
Supporting Professional Development through Research Breaks

Anthony CRIPPS

Abstract

Professional development (PD) is a fundamental keystone of any academic institution that wishes to have a vibrant and effective faculty. Research breaks, or ‘sabbaticals’ as they are more commonly known, are one of the few major benefits of academia. This paper explores the merits and demerits of the sabbatical system through the comments of six academics who have taken a sabbatical. Through a qualitative analysis of the academics’ feedback the paper outlines the relative advantages and disadvantages of sabbaticals before outlining nine proposals designed to improve the current sabbatical system in Japan.

1 Introduction

“Take a rest; a field that has rested yields a bountiful crop.” (Ovid)

Professional development (PD) should be at the core of any academic institution that aims to nurture its faculty. However, in reality, PD appears to be one of the most overlooked facets of faculty support. Research breaks, or ‘sabbaticals’ as they are more commonly known, are an important aspect of professional development. In this exploratory paper the author expounds on the comments of six academics who have taken domestic and overseas sabbaticals. An analysis of the data from the participants in this study helped formulate a set of proposals which faculty members, PD teams, and universities should consider when examining their own sabbatical systems.

2 Background

For the purpose of this paper a ‘research break’ or ‘sabbatical’ shall be defined as an extended absence (three months or more) from teaching and other university duties for research purposes. The number of people taking sabbaticals outside academia has increased over the past twenty years. Business professionals, and the companies they work for, understand the importance of sabbaticals in helping avoid burnout and staleness (Sonntag, Binnewies, & Mojza, 2010). Employees and faculty members returning from sabbaticals often report a renewed sense of energy and direction (Davidson et al., 2010).

Taking a sabbatical has long been part of the infrastructure of academia. In a profession that is time consuming and comparatively not so well paid, it is one of the few benefits that academics can receive. In academia, sabbaticals are regarded as an important component of the faculty framework. They are often seen as a reward for the contribution made to an institution over a number of years. Miller et al. (2012) outline the importance of sabbaticals and highlight the ambiguity of institutions’ sabbatical policies:

Sabbaticals have been identified as an important tool to help faculty remain current in their responsibilities. By having a dedicated break from traditional responsibilities, faculty members have self-reported rejuvenation and recommitment to their professional work. Institutional policies, however, are largely vague and lack measures to help guide faculty in their planned development activities. (Miller et al, 2012, p. 1)

Otto and Kroth (2011, citing Endres, 2001) encapsulate the different views that people in higher education have towards sabbaticals:

Sabbatical leave is viewed very differently by people at various levels of higher education. Some see it as a right; others see it as a privilege. The arguments range from the idea that everyone deserves a sabbatical at a regular interval whether they have a specific project in mind or not, to the idea that only tenured faculty with a legitimate, demonstrated need should be granted sabbaticals. (Otto & Kroth, 2011, p. 10)

Many universities in Japan have a sabbatical system for their tenured professors. The length of a sabbatical and frequency, however, varies widely from one university to another. Typically, tenured professors are not entitled to take a sabbatical or research break until they have taught a certain number of years at that university. This can vary from as little as three years, to seven years or more.

3 Methodology

The stimulus for this paper stems from my own research break which was taken from mid-September 2018 to mid-March 2019. My six-month sabbatical proved to be a very productive time. Despite the fact that I chose to take a domestic research break I made research trips to Hungary, Australia, Finland, Singapore, America, and the UK. I presented seven research papers at international conferences, wrote three research papers, and edited one book. When I resumed my regular university duties I was interested in gaining a better understanding of my peers' experiences of sabbaticals aside from vicarious stories that I had heard. I contacted six academics by e-mail and asked them to respond to five basic questions on their sabbaticals. The qualitative data was analysed using grounded theory. The questions asked were as follows:

1. How long was your sabbatical/research break?
2. In which country did you spend your sabbatical/research break?
3. What were the advantages of going on a sabbatical/taking a research break?
4. What were the disadvantages of going on a sabbatical/taking a research break?
5. Any comments?

As can be seen, the questions were fairly basic in nature and were designed to allow the respondents scope to answer the open questions in their own way. What follows is an overview of the comments that they provided on their unique experiences.

4 Feedback analysis

In total six professors were contacted and asked for their comments on their sabbaticals. Five of these professors teach at Japanese universities and one teaches at a university in Australia. The answers were analysed using a grounded theory approach and the categories naturally emerged from the rich data.

4.1 Overview of descriptive data – Duration and location

As stated earlier, the length of sabbaticals that faculty members can take varies considerably from institution to institution with the shortest being three months, and the longest being 18 months. One of the respondents who provided data for this study is based at a university in Australia and his university allows faculty members to take a research break every year for up to three months at a time (this can be sometimes be extended to six months if an extension application is submitted and accepted). Two respondents took a domestic (within Japan) sabbatical for six months, one took a domestic sabbatical within Japan for one year, and two professors took an 18-month sabbatical in the United States of America.

Table 1. Length and location of sabbaticals

Psuedonym	Sabbatical length	Sabbatical location
Shintaro	3 months (every year)	Australia (domestic)
Kevin	6 months	Japan (domestic)
Takuma	12 months	Japan (domestic)
Jun	18 months	U.S.A. (overseas)
Keisuke	18 months	U.S.A. (overseas)
Tom	6 months	Japan (domestic)

4.2 Merits

Four main advantages of sabbaticals arose from the comments provided by the respondents. The first category that appeared was that sabbaticals allow time for academics to concentrate on their own research. As Shintaro explains: “*You can concentrate on your own research and work on it without being disturbed by other teaching and administrative works.*” Kevin and Jun both stated that their sabbaticals allowed

them to focus on their respective research goals without having to worry about teaching and other responsibilities. All respondents noted that being free from administrative duties (category two) was a major merit of sabbaticals. Keisuke noted that *“being away from university admin work”* gave him a sense of freedom and Tom highlighted that being free from *“program administration tasks”* allowed him to focus on his research.

Increased motivation accompanied by positive physical and mental health were mentioned by Kevin and Jun. Kevin’s comment encapsulates the need for sabbaticals considering the demands of teaching and working at a Japanese university: *“A certain amount of stress comes with continuous teaching and committee work year in year out. This seems to pile up over time, so in order to feel refreshed and reinvigorated a sabbatical is extremely helpful.”* Jun commented that, through his sabbatical, he *“could restore the motivation to teach”*. Finally, the respondents explained that their sabbaticals allowed them to work on their specific research field and plan new projects. As Takuma notes, his sabbatical afforded him the opportunity to catch up *“with the recent studies in my field. Securing the time to do my own studies (plan to publish a book).”*

Table 2. Summary of the merits of sabbaticals

No.	Descriptive category (summary)
1	Allowing time to concentrate on research
2	Freedom from teaching and administrative duties
3	Increased physical and mental well being
4	Allowing time for self-development and research on new projects

4.3 Demerits

Considering my own sabbatical experience, I did not expect that the respondents would mention too many disadvantages to taking a sabbatical. In fact, both Kevin and Keisuke said that they could see no disadvantages whatsoever. On the whole, the respondents’ comments focused on the positives of sabbaticals. There were, however, some comments regarding the demerits of taking a sabbatical and four main categories arose from the data: (1) Lack of motivation to return to teaching; (2) Difficulties in maintaining motivation during the sabbatical;

(3) Missing interaction with colleagues and students; and (4) Difficulties when returning to work.

Both Shintaro and Takuma mentioned that professors may be faced with reduced motivation when returning to teaching after taking a sabbatical. Shintaro commented that he did not see too many disadvantages to taking a sabbatical but "...*maybe you don't want to go back to teaching*". Takuma raised the issue of lack of motivation connected with a reduction in self-confidence by being away from teaching resulting in "*losing some grip of teaching skills*". Tom focused on the problems with maintaining motivation during his sabbatical: "*It was difficult to maintain my motivation to write as I was working at home. I had to establish a clear work schedule and really discipline myself to keep to it.*"

Jun stated emphatically that one of the disadvantages to taking a sabbatical (particularly for a long time) was that "*I missed the interactions with my students and colleagues.*" Teaching is an encompassing profession that permeates many aspects of teachers' lives so unsurprisingly some teachers "miss" their regular university life and all the various facets that come with it. Similarly, Tom missed his university life while on sabbatical and took steps to find the right balance of research and interaction with colleagues: "*I missed the social contact with my colleagues at university. I had to create moments to take a break from my research and mix with other people in order to maintain a balance in my life.*"

Although the teachers in this study who have been on sabbaticals tend to focus on the positives it must be borne in mind that other voices need to be heard. For example, the views of colleagues who cover classes and administrative duties for people while they are on sabbatical should also be considered. In addition, from an administrative perspective, there is an element of 'risk' involved when faculty members go on sabbatical i.e., there is a slight possibility that some faculty members may choose to quit their positions after returning from a sabbatical. To safeguard against this, faculty members typically have to stay at their university for twice the length of their sabbatical period once they return. Despite this, some professors still choose to resign their positions and therefore are asked to 'pay back' the cost of their sabbatical to their host institution.

Table 3. Summary of the demerits of sabbaticals

No.	Descriptive category (summary)
1	Lack of motivation to return to teaching
2	Difficulties in maintaining motivation during the sabbatical
3	Missing interaction with colleagues and students
4	Difficulties when returning to work

4.4 General comments

Below I briefly show some of the general comments on sabbaticals by five of the respondents. Some of the comments include possible refinements to the sabbatical system and this ties in with the proposals put forward in section 5.

Table 4. General comments on sabbaticals

Shintaro	“A research break is meaningful and essential for researchers/lecturers but financial support from faculty is also important to encourage the lecturers’ research activities.”
Kevin	“In the case of a one-year sabbatical (which I will take from April 2020), I have heard other colleagues state that returning to one’s duties after such a long break can be quite taxing mentally. I did not find this to be a problem at all after my half-year break, however. So I am curious to see how returning after a whole year in 2021 will affect my ability to resume my usual responsibilities. Assuming most institutions hold a general policy of allowing faculty to take a one-year overseas sabbatical during their tenure, there may be a good argument for encouraging them to instead take two half-year breaks, spaced out over their career.”
Takuma	“It is a very good system to keep for faculty members.”
Keisuke	“As universities in Japan require scholars to do more things other than research and the situation cannot be easily improved, sabbatical is the only way to concentrate on research and conduct long-term projects.”
Tom	“I think it is very helpful to have sabbatical breaks to work on research. I realized the importance of setting up for the research well in advance in order to make good use of the break time. I also learned about creating realistic, balanced work plans.”

5 Proposals

Considering the comments outlined so far in this paper it is clear that there is a need to reconsider the sabbatical system in Japan. Below I list nine proposals which, if implemented, could serve to create a more effective sabbatical system (n.b., there is some overlap with the proposals put forward by Miller, Bai and Newman (2012)).

1. Design each sabbatical to enhance professional development

For sabbaticals to be effective they should have a positive impact on professional development. If a faculty member returns from their sabbatical energized and having enhanced their skills, or gained new ones, then this is beneficial to all. Sabbatical design should be planned with the help of a mentor.

2. Create a mentoring system for faculty members who intend to take a sabbatical

Mentors from within the faculty could give advice about how, when, and where to spend a sabbatical. They could also offer advice on how to have an effective sabbatical, help draw up aims, and create a sabbatical schedule for prospective sabbatical applicants.

3. Make the sabbatical system easy to understand and transparent

For a sabbatical process to work in an equitable way it is common sense to try and make it comprehensible to all concerned. If the rules for selection are clear and fair, then faculty members will be more inclined to give credence to the selection process.

4. Set in place a one to two month 'settling in' period after academics return from their sabbaticals

It is not uncommon for returning faculty members who have been on sabbatical to be given onerous duties as soon as their sabbatical is over. There is an argument for establishing a 'settling in' period which would allow the returning faculty member to focus on their teaching duties before being saddled with arduous administration work as soon as they are back on campus.

5. Identify specific aims of a sabbatical

Both the academic who wishes to take a sabbatical, and their respective institution, should agree on specific sabbatical aims. These aims could be something tangible such as producing a paper, a book chapter, or even something less tangible such as helping establish research links with other institutions.

6. Establish clear guidelines which outline the amount of interaction between the institution and the person on sabbatical

Often times faculty members are contacted during their sabbaticals (usually by e-mail) in times of crisis, or when certain administrative procedures are unclear. To avoid this kind of intrusion a system needs to be established whereby all relevant information pertaining to administrative tasks is shared with pertinent faculty members before a sabbatical is taken. Of course, sharing information with a faculty member on sabbatical leave to keep them informed of faculty business is courteous and helpful, but the person on sabbatical should be under no obligation to undertake any university business during their sabbatical.

7. Encourage ‘cross-field’ sabbaticals

Sabbaticals should not have to be limited to simply conducting research on an area in one’s field. When commenting on his own sabbatical in the industrial sector, Barker, an academic based in Scotland, notes that: “By taking time out of academia it is likely that academics can improve their knowledge and understanding of the real-world problems faced by industry, and the complex production environments and constraints systems must operate in” (2018, p. 32).

8. Acknowledge that sabbaticals are a form of professional development which are beneficial to both the faculty member and their institution

Put simply, sabbaticals should be seen as a form of professional development. Pidd (2017, p. 13) champions this argument: “I suspect that a university that does not offer sabbaticals or research and study leave to its staff is, in essence, saying they cannot be trusted to use this time properly. I certainly gained great benefits from working in other universities during those periods. I had time to write without the need to teach and mark (I enjoyed teaching but hated marking). I could mix with new colleagues and discuss ideas with them. I could breathe in a different

air and realise that the way we did things back home could often be bettered.”

9. Create a flexible sabbatical system which serves to avoid faculty burnout

Faculty burnout is a serious problem in academia. For a faculty member to have to ‘wait their turn’ (which could mean a wait of ten years) may result in the sabbatical coming too late to be of any benefit. I would argue that having shorter, but more frequent, sabbaticals could lead to higher levels of faculty mental and physical well-being. Having a three-month sabbatical every year as Shintaro’s institution offers would be ideal.

6 Conclusions

Superficially, there seem to be few disadvantages for academics who take a sabbatical. When given one of the rarest of commodities – ‘time’ – professors are free to research at their leisure without worrying about classes, marking, or other administrative duties. Sabbaticals, however, can place an extra burden on professors who have to cover for their colleagues while they are away on sabbatical. That being said, it is clear from this preliminary study that the advantages for both academics and their institutions seem to far outweigh the disadvantages. Yet, further research on the long-term consequences of sabbaticals is warranted. Specifically, the efficacy of short-term sabbaticals compared with long-term sabbaticals needs to be examined.

I will end this paper with a quotation that captures the major merits of sabbaticals. Otto and Kroth (2011, pp. 27–28) citing Sima (2000) contend that there are three main benefits of sabbaticals in higher education:

The benefits of sabbaticals in general higher education are three-fold. There is benefit to the faculty member, the institution and the student. For the faculty member, it serves to allow for rejuvenation, reflection, fresh perspectives, opportunity for development of new professional relationships, staying current in his or her discipline and ultimately enhancing teaching (Sima, 2000). For the institution, it offers increased faculty efficiency, versatility, productivity, strengthened programs, enhanced learning environments, higher

morale, increased institutional loyalty, enhanced faculty recruitment and retention and enhanced overall academic climate and reputation (Sima, 2000). These benefits combine to offer the ultimate benefit to students by having knowledgeable, well-prepared, motivated faculty in their classrooms.

Note

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the academics who kindly agreed to take part in this research study.

Bibliography

- Barker, A. (2018). An academic's observations from a sabbatical at Google. *Communications of the ACM*, September 2018, Vol. 61 No. 9, Pages 31–33. Doi: 10.1145/3177748
- Davidson, O. B., Eden, D., Westman, M., Cohen-Charash, Y., Hammer, L. B., Kluger, A. N., Krausz, M., Maslach, C., O'Driscoll, M., Perrewé, P. L., Quick, J. C., Rosenblatt, Z., & Spector, P. E. (2010). Sabbatical Leave: Who Gains and How Much? *Journal of Applied Psychology*. Advance online publication. doi: 10.1037/a0020068
- Endres, T. (2001). An Examination of the Sabbatical Year in Leviticus 25 and Its Implications for Academic Practice. *Journal of the Association for Communication Administration*, 30(1), 29–38. Retrieved from Communication & Mass Media Complete database.
- Miller, T., Bai, K., & Newman, R. E. (2012). A critical examination of sabbatical application policies: Implications for academic leaders. *College Quarterly*, Spring 2012, Vol. 15 (No. 2). Pp. 1–12.
- Otto, L. R., & Kroth, M. (2011). An examination of the benefits and costs of sabbatical leave for general higher education, industry, and professional-technical/community college environments. *Journal of STEM Teacher Education*, Vol. 48 n.3, pp. 22–43.
- Pidd, M. (2017). In praise of sabbaticals. *Impact*, Autumn 2017. Pp. 13–14.
- Sima, C. (2000). The Role and Benefits of the Sabbatical Leave in Faculty Development and Satisfaction. *New Directions for institutional Research*, 105, 67–75.
- Sonnentag, S., Binnewies, C., & Mojza, E. J. (2010). Staying Well and Engaged When Demands Are High: The Role of Psychological Detachment. *Journal of Applied Psychology*. Vol. 95, No. 5, 965–976.