

Supporting Student Parents in Higher Education: A policy analysis

Executive Summary

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Historically, in the UK as in most Western societies, the default construction of the scholar was those of the white, male, middle class and childfree individual. However, during the 20th century and early 21st century, the place of care in society drastically changed and so did higher education (HE). In England, the widening participation agenda has been associated with a diversification of the student body, although who, what and where learners study remain very much marked by social divides. These days, parents in particular, represent a significant proportion of the student population. Yet, this growing presence in academia has not been matched by an equivalent interest in student parents in policy circles, nor in academic research.

The report summarised in this document presents the main findings of a research project conducted in 2010-12 and funded by the Nuffield Foundation as part of its Student Parents and Women's Education programme. It is an attempt to shed light on the experiences of student parents, with a particular focus on the role university policies play out in these experiences. This key focus appears timely. Intermediary bodies such as Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are increasingly becoming a key level of policy-making, including in relation to the equality agenda, and early evidence suggests that the current socioeconomic and ideological context is not particularly favourable to the inclusion of equality matters in the policy agenda.

Key findings

Chapter 1. Methodology and theoretical framework

This research acknowledges the complex relationships between national policies, institutional policies, and individual biographies, with a key focus on the intermediary, institutional level. To do this, we draw on a case study approach, involving a contrasted sample of ten English HEIs. In each university, policy documentation was collected and semi-structured interviews were conducted with members of staff working in student services and with student parents. This case study approach allowed us to provide an in-depth understanding of student parents' experiences and of their relationship with institutional policies. In total, 20 members of staff and 40 student parents (who had at least one child under the age of 12) were interviewed. Each interview was preceded by a short questionnaire. The sample of students mostly composed of women but was otherwise very diverse, including undergraduates and postgraduates, international and UK/EU, full-time and part-time students, enrolled on a range of courses. All but one interview were digitally recorded, professionally transcribed in full and subjected to a thematic analysis.

Chapter 2. National policies and student parents

In line with the general approach to this research, which acknowledges the complex relationships between national and institutional policies and individual biographies, Chapter 2 provides an overview of the national policy background against which the lives of student parents unfold. The vast range of national policies covered reflects the fact that student parents are positioned at the nexus of a range of policies, including higher education, welfare, family and equality policies. This policy landscape is thus complex, difficult to decipher and quickly transforming. How these changes will affect student parents remains to be seen. However, some have argued that the ongoing cuts to education and welfare will be particularly detrimental to this group and our research also evidenced instances where family-friendly provision, e.g., on-campus childcare facilities, were cut in the current context of financial austerity.

While a range of policies have an effect on the lives of student parents, an analysis of policy text reveals that this group remains mostly invisible in national HE policies. Moreover, when the caring responsibilities of HE students are acknowledged, they are

mostly constructed as a financial issue and a lifestyle choice, with limited reference to how wider societal and institutional structures contribute to the difficulties they face.

Chapter 3. University policies and student parents

Findings presented in chapters 3, 4 and 5 draw on the desk search, interviews and questionnaires. In this chapter, we turn specifically to the analysis of university policies and of the discourses of student parents which underpin these. We found that the pattern of invisibility of student parents as a group noted at national level also characterises some of the sampled HEIs, which rarely mentioned student parents in their documentation. We suggest that this hints to the fact that the dominant, default image of the student remains those of the 'carefree' and the 'careless'. Further evidence of this 'discourse of invisibility' of student parents is provided by the fact that nine out of the ten institutions in our sample do not systematically collect information on student parents.

However, as we have shown, there are important cross-institutional variations among the participating HEIs. This is both in terms of the extent of support available to student parents (from no or very little support to a range of programmes) and of the type of provision available (specific or mainstreamed). This led us to the identification of three different scenarios. While some institutions, to some extent, position care outside academia (scenario 1), others draw on an add-on approach (scenario 2) which does not necessarily challenge the default construction of the childfree student, yet offers some specific provision for this group. Others favour a more integrative, mainstreamed approach (scenario 3). In this latter scenario, institutional policies aim to challenge the dominant construction of the traditional student, with attempts to construct students with caring responsibilities as the default student.

The policies and provision in place are very fluid and the result of a complex dynamic between the national and institutional levels, as well as between different actors at local level. Our study shows that even in institutions where the levels of provision and mainstreaming are high, the arrangements in place are fragile and can change very quickly. Our study also suggests that there seems to be a positive association between the prestige of the university and the wealth of provision available, although further research is needed. This is a rather surprising finding considering that post-1992 institutions have long been associated with widening participation. This link between *élite* universities and extensive provision is however, slightly problematic from a social justice perspective. Indeed, students with the lower levels of economic and cultural capitals concentrate in the post-1992 sector and thus are less likely to be the recipient of such institutional support.

In this chapter, we also explored the discourses of student parents which underpin staff's narratives, as well as staff's wider views of university policy in relation to this group. We found levels of awareness among staff to be highly variable. Taking a more discourse analytic perspective, we reflected on some of the discourses which underpin university policies and staff's narratives and identified four main discourses of student parents in higher education: discourses of student parents as 'heroes'; discourses of student parents as 'problem' students; as well as social-democrat and neo-liberal discourses of student parents. The discourse of student parents as heroes usually celebrates their achievements and the many barriers they overcome in relation to their dual status. The discourse of student parents as 'problem' students usually construct this group through a deficit model, in which they are sometimes seen as being the problem themselves and blamed for their unrealistic expectations of the university and its support of student parents. This view may be compounded by the fact that student parents often only become visible when they stop fitting quietly in university cultures and need support, as often articulated in staff's narratives. Young and single mothers appeared particularly likely to be positioned as 'problem' students, in line with the stigmatization to which these groups are subjected in the wider societal context. Yet, mature student parents are not immune to this discourse. It

was sometimes assumed that student parents are all mature students, and that, as mature students, they return to HE as they have ‘failed’ before, meaning that they are unlikely to be associated with academic excellence.

We also distinguished between the social democrat and neoliberal discourses of student parents in higher education. In the former, HE is broadly expected to serve the public good, and care is, in theory, valued and perceived as pivotal to students’ lives. Supporting students with dependents is seen as part of the remit of universities. This intervention can take the form of an add-on approach to the existing provision or of a more mainstreamed approach. The social democrat discourse emerged as a strong discourse among staff, maybe because of their choice of occupation in the first place (i.e., for most of them, a support role). In the ideal-typical form of the neo-liberal discourse of HE, the main responsibility for one’s learning and care responsibilities lays with the individual. This discourse partly overlaps with a discourse of individualisation, in which the issues faced by student parents are thought of in personal terms, with parenting subsumed to a lifestyle choice while the influence of social structures on student parents’ lives is minimised. As a result, in the neo-liberal discourse of HE, the focus is on the student to adapt or change rather than on the institution – care is not a legitimate area of policy intervention for universities, despite the role played by institutional policies in compounding the issues faced by this group.

Chapter 4. Student parents’ experiences

Student parents’ narratives highlight the pivotal place of care in their lives and the many tensions between being a student and a parent. While student parents represent a very diverse group, some broad experiential patterns include: time issues and the conflicting demands of being a student and a parent; financial issues, often exacerbated by the costs of childcare; mixed emotions and health issues; and missing out on being a student/not fitting in.

As well as being time-poor, particularly problematic were the time-wise conflicting demands of being a student *and* a parent, as well as, in some cases, undertaking paid work, domestic work and caring for other dependents. Indeed, we found that a significant proportion usually undertook paid work (with some working full-time) and that many undertook most of the domestic work in the home despite their other commitments. In relation to finance, many, though not all, discussed financial hardship. For those with small children, the cost of childcare contributed to these financial difficulties, especially for those with no relatives living locally and for those not eligible for the Childcare Grant. Students also put a strong emphasis on the social, psychological and health-related effects of being a student parent, an aspect which was often ignored in institutional policies. Being a student parent was also often associated with mixed feelings, with students questioning whether they were ‘good enough’ as students and as parents and with many feeling guilty about their lack of availability for their children and partner, if any. Some also mentioned physical and mental health issues, despite not being directly asked about this during the interview process. While we acknowledge that a range of factors contribute to physical and mental illness, interviewees often established a link between this and their experience as student parent. Finally, student parents commented on ‘missing out’ on the student experience and ‘not fitting in’ with the student and university cultures.

Yet, student parents also stressed the benefits of their dual situation. Children and families were often mentioned as a key motivation behind their decision to enter or remain into higher education, with being a ‘role model’ for their children something they saw as a positive. However, doing it ‘for yourself’ was also a recurrent theme in student parents’ narratives. This also suggests a much wider view of higher education than the one supported in recent HE policies, in which the focus appears to be on the returns expected from a degree in terms of employment, including in financial terms. Although this was

sometimes discussed, being a student parent was more broadly described as a matter of identity and a transformative process for the self.

Chapter 5. Student parents' views on institutional policies

A widespread view among student parents is that universities provide limited support to those with caring responsibilities, although we identified some important variations across institutions. Unsurprisingly, it is in those institutions falling under scenarios 2 and 3 that students are the more likely to be satisfied with the level and type of support provided, although this was not always the case.

The view above often derived from the perception that student parents were treated 'the same as everybody else'. This was described as problematic as it meant that the specific circumstances of student parents were not acknowledged. This lack of acknowledgement of students' caring responsibilities can be seen as part of a universalist discourse in which all students should be treated the same, with childless students representing the standard against which this 'sameness' is assessed. More generally, students felt that care was constructed at an institutional level as a private matter, something they have to deal with, rather than a policy issue which the university engaged with. They also felt that universities, student services included, were geared towards the young, 'carefree' and 'careless' students, rather than those caring for a family.

So as to avoid assuming that student parents necessarily want support, we asked them their views on it. A clear finding is that institutional support is perceived as important for most of them and that many expect their university to provide some form of support in relation to students' caring responsibilities. Yet, students also expressed some concerns and were often reluctant about asking for help. Many turned to sources of support other than the university and some interviewees never had been in touch with support services. Asking for support was sometimes seen as embarrassing, as if admitting to some form of individual failure. Reluctance to ask for support also seemed to relate to a lack of information on how to access support and information, especially as student parents are often time poor.

We also asked students about their views on policies targeting specifically student parents. On-site childcare provision (whether in the form of a holiday play scheme or of a nursery) was usually identified by those students who used these services as the most important factor in terms of institutional provision making a difference. Students who used these services were mostly positive about it. On the contrary, student parents with pre-schoolers based in universities where such provision was not available suggested that this would drastically improve their experiences. Two aspects of childcare provision in particular were highly valued. One relates to the quality of the childcare, the other to the fact that university nurseries are more likely to fit student parents' needs, due to the proximity with the place of study and to the flexibility of the childcare on offer. However, students mentioned the lack of availability of childcare places and the cost as problematic.

Some universities offered some grants and loans to which student parents are eligible. These were deemed helpful and temporarily eased financial strains. Yet, apart from the Childcare Grant, the amounts remained usually modest and many students, especially international students, commented upon the low level of financial support provided. Further, many student parents noted that the administrative procedures to access these measures were often complex and daunting.

The two other main forms of institutional support provided by the universities in our sample were 1) student accommodation for families and, 2) support groups/events targeting specifically student parents. Family accommodation, when available, was described by students as helpful as it was usually campus-based, thus minimising commuting times and often inducing a better integration in the university life, at a reasonable cost. However, the housing supply was often limited (when in existence) and was not always perceived as

suited to the needs of a young family. Some universities in our sample provided some support groups or other family-friendly, campus-based activities. Some had a group with an online presence. Asked what could improve their experiences, interviewees often mentioned such groups. Yet, they were not always able to attend due to their many commitments and some members of staff who had tried to establish such groups and run family-oriented events reported low attendance.

We also explored how student parents' experiences are affected by the generic institutional policies in place, distinguishing between what we called 'time' and 'space' policies. While these policies may appear neutral in terms of their effects on different groups of students, they affect students differently, whether they have caring responsibilities or not. In relation to time policies, the timing of lectures and seminars early during the day or in the late afternoon, any last minute changes in relation to these, and the late announcement of timetables were described as particularly family-unfriendly by student parents. Time issues were also mentioned in relation to extra-curricular activities: student parents often remarked upon the fact that most, if not all, social activities were taking place in the evening. This was considerably less an issue than, for example, late timetabling, especially as student parents may not have the time to attend such events in the first place. Yet, it was perceived as reinforcing the default construction of the HE student as 'carefree' and played out in their feelings of 'not fitting in'. In relation to 'space' policies, students often mentioned how university policies restricted the presence of children on campus. This hindered student parents' experiences in many ways, for example when they wanted to borrow books from the library, drop an assessment or attend tutorials and lectures. This again sometimes furthered their sense of 'not belonging' to academia. Also, in relation to university 'space policies', student parents saw the lack of facilities for baby change and breastfeeding/extracting milk as reinforcing their perceptions of 'not belonging'.

Recommendations

Recommendations deriving from these findings have been included in Chapters 3, 4 and 5. We suggest that multi-level interventions are necessary. Thus recommendations target a range of organisations, including Higher Education Institutions, HE agencies such as the HESA, and research funders. Incentives for a policy intervention are multiple: a social justice case can be made for a policy intervention and some HEIs have also identified a business case for this. The 2010 Equality Act also makes it a legal matter, by introducing some anti-discrimination legislation for students during pregnancy and maternity.

In particular, in relation to Chapter 3 (*University policies and student parents*), we suggest that HESA should require HEIs to collect data on students' family circumstances to increase the visibility of this group. Research on student parents should be disseminated to staff in HEIs to raise awareness and challenge stereotypical ideas about this group. Parenting and other issues relating to caring should be included in staff equality training and induction programmes. All policies (not just those which target specifically student parents) should be reviewed in the light of how they affect this group, with a nominated member of staff (e.g., an equality and diversity officer) taking responsibility for this. This, as well as any policy change, should be done in consultation with students and the students' union.

In relation to Chapter 4 (*Student parents' experiences*), we suggest that HEIs should consider how changes in the available provision will meet the needs of students with caring responsibilities. For example, part-time courses are often offered in the evenings, but daytime courses may be more appropriate for some student parents. HEIs should provide some clear information in one place about the entitlements of student parents and how to access them, for example through a dedicated web page on the university website that includes links to all available resources. At national level, consideration should also be given to setting up a national website with comprehensive information for students and

staff. In addition to providing advice on financial and material issues, university support services should try to address the emotional, health and well-being needs of student parents. HEIs should consider facilitating the formation of support groups for student parents by student parents themselves. Both academic and social activities run by HEIs should be held in the daytime where possible, or made family-friendly and advertised as such. Finally, consideration should be given to extending some of the financial provision currently available to undergraduates, such as the Childcare Grant, to postgraduates who currently have limited entitlements.

In relation to Chapter 5 (*Student parents' views on institutional policies*), we suggest that HEIs should consider extending their on-site childcare provision. HEIs and other organisations involved in student finance should review their procedures for student parents with the aim of simplifying them, as they can be time-consuming and this group is 'time-poor'. The number of family flats and houses provided by HEIs should be increased. We also suggest that HEIs should inform students about their timetable at least one month in advance and ensure that timetables fitting around school hours are available on most courses. Student parents' circumstances should be taken into account when calculating attendance rates. HEIs should also be less restrictive about the presence of children on campus, unless there is a clear risk (for example in laboratories). Institutions should also consider developing on-campus baby changing and breastfeeding/extracting milk facilities when these are not already in place, and clearly communicate information about this and any other provision relevant to this group to staff and student parents.

Finally, we also made some recommendations for research funders. In particular, further research exploring cross-institutional differences would be useful, as well as research exploring the effects of the new funding arrangements and other policy changes on this group.

This study shows that institutional policies play a key role in reproducing discourses based on a default construction of the student as childfree. This often happens through the implementation of seemingly neutral policies which position care outside academia, despite how much care giving permeates the student experience and despite the fact that university policies partly compound the difficulties they face. However, our analysis of university provision and of student parents' narratives also show that this level of policy-making can bring in social change by contributing to the visibility of this group, by challenging the default construction of the childfree student and by providing provision which can considerably ease the tensions student parents experience in relation to their dual status. Furthermore, the study also highlights the risks of establishing simplistic, causal relationships between national, institutional frameworks and individual lives.

The full report is available to download from www.nuffieldfoundation.org. For further information about the project please contact marie-pierre.moreau@beds.ac.uk.

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