



social policy briefing

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Suggested distribution

Welfare officers,
education officers,
student advisors

Action

This briefing provides information only, you will need to think about how best you can apply this information locally.

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Supporting Student Parents in HE

Key Points

- A new report, *Supporting Student Parents in Higher Education: A policy analysis* launched this month.
- The research found that, while student parents are largely invisible in policies at a national level, there are three typologies of approach to student parents among the institutions studied.
- The most important form of provision identified by student parents was on-campus childcare provision.
- The report makes several recommendations to institutions as well as to other parts of the sector on how to improve support for student parents.

Background

A new report, *Supporting Student Parents in Higher Education: A policy analysis* launched this month. The report was funded by the Nuffield Foundation, but the views expressed are those of the authors, Dr Marie-Pierre Moreau and Charlotte Kerner, and not necessarily those of the foundation.

The report focuses on the key role that university policies play in shaping the experiences of student parents, using case studies of ten higher education institutions (HEIs) in England.

An invisible group

Student parents are at the intersection of many different national policies, but the report finds that, as a group, they are "mostly invisible" in national higher education policies. This was also found to be true of some of the HEIs investigated, where it was uncommon for student parents to be acknowledged in policy documentation. Nine out of the ten institutions they sampled did not have systematic data collection on student parents.

HEI typologies

The report found three 'scenarios' of the approaches that institutions take to student parents. The first is an HEI which offers no or very little provision for student parents at the policy level. In these institutions the amount of support available to student parents often depended on the student parents' individual resources and the subjective support offered by the members of staff they come into contact with.

The second scenario is for HEIs that offer specific provisions for student parents. This was the most common scenario found within the study. In these institutions, support for student parents is an add-on to the mainstream provision for students, while the institution's policies are still generally organised around the 'traditional' student.

The third typology of HEI's identified were those that attempt to mainstream

their provision for student parents. In this scenario, policies that are meant for all students are considered in light of how they will affect students with caring responsibilities.

Experiences of student parents

The report identified the tensions that many student parents face between meeting their caring responsibilities as well as their academic responsibilities. Some of the most common issues faced by student parents included time-poverty, financial constraints, mixed emotions and health issues, and feeling out of place amongst other students. However, many parents were motivated to remain in higher education by their desire to be a role model for their children.

Many student parents across all of the HEIs studied viewed their HEIs as providing only limited support, but students were more likely to be satisfied with the support provided in institutions that fell into the second and third typologies (where policies included some support for student parents).

The researchers asked student parents about the types of support available for them and their opinions on this support. Student parents identified on-site childcare provision was identified as one of the most important services for an institution to provide. Grants and loans for student parents were seen as helpful, as was student accommodation for families, but in both cases there was not always adequate supply. A fourth form of support was support groups or other family-friendly activities on campus. These were often mentioned by student parents as a way to improve their experience, although it was a challenge to find the time to attend these groups.

Recommendations

Amongst other things, the report recommends that:

- The HE Statistics Agency (HESA) should require institutions to collect data on students' family circumstances.
- All policies affecting students should be reviewed in light of how they affect student parents, and the policy review and any resulting changes should be done in consultation with students and the students' union.
- HEIs should provide clear information in one place about the support available for student parents and how they can access it.
- HEIs should consider extending their on-site childcare provision and should be less restrictive about allowing the presence of children on campus.

What NUS is doing

NUS published *Meet the Parents*, its landmark report into the experiences of student parents, in 2010. Many of its findings are echoed by this report. In addition, this year NUS will be doing work on creating child-friendly campuses.

What students' unions can do

- Look at your own institution's policies: which of the report's three typologies do you think your institution falls under and how can support be improved?
- Talk to student parents on your campus: are their experiences similar to those reported here? What types of support are most important to them?
- Discuss this report with your institution and work together to find ways to implement the recommendations.

Further information

The full report can be downloaded at <http://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/supporting-student-parents-he>. To get involved in NUS' work on child-friendly campuses, contact Adam Wright, NUS Research and Policy Officer (HE) (adam.wright@nus.org.uk).

Social Policy Briefing is written to update officers and staff in students' unions on issues relating to social policy, including student finance, welfare, society and citizenship and liberation. Information is correct at time of writing and offered in good faith