenthood involves the need to combine caring responsibilities with academic and professional activities, which poses particular challenges. **A parent-friendly university is a university that is friendly to each individual and to the entire university community.**

From 2022 to 2023, the 'Being a parent at UW' research was conducted among all groups that make up the university: students and PhD students, as well as employees (in both research and teaching and administrative positions), including those in leadership roles.

The data collected provided a closer look at how parenthood is perceived and experienced in the context of studying and working at the University of Warsaw. The most important and general finding of the research is the lack of a coherent university policy towards those in parenting roles. Being a parent at the university is not only an individual challenge, but also an important part of the university's organisational culture. The experience of parenting in the academy is strongly linked to issues of gender equality, the feminisation of university work and stereotypes of caring roles.

In this report, we aim to show challenges and issues surrounding parenting in academia, focusing in particular on less publicly disclosed experiences and opinions.



Photo: UW photo archive

We would like to thank everyone who has placed their trust in us and shared their personal experiences.



Key findings

The University of Warsaw - as a place to work and study - is perceived by parents as a moderately tailored institution: with a visible potential to create, but at the same time with significant gaps of a systemic nature.

The results of the study point to real and recurrent difficulties experienced by parents functioning in faculties, doctoral schools and other organisational units of the university, regardless of status. Below are **the key findings from the survey, organised by four areas of parental experience and existing barriers.**

FAMILY AND LEARNING/WORKING AT UW

1

The university is perceived by parents as an institution **moderately adapted to their needs, with noticeable positive potential, but clear gaps requiring systemic action.** The results indicate **real difficulties within faculty structures and doctoral schools.**

2

There is a perception among the parents surveyed that **having children has a negative impact on their career development** - they are not as effective as those without children, even though they are often expected to work at the same level as before becoming parents. The situation particularly affects **female employees.**

3

An important challenge of combining parental and professional responsibilities is **the high psychological burden.** Respondents (mainly women) spoke of an **undermined sense of self-esteem** that emerged when returning to work after parental leave.

4

Becoming parents translates into the emergence of challenges related to academic career development. Most indicated **difficulties related to research trips, attending training and study tours, going to conferences, publishing, conducting their own research and participating in internships abroad.** Women - who are more likely than men to take care of children - find it difficult to arrange childcare during trips.

5

Academics do research and write publications on a **'back-to-back' basis** - between teaching and childcare. Both of these activities take up a lot of their time, which is no longer available for academic work. Some people **work evenings, nights or weekends**.

6

Teaching parents indicated that one of the biggest difficulties they face is **the issue of teaching when their child is ill**. In some units, there is an unwritten rule that **classes cannot be cancelled and online classes are not possible**.

7

One of the most problematic issues for teachers is **the lack of flexibility when arranging the timetable and consequently, the inability to adapt working hours to the opening hours of care and educational facilities**. Students also stated that they do not always have the possibility to adapt their timetable to their childcare options.

8

Some of the people working in administration also mentioned that a major obstacle to combining family and work life is **that they are expected to work overtime**. They also pointed to the lack of university-wide rules related to remote working and the fact that its granting often depends on the goodwill of the supervisor.

9

Gender discrimination related to **pregnancy was a recurring theme**. Several people mentioned situations where a woman **did not get a job or her contract was not renewed because of her pregnancy**. Sometimes a man is hired and not a woman, for fear that she will be less available because of the children.

10

Due to the work culture - often requiring being available 24/7 and rapid career progression - **parents feel guilty**. They try at all costs to prove that they 'can do it' and **are as available and effective as they were before having children**.

11

Low wages and scholarships mean that parents rely mainly on private resources (relatives), as they often **cannot afford to pay for private care**.

12

Parents raising children on their own or raising children with special needs are particularly vulnerable to the negative effects of a lack of parental support.

13

The 'punishment of motherhood' is strongly present in academia. Mothers experience **undermining of competence, being perceived as less available, being overlooked for promotions and rewards, discrimination and more pressure than fathers.**

INFRASTRUCTURAL, INSTITUTIONAL AND ADMINISTRATIVE BARRIERS

1

UW infrastructure does not sufficiently address the needs of parents: **there is a lack of nurseries, parent-child and feeding spaces. The lack of short-term childcare options increases parents' stress and makes it difficult to respond to work commitments.**

2

Awareness of the available forms of support is very low. The lack of consistent communication means that even existing solutions are not used effectively. Parents point to the **limited circulation of information.**

3

The **low salaries and scholarships of employees and PhD students** make it even more difficult to combine parental and academic roles. In order to be able to support their families in Warsaw, many people seek **additional sources of income.**

4

The grant and promotion system is based on the assumption of **high mobility and uninterrupted activity, which structurally excludes many parents** - especially mothers. Parental responsibilities are mostly not taken into account in periodic evaluations and promotion procedures, leading to systemic inequality.

5

Parental leave is not a common practice and there is also pressure to return from it quickly, lack of support on return and negative consequences in evaluation.

6

The **inability to modify the scope of responsibilities in parental situations** (e.g. child illness) leads to 'improvisation' and psychological strain. The use of the leave due to a child's illness is sometimes stigmatised and treated as neglect.

ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE, BEHAVIOURAL NORMS AND THE ATMOSPHERE AROUND PARENTING

1

Norms of productivity and continuous availability **are based on a model of an employee who has no caring obligations**. A workaholic culture promotes exhaustion, burnout and mental health deterioration.

2

Parents often **internalise the pressure** - working nights and at the expense of rest - leading to long-term health consequences. There is a lack of systemic concern for the wellbeing.

3

The atmosphere around parenting at UW is highly variable and dependent on the culture of the specific unit. Support most often comes from colleagues and peers rather than from the institutional level. Relationships with supervisors and professors range from very supportive to overtly exclusionary. Support based on 'goodwill' evokes gratitude, but also **a sense of dependence and insecurity**.

NEEDS AND EXPECTATIONS

1

It is important to take **parenting responsibilities into account in performance evaluations, promotions, and the awarding of bonuses**.

2

Many respondents also indicated that it is a supportive measure to introduce **university-wide solutions to regulate various forms of remote working and learning**, so that these solutions are not dependent on the goodwill of supervisors or instructors.

3

The possibility **to teach and participate in online classes, to participate remotely meetings and to allow ad hoc remote working, e.g. when a child is ill**, were mentioned.

4

A high expectation was also the introduction of flexibility in work and study organisation by **adjusting hours to the opening hours of childcare and educational facilities, taking into account the needs of parents in arranging timetables and registering for classes and allowing to use leave for childcare**.

5

Many of the parents interviewed called for an **increase in the amount of child allowances or the introduction of new forms of financial support for parents**. Another important need was psychological and psychoeducational support.

6

Respondents also indicated the need to develop infrastructure to **combine caring responsibilities with work and study** by developing nursery facilities, introducing ad hoc childcare facilities, increasing the number and quality of parent-child rooms.

7

Increasing the availability of information on different forms of support for parents was also among the needs articulated.

8

Finally the needs to include the children of people working and studying at UW in the university community by **organising inclusive events - summer or winter camps, offering educational, sporting and artistic, and aligning the timing of winter holidays with the term break** - were mentioned.

A black and white photograph of a woman holding a baby on a beach. The woman is on the left, seen from the side, holding the baby. The baby is in the center, looking towards the camera and reaching out with its right hand towards a hand on the right. The background is a bright, sandy beach with the ocean in the distance. The image has a light blue tint.

3.

Methodology

The 'Being a parent at UW' study was conducted in 2022/2023 and had two phases: **a qualitative study through focus interviews and a quantitative study conducted through a survey.**

The aim of the qualitative study was to understand how people from different groups in the academic community perceive and experience combining parental responsibilities with teaching, learning and administrative work

Focus group interviews were conducted with five groups of people, with majority of women¹:

- female and male students (6 people),
- female and male doctoral students (6 people),
- female and male research and teaching staff (7 people),
- representatives of the faculty administration² (9 persons),
- representatives of the central administration (5 persons).

The main topics of discussion included combining parenthood with academic, teaching and administrative duties, availability and adequacy of infrastructure and institutional support, the organisational culture of the university in the context of parenthood, the atmosphere and relationships in the workplace and in the student environment, the needs and expectations of supporting parents in the future.

A separate focus group consisted of members of the dean's colleges (18 people). The interview with deans and heads of teaching units (KJDs) took the form of a conversation focused on identifying the management perspective and institutional determinants of parenting support.

The material allowed us to identify the main barriers and areas of challenge, as well as best practices in combining professional and family roles. The findings from this stage formed the starting point for developing a survey addressed to the broader university community.

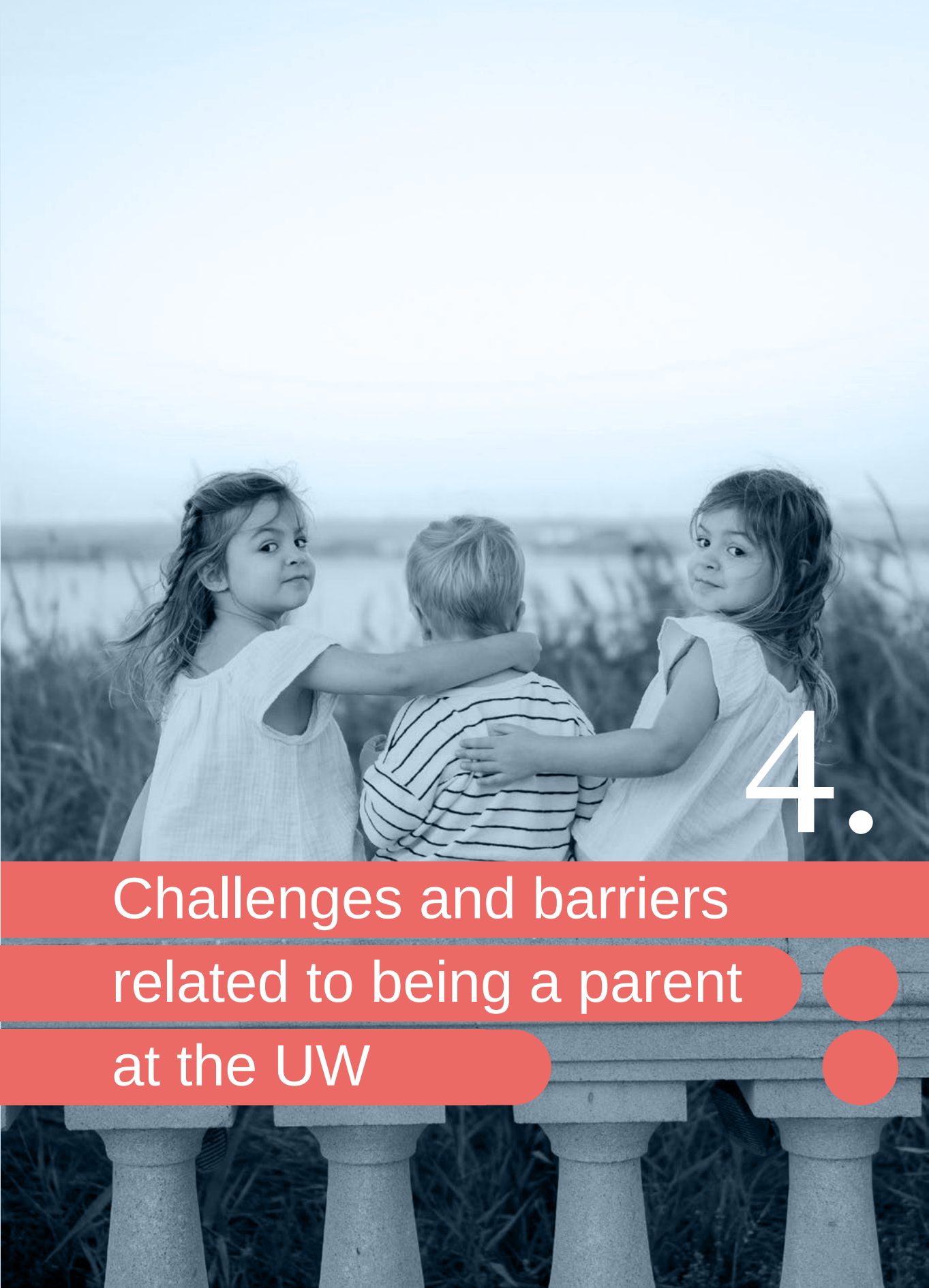
The online survey³ had two groups of respondents: students and PhD students (1) and employees (2). The aim was to obtain a comprehensive picture of the experiences, needs, problems, and expectations related to parenting at the University of Warsaw. The open-ended section of the survey deserves particular attention, allowing each participant to freely write about their experiences and difficulties related to parenting at the university.

A total of 2688 people took part in the survey, including 1315 employees and 1373 students and PhD students.

1 The team developing this stage of the research consisted of Julia Kubisa, Anna Grędzińska, Aneta Ostaszewska, Marta Pietrusińska.

2 We included people working in administration (faculty and central) in administrative, technical and library positions.

3 The PEJK team (Educational Quality Evaluation Unit) was responsible for the preparation and implementation of the survey. The authors of the report were supported in the preparation of the statistical description by Antonina Baczyńska, Helena Marzec-Gołąb, Wiktoria Morawska, and Joanna Pawłowska.

A black and white photograph of three young children standing on a stone bridge. The child in the center is a boy with short hair, wearing a striped shirt, seen from the back. He is being embraced from behind by two girls. The girl on the left has long, wavy hair and is looking back over her shoulder. The girl on the right also has long hair and is looking towards the camera. The bridge has a simple stone railing. In the background, there is a body of water and some reeds or tall grass. The sky is bright and slightly hazy.

4.

Challenges and barriers
related to being a parent
at the UW

The University of Warsaw, as a place of work, is perceived by parents as an institution moderately adapted to their needs, with noticeable positive potential but clear gaps requiring systemic action. The evaluation of the UW from the perspective of parents' needs is predominantly moderate in nature. The most frequently indicated response is 'average' (41%).

At the same time, **almost half of the respondents perceive solutions or conditions at UW that are conducive to parenting positively**. However, strongly positive evaluations are in the minority. The presence of negative evaluations (11%) indicates that some people experience significant difficulties in reconciling academic or administrative work with parenthood.

The evaluation of faculties and doctoral schools from the perspective students and PhD students of parental needs is overwhelmingly moderate or negative. The most frequently indicated response is 'moderate' (47%). Particularly significant is the proportion of 'very bad' ratings (12%), signalling situations of profound institutional mismatch.

Support for parents working at the university is seen as one of the weakest links in the functioning of the institution. Its assessment is clearly less favourable than the overall assessment of the UW as a place to work. The dominant response to the question on the evaluation of parental support at the UW remains the middle value of the scale ('on average' - 43%), which confirms the picture of support as limited, inconsistent or insufficiently visible.

4.1

Parenting versus study and work

4.1.1 Studying

CAREER SLOWDOWN

For many academics, the concern that having a child could negatively impact their academic career led them to postpone the decision to start a family. There is a **general feeling that one is falling behind** - this particularly affects female academics. On the other hand, it is a real limitation of the possibility to participate in many scientific activities due to new childcare responsibilities.

Parents working in research and teaching positions indicated that many of their professional responsibilities had slowed down. Most indicated

difficulties related to research trips, attending training and study tours, going to conferences, publishing, conducting their research and participating in postdoctoral fellowships. More women than men perceived a slowdown in building their careers (52% and 37%) and applying for grants (51% and 38%).

The feeling having a child might have a negative impact on the development of an academic career, for many academics, caused **them to postpone the decision to have a child**.

● SLOWING DOWN ACADEMIC DEVELOPMENT

Students and PhD students also indicated that becoming parents had **a negative impact on their academic development**. 66% of surveyed parents in this group said that having children had affected their preparation of their thesis or dissertation. As many as 75% of parents said that they had fewer opportunities for academic development compared to those without children. Some of those surveyed explicitly said that they had had to stop their studies, or decided not to start new ones, because of becoming a parent.

Many parents surveyed also emphasised that **the University of Warsaw does not support young parents (especially mothers) to return to academic work** after parental-related leaves. They emphasised that they are required to be as available and productive as they were before having children, while at the same time they are not supported in this return and do not take into account that their private situation no longer allows 24/7 availability and accessibility.

● SCIENTIFIC WORK AND FAMILY RESPONSIBILITIES

Reconciling academic work and family life means that parents face enormous pressure but also experience a number of **difficulties in organising the conduct of research, publishing or attending conferences**. A large number of people mentioned that since having children their academic work lacks regularity or the possibility to focus for a longer period of time.

Those working in academia **conduct research and write publications on a 'casual basis' - between teaching and childcare responsibilities**. Both of these activities take up a lot of their time which is no longer available for academic work. Some people work evenings, nights or weekends which takes its toll on their health or family relationships. All these difficulties of trying to balance family responsibilities with academic work lead some people to deteriorate their mental health. There have also been claims that trying to achieve better efficiency takes a toll on the physical health.

4.1.2 Teaching

● TEACHING DUTIES OF PARENTS - CHILD ILLNESS

Teaching parents indicated that one of the biggest difficulties they face is the issue of teaching **when their child is ill**. In some units there is an unwritten rule that classes cannot be cancelled. In such a situation, parents have to organise care for their sick child, ask other lecturers to teach in their stead, or 'make up' the class in question at another time. They are simply unable to take advantage of the care allowance.

Some people also indicated that it **is not possible to teach classes online** when their child is ill. Many people mentioned that it was very helpful for them to conduct classes online during the pandemic and they do not understand why, despite the fact that there are technical possibilities to conduct remote classes at UW, such solution is not introduced.

● TEACHING DUTIES OF PARENTS – CLASS SCHEDULE

One of the most important problematic issues related to parent-led teaching was the **lack of flexibility in the scheduling of classes and consequently, the inability to adapt working hours to the opening hours of childcare and educational facilities**. There were numerous claims that in many UW units the schedules are arranged to suit the preferences of students.

The fact that taking parents' needs into account when arranging timetables is not a common practice at UW is also evidenced by the fact that more than half (53%) of those working at UW - both academically and non-academically - indicated that in their units parental needs are not taken into account in the organisation of work.

● CHILD IN THE CLASSROOM

Students indicated that **they do not always have the opportunity to adjust their timetable to accommodate childcare**. The majority of surveyed responded that they do not benefit from prioritisation of class groups because there are no such arrangements in their unit (67%) and that they do not have priority in choosing subjects (68%). PhD students also indicated that **a lot of classes in doctoral schools take place in the afternoon**, when care facilities are closed.

The impossibility of adjusting the timetable to fit in with responsibilities causes students and PhD students to try different solutions. Some **come with their children to classes**. According to 66% of the respondents, it is perceived positively or neutrally. **It is more difficult to get permission to attend classes online** when the child is ill or when care cannot be arranged.

● STRATEGIES TO ALIGN LEARNING WITH PARENTAL RESPONSIBILITIES

Among parents of students and PhD students, the most frequently cited difficulty associated with parenthood was the **difficulty of arranging childcare** - experienced by as many as 63% of those surveyed. More than a third of respondents (34%) also indicated **problems combining childcare with studying or working on a PhD**. Many highlighted that **having a child had significantly affected the way they organised their study and research work** (29%).

At the same time, they **made little use of the forms of support and facilitation available at universities for parents**, such as individual organisation of studies (12%), dean's leave (18%) or extension of credit terms (21%). In addition, especially in the case of PhD students, studying is made more difficult by the need to support the family and, therefore, **to look for additional sources of income**, as the scholarship is, in the opinion of interviewed, far too low.

4.1.3 Administrative work

● REMOTE OR HYBRID ● WORKING⁴

The biggest difficulty related to balancing work and parenthood mentioned by those working in administration was the **limitations in the possibility to use remote working**. In some units, the use of remote working is not a problem at all, in others it is practically impossible.

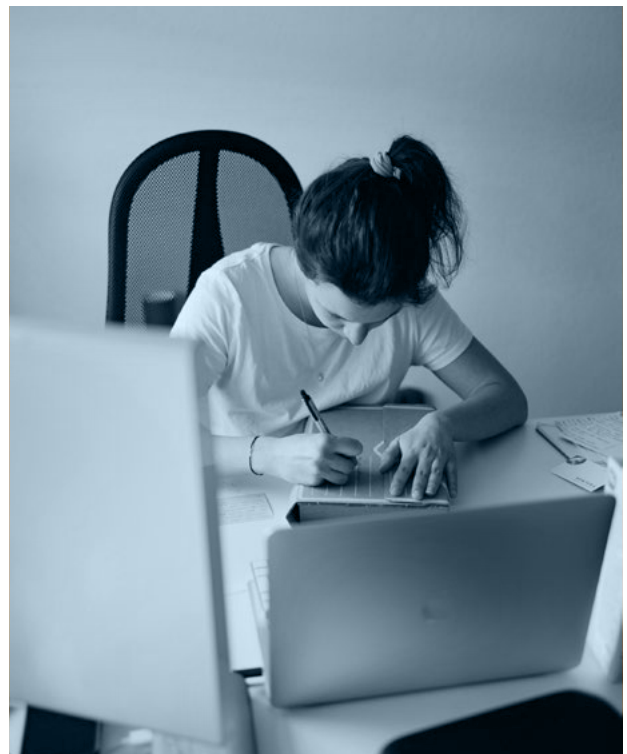
Respondents indicated that they would be able to work remotely in the event of a child's illness, but due to the lack of permission from their supervisors, they have to use leave to care for the child, leave on demand or use family support. At the same time, some interviewees indicated that **taking a leave due to a child's illness is judged negatively by their superiors and people they work with**.

● SLOWING DOWN ● CAREER DEVELOPMENT ● IN ADMINISTRATION

It was also indicated that having children had **slowed down professional development and reduced opportunities to improve skills of administrative staff**. Activities such as taking part in training (47%) and travelling abroad (51%) were likely to have slowed down.

● WORKING OUTSIDE ● REGULAR HOURS

Some people also mentioned that a major obstacle to combining family and work life is that they **are expected to work overtime**. This is particularly evident among those who work in a more task-oriented way and who are required to work harder when deadlines approach. Those whose work involves a lot of direct contact with academic staff mentioned that they find it very difficult to be expected to **be available in the afternoons or evenings or at weekends**.



4 The study was conducted before the introduction of remote work solutions at UW.

4.1.4 Other challenges

● THIRD-PARTY CARE AS A PREREQUISITE ● FOR WORKING AND STUDYING

Interviews and questionnaires in all surveyed groups show that **without the support of third parties** - closer or extended family or people hired to look after the children - **working** (especially academically) **and studying at the University of Warsaw is very difficult**.

Almost $\frac{2}{3}$ of those working at UW and more than $\frac{3}{4}$ of those studying or doing a PhD, use some form of childcare. Parents most often rely on the support of others, especially family members, as well as childcare and educational facilities. Many indicated that **without the support in caring for their**

children, they would not be able to pursue their academic activities, work or study.

The use of support mainly from family is also dictated by the fact that the relatively low salaries at the University of Warsaw rarely allow for the employment of a person for care. Only 9% of those working and 11% of those studying indicated that they employ a person for care. They signaled **an expectation among supervisors that subordinates can (and should) use third-party childcare support** in order to discharge their professional duties effectively.

● PARENTING WITH ● ADDITIONAL CHALLENGES

Among the parents surveyed, some were **single parents**. Among those studying or doing a PhD, this was 13%, and among those working, 6%. 13% of parents working at UW and 10% of those studying or doing a PhD indicated that they **were raising a child with special needs**.

Both parents of children with special needs and single parents indicated several similar difficulties. Firstly - both groups indicated that a major difficulty was **low wages or scholarships** at the UW, which forced them to **take on extra work to be able to support their family**. In addition, both groups indicated that for them, compared to other parents, **it was even more difficult to combine academic work with childcare**.

● EXCLUSION FROM ● SOCIAL LIFE

Another emerging theme was a sense of **exclusion from social life**. Many students and PhD students at UW mentioned that their **social contacts had deteriorated**. 72% of those surveyed said that they had had to limit their involvement in student or PhD student councils activities. As many as 74% had reduced their social contacts at the university. Feelings of exclusion were also linked to the incompatibility of their parents' experiences with the experiences of their peers, who have different lives and challenges on a daily basis.

● RECRUITMENT OR CONTINUING TO WORK AND PREGNANCY

During the research, a theme that came up frequently among those working in administration was **gender discrimination related to pregnancy**. Several people mentioned situations where a woman did not get a job or her contract was not

renewed because of her pregnancy. It was also mentioned that it is sometimes still the case that **a man is hired rather than a woman for fear that she will be less available** because of the children.

● MENTAL HEALTH OF PARENTS WORKING AND STUDYING AT UW

An important challenge of combining parenting and work responsibilities is **the heavy mental burden**. While we did not explicitly address this issue in the surveys, it came up often during the focus interviews and within the open-ended questions in the questionnaires.

Respondents (mainly women) spoke of **an undermined sense of self-esteem**, which emerged when they returned to work after parental leave. They felt that they were no longer working

as effectively as they had done before the arrival of their children. Because of the work culture at UW parents **feel guilty**. What's more, they try at all costs to **prove that they 'can do it' and are as available and efficient as they were before the children came along**. Proving that one can cope was associated with a great **sense of fatigue and overload** in all groups surveyed. In addition to this mental fatigue, there is also **physical fatigue**, because, in order to 'catch up', many parents choose to work nights and weekends.

● PUNISHMENT FOR MOTHERHOOD VERSUS ● BONUS FOR FATHERHOOD

In the university environment, there is the dual phenomenon: '**punishment for motherhood**'-downgrading of the availability and productivity of mothers, and the '**paternity bonus**', linked to the perception of fathers as more stable and committed. While the theme of punishment for motherhood appeared often in our study, the premium for fatherhood did not.

Among the manifestations of 'punishment for motherhood', respondents most frequently mentioned:

- ▶ problems with renewal of employment,
- ▶ being overlooked for promotions,
- ▶ fewer appointments of mothers in management positions,
- ▶ non-inclusion of female scientist in scientific activities,
- ▶ undermining of women's competence,
- ▶ not taking account of caring duties in promotion criteria,
- ▶ mid-term appraisal and awards.

4.2 Infrastructural and institutional conditions

The data collected allows us to capture the various aspects that affect the ability to reconcile family responsibilities with professional, teaching and research activities. The most frequent parents' opinions on learning and working conditions, the

academic culture and the prevailing atmosphere around parenthood were: **limitations related to the University's infrastructure, lack of organisational flexibility and insufficient information on forms of support.**

4.2.1 Infrastructural barriers

Parents at the university often face infrastructural barriers: **nurseries, rooms for parent and child or spaces for feeding are rare** in university buildings, as are **lifts and ramps for prams**.

There is a lack of spaces at the university that allow for *ad hoc*, short-term childcare. As a result,

situations that require flexibility (e.g. emergency meetings) become a source of stress for parents. What for others is an organisational issue, for parents it means having to constantly reconcile work responsibilities with childcare, often without support from the institution.

4.2.2 Institutional barriers

In addition to infrastructural constraints, significant difficulties arise from university policies, regulations and procedures. A major problem is the **low visibility of family-friendly solutions**. Only 23% of employees declare average or high knowledge of existing parental support measures, while more than half have little or no knowledge. Limited information flow means that many parents do not use available forms of support.

Among student and PhD students parents, 87% did not apply for financial or social support related to

pregnancy or parenthood, and only 6% successfully received benefits. The main source of information is informal networks: other students (38%) and friends. Institutional channels such as the dean's office (23%) and faculty websites (22%) play a secondary role, while central university websites and social media are marginal sources.

Parental leave is not widely used. Among employees, 44% did not take any parental leave. Maternity leave was predominantly taken by women (42%), compared to 12% of men taking paternity

leave. Men rarely used full parental leave, and shared parental leave was uncommon. Among PhD students, 59% did not use any parental leave or support; 31% suspended their studies only for the period corresponding to maternity leave. Among students, 72% did not use any parental support mechanisms.

The limited uptake of leave and support may reflect organisational barriers, fear of career disruption, and insufficient procedural knowledge.

Reintegration after leave is not systematically supported, and 20% of parents reported experiencing pressure to return earlier or reduce leave—more often women and teaching staff. Parental responsibilities are not adequately considered in appraisal and promotion systems. According to respondents, career advancement favours childless men (70%) and women (55%). Requirements such as mandatory foreign placements for promotion are perceived as structurally disadvantageous.

4.2.3 Administrative barriers

Parenting burdens are also compounded by **complex administrative procedures and excessive bureaucracy**, from reporting to mid-term evaluations, with a lack of transparency in document circulation. The prevailing feeling is that there is a lack of general, systemic solutions and that people have to deal with getting information and support.

The daily life of an academic parent is complicated by the lack of predictability of the teaching and

academic calendar. **It is common practice for compulsory college meetings and teaching activities to be organised at times that conflict with caring responsibilities. Another problem is the unpredictability of scientific trips** which requires parents to make additional compromises and logistical efforts. Decisions are often made at the last minute, which makes it impossible to plan childcare in advance.



4.3

Work culture and organisation

Work culture and organisational practices significantly shape how parenting can be combined with academic responsibilities. Two key patterns emerge: **flexibility is often informal and dependent on supervisors and behavioural norms frequently ignore parental roles.**

● WORK ORGANISATION AND FLEXIBILITY

The absence of a coherent university family-friendly policy means that **the available solutions depend primarily on the goodwill of supervisors and instructors.** Whether a parent can adjust their work or study schedule is often contingent on their relationship with a supervisor rather than on clear institutional rules. Although some units apply supportive practices, 53% of staff report no such experience, suggesting strong disparities between faculties and a lack of systemic solutions.

For student parents, the main barrier is difficulty in **organising childcare** (63%), followed by **problems combining care with study or doctoral work** (34%). A lack of flexible credit arrangements

affects 23%. While remote work during the pandemic improved reconciliation of roles, the limited possibility to continue hybrid solutions has since created frustration and a sense of inequality in access.

In emergency situations (e.g. a child's illness), formal mechanisms of substitution are often lacking, **forcing parents to rely on informal arrangements.** Using sick leave for childcare may be stigmatised, increasing stress. More broadly, respondents describe an **expectation of constant availability and time commitment**, fostering a workaholic culture in which long hours are normalised. Parental leave is sometimes trivialised through ironic comments.

● ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE AND BEHAVIOURAL NORMS

Organisational culture and behavioural norms are influenced by a number of factors including gender differences. The '**motherhood penalty**' is repeatedly referred to in the statements of participants in the study. This involves greater caring responsibilities for women, or suspicion towards the use of a leave due to a child's illness. Female researchers also describe experiences of systemic discrimination and undermining of their competence in relation to motherhood.

Female participants in the study also emphasise **the impact of work culture on mental health.** They are accompanied by **feelings of guilt** - both towards work and their family - **resulting from the pressure to be constantly available and to 'get by' despite increasing burdens.**

Overall, stereotypes about parenthood — especially motherhood — remain embedded in academic culture. High performance pressure and norms of constant availability undermine psychological wellbeing and reinforce structural inequalities with parenthood sometimes perceived as an obstacle rather than a part of life within academia.

4.4 Atmosphere

The atmosphere surrounding parenthood at the university depends largely on local organisational culture. Some environments support combining family and academic responsibilities while others foster isolation or pressure to conceal one's private situation.

Colleagues and fellow students play a crucial role. Their solidarity, willingness to share responsibilities and mutual understanding—especially among other parents—can significantly ease everyday burdens. Relationships with supervisors vary: **some demonstrate empathy and flexibility, while others adopt controlling or rigid management** styles, perceiving parenting as an limiting obstacle or an 'excuse'. Team leaders most frequently identify limited staff availability due to childcare responsibilities as the main challenge in working with parents.

In many accounts, **parenthood is treated as a private matter that should remain separate from professional life**. In contrast, some units display openness — welcoming children at meetings or informal events — thus creating a more inclusive environment. Where support is offered, it often generates gratitude among parents, sometimes accompanied by a sense of indebtedness or heightened loyalty.

Overall, the prevailing work culture contributes to the reproduction of parental inequalities and increases the burden on parents. This highlights the need for coherent, systemic family-friendly solutions that do not depend on individual relationships, alongside the promotion of an organisational culture genuinely supportive of wellbeing and work–life balance.



A blue-tinted photograph of a family walking across a grassy field. A man in a white t-shirt and light-colored pants is walking towards the left, holding the hand of a young girl in a white dress. To their right, a woman in a white top and patterned pants is walking, carrying a young boy in a striped shirt. In the background, there is a white wooden fence and a line of trees.

5.

Good experiences
and good practices



This chapter presents both informal, less visible forms of support (‘good experiences’) and more structured, organisational solutions (‘good practices’) that help parents combine academic and family roles at the University of Warsaw.

● GOOD EXPERIENCES OF PARENTING AT UW

Although earlier sections highlighted numerous barriers, respondents also pointed to positive changes. Parenthood is increasingly discussed openly at the university.

Positive and supportive experiences prevail among student and PhD students parents, with more than half of surveyed declaring that they have encountered friendly or supportive approaches from supervisors (65%), lecturers (54%) and administrative staff (47%). Some respondents described a general sense of support within their

units, even if they could not clearly identify specific mechanisms and despite lack of university-wide system. In non-standard situations administrative staff helped identify favourable procedural solutions.

Students and PhD students frequently mentioned support from supervisors and lecturers not only in formal matters (e.g. flexible credit arrangements, thesis deadlines), but also through **everyday gestures of understanding and encouragement**.

● GOOD PRACTICES TO SUPPORT PARENTS

Beyond individual goodwill, respondents identified several more structured solutions. At the university-wide level, financial support (e.g. holiday subsidies, vouchers, allowances) was most frequently mentioned. However, **lack of awareness limits its use**. Another central solution is the university nursery, which receives positive evaluations for quality and staff.

A key instrument for students is **the Individual Organisation of Studies (IOS)**, allowing increased absences, alternative forms of assessment, adjusted deadlines or dean’s leave. However, implementation differs significantly across units and even between instructors.

Online teaching emerged as one of the most valued practices. For parents, it reduces commuting time and allows participation during a child’s illness or in the absence of alternative childcare. Similar

benefits were noted by lecturers. Some units also **allow children to attend classes, exams, or even field trips** — practices perceived as highly inclusive.

Flexible scheduling is another supportive practice. In some units, timetables can be adjusted to avoid early morning or late afternoon classes, enabling childcare logistics. Regular meetings scheduled at family-compatible hours were also appreciated.

Remote and hybrid work options were highlighted as crucial for reconciling family and professional responsibilities. Similarly, flexible working hours in administration were cited as valuable but unevenly available practices. Some people spoke of having the option to leave work during **the day in an emergency or exceptional situation**.

A black and white photograph of a woman with dark hair tied back, holding a baby wrapped in a white blanket. The woman is looking down at the baby with a gentle expression. In the background, a world map is visible on the wall, with some continents and a whale illustration clearly seen. The overall mood is intimate and caring.

6.

Needs and expectations
of respondents

An important element of the study was identifying how the UW could better support parents. Many proposals reflect limited awareness of already existing solutions or the need to strengthen and systematise them. In years 2023 - 2026 few relevant regulations were introduced:

- ▶ Ordinance of the Rector of the University of Warsaw on defining the procedure, rules and criteria for periodic evaluation of academic staff - the staff evaluation sheet includes an "other" category where parental responsibilities can be indicated (available in Polish).
- ▶ Ordinance of the Rector of the University of Warsaw on the meetings of bodies, collegial entities and other bodies in a remote mode (available in Polish).
- ▶ Ordinance of the Rector of the University of Warsaw on the principles of performing occasional remote work at the University of Warsaw
- ▶ Recommendations on the hours of business meetings - meeting of UW bodies, as well as important meetings, **should be held during the working hours at the university**, consistent with the opening hours of care and educational institutions - **between 8.00 a.m. and 4.00 p.m.**

Mentioning existing solutions as worth implementing may indicate that communicating about these solutions and where to find them is insufficient. Failure to effectively communicate the necessary information and actions means these solutions have a smaller impact than they could.

6.1 Institutional changes

- reducing the teaching load for parents returning from parental leave, so that they have the opportunity to make up for the "gap" in their academic careers;
- introduction of a university-wide staff appraisal policy relating to the inclusion of parental responsibilities (not just the break related to parental leave);
- taking parental responsibilities into account in promotion procedures (e.g. changes in promotion to the position of university professor, which require completing an international internship);
- taking into account the parenthood when awarding university awards (e.g. a separate awards for parents or competition criteria that take parental burdens into account);
- allowing parents to pursue doctoral studies on a ½-time basis, while extending it twice.

- introducing systemic support for parents returning from parental leaves in the form of dedicated mentoring, grant and coaching programmes;
- synchronisation of the semester break and exam session with the winter holidays, so that parents do not have to organise childcare or can go on holiday with their children.

6.2

Flexible organisation of time and place of work

- introduction of university-wide rules relating to remote working in accordance with the Labour Code, both for academic and non-academic staff;
- introduction of the possibility of *ad hoc* remote working in the event of child illness or other family emergency;
- introduction of the possibility to participate in decision-making bodies' meetings in an online form;
- the possibility of occasionally taking online classes when a child is ill;
- introduction of task-based working for administration (where possible);
- introduction of a system of flexible working hours or the possibility to set working hours within a range (e.g. starting between 7:00 and 10:00), where possible;
- introducing a system of substitution for teaching, so that when a child is ill, the parent does not have to organise the substitution himself;
- prioritising or taking into account the needs of parents in the planning of the timetable;
- giving priority to parents when registering for classes or providing dedicated places for parents in each class group;
- the introduction of a university-wide rule whereby sick leave for childcare will be treated by class instructors in the same way as sick leave;
- the introduction of additional absences from classes related to parental duties other than caring for a sick child (e.g. attending a school assembly, the start of the school year);
- extension of compulsory time for parents to complete subjects due to emergencies from unexpected events in the family e.g. child illness, becoming a single parent;

6.3

Various forms of support

- coaching for parents returning from parental leave to enable them to re-enter teaching and research work and plan their career development;
- psychological support related to counteracting parental burnout;
- educational activities related to the improvement of parenting competences (e.g. parenting skills workshops, building a career after leave, playing with a young child);
- support group for parents, enabling them to self-help and network;

- introduction of a children's winter holiday subsidy;
- introduction of an university research grants fund, travel, traineeships for parents only - especially parents returning from parental leave;
- funding for family travel (partner and children) for a study visit (conference, internship, etc.) of a person working at the UW;
- the introduction of tuition fee reduction for part-time students who have children;
- introduction of a supplement to the doctoral scholarship per child;
- subsidising extra-curricular activities for children of people working at the UW.

6.4

Infrastructure and services

- opening of (new) nursery and kindergarten facilities - especially at the Ochota Campus;
- increasing the number of places in university nursery;
- enabling children of students to attend the university nursery;
- opening a day-care centre where children could wait for parents under supervision;
- hourly care - while people are teaching or taking part in activities;
- *ad hoc* care - opening a point where people could leave children in case of emergency;
- providing care - especially in the afternoons, evenings and weekends - so that working people and students can attend various events (e.g. seminars, scientific meetings, departmental meetings);
- providing care for children during scientific conferences held at the UW;
- organising educational activities for the children during winter breaks or part of the summer holidays (e.g. in the form of half-day camps);
- involving Faculty of Education students' in various forms of childcare, so that while providing care they can simultaneously complete their compulsory internships;
- creating nursing rooms for parents - with space for changing, feeding, preparing meals for young children, pumping and storing milk;
- creating rooms where children can play or wait for their parents (e.g. while doing homework) and parents can work in the same space (similar to the BUW-ialnia);
- providing all units with ramps for prams, lifts and storage space for prams so that it is possible to enter the building with a small child;
- providing places for parents to work in UW units.

6.5

Accessibility of information

- creating a separate organisational unit at UW, which will focus on supporting parents;
- sending an automatically generated e-mail to academic community members who have become parents, with information necessary (e.g. rights and types of support);
- creating an information hub with the most important information for parents;
- creation of a map of university spaces with parent-friendly infrastructure (e.g. which building has a child-parent room or kitchen, where there are ramps for prams).

6.6

Other needs and expectations

- providing parking spaces for parents (if the unit has them) to facilitate their use of the car to drop off and pick up their children from care and education facilities;
- raise awareness among people without children or with children who are already grown up (especially those in leadership positions) of the challenges and difficulties of parenthood that translate into work or study;
- countering negative attitudes and comments about parenting by organising education and information campaigns;
- organising children's days in units and at university-wide level to raise the profile of children at UW;
- organising events such as Christmas parties and family picnics;
- organising sports activities aimed at parents with children (e.g. fitness for mums with young children).





7.

The dean's
perspective

In the 'Being a parent at UW' study, **the expert focus group consisted of members of dean's colleges and heads of teaching units (KJDs)** (18 people in total). Interviews focused mainly on identifying the institutional determinants of parenting support at the university

The statements indicate that **they show an awareness of the problems associated with com-**

binning academic work and parenthood most often rooted in their own experiences. During the interviews, they referred primarily to their situation as parents, and less frequently to the general situation of their subordinates or students who have children. Interviewees consistently emphasised **the lack of systemic, university-wide solutions, with the result that forms of support are primarily discretionary and differentiated between faculties.**

● KEY PROBLEM ISSUES ● AT FACULTIES

From the perspective of the deans, the key problems relate primarily to **the organisation of didactics**, especially the arrangement of timetables. Faculties operate in a tension between the needs of students and the needs of working parents.

A significant problem is also the **periodic performance evaluation and research assessment procedures** which at central level did not explicitly take into account parental leave. Another difficulty identified is the inadequate care infrastructure and the inconsistency of calendars (school versus academic holidays).

● ACTION STRATEGIES ● AND WORK ORGANISATION

The predominant strategy that supports parents, according to the deans, is **organisational flexibility**, i.e. allowing employees to declare teaching hour preferences, individualised study arrangements for students, as well as protecting parents of young children from additional responsibilities, or the use of remote working where possible. At the same time differences between faculties are apparent: from a very flexible approach to a rigid one.

The management style of the deans can be described as **pragmatic**: they emphasise that they take their decisions 'humanely', taking into account the individual situation, but 'within the limits of the regulations in force' and 'the real organisational possibilities of the units'.

● RELATIONSHIPS WITH STAFF AND ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE

The deans' relationships with their subordinates are, in their opinion, characterised by **openness about parenting**. Compared to the past children are no longer 'invisible' in the academic space - conversations about family issues are more accepted and informal.

In the dean's perspective, therefore, the key challenge remains to **transition from a culture**

of individual goodwill to one of systemic support that reduces parents' reliance on the goodwill of supervisors, while fostering a sense of fairness and predictability in faculty functioning. It is noteworthy, however, that **the dean's narratives do not always coincide with the experiences described by parents, whether they are working or studying for a PhD.** This may indicate a limited recognition of existing barriers at the managerial level.



8.

Conclusion

The University of Warsaw is perceived by parents as an institution moderately adapted to their needs, with noticeable positive potential but with gaps requiring systemic action. Although our research focused on parents' experiences, the data we collected shows that a parent-friendly

university is a university that operates on the basis of ensuring work-life balance and is therefore friendly to the whole academic community. Our research has shown that building the university as both an institution and a supportive community for requires change in four areas.

● UNIVERSITY-WIDE NORMS ● AND REGULATIONS SUPPORTING PARENTS

Respondents from all groups repeatedly mentioned the lack of university-wide norms, regulations and procedures that support parents and large differences between units in areas as: **arranging class schedules, enabling remote/hybrid working and participation in classes, implementing an individual study organisation, taking parental responsibilities into account in staff appraisals and promotions, access to facilities for children and parents.**

Many people pointed out that support for parents is very often based on the goodwill of supervisors and colleagues and is quite discretionary. In their view, it is important to introduce university-wide norms and regulations supporting the combination of parenthood with work or study at the UW and to reduce disparities between individuals.

● CHANGING THE ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE ● AND WORKING ATMOSPHERE

One of the biggest difficulties experienced is an organisational culture that promotes being available and effective in an unlimited way. Parents indicated that expectation has a negative impact on their health - both mentally and physically. It also

reflects negatively on their private lives, which they neglect. It is necessary to change the culture and atmosphere but also the organisation of work in order to make it possible to combine private and professional life.

● INCREASING KNOWLEDGE OF PARENTS' NEEDS ● AND HOW TO RESPOND TO THEM

Many respondents indicated that their knowledge of support for parents was not extensive – they said that they did not know where to look for information. It also mentioned that it was not uncommon for administration staff to also be unable to provide with information needed. For these reasons we believe it is crucial to provide better knowledge about

possible forms of support for parents and how to make use of these forms. In addition, it is important to raise awareness among those employees, studying and doing their PhD at the UW about the needs of different groups in terms of combining private and professional life.

● ADDRESSING INEQUALITIES ARISING ● FROM THE MATERNITY PENALTY

Our research shows that women experience a motherhood penalty mainly because they are perceived as less available and as a result of systemic conditions that reinforce gendered inequalities and make it difficult for mothers to

advance their careers. Therefore, it is worthwhile to introduce solutions that change the perception of mothers as less effective and support them to return to work and study after parental leaves.



 **WE ARE**
 **ALL EQUAL**

BEING A PARENT AT UW



UNIVERSITY
OF WARSAW