Supporting Student Parents in Higher Education: A policy analysis

Final report

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Acknowledgements

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... the academy not only defines what knowledge is, but also defines and regulates what a student is. (Morley, 1997: 237)

Introduction

Following the publication of the Dearing report, 'widening participation' has become a focal point of intervention for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in the UK (National Committee of Enquiry into Higher Education, 1997), including in England[1] where this study was conducted. Driven by concerns for social justice and economic competitiveness, the widening participation agenda was a major aspect of education policies under New Labour (DfEE, 1997, DfES, 2003). For example, one of the aims of the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) strategic plan for 2009-2011 was, 'to increase and widen participation in HE' and 'to embed widening participation in the corporate policy and practice of HEIs' (HEFCE, 2009: 19). Since the new Coalition government took over, higher tuition fees have been introduced and a number of programmes serving a widening access purpose, such as Aimhigher and the Education Maintenance Grant, have been removed. Some have argued that these measures will affect so called 'non traditional' students the most (Callender, 2011, Leathwood, 2011). However, access to Higher Education (HE) remains a key aspect of the Coalition's rhetoric, with 'social mobility' and 'fairness' increasingly replacing the older terminology of widening participation (DBIS, 2011).

Despite past and ongoing policy interventions around 'non traditional' entrants into HE, an extensive body of research has highlighted the persistence of inequalities within HE. This work, combined with national statistical datasets assembled by the Higher Education Statistical Agency, shows that 'non traditional' students face a range of issues in terms of access to HE, retention, benefits they get out of a university education, as well as of their subjective experiences of HE and sense of belonging (see, e.g., Archer et al., 2003, Jackson, 2004, Leathwood and Read, 2009, Read et al., 2003, Reay, 2003). This literature, which feeds into the theoretical background against which this study took place, tends to concentrate on students from working-class backgrounds, mature students, women, and students from minority ethnic groups, while also sometimes looking at the 'intersectionality' (Crenshaw, 1989) of their experiences.

In comparison to other groups of 'non traditional' students, student parents have been given limited consideration, both in terms of policy intervention and of research, although the New Labour and the Coalition governments have supported initiatives aiming to increase the engagement of parents in paid work and in education and training (Brooks, 2011). In particular, the level of support offered to this group by English HEIs and how existing policies meet their needs remain a widely undocumented area. It is also worth noting that HEFCE does not require that HEIs collect information on the family circumstances of their student population. Thus, no national data is currently available for this group, however, some information is provided by the Student Income and Expenditure Survey (Johnson et al., 2009a).

In contrast to the relative invisibility affecting this group, several elements point to the timeliness of researching student parents. First, this is a group which according to the scarce but growing literature, face a number of major difficulties due to their dual status as students and parents, including in terms of retention, attainment, finances and in relation to juggling the conflicting demands of parenthood with studying (Brooks, 2011, Hinton-Smith, 2012). These difficulties are also exacerbated by the fact that student parents are over-represented among groups facing disadvantage in HE and elsewhere (NUS, 2009). Second, the available evidence suggests that student parents represent an increasing proportion of HE students, with now a third of all Further Education (FE) and HE students in England and Wales caring for at least one dependent (*ibid.*). Thus, the size of this group and the extent of the issues they face are not matched by the current levels of intervention and of research in this area. Third, in the current economic climate, the translation of the HE equality agenda into policies

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[1] Since Higher Education policies differ significantly across the four countries which compose the UK, this report concentrates on England.

inclusive of student parents may be further compromised. For example, tougher restrictions on benefits and the closure of several university-run nurseries across the country (Insley, 2011) may hinder student parents' ability to juggle their studies with caring responsibilities. Also associated with the current economic climate and the expansion of HE over the past decade, the employment-related 'returns' of having a degree have become less certain (HESA, 2010, Moreau and Leathwood, 2006b), something which may particularly deter 'non traditional' students from enrolling or remaining in HE. Some have also highlighted that financial austerity is particularly detrimental to the well-being of children, especially those from poor households, in the UK (Brewer et al., 2011) and elsewhere (Ortiz et al., 2011). Fourth, the agenda for equality is increasingly devolved at institutional level and the HE sector has now become the driver for social mobility (Callender, 2011). Thus, research focusing on this intermediary layer of policy-making has become crucial to understand the reproduction and transformation of equality issues.

This report 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 addresses the dearth of research noted earlier, while also drawing on the available literature on student parents and groups among which they are over-represented. Drawing on ten case studies of English universities, the project aims to develop a better understanding of how existing policies and practices implemented by these organisations address the needs of the student parent population. In particular, the following questions are addressed:

- What support is made available to student parents in English HEIs?

- Which issues face student parents?

- And how relevant and effective are HEI policies and practices in supporting the needs of diverse groups of student parents (both in relation to their educational experiences and to their wider life experiences)?

In Chapter 1, we describe the methodology and the theoretical framework. We then turn, in Chapter 2, to the national policy context against which student parents' lives unfold. Chapter 3 consists of an exploration of the provision available for student parents in our sample of ten HEI case studies. This section draws specifically on some policy analysis and on the interviews conducted with university staff working in support services. Drawing on the interviews conducted with student parents, Chapter 4 considers the issues faced by this group and how they articulate their experiences of parenting and studying. Chapter 5 explores student parents' views on policies and closely scrutinizes how institutional policies contribute to shaping their experiences.

Chapter 1. Methodology and theoretical framework

In this section, we provide some detailed information about the methodology in use. We also present the theoretical framework to the study and give a brief overview of the literature examining the experiences of student parents.

1.1. Methodology

This research draws on a case study approach, involving ten universities across England. In each university, some interviews were conducted with members of staff working in student services and with student parents. When available, policy documents were collected. This case study approach allowed us to explore how the array of policies and practices in place in each institution affects the experiences of student parents. It also allowed us to triangulate the data collected in each institution by paralleling the findings for each source of data, thus getting a more comprehensive understanding of student parents' experiences and of their relationship with institutional policies and cultures.

To sample the case study institutions, we started with an exhaustive list of all English HEIs, available from the HEFCE website. We then searched for the contact details of the student services department in each university. Among those institutions for which contact details were found, we emailed a diverse sample, in terms of location (in and outside London, North and South, West and East), of status (pre-1992 and post-1992), and of the extent and nature of provision for student parents. This required some prior desk search, for example browsing university websites and searching for evidence about policies targeting student parents. In our initial email to institutions, we asked the recipient to redirect it to the relevant member of staff, where the email had been targeted incorrectly. We also attached an information sheet and a consent form describing the project and its implications for participants. Once we started gaining agreement from universities, we monitored progress to ensure that, altogether, the institutions formed a diverse sample, on the basis of the criteria mentioned above. However, as the initial emails did not result in ten volunteering institutions, we then started the process again, until an agreement was reached with the desired number. Agreement to conduct fieldwork was granted in most cases by the head of student services.

Altogether, the ten case studies represent a diverse sample, rather than one which is representative of the HE sector in England. Among the sample, five universities are located in the South of England, two in the Midlands region and a further three are based in the North of the country. Six universities are pre-1992 and four are post-1992 institutions. Of the six pre-1992 universities, two are part of the Russell group. The level of provision for student parents in the ten universities varies significantly, ranging from very little to an array of policies. This aspect is described in more depth in Chapter 3. Browsing university websites suggests that the institutions participating in the study provide a more extensive provision for student parents than non-participating institutions, and it is likely that, this may have been a contributing factor to these HEIs volunteering to participate in the study.

After access had been negotiated at an institutional level, we asked the contact person in each institution to help us identify two potential interviewees among staff, preferably: one with direct experience of working with student parents and one in a policy or managerial role. This resulted in one to three members of staff being interviewed in each institution, with a total of 20 semi-structured interviews conducted with staff. Prior to the interviews, volunteers were given an information sheet on the project and a consent form. Those we interviewed occupied a range of positions, including: support officer, equality officer, head of support services, student union's officer, or nursery manager (for confidentiality purposes, we do not use the exact job titles in this report). On average, the staff had been in their current role for seven and a half years, with experience ranging from one to 33 years. Most members of staff were not working specifically with student parents as this kind of role is unusual. The sample of staff we interviewed included 19 women and one man, all of which classified themselves as white British. The average age of the staff was 46, with an age range between 22 and 60 years. Nearly half of them possessed a bachelors degree and over a quarter held postgraduate qualifications, including a postgraduate diploma, a masters and a PhD. The remaining staff possessed other qualifications such as a diploma or childcare qualifications.

Data collection consisted of two parts: a short questionnaire, to gain an overview of the participants' background, and an interview that usually lasted about 40 minutes and was conducted face-to-face or, for practical reasons, on the phone. Each interview covered the following topics: description of individual's and unit/department's roles; working with student parents; awareness regarding this group; provision and support available in the institution; main issues faced by student parents; role of the university; recommendations; and effects of changes in HE policy on this group (see the interview schedules in the Appendix). The interviews also gave us the opportunity to ask staff to provide some documentation on university policies, if appropriate. In addition, prior to the interviews with staff and to gain a comprehensive view of university provision, we browsed each university website searching for evidence of provision/policies targeting student parents. Overall, interviewing members of staff and collecting information on the available provision helped us to map policies and practices in the sample of HE institutions. It also provided some information about staff's views of student parents and of university policies in relation to this group.

Once staff had been interviewed, we then asked the contact person in each case study HEI to put us in touch with some student parents. Although we let each university decide upon the procedures to follow, as they would often have some arrangements in place to contact students, we provided them with an announcement, in which we gave some information on the project and called for students to contact the research team. Universities proceeded through various ways to circulate the call. Some contacted students through their intranet or extranet websites, some inserted an announcement on internal newsletters, others used a pre-existing email-list (for example, of nursery users, of mature students, or of postgraduate students), whilst some delegated the task to the Students' Union. Often, several strategies were used.

Initially, semi-structured interviews were to be conducted with an average sample of six student parents in each case study institution. However, the popularity of the study was mixed. In some universities, we got more volunteers than needed. In others, no student volunteered, or they initially did but then did not pursue this, despite our follow up. These difficulties in getting university students to participate in research are not specific to this study, and we have experienced this on previous projects researching higher education. However, it is possible that, in this case, difficulties to reach the desirable number of participants may have been exacerbated by the considerable time pressure on student parents and the often unpredictable nature of care work. To increase numbers, we asked each university to re-circulate the call for volunteers a number of times. When this still did not bring in sufficient results, we used alternative ways, for example posting announcements on parents' websites (such as Netmums) and on generalist social networking sites (such as Facebook). Although some students got in touch through these routes, this only marginally increased numbers. This was partly due to the fact that we could not name the ten universities involved in the announcement and the volunteers often studied in a non-participating institution. We also asked students who had already participated in the study if they knew of fellow student parents willing to take part. This also helped to slightly increase numbers of participants.

In total, 40 semi-structured interviews were conducted with student parents. This compares with the 60 interviews initially planned and reflects the difficulty we faced when trying to identify volunteers. A short questionnaire was filled in at the start of the interview. From the 40 participating students, half were enrolled on undergraduate courses and half were on postgraduate courses, such as a masters, a Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) or a PhD. Twenty-nine participants held full-time student status, with the remaining eleven students classified as part-time. Of the eleven part-time students, eight were postgraduates and three were undergraduate students. Nearly half of the undergraduate students were engaged on vocational courses, such as midwifery, nursing or teacher education. Four students were in full-time paid work and twelve in part-time paid work. Thirty-eight of the forty students were female. The average age was 35. Students classified themselves as White British (26 students), White Other (five), Black British/African/Caribbean (five), Arab (one), Asian (one), Egyptian (one) and Mixed Race (one). Nine students were single parents, all of which were studying at undergraduate level. Twelve students were international students and were all participating in postgraduate study.

Students had between one and six children, with the average number of children being two for both postgraduate and undergraduate students. Approximately a third of the sample had at least one child aged five or under. However, postgraduate students were more likely to have younger children, with 16 of the postgraduate participants having at least a child under five compared to 13 undergraduates. Of those with a child aged five or under, postgraduate students more frequently reported having very young children (one year or under). Of the 20 postgraduate students, seven had children aged one or under, compared to none in the undergraduate sample.

The composition of the student sample partly reflects our endeavour to gain a sample as diverse as possible. Indeed, the literature indicates how diverse the experiences of this group are (including in relation to gender, economic circumstances, age, ethnicity, mode and level of study, and family circumstances) (NUS, 2009). As for staff, semi-structured interviews with students were conducted face-to-face or by phone and the first part of the meeting consisted of a one-page questionnaire helping us to collect key information on the respondents. This was followed by the interview itself, which covered the following topics: personal circumstances; experience of university; issues they face as a result of being student parents; awareness of university policies; views of university policies and provision in relation to catering for their needs; and recommendations. Interviews with students usually lasted 30-40 minutes, with some shorter and some much longer (up to an hour and a half). The time and space of the interviews were itself very informative of student parents' life experiences. For example, interviews took place in various places: the respondents' home, an office or a shared space in the university, a café and, in one case, a cemetery. It was not unusual for children to be present during the interview, with some instances where the interview had to be interrupted so that the respondent could attend to them. A number of students also requested interviews to be conducted in the evening, when their children were asleep. Many postponed or cancelled the interview, often mentioning family events, paid work or study demands. This illustrates, in our view, the pressure many student parents experience on a daily basis, with often very little space and time for themselves and for activities outside studying, care work and, for some, employment.

All interviews with staff and students were digitally recorded, with one exception (a member of staff who objected, thus notes were taken). They were professionally transcribed in full. The transcripts were analysed using a qualitative data analysis software package (NVivo) and then subjected to a thematic analysis, with an analytical grid specifically designed for this purpose. In the case of the unrecorded interview, the notes were imported into the database and coded in a similar way to a transcript. We then produced some thematic reports and summarised the data by institution for each theme, to keep up with the case study approach of this research. The university documentation was analysed by taking notes which were added to the thematic analysis on university provision. Once both sets of interviews had been analysed, we paralleled the findings to establish which types of policies and practices were most likely to meet the needs of student parents. We also looked for commonalities and differences between students and between staff. Indeed, one policy which works for one group may not work for another, especially as this group is so diverse.

1.2. Theoretical framework

1.2.1. Understanding inequalities in higher education

The research is mostly informed by sociological theories of work, education and inequalities and draws on a social constructivist theoretical framework. In the past, two main sociological paradigms have been used to explore inequalities. One could be described as social reproduction theory. This approach has focused on understanding the reproduction of inequalities, mostly from a social class perspective (see, for example, Bourdieu and Passeron, 1970, Bourdieu and Passeron, 1964). By questioning the meritocratic nature of education, and highlighting that education systems can contribute to the reproduction of wider inequalities in society (rather than merely reflect them), this theoretical perspective has shed new light on the relationship between education policies and inequalities. However, a major critique of this body of work relates to its inability to explain social change, with the retained approach often described as overly deterministic. Another approach, known as social theory of reflexive modernization (Beck, 1992, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002, Giddens,

1984, Giddens, 1991), or methodological individualism in its continental version (Boudon, 1973, Boudon, 1979), has supported the claims that social structures have eroded and that individual agency is central to an understanding of social matters. However, this approach has been criticised for failing to fully grasp how individual conditions continue to be constrained by social structures (e.g., Archer et al., 2003).

To escape this theoretical impasse, we draw on a perspective which recognises the key influence of social structures of power (such as gender, social class, family circumstances, etc.) on society and on individuals' lives, while also acknowledging individuals' agency, i.e. their (constrained) ability to resist and transform social structures. The concept of discourse is particularly useful to overcome the dualism discussed above. By discourse, we mean a set of social practices which produce the objects of which they speak, rather than reflect it. Discourse is thus constitutive of 'reality' rather than purely descriptive (Burr, 1995, Foucault, 1969, Litosseliti, 2006). According to this perspective, individuals are positioned within discourses, however they are also able to resist them and produce alternatives. Thus, individuals are simultaneously subjected *to* and subject *of* discourse (Hughes, 2002, Jones, 1997). Without denying agency, this perspective acknowledges that individuals' choices are located against a societal background which constrains the opportunities available to them. This approach appears useful to understand the relationship between student parents, university policies and inequalities. We posit here that national and institutional policies are underpinned by specific discourses of student parents, which contribute to shape their experiences and the opportunities available to them in HEIs. However, we acknowledge that student parents' experiences are not passively determined by policies or policy discourses and that the relationship between individuals and policies is complex, rather than a causal, unilateral one. Indeed, although policies constrain the opportunities available to students, students can also use policies as resources and/or resist the discourses underpinning these.

Another concept central to this study (borrowed from post-structuralist theories) relates to the notion of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989), i.e., the fact that social structures of power do intersect with each other. A consequence of intersectionality is that identities are always multi-faceted and that individuals are always taken at one moment in time in simultaneous relationships of power. In a way, the figure of the student parent epitomises this. They are students, carers, as well as from a particular ethnic, gender, socio-economic, occupational group (if they undertake paid work), etc. As a result, their experiences cannot be understood through the sole lens of their student or parental status.

To implement this approach, we articulated three levels of analysis: the macro-social level (i.e., policies and discourses of education and care which unfold at national level), the meso-social level (i.e., policies and discourses of student parents developed at the institutional level) and the micro-social level (i.e., individual level, and how individuals reproduce or resist dominant discourses, and deploy strategies and resources). This is similar to the approach taken for example by Rosemary Crompton and Nicky Le Feuvre, in their studies of gender inequalities in the labour market (see, for example, Crompton, 1999, Crompton, 2006, Le Feuvre and Le Marchand, 2007), also previously used in a study of gender inequalities in the teaching profession (Moreau, 2011a). So, while our study focuses on the institutional (meso-social) level, we fully acknowledge that student parents' experiences are the result of complex interactions between the national, the institutional and the individual levels.

1.2.2. Researching student parents in Higher Education

As we recalled in the introduction to this report, HEFCE does not require that HEIs collect information on the family circumstances of the student population. However, the Student Income and Expenditure Survey establishes that, among English-domiciled students, 8 % of full-time students and 36% of part-time students are parents (Johnson et al., 2009a), compared with respectively 8% and 33 % of Welsh-domiciled students (Johnson et al., 2009b). According to the Scottish Income and Expenditure Survey, 8% of undergraduate students based in Scotland are parents (Callender et al., 2005). Similarly, the NUS study (the only UK-wide survey of student parents, which includes both the Further and Higher Education sectors) found that a third of FE and HE students in England and Wales

care for a dependent (NUS, 2009). This study also provides some key information on the characteristics of this group. Drawing on a survey of about 2,200 parents, the authors established that a very large majority of the student parents in their sample were women (87%) or mature students (89% over 25, the age group classified as 'mature' in the NUS study) (NUS, 2009). They also found that 34% were lone parents and that student parents disproportionately enrolled on vocational courses. A single university case study found student parents to be mostly women and mature students and identified a large proportion of lone parents and Black and Minority Ethnic students among this group (Wainwright and Marandet, 2006), although this may be related to the wider intake of this particular institution.

The experiences of 'non traditional' students in the UK have given rise to an extensive literature (e.g., Archer et al., 2003, Bhopal, 2010, David, 2009, Hussain, 2007, Leathwood and Read, 2009). This body of work informs this study in many ways as it seeks to understand the experiences of 'non traditional' students in HE and highlights the tensions and ambivalences experienced by this group. Indirectly, it also sheds light on the experiences of student parents, who are over-represented among students from groups with no prior history of HE. Crucially, this scholarship has highlighted how the issues faced by this group in terms of education are not just a matter of access. While expanding, the HE system has become an increasingly differentiated field, and this differentiation follows gender, class and ethnic divides, with student's 'choice' of institution and course clearly related to these identity markers (Collins, 1999, Leathwood and Read, 2009, Reay et al., 2005). 'Non traditional' students tend to concentrate in the less prestigious segments of HE and those associated with the highest level of uncertainties regarding the rewards of a degree (i.e., undergraduate programmes, 'new' subjects and post-1992 universities). Clearly, research concurs to the view that widening participation policies 'have not led to fair or equal access to equal types of higher education or outcomes in the labour market' (David, 2010b: 5). Moreover, 'non traditional' students may also experience feelings of struggle (Leathwood and O'Connell, 2003) and alienation (Read et al., 2003). So while inequalities in HE are often material and quantifiable, there is also an affective side to inequalities that should not be underestimated (Skeggs, 1997). Yet, as evidenced in our study, it would be incorrect to assume that all 'non traditional' students face such difficulties.

Yet, research has not been immune to this discourse of student parents as invisible and may even have contributed to its reproduction. As noted in Marandet and Wainwright, who talk about 'the invisible experiences' of student parents, there has been limited research on this group (Marandet and Wainwright, 2010). In most work relating to social justice and HE (including our own), parental status is often presented as some sort of contextual, even anecdotic, information, rather than a key structuring dimension of individuals' experience. Karen Danna Lynch makes a similar comment in her study of graduate student parents in the United States. There she contrasts the 'burgeoning literature discussing issues of mothering and identity in the context of patriarchy' and the 'numerous resources detailing the harsh state of the American academic environment for women', with the fact that 'there is little formal documentation focusing specifically on how the roles of graduate student and mother are combined or how attrition may be affected by this unique role combination' (2008: 587). Moreover, when such literature is available, the focus is usually on mature students (Alsop et al., 2008) and on particular subject areas, such as nursing and education (see, e.g., White, 2008). The absence of an extensive scholarship on student parents also represents a sheer contrast with the abundance of work on academic staff and parenting. While there are similarities between academic parents and student parents (and, indeed, student parents are also sometimes employed in academic posts) as both groups navigate the tensions between academia and care, some clear distinctions remain, for example in terms of employment, regulations, financial support and other resources. This means that findings about academic parents cannot be simply extended to student parents.

Research focusing on student parents identifies three key issues experienced by this group. Retention is a major problem, despite the exact proportion of student parents dropping out remaining unknown. However, the NUS study established that 60% of (FE and HE) survey respondents had thought about leaving their course, a figure which was significantly higher for lone parents and women compared with other groups of student parents (NUS, 2009). In the United States, 'The rise of attrition rates for graduate student mothers is one of the most serious problems in the American system of higher

education today' (Danna Lynch, 2008: 585). A related issue consists of the financial strain experienced by many student parents, described as a result of the lack of funding for childcare and associated course costs, as well as modest welfare benefits and limited availability for paid work (NUS, 2009, Wainwright and Marandet, 2006). Seventy-six per cent of participants to the NUS survey stated that they received no funding at all for childcare. Tamsin Hinton-Smith's study of lone parents in post-compulsory education identified that lone parents were particularly at risk of facing financial hardship (Hinton-Smith, 2008, 2012). The NUS study also takes note of the 'complex interaction between benefits and student support' and of the lack of 'clear or consistent funding entitlement for student parents in either FE or HE' (NUS, 2009: 4). This may result in some student parents struggling to gain a clear view of their entitlements, especially as funding allocation depends on a range of criteria. A third major issue, also possibly related to retention, is the lack of time and the juggling of the conflicting demands of being a student, a carer and, sometimes, a paid worker (Moreau and Leathwood, 2006a, Wainwright and Marandet, 2006). Cappleman-Morgan's small-scale study of mature students in HE showed that 'competing multiple obligations can leave student-carers time-starved, stressed and consequently adopting "instrumental" approaches to learning and caring' (Cappleman-Morgan, 2005: 1). In her study, missed lectures or assessment deadlines were not uncommon, due to problems with childcare, child sickness, or general lack of time for studies, and lone parents were more prone to this than those living with a partner, with similar findings in the NUS survey (NUS, 2009). 'Time poverty' can also result in limited engagement in the student community and, in some cases, bring about a sense of isolation. However, the NUS survey also highlighted that a vast majority (75%) of student parents felt that studying in HE had been a positive experience for them and their family. Overall, the picture drawn is that student parents are enthusiastic about learning, despite the barriers they face (NUS, 2009).

Finally, there is a limited amount of research focusing specifically on how institutional policies and practices affect or support student parents. However, the literature exploring this aspect identifies a general mismatch between student parents' needs and university policies, as many institutions address by default the needs of the young, childfree, single and male student (the 'bachelor boy', as summarised by Hinton-Smith) (Hinton-Smith, 2012). In particular, the NUS report points to a discrepancy between the needs of student parents and course organisation (NUS, 2009). For example, over a third of the NUS survey participants had received their timetable on the day or after the day term started, something which impacted on their ability to find suitable childcare. Marandet and Wainwright (2010) also observed that the lack of classroom space often resulted in lectures taking place at times conflicting with family demands. Wainwright and Marandet had earlier identified a lack of awareness among staff about students' caring responsibilities, which they described as 'hindering the needs of this group to be sufficiently addressed' (Wainwright and Marandet, 2006: 16). The NUS research found that younger student parents in particular were made invisible in terms of policy and practice, due to the conflation of student parents with mature students (NUS, 2009). The lack of institutional support implies that students depend on the benevolence of particular individuals, for example tutors, relatives and friends. This is problematic as it means that there is no insurance regarding the continuity and quality of support despite 'support from school and service staff [being] crucial for non-traditional students such as those with dependent children' (Wainwright and Marandet, 2006: 42). The same also note that widening participation policies have taken an 'add on' approach, with a focus on entry rather than retention and progression, and have ignored how the new opportunities opened to non traditional students such as student parents have been modelled on the needs of childless students (Marandet and Wainwright, 2010). In their work on the feminisation of higher education, Leathwood and Read note that the participation of groups of 'non traditional' students in HE, associated with raising levels of achievement, have sometimes led to a 'moral panic' about 'dumbing down' the standards (Leathwood and Read, 2009). This may have implications for universities trying to recruit and support these students as policies aiming to be inclusive may be seen as antithetic to academic excellence and high standards. However, the lack of research with a specific focus on policies and student parents means that what we know about this group remains rather impressionistic. In particular, most studies of student parents are based on a single case study institution, thus limiting the opportunities to explore how different institutional policies can make a difference to the lives of student parents due to the lack of a comparator.

Chapter 2. National policies and student parents

In this section, we explore the national policy background against which the lives of student parents unfold. This is in line with the general approach presented in Chapter 1, which acknowledges the complex relationships between national policies, institutional policies, and individual biographies. The vast range of national policies covered here reflects the fact that student parents are positioned at the nexus of a number of areas of state intervention, including higher education, welfare, family and equality policies. This policy landscape is also transforming at a quick pace, something which is partly related to the recent change of government in the UK.

2.1. Higher education policies and student parents

Some of the entitlements of England-based university students, including student parents, are defined at national level. This is particularly the case in terms of financial support, while other types of support (such as on-campus childcare provision) are more closely tied to institutional policies. A national framework of HE policies establishes which loans, grants and tax credits are available to student parents and to other groups of students. Most of the programmes accessible to student parents are not, however, restricted to this group, with the exception of the Parents' Learning Allowance and of the Childcare Grant. It is also worth noting that all student parents do not have the same entitlements as these often rely on characteristics other than parenthood. For example, both the Parents' Learning Allowance and the Childcare Grant are restricted to families with low income (means-tested) and available only to full-time students. Moreover, as is the case for other students, student parents' rights in terms of financial support vary significantly depending on their personal circumstances and the nature of their studies. In particular, the level of income, nationality, level of study (i.e., undergraduate or postgraduate) and mode of study (i.e., full-time or part-time) often condition eligibility.

Since the 1980s, the financial support to which HE students can claim has drastically reduced. In the late 1990s, the New Labour government replaced maintenance grants by a combination of loans and tuition fees (Moreau and Leathwood, 2006a). Combined with a shift from *élite* to mass HE, this resulted in a significant increase in the proportion of students facing hardship (NUS, 1999). Moreover, the wealth of policy intervention in HE has resulted in some rather complex arrangements. These days, undergraduate students based in HEIs within England can apply for a tuition fee loan in order to cover the costs of their university fees and are eligible for a student loan for maintenance to cover individual living costs. For independent students living outside London, the maximum amount of the maintenance loan for 2010-11 was £4,950 and for 2012-2013 is £5,500. Students enrolled on National Health Service (NHS) or social work courses may also be eligible for extra financial help. Part-time students cannot apply for a maintenance loan. Financial help from NHS approved courses comes from the NHS and thus students on these courses are not eligible to apply for the maintenance loan, but instead have their tuition fees paid by the NHS. As of September 2012, students on these courses will receive an annual bursary of £1,000 and can apply for an additional means tested bursary of £4,395.

In addition to this standard support package, some student parents are entitled to extra financial support. Some of those studying full-time are eligible to apply for the Special Support Grant. The grant is available to lone parents or individuals whose partners are also students, unless they study on an NHS-funded course. In 2010-11, individuals could receive up to £2,906 per year. However, the Special Support Grant is reduced if the household income is above £25,000. As student parents are considered 'independent' students, household income is calculated on the basis of personal household income, while for 'traditional' dependant students the calculations are generally based upon parental household income. For those that are not eligible to receive the special support grant and who are new or returning full-time students and with a household income below £50,020 or less, the Maintenance Grant is available. As for the Special Support Grant, the grant is capped at £2,906 per year and the grant will be reduced if the household income is above £25,000. Recipients of the Maintenance Grant will experience reductions in their student loan for maintenance. Part-time students cannot apply for the Special Support Grant or Maintenance Grant, but for a Fee Grant to help with the cost of tuition fees and a Course Grant to help with other study costs. Their household income needs to be below £28,066. In 2010-11, the maximum combined Fee Grant and Course Grant was £1,495.

The Parents' Learning Allowance is another form of student support, available specifically to students with dependent children to help towards learning costs. It is accessible to full-time undergraduate students and to full-time postgraduate Initial Teacher Training (ITT) students. The payment is dependent upon household income and students can receive up to £1,508 per year. Parents can use it to pay for books, materials and travel. Although this study only looks at students with young dependents, it is also worth noting the existence of the Adult Dependants Grant, for full-time students on low income with adult dependents.

Alongside this, full-time undergraduate students and postgraduate students on full-time ITT courses with dependent children can apply for the Childcare Grant. This is available to contribute to the costs of childcare, for children under the age of 15 (17 if the child is registered as having special educational needs), who are in registered or approved childcare. However, the grant cannot be used to fund childcare provided by a partner or a child's relative, including if they are registered childminders receiving payment from the student parent. The amount that an individual receives depends upon the household income, the number of children and the actual costs of childcare. The grant could cover up to 85% of childcare costs (with a maximum of £148.75 for costs up to £175 per week for one child, a maximum of £255 for two children or more). However, the grant is means-tested, available only to full-time students and if a student parent has a partner who is in receipt of the childcare element of Working Tax Credits, they will not be eligible for the Childcare Grant.

Students facing hardship can apply for the Access to Learning Fund, through their university student services. Although this is a national initiative, eligibility and the amount that an individual receives are at the discretion of individual institutions. Universities can decide which categories of students are given priority. This is accessible to full-time and part-time students, undergraduates and postgraduates. Full-time and part-time students with dependent children are a priority group and so are students from low-income families, care leavers, homeless students, students in their final year, and disabled students. This fund is usually given in the form of a grant but can sometimes be a loan (this depends on the institution). Its purpose is to provide support for students who cannot cover their living costs using student finances and those who have emergency costs to cover. In particular, it is available to students who are considering leaving university as a result of financial difficulties. It can be used to pay for childcare costs. Some institutions also offer a summer support fund to provide financial support over the summer vacation.

Unlike undergraduate students who rely upon a combination of student support and welfare, postgraduate students get significantly less support. If an individual's postgraduate position does not come with funding, then the student parent needs to be able to pay for tuition fees, alongside living costs. With the changes to income support, relying upon income support to assist a lone parent through postgraduate studies is no longer an option if their child is over seven. On the other hand, funded positions such as PhD studentships usually cover the cost of tuition fees and living costs. Student parents in funded positions, still have access to certain welfare benefits, such as Child Tax Credits and Housing Benefit, depending upon the amount of the bursary. When investigating funding for postgraduate courses which lead to qualified teacher status, some student parents may be eligible for a government training bursary, depending upon the subject. Additionally, these students are also able to apply for the Maintenance Loan and Maintenance Grant. Student parents enrolled on a Postgraduate Course in Education (PGCE) programme are eligible for the same supplementary grants as undergraduates such as the Childcare Grant and Parents' Learning Allowance.

The majority of full time undergraduate students are not eligible for income related benefits. However, in terms of the student parent population, it is generally accepted that lone parents or those who have a partner who is also a student are eligible to apply. Yet, the welfare system is complex and varies depending upon personal circumstances. Not all forms of student support are counted as income when calculating entitlement to certain benefits. Access to learning payments that are proposed to help with general living costs will affect the amount of benefits that an individual receives. The maintenance grant is one form of student support which is considered as income when calculating benefit entitlement. Additionally, the maximum amount of student loan an individual is entitled to is counted as income when calculating benefit entitlement. When calculating benefit entitlement, £380 is deducted from the student loan for books and equipment, unless the loan specifies

a different value. Moreover, £295 is disregarded for travel costs unless a specified value is mentioned on the loan documentation. Depending upon personal circumstances, some student parents may be eligible for Income Support and Housing Benefits. Student parents may also be able to receive Working Tax Credits if they engage in paid work for 16 hours or more a week, although this is changing. However, if students are in receipt of the childcare element of Tax Credits, they will not be able to receive the Childcare Grant. Student parents may also be able to receive Child Tax Credit during their period of study.

The arrival, in Spring 2010, of a new UK government has been associated with a number of changes for the HE sector. A major, and controversial, decision is the future increase of tuition fees from £3,290 to £6,500-9,000 a year for an undergraduate degree from 2012, as recommended in the Browne Review (Browne, 2010). Students will be expected to start repaying the fees once they start earning a salary equalling £21,000. Other programmes have been cut down, such as the Access to Learning Fund. The benefits associated with holding a degree (or 'graduate premium') represent the main justification for increasingly passing on the costs of a university education on the students themselves. As argued by Stella González-Arnal and Majella Kilkey, 'To reconcile the contradiction between widening participation and the individualization of the costs of study, HE is being framed as a risk-free and individualized financial investment', with this view drawing on 'a narrow concept of reason' and 'presuppos[ing] highly individualized, instrumental, and economic actors' (Gonzalez-Arnal and Kilkey, 2009: 85). However, a widespread counter-argument is that the focus on the graduate premium draws on a rather instrumental and narrow view of education, which ignores the wider benefits of HE, both at individual and societal level, and focuses on outcomes rather than processes. Another counter-argument relates to the fact that the employment-related returns of holding a degree vary significantly across groups and are gendered, 'raced' and classed (Moreau and Leathwood, 2006b). Employment opportunities have also been further jeopardised in the current economic context (HESA, 2011). As well as bearing a relationship with gender, race and class, one may hypothesize that the graduate premium relates to the family circumstances of students. For example, student parents often have a rather restricted geographical mobility, as they tend to rely on local networks of support, and may not be able to take unpaid work placements due to time constraints or to the need to provide for a family. Moreover, as noted by Alsop and colleagues (2008), while having a degree is more likely to make a difference in terms of employment outcomes for women than for men, mature women may never recoup the financial costs of HE.

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 (NUS, 2010). Partly as a result of changes in HE national policies, the closure of university-run childcare facilities has become a rather common occurrence, leading to NUS, UCU and UNISON launching a campaign to 'save nurseries'. This is also evidenced by our research: while browsing university websites in the early stages of the project, it became apparent that several universities had followed this road. It also emerged from the interviews we conducted with staff that, in several of our case studies, university nurseries had been threatened with closure. It is also worth mentioning here that changes which may impact on HE student parents are taking place at other levels of the education system, with plans to terminate some level 2 qualifications for people over 25, and for fees to be paid on level 3 qualifications for people over 24. According to the NUS, this 'will seriously hamper the ability of these potential students to work for qualifications to help lift them and their families out of poverty' (NUS, 2010: 2).

While most of these changes are likely to affect student parents, limited consideration is given to this group in policy circles. The widening participation strategy of the New Labour aimed to increase the number of mature students in higher education (DfES, 2003), yet mature students are not necessarily parents, and all student parents are not over 21 (the threshold from which one becomes 'mature' according to institutional classification systems) when they start university. Besides, as noted in Alsop et al. (2008), the DfES White Paper did little for addressing the needs of this group apart from arguing for 'more flexible ways of learning that attract people with different demands and commitments' (DfES, 2003: para. 5.25), in contrast with the emphasis on learners in paid work. Similarly, our experience as academics has been that twilight and Saturday lectures and tutorials are seen as more

appropriate for part-time and mature students. Yet, while this acknowledges the fact that students may be in paid work during the day, this does not take into consideration that they (and academic staff) may have dependents to care for.

More recently, a rare mention of student parents could be found in the Hughes report, which specifies that 'People who drop out of universities may do so because of problems at home, pregnancy or financial or other family reasons' (Hughes, 2011: 38). Similarly, the recent government's White Paper swiftly mentioned that: 'For many people, entry to higher education does not follow the traditional and well-established route of A-Levels followed by a full-time, residential, three-year degree… Some want to work or take care of their family alongside studying part-time while others want to study more intensively, compressing a three-year degree into one or two years' (DBIS, 2011: 46). Yet, the predominant pattern, and one on which we come back later, is that student parents are mostly invisible in national HE policies. Moreover, when care is addressed, it is mostly constructed as a financial (Alsop et al., 2008) and a lifestyle issue, with limited reference to how wider societal and institutional structures may contribute to the difficulties faced by students with dependents.

2.2. Welfare and 'family' policies

Depending on their personal circumstances, student parents can be eligible for a number of benefits. This is, however, an area of the policy landscape which is quickly changing in the current recessionary climate. For example, in terms of welfare, as of April 2011, benefits are no longer linked to the Retail Price Index but to the Consumer Price Index, which increases at a slower rate. Moreover, the Local Housing Allowance that an individual receives is capped as of April 2011. One major change to the welfare system that is likely to influence a parent's ability to study in higher education, lies in the changes being made to Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) and Income Support (IS). In 2008, changes were made to some lone parents receiving income support. If the youngest child of the claimant was aged 12 or over, then income support would stop. In October 2009, the age of the youngest child dropped to 10 and, a year later, dropped to seven. In October this year, the age of the youngest child will fall again, to five. Upon cessation of income support, the lone parent would have to move onto Jobseeker's Allowance. This has serious implications for those who are also HE students, as individuals on Jobseeker's Allowance have to be available for work to claim this benefit.

Changes to Child Tax Credits and Working Tax Credits could also impact on student parents. Individuals with dependent children can claim Child Tax Credits. Loans and grants the student receives are disregarded when the HM Revenue & Customs calculate the entitlement to Child Tax Credits. Families receiving the full amount are entitled to free school meals. However, from 2011, the childcare element of Working Tax Credits has been reduced to 70% of childcare, as opposed to 80%. Additionally, as of April 2011, there has been a rise in the number of hours that an individual has to work in order to be entitled to Working Tax Credits, with the minimum raising from 16 to 24 hours a week. As a result, some parents who cannot increase their hours are worse off. Additional support that parents with a child under one received has also been removed. Moreover, when household incomes exceed £23,000, losses in tax credits will be apparent and families with household incomes of over £41,000 receive no Child Tax Credits as of April 2011. Some Sure Start children's centres services have also closed, despite the government announcing in the Spending Review its intention to protect funding in this area (HM Treasury, 2010). Further, the Child Trust Fund is not available anymore for new parents and the Health in Pregnancy Grant has been abolished. Child benefits have also been frozen for three years and families containing a higher rate tax payer (i.e., earning above circa £44,000 a year) will not be able to access it anymore. There are also plans to terminate the Care to Learn programme, which allows under certain conditions those under 20, when they start a course, to get up to £160 per child per week (up to £175 in London) towards their childcare and travel costs while learning. HE students are not eligible but it is likely to impact on schools and college students willing to progress at this level of study. So as to compensate for some of these cuts, Child Tax Credits increased by £30 in 2011, and by £50 in 2012.

It is worth reminding that there has traditionally been no area of policy intervention called 'family policy' in England, although there are some programmes falling under that category if broadly

interpreted. This level of state intervention in family matters offers an interesting contrast with what can be observed in other European countries with a tradition of extensive state regulation in this area. In line with a conception of the Welfare state often described as neo-liberal and market-regulated (Esping-Andersen, 1990), having a family of one's own is often seen as a private matter and a personal choice, whose cost should be covered by those deciding upon having a family (Gregory and Windebank, 2000, Hantrais, 1990, Moreau, 2011a). It is also worth noting that the use of pre-school structures is more likely to be perceived as detrimental to children in comparison with other European countries, while the view that part-time work is the only socially acceptable form of employment for a mother is also widespread (European Values Study, 2009).

As a result, the supply of childcare available for children under five is limited and often costly. A major consequence is the low level of employment among mothers of young children, in comparison with other European countries (EUROSTAT, 2007). Jane Lewis described the UK as a strong version of the 'male breadwinner model' (Lewis, 1992), while Rosemary Crompton described the 'dual earner/female part-time carer' as the dominant arrangement between men and women in the UK (Crompton, 1999). Since this body of work was published, there has been, however, some significant changes in terms of how family matters have been approached in policy circles. Since the late 1990s, a number of initiatives have been introduced and described as more favourable to families and to the employment of mothers of young children. The 2006 Child Care Act and the 2006 Families Act have aimed to increase the availability and quality of childcare, while also facilitating work-life balance for parents. The recent introduction of the Nursery Education Fund (NEF) also means that, while childcare costs remain higher than in most European countries, parents are now entitled to 15 free hours of childcare a week from the term after their child turn three years old and until they start primary school. Yet, some recent measures appear to be less family-friendly, with support to families becoming increasingly means-tested and significant cuts made to the benefits accessible to families until recently, as noted earlier.

2.3. Equality policies

An extensive equality framework has been put in place in the UK since the 1970s. Some legal milestones include: the 1970 Equal Pay Act, the 1975 Sex Discrimination Act, the 1976 Race Relations Act, and the 1995 Disability Discrimination Act. In October 2010, the Equality Act came into force, bringing together a range of anti-discrimination laws and providing a simplified legal framework applying to England, Wales and Scotland. The Act covers discrimination relating to a range of aspects ('protected characteristics'), including gender, race, disability, religious belief, sexual orientation, as well as pregnancy and maternity, in a range of areas. The general duty requires public bodies and those providing some services to the public to eliminate discrimination and harassment, to promote equality of opportunity, and to foster good relations between groups. Section 17 of the Act extends the protection already in place for women in employment and vocational training to HE, by introducing some anti-discrimination legislation for students during pregnancy and maternity. As a result, universities must ensure that they do not penalise expecting students or new parents. The Equality Challenge Unit (ECU) has produced some guidelines to help HEIs to address the Act's implications in terms of their policies and practices (Pugh, 2010). The Act protects pregnant women and new parents, i.e., those who have had a child in the past 26 weeks, thus applying to a significant proportion of student parents (in their study, the NUS found that 29% of their participants had become pregnant *during* their studies-NUS, 2009). Research in other regions of the UK and other European countries points to the likeliness of an increase in this group, as the number of 'mature' students is on the rise, and as this positively correlates with becoming a parent (Orr et al., 2008, Universities UK, 2008). Yet, as highlighted in the Equality Challenge Unit's guidelines for HEIs (Pugh, 2010), the remit for pregnancy and maternity is narrower compared to discrimination on other grounds. For example, discrimination for being associated with someone who is pregnant or has recently given birth is not condemned by the Act, although discrimination towards the mother's partner on the basis of her being pregnant or having given birth may be covered by sex discrimination (*ibid.*). However, changes to initial plans have been introduced under the rationale that the initial documentation was too bureaucratic. The Specific Public Duty (whose remit is to help organisations meet the General Duty)

came into force on 6 September 2011 and required that organisations publish information demonstrating that they comply with the General Duty and publish equality objectives at least every four years from 2012. This draws on a broad understanding of equality, which includes staff and services (thus, students in the case of HEIs). However, having an equality scheme in place and conducting equality impact assessments are no longer legal requirements.

It is clear, however, that this legal framework has only managed to tackle inequalities to a certain extent. Some have argued that this has to do with a policy intervention which, in line with its neo-liberal orientation, has traditionally been little coercive (Ball, 1990). Moreover, some have commented that the recent period has been characterised by a shift away from equality concerns. For example, as noted above, public bodies and government departments are no longer required to conduct an audit of the implication of their policies in relation to gender equality (David, 2010a). Yet, the Fawcett society conducted their own gender audit of the government policy changes, which revealed that women, children and families would be the most affected by the new budget (*ibid*.). In relation to higher education, it is indeed a characteristic of the most recent governmental reports that concerns for equality matters are being sidelined, with the term itself being avoided (see, for example, DBIS, 2011) and replaced by notions of social mobility and fairness. Indeed, the recent government White Paper describes HE as 'a powerful engine of social mobility, enabling able young people from low income backgrounds to earn more than their parents' (*ibid*.: 54). This vocabulary also raises some concerns relating to the place granted to social divisions other than social class in governmental policies, as well as to the narrow focus on the income-related returns of holding a degree.

Chapter 3. University policies and student parents

In this section, we provide an overview of the provision and policies in place for student parents, then turn to an exploration of the discourses[2] of student parents which underpin staff's narratives. While we try to give as much details as possible on the provision in place and its institutional context, we are, however, constrained by our ethical commitments to the participating institutions and individuals. Indeed, in some cases, a high level of details would compromise the guarantees given in terms of confidentiality and anonymity when negotiating access and participation. As a result, some information may have been withdrawn. For similar reasons, pseudonyms are in use in this chapter and throughout this report.

3.1. Present but invisible? Student parents in university policies

In contrast with their significant and growing presence among the UK HE population, student parents are relatively invisible in the websites and documentation of the ten universities involved in this research project. Indeed, mentions of student parents are rare and often concentrate in online or paper documentation specifically dedicated to this group, or to groups in which student parents concentrate (e.g., in material targeting nursery users or mature students). This hints to the fact that the dominant, default image of the student in these 'texts'[3] remains those of the carefree and the careless, with sites often populated by the presence of young, smiling and (presumably) unencumbered women (Leathwood and Read, 2009). This also echoes the limited visibility of this group in national policies, which was commented upon in Chapter 2. Further evidence of this 'discourse of invisibility' is provided by the fact that nine out of the ten institutions in our sample do not systematically collect information on student parents. Yet, some members of staff described it as an issue and some institutions were debating at the time whether they should collect data on students' family circumstances. Considering the effects of caring for dependents on individuals' lives, especially on women's (Crompton et al., 2007, Daune-Richard, 2005, Gregory and Windebank, 2000, Le Feuvre and Andriocci, 2005), it is somewhat surprising that HEIs would collect information on other identity markers (such as gender, ethnicity, age, etc.), yet neglect this dimension. This invisibility is not specific to England. As noted by Kristen Springer and colleagues in relation to US-based graduate student parents:

> *Mothering and fathering is not normative on campus. Student mothers experience awkward pauses rendered by pregnant bodies on campus, struggle to navigate strollers in classrooms, and search to find clean and discreet places to feed their babies. Although sometimes subtle, there are constant reminders in the social and physical environment of the university that graduate student parents and their children do not truly belong. (Springer et al., 2009: 439)*

Yet, in the English context, there is a tension between the foregrounding of a widening participation or social mobility rhetoric in policy circles and this widespread pattern of invisibility.

The relative absence of student parents from university texts raises issues as students, especially those from non traditional backgrounds, often rely on university websites and documentation in their 'choice' of a university. In relation to this point, Diane Reay and her colleagues (2005) highlight that the use of prospectuses is often the only source of information for students from working-class backgrounds. Drawing on Ball (2000), they argue that:

> *High-tech, glossy images [used in the marketing strategies of élite universities] are utilised to conjure up the idea of a university that is not primarily about the high-tech and glossy but rather about a set of values which have an established, elite and exclusive history. (Reay et al., 2005: 140)*

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[2] For a definition of the concept of discourse, see Chapter 1.
[3] By 'text', we mean 'Anything which can be "read" for meaning. As well as written material, this potentially includes pictorial images, clothes, buildings, food, consumer goods and so on' (Burr 1995: 185).

As the same note, post-1992 universities, with a more diverse student body, tend to foreground the figure of the student in promotional material rather than the classicist and traditional values of academic culture. This is not without problems either, as constructions of students in these documents can make reference to specific lifestyles, which student parents may not associate with (for example, when the emphasis is on evening events and pub culture). Moreover, because of the stereotypes often associated with being a student parent, simply adding 'family-friendly' pictures may lead to unexpected results. As academic excellence has long been associated with the image of the single, childfree, white, middle-class man, the inclusion of student parents may deter some students, including some student parents, who may conclude that such universities are not targeting the 'academically excellent'. Thus, addressing this invisibility remains a complex issue and an 'add-on' approach may sometimes compound further problems rather than address these.

However, beyond this overall pattern of invisibility, our study has also led to the identification of significant variations across institutions. We now turn to exploring these variations in more detail by looking at the policies and provision in place in the ten case studies.

3.2. An exploration of the provision in place for student parents in the ten case studies

A key finding in this study relates to the variability of the provision in place for student parents across institutions. Provision varies both in relation to the extent of support (from no or very little support to a range of programmes) and to the type of provision available (specific or mainstreamed). Taking into account these two aspects, three main scenarios have been identified. A **first scenario** characterises universities offering no or little provision to student parents. A **second scenario** exemplifies universities with some specific provision in place for this group. A **third scenario** is characteristic of universities mainstreaming student parent policies. We now turn to explore these in more detail.

3.2.1. Universities providing no or close to no provision for student parents

This **first scenario** characterises universities with no or very little provision targeting student parents, whether through specific or mainstreamed policies. It does apply to two of our ten case studies: Case study 7 and Case Study 9.

Case Study 7

> Case Study 7 is a post-1992 institution located in the South of England. An examination of the university website and of the policies and guidelines accessed by the research team shows the predominance of a discourse of invisibility regarding student parents in this institution. There is no policy or provision in place catering specifically for student parents[4] and no mainstreaming of student parents in generic policies. Some documents make some brief reference to this group, such as the guidance notes for claiming extenuating circumstances, in which childbirth, pregnancy complications and the serious illness of a relative (including a child) are listed as eligibility criteria. Some other policies, such as the health and safety and the library policies, make reference to student parents and their children (defined in this institution as those under 16 years of age). However, far from expressing a concern for inclusiveness, these policies forbid the presence of children in most premises or allow it under strict conditions (i.e., for brief periods of time and occasionally, to deliver or collect study-related materials). This is justified by health and safety issues and by concerns that children may distract students from their learning.

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[4] Apart from the Access to Learning Fund, a national programme which is administered at institutional level-see Chapter 2.

Case Study 9

Case Study 9 is a pre-1992 institution located in the Midlands. Compared to Case Study 7, the University website and paper documentation make some more references to student parents. For example, various sections of the website include some information about the organisations which may be able to support this group, as well as some information on the financial support available to them. Student parents are able to apply for small bursaries, usually means-tested, for example to help them with childcare during school holidays or with the extra-costs of having a baby. The University used to run a play scheme during half-term, which has now been interrupted. There is currently very little on offer for student parents, although student parents may be able to access some hardship funds based on a range of circumstances, which include family circumstances.

From the two case studies above emerge a number of characteristics specific to this scenario. A key feature is that university documentation is predominantly characterized by a discourse of invisibility regarding student parents. This relative invisibility is associated with the absence of a significant policy intervention targeting student parents, either under the form of specific policies or of mainstreaming. This of course does not mean that student parents have no entitlements or receive no support. Depending on their personal circumstances, they may benefit from some of the national measures discussed in Chapter 2. Moreover, as identified in student interviews, some individuals will receive support from staff who are sympathetic to their circumstances. However, this support is usually not embedded into policies, nor in the cultural ethos of the institution.

The absence of policies targeting student parents in an explicit manner does not imply that the policies in place are 'neutral' in terms of their effects. For example, as we shall see in the forthcoming Chapters, timetabling policies can differently affect students, depending, among other things, on their family circumstances. Similarly, health and safety policies forbidding the presence of children in some areas, as in Case Study 7, will have differential effects depending upon one is a parent or not. In this particular institution, this theme emerged recurrently in students' narratives as it created many difficulties for them. More generally, in the absence of support, the effects of institutional policies and cultures will depend on student parents' capitals and other forms of support available to them, as also illustrated by the interviews with this group (see Chapters 4 and 5).

We cannot establish a direct link between staff's narratives and the wider approach to student parents in place in each institution. Nor can we conceive staff's narratives as a pure reflection of what happens at an organisational level, as, indeed, the available provision for student parents in each institution is the result of many factors. However, the fact that some of the staff interviewed in these institutions demonstrated limited awareness of the issues faced by student parents and of the support provided by their own institution can be read as indicative of a wider institutional culture or ethos which is not particularly family-friendly. In such a culture, issues faced by student parents tend not to be constructed as a legitimate area of intervention for institutions, despite institutions themselves sometimes contributing to these problems through policies geared towards childless students.

3.2.2. Universities providing some specific provision for student parents

This **second scenario** applies to universities with some specific provision available for student parents. Five of our ten case studies fall under this category: Case Study 4, Case Study 10, Case Study 8, Case Study 5 and Case Study 3. Thus, this is the most common scenario in our study and, altogether, these universities represent a diverse group, both in terms of their general characteristics and of the extensiveness and nature of their provision for student parents.

Case Study 4

Case Study 4 is a pre-1992 institution located in the South of England. Some significant provision and policies are in place for student parents. The university website and documentation include some information targeting this group on the support they are entitled to and some links to organisations able to support them further. The Students' Union has been consulting students about their caring responsibilities and occasionally organises events on campus for students and their young families.

One of the university campuses is equipped with a nursery (a subsidiary of the university). This service is open to the children of students, staff and members of the local community, who are between three months and five years of age. Slightly discounted fees are available for students. The nursery is open ten hours a day during the week and closes for a very short period of time during the year. A term-time only contract is also available, as well as full-time and part-time places. Although the nursery is well-subscribed, students are usually able to secure a place. Other provision includes a half-term, campus-based play scheme, open to children of primary school age. A very small number of campus-based family flats are also available, with restrictions on how long students can occupy a flat. This university also offers a small loan fund to assist new international students with families.

Case Study 10

Case Study 10 is a pre-1992 institution located in the North of England. The university documentation makes some references to student parents in sections targeting specifically this group, including through indications of where expecting students and student parents can get support, from within and from outside the university. The university extenuating circumstances guidelines mention that an unexpected loss of childcare during exam period and illness in the family can lead to a deferral for both parents.

The main provision specifically available to student parents consists of a university-run nursery, which accommodates children from 6 months to 5 years of age and is open ten hours a day. Students, staff and members of the local community can access this service. Full-time and part-time places are available, with slightly discounted fees for students. Fees are low compared with other university nurseries (i.e., circa half the fees charged in some other case studies), something which may partly reflect differences in childcare fees between the North and the South of England. In addition, the university runs a play scheme club during the summer holiday for children of primary school age. The university also has some guidelines in place for students and staff in relation to student parents and expecting students. This includes information on disclosure of their circumstances and on the support available. The design of a support plan is encouraged, with a member of staff acting as key contact. The guidelines also make clear that maternity related absence after the birth of a child is allowed and that resting and breastfeeding spaces are available to mothers to be and mothers. It also clearly states that supervised children are allowed on campus, although not in teaching areas. The guidelines also include some specific information relating to fathers, fathers to be and same-sex partners, with their absence being authorised under particular circumstances.

Case Study 8

Case Study 8 is a post-1992 university, located in the South of England. The university website and documentation make very little mention of student parents, outside of particular areas of the website (for example, the nursery and the family accommodation webpages).

Specific provision for student parents includes a privately-run, on-site nursery. This service is open to the children of students, staff and members of the local community, and accommodates the needs of babies and children up to five years old. Full-time and part-time places are available. The university also provides some family accommodation, some of it within close distance from the nursery, as well as advice on housing suitable for families in the private sector. Rules for allocating accommodation vary across sites. Because students can stay in the same flat for the duration of their studies and the housing supply for families is limited, only a small number of student parents are able to use this service.

Case Study 5

Case Study 5 is a post-1992 university, located in the South of England. The university website and documentation include some references to student parents. This is also a rare case of an institution using representations of student parents in their documentation and promotional material.

Specific provision includes a university-run, on-campus nursery, which accommodates children from three months to five years of age. This service is available to students, staff and members of the local community. The nursery is open nine hours a day and offers an all-year round and a term-time only contract, although it closes for several weeks during the year. Flexible sessions can be arranged but this is constrained by the availability of places. Students can benefit from slightly discounted fees. Although places go in priority to students, they are not guaranteed a place and, indeed, there are times when the majority of users are staff or members of the community. This is because the nursery is over-subscribed and because students may not receive confirmation of their place or of their timetable early enough in the year to be able to secure a place for their child.

This university also runs a holiday play scheme, jointly with another educational establishment, for children of primary and secondary school age. Corporate discounts for students to spend on a range of childcare services are also available. Advice, information and support to students and staff about childcare are on offer. A member of staff used to coordinate childcare advice, a role which is now distributed across support services.

Case Study 3

Case Study 3 is a pre-1992 institution. It is based in the Midlands. The university website and documentation make some reference to student parents, though mostly in the nursery section.

Two nurseries are based on the university campus, one of which is run by the university and is over-subscribed. The university-run nursery accommodates children from 4 months to five years of age and is open ten hours a day, although children can only attend a maximum of 9.5 hours a day. It accommodates the needs of students' and staff's young families. It provides some flexibility in terms of which sessions the children attend.

Within student services, there is a unit specifically dedicated to childcare services, which is coordinated by a member of staff and is available to full-time students and staff. The university runs a play centre, for children from 18 months to five years of age, which is open nine hours a day, with a choice of half-day or full-day sessions. A small number of subsidised and means-tested places are available to home and international full-time students. The play centre also includes a school holiday play scheme, which caters for children until they enter secondary school, and a toy loan service, for which a small fee is charged. The University also has on offer a small, means-tested grant to support students with childcare issue.

As we shall see in Chapters 4 and 5, this specific support can make a huge difference to student parents, although its effects depend on the specific characteristics of the provision. Indeed, barriers can remain even when some provision is in place, as is for example the case when on-site nurseries have long waiting lists or high fees, which make them inaccessible to some student parents. This second scenario draws on an 'add on' approach, in which HE widening participation policies attempt to attract 'non traditional' students while mostly continuing to model their policies around the needs of 'traditional' ones (Marandet and Wrainwright, 2009, 2010). The effects of generic university policies can sometimes be left unaddressed as the structures in place endeavour to meet the needs of the 'bachelor boy' (Hinton-Smith, 2011). There is thus a risk that student parents are constructed as 'special', 'demanding' or, even, in a time of austerity, as 'costly'.

3.2.3. Universities providing some mainstream provision

A **third scenario** consists of the mainstreaming by institutions of policies relating to student parents. It usually combines with scenario 2, that is with the existence of some specific provision or policies targeting student parents. Three universities in our sample fall into this category: Case Study 2, Case Study 6 and Case Study 1.

Case Study 2

Case Study 2 is a pre-1992 university, based in the North of England. Student parents are made visible in university documentation. For example, the equal opportunity policy includes a specific section about this group and makes clear that no student should be disadvantaged on the basis of their family circumstances. This policy also specifies the need to acknowledge student parents' perspectives across the board and states its commitment to supporting this group across a range of areas. Some specific documentation is also produced for international students so that they are aware of the help with childcare costs available to them.

The University is also committed to making sure that the campus is child-friendly. In terms of provision and policies, this translates into the existence of a room specifically dedicated to families. Financial support includes a small, non means-tested bursary to help international students with childcare expenses. The campus-based childcare centre is open nine hours a day, with full-day and half-day sessions available. Fees are discounted for students and are kept relatively low compared with other university nurseries. The centre is also open to children of up to 7 years of age during holiday periods and conferences. It also hosts a playgroup scheme, with weekly events for children of pre-school age to attend with their parent/carer.

Case Study 6

Case Study 6 is a pre-1992 institution. It is based in the North of England. The University website provides some information on the support available for student parents.

Two nurseries are located on campus, one of them offering some discounted rates for students, although international students can apply for a reduced fee. The nurseries are open nine hours a day, and accommodate the needs of children from 6 months to five years of age. This institution also offers some family accommodation, with halls specifically dedicated to couples and families with children. However, the nurseries and family accommodation are over-subscribed. The University also has a housing scheme which can support families in finding suitable accommodation in the private sector. This is also a rare case of the University collecting information on students' caring responsibilities when they complete their registration, to facilitate identifying the needs of this group. The University and the Students' Union have set up a student parents group.

Case Study 1

Case Study 1 is a post-1992 institution located in the South of England, and one of the Universities in our sample offering the most integrated provision in relation to student parents. The University documentation provides some extensive references to student parents on their website and in their documentation (see below).

The University runs two nurseries. Both are open over nine hours a day, with early closure two days a week. The nurseries are closed several weeks a year and offer full-time and part-time places. This service is accessible to 2-5 year old children of students and staff from the University, and members of the local community. Places are allocated on a first come, first served basis. Fees for student parents are significantly below those of staff and the local community. They also vary depending on the household income and on whether students receive the Childcare Grant or not. Parents and carers can choose a selection of morning and afternoon sessions.

The University provides some space for breastfeeding. Children and babies are allowed on campus, with the exception of high risk areas (mostly laboratories). The presence of children in lectures and seminars may be allowed by the teaching member of staff. A social group for student parents is in place.

An equality adviser ensures that student parents' perspectives are acknowledged and that student policies are mainstreamed. This member of staff also provides direct support to this group. A very comprehensive set of guidelines for students with dependents is in place and a similar one for staff dealing with students with dependents was in preparation at the time of the fieldwork. The documents acknowledge the Equality Act (2010) and the fact that the University has a responsibility in ensuring that they do not penalise student parents in any way. A consultation was run to identify the key issues faced by student parents. The guidelines were developed on the basis of these findings. These guidelines suggest a high level of policy mainstreaming in relation to this group, for example requesting adjustments in relation to teaching arrangements, health and safety issues, timetabling, applying for mitigating circumstances, study options, access to counselling, breastfeeding, childcare support, social support, etc. This is also a rare document that states that one size fits all policies may not be appropriate due to the circumstances of student parents being very diverse. Most importantly, the guidelines also recognise that pregnancy and parenthood is not only a women's issue and similar guidelines are to be followed for fathers, although in a less formal way.

As a result of these measures, the strategy to support student parents is embedded in the University structures, including at departmental level. The University does not collect information on students' caring responsibilities. However, there is a support agreement in place, signed by a member of staff and by the student. This allows student parents who wish to do so to consent to the sharing of information on their current circumstances so that other staff can be informed and the appropriate adjustments can be made.

The mainstreaming of student parents' issues in university policies characterises three universities in our sample, albeit to a diverse extent, and is also associated with the existence of some specific policies. This mainstreaming means that generic policies (or, at least, some of them) are read in the light of how they will affect those students who have responsibilities for looking after young children and sometimes other dependents. In these universities, there is some evidence suggesting that, rather than simply drawing on an 'add-on approach', as was predominantly the case with scenario 2, some of these institutional policies aim to challenge the construction of the traditional student, with attempts to construct students with caring responsibilities as the default student.

3.3. Differences across institutions

Our ten case studies are spread across three scenarios. Because the provision in place can evolve quickly and is the result of a complex dynamic between the national and institutional levels, as well as between different actors at the local level (including, management, staff, the local community, the students' union, and students themselves), this classification is thought of in terms of scenarios rather than as a typology. This facilitates the acknowledgement of the fluidity of the policies and provision in place.

Table 1. University scenarios in relation to student parents

Scenario 1: Universities offering no or very little provision for student parents	Scenario 2: Universities offering some specific provision for student parents	Scenario 3: Universities offering some mainstreamed provision
Case study 7, a post-1992 institution, located in the South of England Case study 9, a pre-1992 university, located in the Midlands	Case study 4, a pre-1992 institution, located in the South of England. Case study 10, a pre-1992 university, based in the North of England Case study 8, a post-1992 university, located in the South of England Case study 5, a post-1992 university located in the South of England Case study 3, a pre-1992 university, based in the Midlands	Case study 2, a pre-1992 university, based in the North of England Case study 6, a pre-1992 university, based in the North of England Case study 1, a post-1992 institution, located in the South of England

The provision and the institutions falling under each scenario are diverse. This needs to be related to the context of an increasingly market-regulated HE sector, in which HEIs are highly autonomous. As a result, HEIs compete against each other to attract particular segments of the student population, something which leads to the differentiation of their provision. This is similar to what Caryn Medved and Jennifer Heisler found in the US, a country where the HE sector is characterised by high levels of market-regulation and cross-institutional differentiation (Medved and Heisler, 2002). The interviews we conducted with students confirm that, for some of those who were already parents or expecting at the time of selecting a university, the provision in place (especially the presence of a campus-based nursery) played a key role in their decision to apply.

Identifying a clear trend in terms of which universities fall under each category is complicated by the fact that we are only dealing with ten institutions. Yet, looking at the distribution of institutions, pre-1992 institutions appears slightly more likely to be associated with scenarios 2 and 3, particularly for those two in the Russell group (with one falling under scenario 3, the other falling under scenario 2 and with one of the most extensive family-friendly provision in the sample). Although all categories are mixed and such differences are not statistically significant, there is some indication that pre-1992 and/or high-ranking universities are in a slightly better position when it comes to student parents. This is a rather surprising finding considering that post-1992 institutions have long been associated with widening participation. Less surprising maybe is the fact that two out of the three universities based in the North fall under scenario 3, maybe because space is less at a premium, thus enabling institutions to offer family accommodation and on-campus nurseries.

Browsing through university websites brings more evidence of a possible link between a relatively extensive, and sometimes mainstreamed, provision for student parents and pre-1992 universities, especially in relation to the more prestigious institutions. For example, both the University of Cambridge and the University of Oxford, who have long epitomised the figure of the 'traditional student', offer some extensive provision according to their websites. This finding is in line with those in Rachel Brooks' comparison of Danish and English HEIs, in which she established that, of the two case studies conducted in England, the 'Older University' was more 'parent-friendly' than the 'Newer University' (Brooks, 2011). In the United States, Karen Danna Lynch established a link between the extent of the provision available for student parents and university status, noting for example that Harvard and Princeton 'are among those that offer expanded benefits packages to graduate students with children… as well as sensitivity training for faculty' (Danna Lynch, 2008: 603). Because Ivy Leagues institutions only accommodate the needs of a small number of graduate mothers, the effects of these policies on this population may be limited. Building on these findings and her own empirical study, Brooks suggests that such differences relate to the more secure financial position and higher level of prestige characteristic of so called older universities in England (Brooks, 2011). 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. This finding, however, ignores the fact that all support is not institutional and that daily practices are also to be considered.

What also emerges from our study is that, while each organisation has its own culture and ethos, which can be more or less family-friendly, differences across institutions are often down to the good will and initiative of a particular individual or of a small group of individuals who are dedicated to the cause of student parents or, more generally, to equality issues. For example, in Case Study 1, the consultation the University conducted with student parents, the guidelines subsequently developed and the expansion of a 'family-friendly' provision, took place at the initiative of a particular member of staff, although it is also very clear that she needed institutional support to do so. Similarly, in another university, a member of support services and the student union women's officer had been working together to develop some provision for student parents. The quotes below also highlight the fact that, in both cases, external factors were particularly influential. In one case, this was the Equality Act 2010, in the other one, it was the NUS report on student parents (NUS, 2009), which triggered an intervention from within the university. This confirms that the provision available for student parents results from the complex interaction between a number of factors, including individual, institutional and national ones.

> *It was a little bit my initiative but I got approval for it, I started it... The survey really triggered it and then I saw the Equality Act included pregnancy and maternity, I thought 'the time is right'. Then, shortly after, I found out that the Equality Challenge Unit have done a lot of work on student parents so that helped as well... I put an announcement up on our student intranet... and then I sent a similar message to all staff... And so I collected all that information... which I then tried to write guidance for. (Staff, Case Study 1)*

> *It began really when the NUS report came out, the Meet the Parents' report was released... I've worked quite closely with the Women's Officer, when we had a very, very long conversation... I think people will go and say things to the Student Union that they can't come to a member of university staff and say, and so I think that link with the Student Union has been very important, that collaboration, and being able to actually identify what it is that student parents feel are the problems... What we are doing is we are trying to respond to what is being fed back to us. Sometimes it can be quite frustrating in the sense of not having finances available, that kind of thing, but we've tried to put in place what we can. (Staff, Case Study 6)*

The arrangements in place often appear very fragile. For example, in one case study where the most integrated provision was on offer, the university management had initially decided to close one of the nurseries. This attracted some important resistance from staff and students, leading to the decision being postponed. Moreover, it is worth noting that, particularly in times of austerity, even when

universities are supportive in principle of the development of a family-friendly provision for students, this is not necessarily associated with the adequate financial support.

> *I think, financially, we are extremely limited in what we are likely to get, but in terms of things that can be done which don't actually have to cost an awful lot, then, yes, I would say they are [university management] supportive to it. And I think they are supportive of it in a sort of widening participation context, I think it is something quite important. (Staff, Case Study 6)*

3.4. Staff's narratives and discourses of student parents in HE

In this section, we want to explore the discursive constructions of student parents which underpin staff's narratives, as well as staff's wider views of university policy in relation to this group.

3.4.1. Issues faced by student parents: University staff's perspectives

As well as asking student parents about the issues they face (which we explore in Chapter 4), we asked university staff about what they saw as the issues faced by this group. Financial difficulties were usually described as a major problem, although interviewees often acknowledged an element of diversity within this group in relation to economic capital.

> *One common area where students with children are seeking advice from our services is around funding and childcare, grants, all the different arrangements to make sure that they are getting all the financial support that they are entitled to and if they are able to kind of manage, and that students also apply for additional help through the hardship funds that we operate, including the Access to Learning Fund. (Staff, Case Study 4)*

> *Finance I suppose, there is quite a lot of financial pressure. If you become pregnant at university you can't take funded maternity leave. So if you decide to take a year out, you lose your student funding for that year. So there is a pressure for people to keep going and to return back to their studies as soon as possible, so that they still have that income. So yes, I think finance must be huge. (Staff, Case Study 1)*

Childcare was also often mentioned as a key issue for student parents. It was explained that to fit student parents' needs, childcare needed to be flexible, financially accessible and, of course, available, all conditions which, according to most members of staff, were often not united. Paying for the costs of childcare, in particular, was seen as a major issue, especially for international students who, according to these accounts, had not always anticipated such costs.

> *I think one of the biggest [issue] revolves around childcare, I think there is an awful lot of issues that feed into that... Even for students who get the Childcare Grant that doesn't cover the entire cost of the childcare so they've immediately got this extra big expense. I think for postgraduate and international students who don't receive that Childcare Grant, if our subsidised places have run out or there is no space left in the nursery, it means they have to then go to private childcare which obviously is not subsidised, and then they are left with the whole bill... I know certainly many international students that we've had come to us for help it is because they've arrived here and they have just not anticipated the cost of childcare. It is just astronomical, and a lot of them are quite overwhelmed by that level of extra expense. (Staff, Case Study 6)*

In this respect, university nurseries were often described as more appropriately serving the needs of student parents than privately-run and out-of-campus nurseries. The former were described as more flexible, as they offer term-time contracts and for some, allow students to choose sessions, fitting to some extent, with their timetable. They also compared favourably with other nurseries, due to being close to the place of study and to staff having had the opportunity to develop a good understanding of student parents' needs.

The main issues have always been financial and finding the most suitable childcare for their studies, because obviously a student who is studying, a lot of the childcare facilities aren't flexible enough to accommodate their needs, as in timetables and term-time only. Because if you are a term-time only student most childcare facilities out there make you pay for 52 weeks of the year. That is one of the big issues, and then obviously it has a cost implication, doesn't it? (Staff, Case Study 5)

A third issue, also often mentioned, related to the conflicting demands of being a student and a parent, especially at times when such demands were high, e.g., when a child is ill or when assignments are due in.

I think the first [issue] is time and organisation. I think a lot of student parents find it difficult juggling their study commitments with their family commitments, and whether they are in a partnership with somebody else, then there is the time commitment that you are not spending time with your partner, or if you are a single parent. I think that that is one of the main things that they struggle with, that the time that they are at university in the day has to be used really productively in order that, when their other commitments kick in later, they are available to do them because they don't have the six hours in the evening when they can do a bit of background reading. (Staff, Case Study 2)

Certainly, the ones that I see, clearly the main issue for them is finance. It is being able to pay for the childcare in order for them to come to university, but it is also juggling their studies with being a parent. You know, wanting to revise in the evening when the children want help with their homework or the baby is crying or commitments that the children have in terms of their own activities. So balancing being a parent with also being a student is quite fraught in itself, I think... It is juggling all the activities that require your attention in order to tackle at least two areas of your life really well. There may be more, it depends how many people are in your family and some parents will also hold down a job. So that, you know, it is juggling everything and managing to meet deadlines and do the best you can for all concerned. (Staff, Case Study 9)

Occasionally, the more immaterial costs of being a student parent were mentioned. References were made to the isolation of student parents, as well as to the impact of juggling multiple commitments on the mental and physical well-being of this group.

I did a workshop with a group of mature students this week and one of the things was the sense of sort of, I was going to say alienation but that is too strong, sort of disconnection from the life of the university and the lack of focus by the university and the Students Union actually on activities that are at times that feel do-able. So the kind of idea that people are expected to kind of socialise late into the evening and when it is just impossible, this kind of pulling in different directions, juggling of different responsibilities, and this sense of there is not enough to bring people together during the daytime. (Staff, Case Study 4)

I think student parents probably miss out on some of the social aspects and activities going on within the university, if they are in the evening or Fresher's Week where they do activities and it is very difficult for student parents. It is not just the academic and learning side of it, I think it is the whole picture of activities external, meeting new people, particularly if it is Fresher's Week. And the other thing for some of the students, that, a, come from overseas or, b, not locally, if you've got a child it is very difficult if the child is ill and the parent ... there is nobody around to support the family if you see what I mean, because you are living away from home with a young child... It is not just the learning and the academic and modular side of it, it is the social aspect as well. I would think that was more limiting for students because I've got one student who has to come on the train every day, it is an hour's train journey with a young child, it is quite stressful in itself. (Staff, Case Study 5)

Yet, beyond the broad patterns of staff's narratives, some groups of student parents were described as facing more difficulties than others. This included students on courses with a high number of contact hours or including a work placement.

The other key thing to mention is the nature of the course that they are studying. For example, you can be an undergraduate history student and have six hours contact time a week, which gives you a high degree of flexibility. I am not saying that a history degree is any easier than another degree, but you have lots of flexibility with your time to perhaps fit your studies around your childcare responsibilities... We find that we have quite a high concentration of student parents within courses such as nursing and those are courses that will often require students to go out on placements, and that can become quite problematic... Sometimes it can involve unsociable hours. That might present a huge problem in terms of finding out-of-hours childcare, and if they do manage to find it, then the price is massively inflated, so they can come up against those sorts of problems. (Staff, Case Study 6)

International students were also more likely to be identified as facing a higher level of difficulties compared with other groups of student parents. The costs of relocating and the higher fee regime applying to this group were described as having major financial implications for them. Cultural factors were also mentioned, as it was often assumed that they would have to 'adapt' to a new environment and that they would lack local networks of support available to some of the home students. Even in universities where the provision in place for student parents was significantly developed, this was seen as a group whose needs were not met.

I don't know, maybe it is different for international students as well, international student parents because it is a whole new culture around children. Because it would be very different for a student parent who is from the city where they are going to university, has all the networks of support sorted, compared to a student parent from the other side of the world coming and not really knowing those networks of support really. (Staff, Case Study 10)

The only other area where we don't actually meet the needs of some students is international students, because of the visa requirements and the length of time they can have off. If they have a break in their studies, say through being pregnant and having a baby, we don't actually admit children till four months of age and for some international students that will be too late, because they would have latched on their visa because of the time they've taken off. However we don't take till four months of age because that was on the advice of health professionals in terms of young babies ready enough to be able to cope with group care settings, so whilst a lot of private day nurseries will take in at six, seven, eight weeks of age, we chose to put that at four months. So for those students it might be a case of having to juggle the childcare, so I think that is an issue. (Staff, Case Study 3)

That is problematic, because you can give more support to home students than you can to international students, so it is not really equitable support... [The hardship fund] is for home students and for international students who can definitely demonstrate that this is causing them financial hardship. But, as they now have to prove that they've got enough money to be in the UK, then it is a circular argument, you know? (Staff, Case Study 9)

Single parents represented another group deemed to face a high level of difficulties compared with 'partnered' student parents. This group was often described as struggling to cope, with their difficulties sometimes naturalised (as in the following quote, where it is described as 'obvious'). In some narratives, we found evidence of stereotyping, as sometimes also observed in the case of international students. This needs to be related to the views of single parents which circulate in media and policy texts, and sometimes stigmatize this group (Doughty, 2011).

Obviously, single parents are going to find it difficult. (Staff, Case Study 2)

I think different kinds of situation all have their different challenges. I guess lone parents/single parents would have, or may have, a more difficult time with it than maybe a student who has the support of a family around them, has somebody else that can maybe be spending time with the child. I can imagine that if you were a single parent with a responsibility for everything, yours to manage really, that would be really quite intense I would think, and possibly to give rise to some quite conflicting feelings about studying or

being with your child. I think student parents particularly in that situation would need to be very strong people, yes. (Staff, Case Study 6)

Although staff articulated a number of issues faced by student parents, levels of awareness were very variable. Some staff provided detailed accounts of student parents' experiences and of policies. Others, on the contrary, demonstrated some limited awareness of the experiences of this group and of the policy intervention in this area. Some commented on not having given much thoughts to this topic prior to the interview and several highlighted how the lack of statistical data meant that their experience was 'kind of anecdotal rather than statistical' (Staff, Case Study 4).

I'll be honest, I hadn't given it a great deal of thought before you came. (Staff, Case Study 9)

You are going to speak to one of our advisors I think who is probably, will definitely have more experience of that... We don't ask the question at the moment as to whether or not students have caring responsibilities or children, so we have no kind of, we don't capture that information... I have no way of gathering that data... I know how many clients we have from each of the different academic courses, I know how many women we have, I know what age profile they are, I know what international students they are, well caring responsibilities and parenthood is not considered a capture. (Staff, Case Study 4)

To be fair, sometimes we are not aware whether the students are student parents unless they declare it to us. It is not a specific question that we would ask everybody coming to ask us for information or advice. (Staff, Case Study 8)

This lack of awareness was also noted by students, who sometimes emphasised how they struggled in finding the appropriate information regarding the type of support available.

Like the first day I walked into the student support office and said, 'is there anywhere I can express breast milk? I've got a breast pump with me', and they kind of did a double take. It was obviously the first time they'd ever been asked that question and by lunchtime that day they'd found me a dedicated nursing room with a fridge and everything. It's obviously been set up for staff in one of the other buildings and because it was in a secure building they'd got me swipe card access into the building and got me registered and everything by lunch time, so some of the experiences with the medical school itself have been fantastic. (Nesha, Case Study 6)

I'll have to find the support. It won't come to you. You have to go and look for it, so yeah, I'll have to research on how to get the support. (Amber, Case Study 7)

Only a minority of staff spontaneously mentioned the possibility of an effect of some generic policies on respondents. Often, this was in relation to timetabling or work placement policies, which were seen as creating conflicts with students' time regime of care.

3.4.2. Discursive constructions of student parents in staff's narratives

We now suggest reflecting on some of the discourses which underpin staff's narratives and university policies, thus taking a more discourse analytic perspective (Burr, 1995, Foucault, 1969). We have identified four main discourses of student parents in higher education: a discourse of student parents as 'heroes', which celebrates their achievements; a discourse of student parents as 'problem' students, which may minimise the barriers they face or, on the contrary, emphasises their difficulties, yet foregrounds the role they play in compounding these; as well as social-democrat and neo-liberal discourses of student parents, which are explained in more detail hereafter. Two key points here are that we are not proposing a typology based on staff's views or institutional provision and that these discourses are not exclusive of each other. Talking about discourses enables us to consider that, in each narrative, several discourses of student parents can coexist, and possibly enter in tension, and that opinions and policies are dynamic constructs.

Student parents: 'Heroes' or 'villains'?

By discourse of student parents as 'heroes', we mean a broad view of student parents in which they are constructed in heroic or celebratory terms for having overcome so many barriers and singled out for their achievements. We found evidence of this discourse in the media (see, e.g., Tanjuakio, 2005), in the university documentation, and in some narratives.

> *[They are] incredibly busy, so huge time pressures, lots of different responsibilities to different people, financial issues because childcare is very expensive, also if they have older children who were at school then the timing of lectures could be conflictual with the school times and things like that. What else? Oh, there's just like, student parents that make it through university, I am just in complete awe of them! They've got so much on their plate and juggling so much and then not having enough facilities to support them when they need it the most. (Staff, Case study 10)*

> *They are wanting to get the best for themselves and their family, they are very committed, lots of our students do very well, we are aware each year that some of them are achieving firsts. And I think it is that motivation, if you are going to embark on studying and you've got small children or perhaps older children as well, I think you are very sure about what you want to do and why you are doing it and they are overall very motivated and very appreciative of the support we give them in order to do a very difficult thing. (Staff, Case Study 1)*

In this discourse, student parents are often constructed as 'special'. Their academic success or, merely, their presence in HE, is often interpreted as a result of their exceptional abilities or strength of character. Thus, while this discourse acknowledges the influence of social structures on individuals' experiences, it is not immune to a discourse of individualisation (Beck, 1992, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002).

> *I do find as a group, though, that they are extremely motivated, and they have to be organised because of everything else that is in their lives, and their motivation shouldn't go unrecognised I feel... In my experience, they just teach the rest of us a lesson, because they cope brilliantly. (Staff, Case Study 8)*

A counterpoint to this discourse of student parents as heroes is provided by the discourse of student parents as 'problem' students. In a particular version of this discourse, student parents' achievements, rather than being lauded about, tend to be trivialized. This is evident in the following quote where the interviewee acknowledges some of the issues faced by this group, yet, drawing on her own experience, describes a rather smooth trajectory.

> *I was a mature student with a child whilst studying, and I didn't experience many difficulties myself. Maybe I was lucky to have a good network and support around me at home, but obviously the financial issue can be quite a big one for them. (Staff, Case Study 8)*

In another version of this discourse, the emphasis tends to be, on the contrary, on the many problems associated with being a student parent.

> *I met students who had academic problems, but often parents are more likely to have academic problems, given the number of things that they are juggling. So quite a few of the people I met at that point were parents and had became aware of how difficult it was for them and how many barriers are in their way. I can remember talking to a single parent with four children, who I can't even remember what her academic issue was, it was just a problem with the department of some kind and she was trying to juggle the needs of quite a difficult demanding course with juggling her work and the fact she had four children and she was [laughing] she was surprised she wasn't coping, but it was so difficult for her – it is not an easy situation at all. (Staff, Case Study 2)*

Yet, in both cases, rather than suggesting that these difficulties have been brought upon them by circumstances, students are sometimes blamed for not having made the right decisions in life and, in

particular, for their unrealistic expectations of university. As a result, this also leads to constructions of student parents as 'problem' students since their difficulties are constructed as a result of their miscalculations or lack of abilities to take responsibility for themselves.

Often, the financial difficulties in a family have been simmering along for a long time, you often find that people don't think through, 'oh, when I go to University, it is going to cost', they'll think, 'I am going to get this, this and this. I am going to get this nursery money, I'm going to get this amount for a grant, I am going to get this inner loan', whatever, but they don't think, 'I am carrying all this debt with me and I'm going to clear this debt before I get there' and they'll often come with a whole complex debt and we'll have to sort that debt out with them... and you'd be shocked at the number of people that do have babies, they've got other children and they come to study and they've got a bundle of debt, they've got everything and yet they have more babies, and it adds to the whole complex muddle that they are in, you know so that can be extremely difficult. And always, always as an advisor you are an advisor, you are neutral, so even if they sit there and you think, 'oh my God, why did you do this? Why are you sitting there when you are seven months pregnant and you've got this one year old and you are trying to do this course? How on earth do you think you can juggle all of these things and you've got £20,000 worth of debt that you've come in with, and your husband's not got a job' or whatever, 'your partner's not got a job' or it is a sixth partner and they've got children by everyone. Some people come in with the most awful situations and you think, 'we've just got to help you out of this situation', this is the thing that we are looking at, what is happening now and being totally neutral, totally non-judgemental because that is what you have to be, and that can be quite difficult but we do make sure that we are. (Staff, Case Study 9)

As well as the broader political categories that people use to make sense of the world that surrounds them, it is worth noting here that such a view of student parents as 'problem' students may be compounded by the fact that members of this group often only become visible when they don't fit quietly in university cultures and need support. This was a perspective often articulated in staff's narratives, as they commented upon the fact that their views were skewed because of their particular role in the institution.

They are part of the student body, and it is only when there are particular issues as and when they crop up, that they tend to be supported. (Staff, Case Study 8)

The main issues? I would say firstly for most, not for most because we don't see them all so it is a bit sweeping to say most... we tend to see the ones that are having difficulty so I don't see the ones that aren't... (Staff, Case Study 9)

This is in line with Medved and Heisler's (2002) findings, who noted that student parents often only become apparent when a problem arise: 'The unique challenges student-parents face outside the classroom become visible to faculty members only at particular times during the academic year' (105). Constructions of student parents as 'problem students' are also evidenced by the fact that, contrarily to student parents themselves, staff often did not mention any positive in relation to being a student parent.

Constructions of this group as 'problem' students sometimes extended to their academic performance. While, in the 'hero' discourse, their achievements were celebrated and their attitude to learning tended to be described in positive terms, in this 'problem' discourse, they were sometimes constructed in opposition with academic excellence (see, also, Brooks, 2011).

I was Graduate Studies Advisor when I first came to the university, so I met students who had academic problems. But often parents are more likely to have academic problems, given the number of things that they are juggling, so quite a few of the people I met at that point were parents [who] had became aware of how difficult it was for them and how many barriers are in their way. (Staff, Case Study 2)

Young and single mothers appeared particularly likely to be positioned as 'problem students'. This can be read as part of the increasing polarisation between 'young' and 'late' motherhood, in which young mothers have been increasingly stigmatized, with motherhood becoming the site of social inequalities between women (Kehily and Nayak, 2011). This echoes to some extent the way the younger student parents are sometimes constructed in staff's narratives, that is as ill-equipped to deal with being a parent and a student, while their mature equivalents are more likely to be perceived as, precisely mature, presumably due to their age and experience. These narratives are often underpinned by a neo-liberal discourse of risk and responsibility, to which we come back later, in which students should take the sole responsibility for their decision, with limited consideration of the social structures of power which surround individual 'choices'. However, mature student parents were not immune to this discourse. It was sometimes assumed that student parents are all mature students, and that as mature students they come back to HE as they have 'failed' before, meaning that they are unlikely to be associated with academic excellence.

> *In terms of participation, I see quite a lot of students who are returners to education who perhaps haven't done very well in the first educational experience and now have gone to return to study quite often after having had a family. (Staff, Case Study 7)*

Similarly, international students were more likely to fall into the 'problem' student category than other student parents, in line with our earlier comments suggesting that this group, as well as young and single student parents, were subjected to a certain level of stereotyping.

> *International students, they are often in culture shock when they, you know the children of international students, the children are often in culture shock when they first arrive in the UK, they have no understanding, no comprehension, no expression of the English language. Not all children but the vast majority, and obviously things like their diets have changed, the temperatures have changed, the sights and smells and people look different, and then they're starting to do visits into childcare because often they arrive as the courses are about to start, not that long before, and so then it is the case of doing intensive visits to try and help the children to get settled into the nursery and so that parents have got peace of mind when they go off and do their studies... (Staff, Case Study 3)*

Social democrat and neoliberal discourses of student parents in HE

In the ideal-typical form of the social democrat discourse of Higher Education, HE is broadly expected to serve the public good, by producing knowledge and embracing cultures and pedagogies which are critical and challenging (Leathwood, 2011). Institutions provide a space for the 'disqualified discourses' of equality (Morley and David 2009; cited in Leathwood 2011). Addressing inequalities is seen as a legitimate area of intervention for universities.

In the social democrat discourse of HE and student parents, care is valued and perceived as pivotal to students' lives. Supporting students with dependents is part of the remit of universities. Monitoring students' caring circumstances at institutional level is perceived as a prerequisite, to inform policy intervention in this area. 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).

> *To not provide support to student parents would be to single out a group of people and not support them. Student parents deserve the same educational opportunities as every other group of students. I don't see supporting student parents as being about giving them special treatment or giving them an advantage, it is about making sure that they are not advantaged, making sure that they are treated fairly as individuals and about their individual situation, and making sure that we don't disadvantage people, stop people from seeking their potential because they have a child. I can't see why we wouldn't have*

a responsibility to support them. It would seem a discriminatory thing to not provide as much support as we could. (Staff, Case Study 6)

I feel it should be [the role of the university to support student parents], yes... Just because they have a right to be able to have the same opportunities as the other students... Staff have a fairly flexible policy, so therefore why should we not have every opportunity for the students to have these opportunities? Just as any business really should offer the opportunity. (Staff, Case Study 5)

This often took the form of an egalitarian discourse, motivated by principles of social justice and equal opportunities. Sometimes, a 'business case' for equal opportunities, drawing on a more instrumental rationale, was made.

Because, I think, for a student to get the best out of their experience at university, and to get the best out of the experience for themselves in terms of their own professional and personal growth, the last thing you want is a student worried about childcare because then they are not focused on the course. So it actually is beneficial to the university as well. Because if the student has no issues with the childcare and they know that their child is being well looked after and so, and it is you know, even with a bit of a struggle it is affordable-ish for students, then the student can actually stay focused on their studies, their research or whatever. And that puts back a lot more into the university and obviously it is better for the university's reputation if the students are achieving well at the end of the programme. (Staff, Case Study 3)

It makes them a more equal access and some people when they are younger may not have considered themselves to be the person who would go to university, or was interested in it, and later on they may then have had a family. But it doesn't mean that either completing a degree or getting some of the qualification won't benefit them and their families. So I think it is helpful and useful to broaden the availability of places to family - to student parents... I also think that they can be really good students because you don't decide to come and do a degree when you've already got a family if you don't really want it, they are highly committed students, and obviously that is good for the university. (Staff, Case Study 2)

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, as part of the wider risk ethos characteristic of late modern societies (Beck, 1992). This discourse also partly overlaps with a discourse of individualisation, in which the issues faced by students 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 (Arnot and Mac an Ghaill, 2006). As argued elsewhere,

In the new, neo-liberal understanding of late modern society, a discourse of individualisation and choice is increasingly mobilised to explain (justify) individuals' positions in society, while the weight of social structures and relations of power is being minimised... (Moreau, 2011b: 161).

The following extract provides an illustration of a narrative drawing on this risk ethos.

I think it is very irresponsible of a student to go to university and expect the university to sort everything out for them. That is wrong. If you are a parent, you've got responsibilities to your child or children, and if you then make a decision that you want to educate yourself, which is admirable, but you can't expect other people to sort out your issues. It is like saying, 'oh, but I've got three dogs, who's going to walk me dogs?' You wouldn't expect the university to become dog walkers would you? If I can put it like that? It is about responsibilities. You know students say they've got rights, but they've also got responsibilities, and it is the adult thing to do. If you make a decision, you've got to weigh up the pros and cons of the move you want to make, and if it means sorting out childcare, then you jolly well sort it. It would be helpful if there were more of it on campus, but apart from that I can't see how the university could be responsible for

something that is a parent's responsibility... Well, it gets a bit political, but I'm afraid I don't believe in the nanny state at all. I do not. I just find that that is just ridiculous. If somebody wants to make a decision, then on their head be it. They take the decision and they have responsibility for it, whatever it is. That is first and foremost where I am coming from. (Staff, Case Study 8)

While the neo-liberal discourse of HE draws on a seemingly 'neutral' rhetoric, this is in fact a discourse infused by gender, race, class and other social divides. Finances are discussed, rather than social class, motherhood rather than gender, international students rather than race. In this discourse, the focus is on the student to adapt or change rather than on the institution (Crozier et al., 2010), with the student constructed as a rational economic actor with sometimes the assumption that student parents' miscalculations, have caused the difficulties they face. As stated by Bernie Grummell and her colleagues, drawing on a range of authors,

> *Within the neo-liberal frame, the citizen is defined as a rational economic actor (REA), essentially a worker and consumer; an autonomous rational actor governed by competitive individualism. This emphasis on the creation of self-sufficient and market-oriented citizens builds on the long history of gendered liberal political thinking that underestimates the role of dependency and interdependency in human relations... The liberal tradition does not recognize fully the role that emotions play in our relationships and actions (including teaching and managing), and is largely indifference to the centrality of care and love relations in defining who we are... (Grummell et al., 2009: 193)*

Evidence of this discourse is provided by the fact that institutional policies are not always perceived as playing a role in the problems faced by students and that care is not a legitimate area of policy intervention for universities. In some cases, such an intervention was described as 'pigeonholing' and possibly favouring student parents over childless students.

> *I guess we are not in the habit of pigeonholing people either. We take everybody that we see and everyone that we deal with very much as an individual, and to break them down and classify them and say, 'that person is more likely to have issues than that person'. I am not sure that that is the case. (Staff, Case Study 8)*

> *Some of our students say by the time they get home from lectures, do the tea, it is just like with staff really, anybody with children if you are working. It is the same sort of idea. Any working mother has the same problems, fitting things in, school run, shopping, food. There is nothing different really. It is just that instead of going to work, they are coming here to study… So, the difference, if they've made that decision to do it, they get on with it and just deal with it, but if there are times when the needs of the family clash, then it is just dealt with on an ad hoc basis as and when that arises... Well, I mean that is a personal decision, isn't it? It is like when you are at work. You accept the job or you accept a place at university and it is up to you to sort out how you are going to manage it. It is not the university's responsibility as such. I think the university's responsibility is invoked if you're dealing with disabled children, as it could be for any disabled person. It could be a parent that you are looking after. If you have a disabled person in your family and you are the main carer, then you come under the Equality Act, but other than that I don't believe it is the university's responsibility. (Staff, Case Study 8)*

This discourse also echoes to some extent the dominant national policy rhetoric and focuses on the employability-related, and specifically finance-related, benefits of having a degree. While many of the students we interviewed experience some financial, childcare and time-related difficulties, their narratives also strongly emphasise the social, psychological and health-related consequences of being a student parent. Yet, in staff's interviews, considerations relating to emotions, feelings and the body (all questions which have traditionally been constructed as external, possibly antagonic, to academia) are often seen as secondary and, sometimes, fully invisibilised, leading some to qualify higher education as 'carelessness' (Lynch, 2010). As recalled by Carole Leathwood, in this neoliberal perspective, a major, if not the main purpose of HE is to serve the economy (Leathwood, 2011).

Students are constructed as consumers/future workers and universities as service providers. Drawing on this perspective, one interviewee pointed out that student parents 'need to do a degree that makes them employable' (Staff, Case Study 4). She then continued by making reference to a relative who enrolled on a media studies programme and added that student parents should choose programmes of studies associated with more certain employment outcomes. While this notion of employability needs to be deconstructed (Moreau and Leathwood, 2006b), such a view backs Nancy Fraser's argument that the worker has become the new universal subject of late modern societies (Fraser, 1997).

Finally, in the business model of new public management, where HEIs are competing to attract students, students are increasingly positioned within policy circles as consumers (see above), although this positioning may well be resisted by students themselves (Williams, 2011). Some universities use their family-friendly provision as a marketing strategy to attract (and possibly retain) students with parental responsibilities. This takes place in a context where attracting international students has become a key ambition of many universities as the funding system for these is differentiated (with higher tuition fees). Indeed, after the US, the UK is now the country which receives the largest share of international students worldwide (OECD, 2010, cited in Waters, 2011). In this respect, providing support and provision for international families can also be a way, beyond equality concerns, to tap into this financial stream.

3.5. Recommendations

A key finding in this chapter relates to the invisibility of students' caring responsibilities within HE spaces. To tackle this invisibility, we recommend a multi-level intervention, involving HE agencies, research funders and HEIs themselves. In particular, we advise that HESA requires from HEIs that they collect data on the basis of students' family circumstances, such as information on the number of children and their age, as well as on any other individuals for whom the student is a main carer. Before this is rolled out, universities which have already started to collect these data could be consulted to identify the benefits of this approach as well as any potential difficulty associated with it. Lessons could also be learnt from Northern Ireland HEIs, where, to comply with statutory Equal Opportunities monitoring, data are collected on whether HE students have dependents on entry and on marital status (allowing for example to identify if students are lone or partnered parents). So as to increase the visibility of this group and to provide a better understanding of their experiences, we also recommend that research funding organisations encourage researchers to develop specific proposals in this area by making it a priority area in their research agenda. In particular, there is some indication in this project and in previous research (e.g., Brooks, 2011; Danna Lynch, 2008) that pre-1992 universities provide some more extensive provision for student parents. We believe that it would be useful to encourage further research exploring this aspect, as well as other cross-institutional differences. Similarly, it would be appropriate to encourage further research on the effects of the new funding arrangements and other policy changes on this group of students, both in terms of access and of their actual experiences once they have entered HE, although the Student Income and Expenditure Surveys will shed some light on this. At HEI level, this discourse of invisibility could be addressed by ensuring that university documentation (whether policy statements or marketing material) makes references to a variety of students and lifestyles. However, careful consideration should be given to how such representations may be 'read' since, as we noted earlier in this chapter, images of student parents and other 'non traditional' students may deter some students, including some student parents, who may conclude that such universities are not targeting the 'academically excellent'. Thus, the way students 'read' websites and other information provided by universities is another area which would benefit from further research.

This chapter also evidenced the highly variable levels of awareness among staff about the presence of student parents in HE, the issues they face and the provision and policies in place at national and institutional levels. Moreover, some staff sometimes drew on stereotyped constructions of student parents, particularly in relation to young and single student parents. To raise awareness among university staff and challenge stereotyped views of this group, we recommend that research in this area be widely disseminated to them on a regular basis, for example in the form of research and

information summaries sent to HEIs. In particular, such documents should make it clear that care is not an issue external to universities, but, rather, that university policies and cultures can compound as well as tackle the difficulties faced by this group. To increase levels of awareness and encourage a better understanding of student parents' experiences, HEIs may consider running workshops with support, academic and administrative staff, as part of their training programmes. Parenting and other caring responsibilities, whether in relation to staff or to students, could be systematically included in university equality training and in staff induction programme, and by doing so acknowledge the recent changes in the equality legislation.

When making decision about provision and policies (whether they are generic policies or policies targeting student parents only), institutions could consult with students and the students' union about their needs, for example through meetings with the students' union and/or the organisation of focus groups and surveys with student parents. Working in partnership (for example, between support services and the students' union) would help to make the provision in place more suitable for this group and more perennial. As we shall see in the next chapter, it is not just policies targeting specifically student parents which affect this group. 'Generic' policies can affect students differently depending on whether they have caring responsibilities or not. The 'mainstreaming' of all policies should also be encouraged, for example by ensuring that all policies (not just those targeting student parents) are reviewed on the basis of how they affect various groups of students. As already highlighted, this would also help to ensure that university policies are in line with the 2010 Equality Act and do not indirectly discriminate against this group. However, there is a risk when mainstreaming that equality issues are 'diluted' and get out of sight, especially in a challenging financial climate. For this reason, and as also evidenced in the scenario 3 institutions, the identification of a key person with responsibility for pushing forward the equality agenda and overseeing policies and their effects on student parents, for example an equality and diversity officer, would help avoiding this – indeed, the policies need 'ownership'.

It is worth reminding here that incentives for HEIs, research funders and HE agencies are multiple. While a social justice case can be made for a policy intervention in this area, 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 which protects students during pregnancy and maternity.

Chapter 4. Student parents' experiences

In this chapter and the following, we present some findings from the interviews conducted with student parents. This chapter focuses more specifically on the issues faced by this group, while Chapter 5 explores in more-depth student parents' views of university provision and policies. Although the study highlights the existence of significant variations among student parents, there are also a number of commonalities among that group, which we now turn to discuss.

4.1. Issues faced by student parents in higher education

4.1.1. Time issues and the conflicting demands of being a parent and a student

Student parents' narratives confirm what has been evidenced by others authors, that is that time-related issues represent a major concern for this group (Brooks, 2011, Danna Lynch, 2008, Marandet and Wainwright, 2010). Most students spontaneously discussed these issues, which also become particularly visible when they were asked to describe a typical day in their life. Many depicted busy daily experiences, with work[5] often starting early and finishing late.

Particularly problematic are the time-wise conflicting demands of being a student *and* a parent as well as, in some cases, undertaking paid work and caring for other dependents. Students talked of a 'balancing act', through which they aim to dedicate enough time to the needs of their family, to their studies and to the other activities and people that matter in their lives. This is in line with findings from the Marandet and Wainwright's (2010) study, in which they established that, in the institution where they conducted their fieldwork, 85% of student parents described balancing studying and domestic responsibilities as difficult, while 69% struggled to find time for personal studies. Similarly, Alsop et al.'s (2008) study of mature students (many of them parents) identified that balancing the time demands of their dual role was reported by this group as their biggest issue. In our study, student parents' narratives also evidenced the 'mental burden' (Haicault, 1984) associated with juggling and coordinating 'discordant times' (Moss, 2004).

> *It is a constant balancing act and you can't ever win, if I dedicated as much time to my studies as I wanted to, I would be neglecting my child, if I dedicated as much time to my child as I wanted to, I would be neglecting my studies. (Katherine, Case Study 1)*

> *When I've got exams and stuff, I do get really stressed out and think, 'I can't do this, I just haven't got the time, got to pick [son's name] up', I can't think of a particular time, but just in general that just happens and I do feel like, 'I can't do this, I'm on my own and I've got a child, he comes first'. (Becky, Case Study 1)*

> *It always feels like I am not doing enough of both. I'd like to be studying more and I'd like to be with my kids more and I always feel like I am failing them both and I think that is very, very common of working mothers. I don't think that is specific to studying. I mean, I cry about it regularly that I don't have time... like, on my son's second birthday, I had to send him to nursery, I couldn't miss class. I couldn't keep him off and be with him on his birthday and I cried about that. (Nesha, Case Study 6)*

In these narratives, there is often a sense that 'you can't ever win', as articulated by Katherine above, since academic and parenting works are 'open-ended' activities. As noted in Hinton-Smith (2008), drawing on Acker's (1980) and Edwards' (1993) work, academia and the family are both 'greedy institutions', task-driven rather than time-driven commitments. But, even when a 'task' appears completed, there is always room for producing 'better' academic work or being a 'better' parent. Pregnancy and parenting have traditionally been constructed in this particular societal context as private matters (Moreau, 2011a), yet they are now the subject of intense scrutiny and state regulation. This new level of prescriptiveness is exemplified by the development of universal parenting classes by

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[5] We draw here on a broad definition of work, which includes not just paid work, but also care work and studying.

the current government. A recent report from a think-tank also provides further evidence of it, when recommending that parents: '1) Read to your child for 15 minutes; 2) Play with your child on the floor for 10 minutes; 3) Talk with your child for 20 minutes with the television off; 4) Adopt positive attitudes towards your child and praise them frequently; 5) Give your child a nutritious diet to aid development' (Centre Forum, 2011: online). While we need to acknowledge that what constitutes motherhood varies across class and ethnic groups (Hills-Collins, 1994), the dominant cultural script in the West is of 'intensive mothering'. Women are expected to spend considerable time, emotion and energy on their children (Danna Lynch, 2008, Douglas and Michaels, 2004, Hays, 1996), as well as demonstrating devotion and self-sacrifice (Arendell, 2000). Indeed, as noted by Kristen Springer and colleagues, this culture of idealized parenthood affects men and women, but is mostly about the latter (Springer et al., 2009). Parenting, in particular, is never a completed project. While theories of maternal deprivation (Bowlby, 1953) may have been invalidated a long ago, views that parents, particularly mothers, are the best person to look after a child are very widespread in contemporary England (European Values Study, 2009). This model of parenting has also been described as a policy attempt to re-socialize working-class parents through trying to universalize the values of (a fraction of) middle-class parents (Gewirtz, 2001). Similarly to parenting, academic work can be described as 'bottomless', to use the words of a student we interviewed. In particular, in the recent period, work in academia has been described as intensifying and, as for parenting, is becoming the subject of increased scrutiny (Calvert et al., 2011). Students, especially postgraduates, have not been immune to this. For example, doctoral students may be expected to work intensively, while also attending conferences, undertaking administrative duties and/or providing research assistance for more senior academics (Springer et al., 2009).

The 'bottomless' nature of parenting and academic work requires from student parents that they carefully plan the combination between these activities. Common strategies include studying when children are in childcare/at school, and when they are asleep.

> *I find that I don't have enough time to do the stuff that I need to. So, in the time that I am at home, it is really difficult because, obviously, the kids don't go to bed until half seven, eight o'clock, which is the time I basically get to do my work.* (*Stephanie, Case Study 3*)

These arrangements are fragile and can collapse at any time: sickness and the sleeping patterns of a small child are indeed hardly predictable. The circumstances surrounding the interviews illustrate this point. As noted in the Methodology section, interviews were also often interrupted by the presence of children. This can be read as evidence of the constant availability expected of women for care work (since most student parents are women), as well as of the high level of porosity for this group between domestic and other social temporalities (Chabaud-Rychter et al., 1985). This implies that the availability to study is always uncertain and will depend on the demands of a family, as well as on the support and resources available to students. Moreover, the demanding nature of studying combined with intensive parenting means that some student parents are time-poor, with limited time for activities other than studying and raising a family.

The nature of studying and parenting also means that decisions have to be made and boundaries established about what is 'good enough' in terms of these two activities. As we shall see, however, such decisions are often associated with mixed feelings, including guilt and a sense of frustration. The non-finite aspect of academic work, combined with institutional 'time policies' described as family-unfriendly leads some interviewees to describe being a student parent as harder than being a working parent. However, it could be argued that, as in the following quote, this view refers implicitly to certain types of work (the fixed hour, nine-to five job, which is increasingly rare), and omits the fact that student parents are also sometimes in 'open-ended' jobs in terms of their time characteristics.

> *When you are working, you usually know what your timetable is going to be. For most jobs, you know what your requirement is, like you finish your shift and that is the end of your shift or you know what your contract is. Studying is kind of bottomless in that you could always do a bit more, you could always read a little bit more or do a bit more work and you could always push your grades up a little bit more. There is no final point, but yes, I think I've had to learn what is a good enough point for me, what is a good enough*

amount of parenting and what is a good enough amount of studying and how I am going to make that balance. (Nesha, Case Study 6)

Whether being a student parent compares favourably with being a working parent or not closely relates to the programme of study. Students with more independence in organising their studies (for example those with limited contact time or on doctoral programmes) are more likely to compare favourably being a student parent with being a working parent and face less time-related difficulties as the temporal flexibility associated with their studies limits the occurrence of discordant times. This is evidenced by the following quote from an interview with Lauren, a PhD student. This quote also provides a sharp contrast with the experience of Nesha above (a medical science undergraduate).

In my working life, I was very, very stressed and under a lot of pressure so I actually feel I have a lot more freedom than I had... It is nothing like the work situation, so mostly it is hugely positive. (Lauren, Case Study 5)

However, many student parents who participated in our study did not choose between being a student and undertaking paid work. Instead, they cumulated both activities. Asked in the short questionnaire which preceded the interview if they usually undertake paid work, 16 students out of 40 answered positively. Out of the 16, four were in full-time employment. This tended to exacerbate time pressure and the temporal conflicts between various aspects of their lives (Moreau and Leathwood, 2006a), as paid work limited their availability for studying and parenting, while the mental burden associated with juggling different tasks was also heightened.

I find it frustrating sometimes because I can't get enough done. I would like to be working at it a lot faster but I feel that my time can sometimes be very restricted with my full time job and also my family as well to a certain degree. But I tend to keep the two quite separate, I think it is just juggling the full time work and doing the PhD can be quite hard work sometimes because there are so many pressures on us now as lecturers with cutbacks and everything else. There is more pressure put on you, the job still needs doing, so then everyone has extra work to do. (Rachel, Case Study 7)

This also echoes findings by Marandet and Wainwright, in which they noted the greater level of stress and difficulties in finding study time experienced by student parents who are also into paid work (Marandet and Wainwright, 2010). Yet, as exemplified by the narratives of the participants in this study, having a job has mixed effects: as well as bringing in an income, it can also provide a sense of satisfaction and identity.

As well as paid work, domestic work was also often mentioned. In particular, students discussed the lack of time to look after a home. In many cases, this was an area of compromise, with some describing their home as 'a pigsty' as a consequence of their other commitments (see Nicola, further). This concern for domestic work may be related to the fact that the overwhelming majority of student parents in our study are women and that, as evidenced by time-use surveys, women are, on average, the ones who tend to undertake most of the domestic and care work (EUROSTAT, 2003). Time-use surveys show that, in England, women dedicate four hours 15 minutes a day to domestic work, men two hours and 18 minutes (HETUS, 2009). This echoes work by Reay et al. (2002), who examined the difficulties faced by mature students in balancing their studies with domestic responsibilities as well as, sometimes, paid work. Although some have argued that studying and other work commitments can lead to a renegotiation of household roles and, possibly, to more gender equal arrangements (Moss, 2005), the narratives of student parents taking part in our study suggest that most student mothers kept the main responsibility for care and domestic work, despite their other commitments.

My husband's family don't live in this country. My husband is the stereotypical guy that just doesn't do any housework, avoids childcare at all costs. Comes in and says, 'what's for dinner?'. I've been trying for five years to work on it and I am giving up. Yes, so not very much on that side. (Nesha, Case Study 6)

Our findings echo Baxter and Britton's study, in which they showed that the male partners of student mothers continue to expect that they keep the main responsibility for domestic duties, while the female

partners of student fathers are more likely to adjust their lives to accommodate the needs of their male partners (Baxter and Britton, 2011 ; cited in Alsop et al., 2008). Alsop and colleagues also found that,

> *... given the traditional division of labour, female students were expected – by those in their families and by themselves – to keep their role of carers unchanged when they become students. Although mature student carers of both genders have to overcome similar difficulties when combining their dual role, there are gendered aspects of caring that must be acknowledged in order to develop appropriate strategies to allow all students to fulfil their potential in HE. (2008: 630)*

As already evidenced by some quotes, these time pressures and time discordance affected the lives of student parents in many ways. One effect was that students felt that they did not dedicate enough time to their child(ren) and partner, if any, as well as to their studies. This was often associated with feelings of guilt, possibly because 'care is not only a set of social practices but a strongly gendered one with deep moral connotations' (Grummell et al., 2009: 194, O' Brien, 2007).

> *I feel like I am always compromising in both areas. I am always compromising in everything, I feel that my husband is great but I am not giving enough time for him, I am not giving enough time for the kids, the kids need the time, my husband needs the time and they'll try and take it whether I want to give it, whether I feel able to give it or not, and the number of times you end up trying to write an essay with a child on your knee and it just gets a little bit silly particularly when the child is trying to look up a football club on the internet at the same time! (Holly, Case Study 7)*

> *I wrote in my Valentine's card to my husband this year, 'see you in June'. That was in February. It is because we know that... I haven't done anything with my children in weeks, do you know what I mean, there is no way. If I want to come out with a First, I have no choice because of the time schedule. (Nicola, Case Study 7)*

This juggling also led some students to describe their experience as a 'struggle' (Leathwood and O'Connell, 2003). Several interviewees mentioned that they had thought of dropping out due to this constant juggling, in line with the NUS survey, which found that this group is more at risk of experiencing retention issues compared with childless students (NUS, 2009). This sense of struggle is also evidenced by the answers given to the short questionnaire which preceded the interview. Asked how easy it is to be a student parent, students answered by giving an average score of 3.8 (out of 10, with 1 standing for 'very difficult' and 10 for 'very easy'). It is worth noting, however, that this discourse of 'struggle' does not characterise all students in the same way. In particular, this seems closely related to students' socio-economic background, as there is a financial side to experiences of struggle and students from deprived socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to experience a sense of not belonging in academia (Read et al., 2003).

> *I have achieved everything I want to, but it has been a hell of a struggle and there has been so many times where I have been tempted to just think, 'this is coming at too high a price really', because effectively I have to sacrifice my family to pay attention to other people's families and loved ones. And that really kind of grates against me a bit because I hardly see mine and they are all feeling very neglected and so on at the moment. So yes, it would be nice to finally finish and give them some time again and have some for me too. (Nicola, Case Study 7)*

> *It is hard, really hard. At times I have felt like giving up, because I have been struggling for the money to pay for the childcare. I have struggled for the time for myself to do the work that I needed to do. It is really hard to get all the reading done, because, you know, you can't do it with the telly on, so you can't do it when the kids are around. You can't leave the kids on their own because they are too young, so you are fighting for time to do your work. That is really difficult. (Stephanie, Case Study 3)*

In a context where motherhood is increasingly becoming a public matter and a cause for celebration (Kehily and Nayak, 2011), despite the lack of a tradition of family policy noted earlier (Chapter 2), the experiences of the student parents who participated in our study remain a very far cry from some of

the normative, idealized constructions of motherhood. They are for example clearly distinct from the contemporary media discourse of mothers as 'yummy mummies', supposedly fulfilled by motherhood while effortlessly retaining some form of 'sexy' femininity. They are also a far cry from those 'affluent and successful women who have made it to the top and who have supposedly access to the vast array of choices available to modern women [who] are now *choosing* to stay home with the children' (Springer et al., 2009: 409; original emphasis). Their sense of struggle, their difficulties to juggle care, domestic, academic and sometimes paid work commitments suggest a more complex and diverse reality. Most importantly, while motherhood is sometimes associated with a lack of ambition and, especially in the case of young mothers and single mothers, with downward mobility (Kehily and Nayak, 2011), these narratives, on the contrary, often reconcile motherhood with aspirations and upward mobility.

With only two student fathers participating in our study, there is little room for comparison between gender groups. Yet, it is worth noting that one of the male students' partner is a stay-at-home mother, meaning he can potentially rely on a support not available to most of the student mothers involved in our study. He also has a job as well as a bursary, meaning he remains the main breadwinner in the home. Overall, his situation as a student parent is described in much more positive terms compared with those of the student mothers in our study. The second male student in our study can be described as rather atypical since his wife is the main breadwinner and spends several nights a week away from home due to the nature of her job, while he takes main responsibility for the childcare. The couple had high outgoings as a result of having several children in nurseries. It was thus decided that one of them would stop working for a while. Yet, as he notes,

> *A lot of people are assuming that because I am married and have a wife, then she is at home looking after the children, that is probably the biggest thing I've had, attitudes on that side of it. (Alfredo, Case Study 2)*

According to his account, the fact that '[wife's name]'s career was going a bit more fast than my one' played a key role in this decision. However, it also appears that he had planned to retrain to change career for a very long time and that *her* situation, i.e. working full-time, was a result of *his* decision to go and retrain. Similarly, she is expected to go part-time once he will have gained his qualification. In other terms, she has adapted her own situation to fit his needs.

> *My wife is obviously the one working, she has been for the last couple of years because I stopped working anyway... the idea is when I go back and earn again, then she will reduce her hours. (Michael, Case Study 1)*

While these two students admit that juggling studying and parenting is a challenge, they do not articulate the same sense of struggle as most of the student parent working mothers. Alfredo does not draw on a discourse of struggle and does not mention time-related conflicts, while Michael admits that, 'it is like a little added pressure on top of everything else you've got really'. While it is a possibility that gender norms may lead men to downplay the difficulties they experience, this situation may also relate to the fact that, while they both contribute to domestic work and childcare in the house (with Michael the main carer during the week), they do seem able to abstract themselves from the domestic environment in a way most of the student mothers cannot.

> *But housework... I just don't have time for it, that is one thing that gets neglected and is the biggest cause of stress between us, it is not trashed but you've got three children in the house all under seven, the fact you are in a rush in the morning and out yourself, it is like having two working parents basically, so this is what it is like, the house is not a tip but it could be a lot tidier! It is my priorities, the house is last on the list. (Michael, Case Study 1).*

This echoes another study conducted in the US, in which some major differences between student mothers and student fathers were identified. According to this study, graduate student mothers dedicated 102 hours a week to their paid and unpaid duties, compared with 95 hours in the case of graduate student fathers and 75 hours in the case of childless graduate students (Mason 2006, cited in Springer et al., 2009).

4.1.2. Student parents' financial difficulties

Financial issues represent another recurrent theme in student parents' narratives. These financial difficulties are not specific to student parents. Indeed, the abolition of student grants and the introduction of tuition fees have been associated with a sharp debt increase (Callender and Wilkinson 2003). However, student parents appear more likely to face financial difficulties than other groups as they have higher outgoings and are not available, in theory, for full-time work. For those with small children, the cost of childcare can contribute to further financial difficulties. It is worth reminding here that English undergraduate tuition fees for national students are currently the third highest in the world, while the part of the net income parents spend on childcare is the highest among all OECD countries (OECD, 2011). Asked about the main issues they faced, 47.9% of the participants in the Marandet and Wainwright's study mentioned financially supporting their studies and 43.2% paying for childcare (Marandet and Wainwright, 2010). The cost of childcare in this country is also increasing at a quicker pace than salaries, meaning that while citizens are increasingly encouraged to engage in paid work, it is becoming more and more difficult if they have dependents: in England, the cost of a nursery place for a child of two or over has increased by 4.8% since last year-more than the average pay increase of 2.1% during the same period (Daycare Trust, 2011). The costs of childcare represents a major explanation of the low proportion of mothers of young children in full-time employment in this country (Moreau, 2011a, Gregory and Windebank, 2000).

While a number of grants, and loans are available to student parents and other students facing financial difficulties, their eligibility depends on a range of criteria. For example, the Childcare Grant, the Parents' Learning Allowance and the Learning Fund are only available to some students (see Chapter 2). The threshold for eligibility is sometimes so low that it may not be accessible to some of the students who are financially struggling. Besides, amounts can be modest. Thus, while student parents' views of HE are not strictly instrumental and while they have a range of motivation to go (or remain) into HE, securing a 'graduate job' is crucial so that they can recover their debts or, for those that are not into debt, that all their efforts are 'worth it'.

> *So the financial side of it is huge, yes. I find I am really struggling, constantly worrying about money. I am just hoping that, at the end of this, I will be able to get a good job and not worry about money anymore. (Natalie, Case Study 8)*

> *It is really hard struggling through and we just find that we are permanently overdrawn really. The student bursary and the loan that we get just about help here and there but you know it is difficult, so that will be nice to actually earn some pennies and, you know, not be overdrawn all the time for once. (Nicola, Case Study 7)*

These financial difficulties represent an important source of anxiety for student parents from the poorest socioeconomic background, who sometimes take significant 'risks' by entering HE (Archer et al., 2003), with potential consequences for themselves and their families. This risk is also heightened by 'credential inflation' (Brown and Hesketh, 2004) and the current economic climate, in which the returns associated with having a degree have become more unpredictable. These findings also echo Eve Gerrard and Ron Roberts' (2006) study of a small sample of student mothers in a post-1992 university in South London. These authors identified high levels of debt and hardship among participants, something which may be related to the characteristics of the student population in the particular institution where the fieldwork was conducted, as well as to its location. In comparison, our study shows a dominant pattern of financial issues, yet a higher level of diversity among this group in financial terms. This is likely to relate to the wider size of our sample and to the participation in our research of students coming from a contrasted sample of institutions. It is worth reminding here that student parents' experiences are strongly marked by social class and the resources associated with this. While financial issues constitute a dominant pattern of student parents' experiences, all do not experience such difficulties. For example, Katherine (Case Study 1), from a middle-class background has an experience which is significantly different from some of her peers from a more deprived background, some of them have gone into significant debts to fund their studies. She described her parents as middle-class, with both of them having received a university education. Katherine's social

and economic capitals mean that she and her partner were able to study full-time while raising a small child, without experiencing the level of financial difficulties mentioned by many of her working-class peers. Although her partner occasionally undertakes paid work, she notes that,

> *…we are managing to get by on our grant and the money that we are getting from the lodgers. That means he hasn't had to work so much, he did last work last weekend for example and when he works, the only reason I think it is worth him doing it is to keep contact with the people because it throws everything out, for me it is not worth the money because then I can't study, all I can do is look after my son. (Katherine, Case study 1)*

The Childcare Grant (which covers 85% of childcare expenses up to a threshold) made a huge difference to student parents who were recipients. However, the grant is not available to all (see Chapter 2). Childcare can be a particular issue for this group who often had under-estimated its costs. Students sometimes questioned this lack of financial support for postgraduates and other groups, and critically engaged with a discourse in which it was seen as acceptable for a mother (since the huge majority of student parents are women) to gain a degree, but not to continue studying any further.

> *I was just going to say, undergraduate student parents are entitled to quite a large portion of their childcare fees being paid but postgrads aren't... So it almost seems like a glass ceiling where it is okay for you as a woman parent to do an undergraduate degree but that's it, you are not allowed to go any further. (Nabila, Case Study 2)*

There were also a small number of students who, albeit eligible for some form of financial support, faced some unexpected difficulties. Some mentioned that the payment of grants or loans was sometimes delayed, which meant that they had to pay in advance, something they could not always afford. Others also gave up on claiming some of their entitlements due to the complex and lengthy administrative procedures in place. While it may be argued that these students would have persisted if they needed the money, it is also worth keeping in mind that this group is also often time-poor and pursuing this may have proved more costly than not getting it in the first place. This echoes findings from the Marandet and Emma Wainwright's study, in which students reported that applying for the Access to Learning Fund was very time-consuming, that applications were sometimes lost, and that other sources of financial support were sometimes paid in late (Marandet and Wainwright, 2010).

> *It is really hard to get the childcare sorted and the funding sorted at the same time, and then they don't start funding it until after you have started university and then you've got this lapse in the middle, where you have got all this money to pay and no money to pay it. (Jennifer, Case Study 1)*

> *I have to pay for childcare for the mornings, for [club's name], which is, it is £4 for 50 minutes, which isn't too bad, and he does get breakfast in that as well. So, if he doesn't eat anything particularly at home in the mornings, I know at least he is getting fed there. But I am supposed to claim it all back, but last year I tried to do it and it was a complete nightmare, really. I get charged monthly for my childcare, I pay monthly and they wanted it out per day, per hour, all set out and then, of course, I hadn't got it written like that. I'd got it down, I could get it down to weekly, but not completely, and they wouldn't take it, so I haven't bothered this year. (Christine, Case Study 7)*

4.1.3. Health and emotional aspects of being a student parent

As mentioned earlier, being a student parent was often associated with mixed feelings. Many identified some tensions between being a 'good' student and a 'good' parent and expressed a sense of guilt in relation to not dedicating enough time to their children and partner (if any), as well as to their studies, thus not fitting with culturally prevalent constructions of motherhood, nor with the default image of the childfree student fully-available for their studies.

> *I would say I always have a guilt complex about time studying and I never have enough time in the day. I feel guilty that my husband has to play second fiddle to my laptop in the evening… I guess, the juggling of parenting and you can't split yourself between*

everybody and achieve everything you want. It is always a compromise. (Lisa, Case Study 5)

Yet, some interviewees were well aware that such guilt derives from normative constructions of motherhood and deconstructed the wider gender arrangements underpinning such feelings in their narratives.

I think it is partly a gender thing, I don't think he feels the sense of guilt that I feel, I do feel guilty, whatever I do I feel guilty and I think that probably is a gender thing, but I know he certainly feels the pressure of trying to do the right thing. (Katherine, Case Study 1)

Maybe of more concern is the fact that several student parents also mentioned physical and mental health issues, despite not being directly asked about this during the interview process.

I live in a pigsty, I have no time to do housework and because shift work has proven to really flair up my health problems quite badly and the exhaustion and the stress of the course has kind of added to it all. It is just that, you know, my health has really been wobbling quite badly this year, so I have actually had to cut back the shifts but I still have no time to do housework. But I have just learnt to live in a pigsty for three years really, because it is a means to an end and, you know, I have something great to show for it at the end. (Nicola, Case Study 7)

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. This is in line with other studies of student parents, who identified high levels of sleep deprivation among this group (Marandet and Wainwright, 2010) and occurrences of depression. In the Gerrard and Roberts' survey, seven out of 12 of the participating student mothers were depression sufferers, something they often related to stress and financial difficulties (Gerrard and Roberts, 2006). Yet, as in the case of Natalie (below), students did not always feel that their mental health issues were taken seriously.

I've been suffering a bit with depression recently, which is a bit of a pain. Because I didn't actually go to a ... well, I did, I did go to a counsellor, one of the university counsellors for some help, and the university counsellor seemed to be of the opinion that I just needed to manage my time better and there was nothing really wrong with me and kind of sent me packing. (Natalie, Case Study 8)

4.1.4. Missing out on 'being a student' and 'not fitting in'

Although this was not perceived quite as problematic as the issues described above, some student parents commented on 'missing out' on the student experience and 'not fitting in'. Indeed, the lack of time for activities other than parenting and studying, for example to engage in leisure or community activities, or simply to socialise or rest, was a recurrent theme. These were often described as necessary sacrifices by the student parents.

I just do the kids, the university and my job and that's it and nothing else. I am a member of the church but I've had to stop going because of lack of time. So, while I am at university, I've had to give up lots of things like hobbies, leisure and time, you know, seeing friends and going to church and things like that, but I know it is not going to be forever, it is just for the next three years. You have to make some sacrifices. (Amber, Case Study 7)

I think I have probably given you my very, very dull existence, or probably most people would think it was very, very dull because I don't do anything outside of work and university until the summer comes, when I just collapse in a heap for four months. (Nicola, Case Study 7)

In terms of negative experiences, there is an awful lot of stress, particularly related to finances and also to just how we are accepted and how we are seen in an academic sphere. (Nabila, Case Study 2)

These comments shed more light on what has been evidenced in the NUS survey, i.e. the fact that only 22% of HE and FE student parents agree that it is easy to get involved in university or college (NUS, 2009), with lack of time, childcare and financial concerns the main reasons stopping student parents' involvement in extra-curricular activities. The same survey also identified that only one in ten respondents had been a member of a club or of a society. The authors of the NUS report and of its related briefings also noted a lack of engagement of student parents in the union structures, something which was related to the timing of meetings, to the time commitment required, and to a lack of childcare opportunities (NUS, 2009). 68% of the participants to the same survey thought that child-friendly attitudes would be the most helpful factor in getting them involved in student life. Further evidence regarding student parents' involvement in university structures, is also brought in by Rachel Alsop and colleagues, who argue that,

In reconciling studying with their caring commitments, both full-time and part-time mature student carers tended to prioritise formal academic activities over informal academic activities, and as a consequence they sometimes felt socially isolated within the university. (2008: 629).

In a similar vein, Marandet and Wainwright argue that 'the social environment provided by university was seen as geared towards younger, white, middle-class students' (Marandet and Wainwright, 2010: 800). Only 19% of the participants to their study described universities as inclusive. However, It is worth noting that, in our study, participants enrolled in programmes in which student parents concentrate (e.g., nursing or education) were more likely to express feelings of 'fitting in'. They often talked of supporting each other, although more in moral than practical terms, and seemed to be in a better position than other student parents to renegotiate their timetable and other course arrangements with the course tutors.

Many mature students talked of the age and cultural gap between them and the younger students on their course, often endorsing discourses of younger students as 'carefree and careless, living what was perceived as a typical student's lifestyle (i.e., with lots of free time and an intense social life). However, this view does not acknowledge the fact that younger student parents also experience similar feelings of not fitting in, feelings which may even have been more acute for them, as this was their first experience of HE.

I just wish I had more time to spend with the other students, because it's like there is a division in the group. It is like the 18 year olds, the younger ones with no children, they tend to congregate together and they go out at night and go to the pub, or go clubbing and do the leisure things that I can't do, and all the people who have children and the parents, they can't stay, you know. They can't meet up and they have to go straight back to pick their kids up, so yes, you do miss all the social side of it. You do miss out on that leisure part of it. (Amber, Case Study 7)

While many student parents are mature students, this opposition between the younger and the more mature students is unhelpful as it contributes to reproducing the representations of young students as carefree and thus, marginalise younger student parents. This association between being a student parent and being a mature student is not specific to mature student parents and also echoes findings based on staff's narratives (see Chapter 3).

Finally, as well as feelings of not being socially included, there were also concerns about not being seen as fitting within the ideal of the academically excellent student by university staff, as their parental status may have been interpreted as a lack of commitment. This feeling is expressed in the following quote,

I don't think I get any support for being a student parent, I would get grudging acknowledgement but it's in this: 'Oh yes, I suppose you'd have to go to that wouldn't you?', not really good enough, not really focused on the task. 'Come on now lady, you're

doing a PhD, where are your priorities?' is what I feel is the line, so you have to pretend and get round it. (Lauren, Case Study 5)

So that they could still be seen as fully committed and able to fit within the ideal of the academically excellent (and childfree) student, students sometimes used strategies of 'maternal invisibility' (Garey, 1999), as also identified in Karen Danna Lynch's (2008) study. However, not disclosing their motherhood status could come at a high personal cost as this would reproduce the invisibility of care within academia and as student parents then would not be able to claim formal or even informal support from their own institution.

4.2. The positives of being a student parent

4.2.1. Being a positive 'role model' for one's children

Children and families were often a big motivator behind student parents' decision to enter or remain in higher education, with being a 'role model' for their children described as a positive aspect of being a student parent and a key motivation. While this notion of being a role model is problematic in many respects (Moreau, 2011b), it suggests that student parents do not enter or remain in HE purely because of the job prospects associated with getting a degree.

I thought 'I really have to do this', it makes me a better help for them and I think it is quite a good role model for them and hopefully in terms of getting some money so they can actually go to university, I will be able to do that with my enhanced income that I will have to get. (Lauren, Case Study 5)

I am not just doing this course for me, I am doing it for him. And when I qualify, I'll have money and I can give him a better quality of life and that is really all it boils down to. (Suzanne, Case Study 3)

I think as a student, through what I am doing, I am setting myself as a good role model for my girls to show them what I am capable of, and they seem to be extremely proud of me. You know, when I come home and I say, 'oh, I did this in the exam' or 'I got this in an essay'. Yes, they are very proud of me. (Kelly, Case Study 1)

This discourse of being a role model sometimes drew on a binary opposition between being a student parent, i.e., somebody who accomplishes something positive with their life, and the stereotyped image of the working-class and unemployed mother 'drinking cups of tea doing nothing and living off benefits'.

I think the benefits far outweigh, in terms of an example, I am setting a model of behaviour for my children, in the fact that mum isn't sitting down drinking cups of tea doing nothing and living off benefits.' (Shanice, Case Study 7)

This reference to the (presumed) idle, working-class mother (as implied by 'living off benefits') can be read in conjunction with an economic climate in which single, working-class mothers have attracted much criticism and stereotyping in the media and in policy circles (see, e.g., Doughty, 2011), as discussed earlier. It is of interest to note here that while, in policy and media circles, motherhood, especially single and young motherhood, has sometimes been associated with a lack of ambition and aspirations, the life stories of the women we interviewed challenged this construction, and show that, as student parents, they have ambitions for themselves and for their family. Yet, at the same time, many interviewees reproduce available discourses by drawing on 'us' and 'them' oppositions.

Moreover, as argued by Alsop and colleagues,

In Western culture, there has been a tradition to exclude women from education, as it was argued that if women engaged in intellectual pursuits their reproductive capacities would be compromised. Although we no longer hold these beliefs, the roles of (good) mother and student can still be perceived as in conflict with one another (2008: 630).

Thus, emphasising the benefits of being a student parent for their family, rather than just for themselves, may be one strategy for respondents to reconcile the possibility of being a 'good' student and a 'good' parent.

4.2.2. Finding yourself after being 'just mum'

As suggested in some of the quotes above, identity is at play in students' decision to combine parenting and higher education. Being a university student is often articulated as a way of being a better parent in the longer term, although student narratives are ambiguous in that respect as many regret their lack of availability for their children in the shorter term. But studying is also a way of not being 'just mum'. So, while doing it 'for the children' is a recurrent theme (at least, for those who already had children when they started HE), doing it 'for yourself' is also a main motivator and described as one of the positive aspects of being a student parent.

In these narratives, the self is presented as a project to be worked at, with HE a way to develop one's human capital, to take responsibility for one's own life and to create this new, educated and aspirational self (Gordon, 1987, Rose, 1999). Although talking of being 'just mum' or 'just that mum over there' invokes a rather undervalued view of motherhood, it also calls upon a much wider view of HE than the one supported in recent HE policies in which the focus lies in the returns expected from a degree in terms of employment and, above all, finances (Browne, 2010). Rather, as apparent from the following quotes, being a student parent is an identity matter and a transformative process for the self.

> *It is helping me find my own identity because, you know, I have spent so long being mum, which is like 20 odd years, I have lost my own identity. It's like, I was just mum. I didn't actually know who I was or was not, so it is a definite positive. (Stephanie, Case Study 3)*

> *When you have a child, as a mother, you lose your identity perhaps from where you were before, particularly if you were a professional type person. You suddenly become just that mum over there. People don't see you for being anything other than that, but it gives you just a little piece of you back and I think that is highly rewarding for me, you know, combining parenting and studying. (Lisa, Case Study 5)*

Indeed, sometimes, this transformative process was so significant, that student parents articulated feelings of drifting away from their community or their partner, when they had one (Lawson, 1990). Students' narratives suggest that their change of status was often a key factor in relationship breakdowns. Many interviewees also mentioned not feeling quite fulfilled as mothers and having low self-esteem, with being a university student considerably enhancing the latter.

> *Positive experiences, you get to learn so much about yourself in terms of what you are capable of doing. I think it is really good for the self-esteem. (Shanice, Case Study 7)*

Finally, also in relation to the positive aspects of being a student parent, it was often argued that, because of their life experience, they were better equipped to deal with HE. This was particularly the case of mature students who described having 'a lot more life experience' as an advantage. This discourse of the mature student as better equipped for HE draws again on a binary opposition between this group and the younger students (assumed to be childfree and rather disorganised), a view which, as we argued earlier, is not unproblematic.

> *I have got a lot more life experience, quite often I can relate what I am being taught more to my experience either with myself or my children or people around me, far more than maybe a younger student would be able to. And I think probably being a parent, you have had to learn to be organised. (Holly, Case Study 7)*

4.3. Single and international student parents' experiences

This section explores how single student parents and international student parents' experiences of higher education differ from other student parent groups. The study highlights that these two groups

often experience some more acute issues compared with other student parent groups due to a lack of consistent support networks.

Firstly, in relation to time pressures, the experiences of international students appeared to reflect those of other student parent groups. However, some differences emerged when examining the single student parent subgroup. Like students with partners, single student parents discussed the detrimental impact of conflicting time demands and time pressures. The typical days of single student parents were characterised by nonstop activities, with the majority of students suggesting that there was little differentiation in terms of time pressures between weekdays and weekends.

> *As you can imagine, my weekend consists of food shopping, cleaning, washing school clothes, ironing. Then trying to catch up on work I've either missed, plus trying to do assignments on top of that, that need to be handed in. (Shanice, Case Study 7)*

For single student parents, time demands were exaggerated by the fact that there was generally not a consistent other adult in their lives to share domestic duties. Any 'free' time tended to be directed towards maintaining the household, helping children with homework or undertaking university work.

> *I don't do anything apart from my children, uni and the house. (Kelly, Case Study 1)*

Although a lack of time to undertake leisure activities was apparent across all student parent groups, this was particularly evident in the single student parent subgroup. Single student parents suggested that leisure activities on their own were not an option. Reasons for this were expressed in terms of a lack of time, finance or childcare.

> *The negative things I suppose are just there is no time to myself. There is absolutely none. (Kelly, Case Study 1)*

Secondly, in terms of financial issues, conflicting experiences were presented by single student parents. There was a division between those who felt that they were struggling financially and those who suggested that being a single student parent was financially a better option to solely being a claimant of state welfare. The student below expressed how finance is not one of the main issues that she faces.

> *I've got a loan which obviously, when I am working, I need to pay back, but at the moment no, financially I'm okay. What I've got coming in goes out each month more or less to the penny, but no, it is working along okay. (Kelly, Case Study 1)*

On the other hand, other students in this group suggested that finance was a huge concern to them. Reflections such as these below are in accordance with previous research which suggests that single student parents are more likely to suffer financial hardship or seek financial advice (Hinton-Smith, 2008, Hinton-Smith, 2012, NUS, 2009).

> *The financial side of it is huge, yes. I find I'm really struggling, constantly worrying about money. (Natalie, Case Study 8)*

Financial issues were strongly presented by international student parents as one of the factors which significantly contributed to their experience of higher education. All of the international student parents interviewed in the current study were postgraduate and most were in receipt of some form of studentship or student bursary which either waivered their fees and/or provided them with finances for living costs. However, those that were paying fees for their studies were doing so at international rate, thus paying considerably more than UK based students.

> *The other thing is, when I was doing my Masters again I was self-funding as an international student, so the fees are quite steep and I was sending my daughter to a nursery sometimes. And because we are international students, we don't get any government benefits or anything like that, I don't qualify for example for the Learner Parent Fund. So basically, I have to completely pay for, cover my own fees and of course the expenses of sending my daughter to nursery myself. So I was working as well. (Amina, Case Study 2)*

In relation to finance, the main issues arose around the access to affordable childcare. Without access to state benefits, international students often relied upon student bursaries, savings or additional paid work to fund childcare. International students felt particularly unsatisfied with the minimal reductions that were provided for students at their respective institutions.

> *I wanted this discount from nursery, but there is no help in terms of money, because I am a foreign student here, so I have no access to public funds, so I cannot get any public funds and the university cannot support me. (Amita, Case Study 4)*

> *Then maybe more, as you say, I don't know if it is something that the university has influence over, like these childcare services, like nursery, or that could be a little bit cheaper for students with more available places for children because it would be a great relief for me. (Marta, Case Study 5)*

In addition, international students were often shocked by the high price of childcare in the UK in comparison to their home countries. In some cases, international students relied upon family members from other countries to support them with childcare, with some having relatives visit on a regular basis.

> *Oh yeah, I think the most difficult is to arrange childcare because, well on the one hand if we had say more money I would send him to nursery and the problem would be solved. With our arrangement, when we have parents coming over, it is cheaper, but logistically, it is more difficult, we have to manage time so properly, who comes in what month, when this person leaves or when it comes, so there must be always someone to pick up this particular family member from the airport, then bring the person to the airport. Remember that there must be continuity of people coming here, so we have to avoid gaps in childcare because then none of us can work or one of us can't work in fact. (Marta, Case Study 5)*

Thirdly, like other student parent groups, some single participants expressed mental health concerns in relation to their status as a student parent. This was particularly exaggerated by feelings of isolation within the home and at university. This reflects the interview data of the NUS report, which described how lone parents found it more difficult to get involved with university life compared to other student parent groups (NUS, 2009).

> *It is impossible to keep up with the uni life geared towards 19 to 24 year olds, it is really hard. I did struggle with that and subsequently ended up nearly having a nervous breakdown, so I am having counselling at the moment. (Shanice, Case Study 7)*

Finally, the notion of defying the stereotype of a single mother was something which was very powerfully presented by the single student parents interviewed. As Haleman (2004) describes, the term single mother is often associated with welfare dependant, uneducated, unmotivated, low socioeconomic status individuals. Through the interviews, the single mothers actively contested the stereotypes associated with single motherhood and perceived engagement in higher education as not only a process of empowerment but as an active process for escaping poverty. This echoes the responses of single student parents in the 2009 NUS report, whom noted higher education as a tool for 'bettering themselves'. Similarly, single student parents in the current study were strongly influenced by the defiance of the negative discourse associated with single parenthood.

> *I did not and do not envision myself being a single mum, dropping my kids off, coming home to watch Jeremy Kyle for the rest of the day, or Loose Women. It doesn't interest me to be honest. I think in terms of getting out of this socioeconomic group that I am in, I think going to university is a positive thing and it can help you to a certain degree. (Shanice, Case Study 7)*

> *The alternative to studying at the moment with such a little one, because I wouldn't go out to work and keep her in a nursery, so the alternative is me sitting on my backside on the dole doing nothing. I just don't think that is a very positive thing. (Natalie, Case Study 8)*

In the same respect, single student parents felt a strong sense of duty to portray themselves as positive role models to their children. This may have been heightened by the fact that in a single parent household there was only one potential 'role model'.

> *I think as a student, through what I am doing, I am setting myself as a good role model for my girls to show them what I am capable of, and they seem to be extremely proud of me. You know, when I come home and I say, 'oh, I did this in the exam' or 'I got this in an essay'. Yes, they are very proud of me. (Kelly, Case Study 1)*

> *You are building a better future for yourself and your children, a better life and you are living your dream. You are doing the career that you wanted to do, so hopefully I will get a good job at the end of it. Then also to remember it won't be hard forever. (Amber, Case Study 7)*

4.4. Recommendations

A key finding in this chapter relates to the fact that many of the issues faced by student parents are time-related. A general recommendation is for universities to consider, when renewing or extending their provision, how it will meet the needs of students with caring responsibilities. For example, the development of evening and weekend part-time programmes in some institutions relies on the assumption that part-time students are in paid work, but their other circumstances are rarely considered. In some cases, daytime courses may be more attractive for student parents. Universities should also consider how distance learning can be facilitated, for example by making sure that course material is available remotely, for example through their intranet interface. It should not be assumed that students prefer face-to-face tutorials and online/phone tutorials should also be routinely offered.

In relation to student parents' financial issues, we recommend that universities and other policy-makers consider simplifying the procedures in place. Some clear information should be made available to students and practitioners in one place, so that they have a clear view of their entitlements and of the routes to follow to access these, for example through a dedicated webpage on the university website. At national level, it would be useful to have a dedicated website in place. Some websites already provide some very useful information, however they tend to focus on the financial aspects of being a student parent and usually cater for students rather than staff. Although the financial climate may not be favourable to an extension of financial support, policy-makers should consider extending some of the provision available to undergraduates (such as the Childcare Grant) to postgraduates. Universities may also consider reserving some bursaries or scholarship for students who would benefit from receiving the Childcare Grant, yet do not qualify for it.

We also identified in this chapter that some student parents face health and emotional issues, and experience feelings of 'missing out' and 'not fitting in'. Interestingly, this is one of the areas where staff awareness is the lowest and where students appear very hesitant to ask for help. We recommend that support services try and ensure that the support provided to student parents does not only address the financial and material issues they face, but also cover emotional, health and well-being matters. In some cases, students may just want to share their experience. In other cases, a referral may be needed towards the appropriate services, for example when a student parent experiences depression, anxiety or is overwhelmed. So that such comprehensive support can be provided, we have recommended in the previous chapter that, in each institution, one member of staff should coordinate support for students with caring responsibilities, although all support staff should be expected to have some knowledge in this area.

To address the issues faced by student parents, universities could also support them in establishing their own support group. For example, a room may be made available on campus and the group may be encouraged to have an online presence. As for other interventions, this should be preceded by some prior consultation with student parents so that their needs are addressed and that they are involved in the process from the beginning. So as to tackle the feelings of 'missing out' observed among this group, we also recommend that, as much as possible, academic events such as seminars and extra-academic events such as social activities are timed during daytime. Alternatively, such events could be

made family-friendly, with the presence of children accepted, and this should be stipulated in announcements. Further consideration is given to these issues in the next chapter, which also includes some additional recommendations.

Chapter 5. Student parents' views on institutional policies

In this chapter, we focus specifically on student parents' views of the support provided at institutional level. We start by examining their views on the level of institutional support available. We then focus on their views on the policies which target them specifically as a group, before turning to the wider, 'generic' university policies, as these also have an effect on this group.

5.1. Student parents' views on the level of institutional support available

A widespread view among interviewees is that their institution provides limited support to student parents. However, there are significant variations in that respect across institutions and, unsurprisingly, it is in those institutions falling under scenarios 2 and 3 that students were the more likely to be satisfied with the level and type of support provided. This contrast is exemplified by the quotes below: the first one is taken from an interview with a student based in a university which provides some specific and mainstream provision for this group, the second was conducted with a student based in a university providing some specific support, and the third one in a university providing close to no support to this group.

> *Apart from the timetabling issue, which really is a bug bear for me, yes I do feel I receive the support that I need. (Katherine, Case Study 1)*

> *The university doesn't provide any kind of support, like even when I try to make a complaint regarding having to pay for two months when I am away. I couldn't even submit a complaint because they told me that they had nothing to do with the nursery, it doesn't belong to them. It is more or less a private business. So I don't think that the university offers any kind of support other than they give you up to one-year maternity leave. That is the only kind of support I would say that I benefit from. Other than this there is nothing I think, at least not to my knowledge that there is anything they do about supporting parent students. (Akila, Case Study 4)*

> *Within the university there is nothing for student parents. There is no support groups, there is no clubs. It is all very much the same sort of avenue as everybody else. (Lynsey, Case Study 7)*

In the short questionnaire given to students prior to the interview, we asked them: How well does your university accommodate student parents (giving a score comprised between 1 and 10, with 1 standing for 'not well at all' and 10 for 'very well')? The average score was 3.7 out of 10, suggesting that overall, students did not feel their needs were well accommodated. Despite the small size of the sample of respondents for each institution, it is worth commenting here on the high level of variation, from 2 to 5.5 out of 10. Although the universities with the highest scores all provide student parents with some significant provision, some universities with extensive provision received a low score. While some provision in place makes in some cases a huge difference to the lives of student parents, their experiences are also affected by multiple factors. Moreover, many students do not use the provision itself, because of restricted access or because it does not fit their needs. Thus, while some elements suggest an association between the support available at institutional level and students' experiences, there is no simple, causal relationship between university policies and individual experiences.

A widespread view among the student sample, however, is that universities provide limited support to student parents. This echoes previous research in this area. In their single-institution survey, Marandet and Wainwright (2010) found that 88% of respondents thought more could done to support student parents (only 3% of respondents disagreed with this statement). Similarly, the NUS research found that 59% of the FE and HE participants to their study did not feel supported by their institution (NUS, 2009). Although some universities, including in our study, seem to go to considerable lengths to support student parents and address their needs, this questions whether the efforts at national and institutional levels in attracting 'non traditional' students (such as student parents) in HE have been matched by similar efforts once these students have entered HE.

In our study, some student parents felt that the lack of support came from the fact that they were treated 'the same as everybody else', although, as we noted earlier, some felt they were stigmatized and perceived as less committed due to their dual status.

> *On a bigger level I don't think I have had that much support, not from the uni. Basically I am the same as everybody else, you know, all students are basically treated the same. (Lynsey, Case Study 7)*

This 'same treatment' was perceived as problematic as it meant that the specific circumstances of student parents were not acknowledged. This 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. This discourse also underpins some of the interviews with staff, who sometimes opposed the development of specific policies for student parents, something one member of staff described as 'pigeonholing' (see Chapter 3). More generally, students often felt that care was constructed at an institutional level as a private matter which students have to deal with, rather than a policy issue which the university should engage with.

> *The attitude, certainly in the nursing faculty, is, 'you may have children, that is your problem, not ours'. Don't use it as an excuse, don't use it as a reason for not being here. If your child is sick, you still have to be here and, within reason, they are not completely impractical as long as your child doesn't get sick very often. (Holly, Case Study 7)*

> *I do feel I get a lot of support and understanding financially and for a whole range of things, but I still feel like I have this guilty secret, that I actually have a family all the bloody time that gets in the way! (Lauren, Case Study 5)*

As discussed earlier, this perceived lack of support sometimes led to feelings that universities, student services included, were geared towards the young, 'carefree' and 'careless' students, rather than those caring for a family.

> *The Student Services seem to really be geared towards the typical young student freshly out of school to help them get housing and to help them get used to suddenly having to do their own washing and stuff. (Natalie, Case Study 8)*

> *If I was a single student I think I would have [been] very happy with what the university provided me, but unfortunately working from the perspective of a student parent I think the university could have thought about a lot more what to do about improving the experience and the helping, just with the standards at least of living and everything. (Irina, Case Study 8)*

As a result of the lack of formal support available in some case studies and of the related construction of care as a private issue, students mentioned relying on the good will and benevolence of individual members of staff (for example, their tutor or dissertation supervisor). This raises several issues. First, it raises some concern about the consistency of support across departments/research institutes and across individual staff members within the same institution/unit. This point is backed by the Marandet and Wainwright's (2010) study, which established that staff's attitudes towards this group varies significantly and is also illustrated by the following quotes.

> *I would say that the people in the department, they are understanding, like my supervisor, he understands my situation and everything but there is no procedures or anything other than what people can offer or volunteer to do, but no, I don't think that the university provides any kind of support. (Akila, Case Study 4)*

> *I think we are hit quite hard by the very apparent lack of any moral support. You go to any of the tutors and one or two of them are, but the general ethos is 'just get on with it, you knew what it was going to be like, just get on with it, organise yourself'. Which there is some in truth in that, yeah, you do have to just get on with it and get organised, I suppose. I don't know, half of me thinks maybe they are right, maybe we should just not be expecting any more than we are getting. (Natalie, Case Study 8)*

A second issue relates to the lack of stability of the arrangements in place, for example when a member of staff moves elsewhere. A third issue relates to the invisibility and lack of reward associated with this type of work for staff. Indeed, it is unlikely to be part of a measurable target. Considering the strong cultural association between women and doing care work, this may also have some gendered implications for the HE workforce.

5.2. Do student parents want support?

So as to avoid assumptions that student parents necessarily want support, we asked participants about their views on it. A clear finding is that institutional support is perceived as important for most of them and that many expect the university to provide some form of support in relation to students' caring responsibilities. This may be in line with a widespread view that students have high expectations towards universities and increasingly behave as consumers of education (Gillies, 2009). However, these 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 had never been in touch with support services. As noted by Sue Clegg and colleagues (2006), deciding to seek or not to seek help is a highly complex matter. As the students in Clegg and colleagues' study found, many of those in our research sought support outside the university environment: indeed, their partner or another family member were often the first person to which the students would go when help was needed, with this kind of support often unproblematised and naturalized. Only a few had ever contacted specialist student support teams at their university. Yet, the same students also admitted that they needed support and some used the interview as a way to get information on their rights and entitlements. Asking for support was sometimes seen as embarrassing, as if admitting to some form of individual failure in becoming the self-reliant individual of late modern society.

> *I think they are aware of the inconveniences of family life. Maybe it is me, but I still feel embarrassed about it. I feel there is no acknowledgement of 'this is a big school holiday here', I have to pretend a bit, try and get in and look like I am around. I am not sure I am allowed holidays, I know I am but it doesn't feel like I am! (Lauren, Case Study 5)*

This reluctance to asking for help may also have been reinforced by the view among some of the staff that support services played a 'safety net' role, rather than being 'normalised' and seen as fully part of students' experiences, whether they experienced difficulties or not.

> *I deal with lots of different practical issues within my role... So we're trying to give that practical safety net and support for students. (Staff, Case Study 9)*

Finally, 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.

> *I think there should be some support there definitely, it seems to be that people make the right noises of sympathy in the right places but when it actually comes to implementing anything, there is absolutely naff all available. I am not aware of any support for students who are parents and frankly I wouldn't have the first clue who to go to, even if I did need to contact somebody, so I have no idea. (Nicola, Case Study 7)*

In this respect, universities with a service dedicated specifically to student parents (for example, a childcare officer) seemed to be in a more favourable position as the contact person is more easily identifiable and all the information about student parents can be found in the same place. In universities where this service did not exist, as is usually the case, students thought this would be helpful.

> *Maybe having a special unit or a coordinator within student support for student parents where there is somebody specifically they can go to, should they have an issue, with absolutely anything in terms of especially deadlines and submitting work. (Shanice, Case Study 7)*

So, rather than a condemnation of student support services altogether, this seems to advocate increasing the profile and visibility of support services. This echoes findings from Marandet and

Wainwright's (2010) study: when asked what could improve their experience, the most frequent answer given by respondents (70% of them) was 'information targeted at students with dependent children'.

5.3. Student parents' views on policies targeting them specifically

5.3.1. Childcare provision

On-site childcare provision, whether in the form of a holiday play scheme or of a nursery, was widespread in our sample of institutions. This type of provision was usually identified by those students with access to it as the most important factor in terms of institutional provision making a difference. On the contrary, student parents with pre-schoolers based in universities where such provision was not available suggested that this was the single thing that would improve their experiences.

> *At this university, I think it is brilliant that the nursery is on site.tThat is good for me on a number of levels. (Katherine, Case Study 1)*

> *I would also suggest that the university also helps the student parents with some extra facilities for their kids, like to provide something, some services during the holidays. Because during the holidays for the kids, I don't have a holiday, I just have to continue working and it is difficult to combine the kids' holidays and my work. So, my work, sometimes I have to compromise with my work... (Irina, Case Study 8)*

Two aspects of childcare provision in particular were highly valued. One relates to the quality of the childcare. It is worth reminding here that most of the university nurseries in our sample have been assessed as outstanding by Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education) in their most recent inspection report. Another relates to the practical benefits of such childcare. Having an on-site nursery, especially one run by the university, means that travel times between nursery and the place of study are kept minimal. Students also appreciated the fact that they could easily pick up their child in case of illness. It was also thought that university nursery staff better understood the needs of student parents and that the provision was more flexible and more suited to the specific needs of student parents compared with what is on offer in other nurseries. Indeed, some university nurseries in our sample offered the opportunity to choose between a mix of morning and afternoon sessions, or between a term-time only or full year contract.

> *The nursery provision is fantastically flexible, just brilliant. I know other nurseries where they say that you have to come in for four or five days a week or something. They are very flexible with pick-up and drop-off times. (Katherine, Case Study 1)*

However, students also mentioned a few issues regarding on-site childcare. As well as the lack of such provision in some universities, many university nurseries are oversubscribed, and waiting lists are sometimes very long. Even where students are given priority access, a place is not always guaranteed. By the time they receive confirmation of a place or of their timetable, places may already have been allocated to staff or to members of the local community.

> *I don't use them on our campus, because when I first applied we had to go on a waiting list and I couldn't wait. (Tahera, Case Study 6)*

Moreover, even though university nurseries were usually described as more flexible than other nurseries, some students would welcome some further flexibility.

> *I can drop him in when I want to, but to keep his place I have to pay full pay every month regardless of whether he goes or not. So I pay £400 out at the moment and he is going once every fortnight, but I need that place because in June when I go back I am in lectures and he'll be going Monday to Friday full time. There isn't like an option to either pay only the sessions that I use, it is a full whack payment every month. (Suzanne, Case Study 3)*

However, on the negative side, they are not flexible at all and it is quite expensive, like for example I had to pay for two months even though she wasn't going to the nursery because I was on a field trip collecting data back home. (Akila, Case Study 4)

As well as more flexibility in terms of matching more closely their timetable and needs, some students suggested that having some crèche facilities during the school holidays/INSET days would be helpful.

To have some sort of, for me personally, some sort of crèche facility or something like that, because days when my girls have got INSET days, you sort of have to juggle. It would be nice to have some sort of perhaps on site crèche facility that you could call on if you needed to. (Kelly, Case Study 1)

A third issue related to the costs of childcare which, from the perspective of students, were too high. However, it is worth noting here that these costs vary highly across institutions, with much higher fees in the South of England (sometimes double to the fees applying in the North), and that university nurseries usually offer cheaper fees compared with their local competitors. As we shall see in the next section, university nurseries also usually provide some discount for students, yet these discounts are very modest. In that respect, there were huge differences between those eligible for the Childcare Grant and those who were not (who, as a result, often reverted to finding alternative childcare).

Like this childcare services, like nursery, or that could be a little bit cheaper for [University] students with more available places for children because it would be a great relief for me, really, to be able to have my son so close and knowing that this is a good childcare, the quality is good. (Marta, Case Study 5)

All the nursery do is that they offer a discount of price for students which is like £1 or £2 less than the [standard] price. (Akila, Case Study 4)

I was preparing myself to be enrolled at the play centre of the [University], and I prepared all my budget according to that. Unfortunately when I came they said they could not secure a place for me so I have to put [daughter] in another private nursery, and I had to pay about £700 per month for about nine months, which really took a toll on my finance before I could secure a place. (Judi, Case Study 3)

5.3.2. Financial support for student parents

Most of the financial support available to student parents is made available at national level (see Chapter 2). However, some financial provision is also available to this group at an institutional level. Discounted fees to use the university childcare provision are one form of financial support. However, as we observed earlier, they hardly make a difference as the discount is usually kept minimal (sometimes as small as £1). Moreover, all students were not eligible for the discounted fees (as illustrated by the example of Sandra, a PhD student who had been told she was not eligible as she had been the recipient of a university bursary at some stage during her PhD). Another form of financial support consisted of hardship funds and various grants and loans.

I got the summer hardship last summer, a similar thing but separate for the summer period because Student Finance doesn't cover that time and that is pretty good, I got £800. (Becky, Case Study 1)

I did manage to get a tiny bit of a grant from the university to help me with my childcare fees because that was my last resort. There is no guarantee that I'll get that again... (Suzanne, Case Study 3)

Such grants and loans were deemed helpful and temporarily eased financial strains. Yet, apart from the Childcare Grant, the amounts remain usually modest and many students made negative comments upon the level of financial support provided.

There is no services whatsoever that take you as a student parent in [University]. You know, you get £1 discount if you are a student parent in the nursery, and that's it, but we get no support or, you know, we get no kind of support, really, from the university, being

a student parent, and really we don't get any benefits or anything like that being a student parent. (Alfredo, Case Study 2)

Further, as also noted in Chapter 4, many student parents described the administrative procedures as complex and somewhat daunting.

I recently made an application to the hardship fund at the university... I did it in a bit of a rush because there is so much to do, it really got me, I photocopied everything, bank statements, proof of income, really overwhelming and sometimes you don't keep these things, all these letters so although I [inaudible] got to find it all, I've got to almost keep receipts and bank statements and things, I managed what I could as quickly as I could and put it in and then I got a response on Friday and they said that I'd been unsuccessful, which I was really upset and disappointed about. (Becky, Case Study 1)

In some cases, mistakes meant that students received grants to which they were not eligible and had to repay it.

I got a bursary in the first year and then they phoned up and said, 'oops, we shouldn't have given it to you, it is only for full-time students and you are a part-time student so now you have to pay it back'. But of course I had spent it, [laughs] so, now, I am paying it back in instalments. (Natalie, Case Study 8)

5.3.3. Other forms of institutional support

The two other main forms of institutional support provided by the universities in our sample consisted of: student accommodation for families and support groups/events targeting specifically student parents and their families. 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 university life, at a reasonable cost.

Then again, I know there are some rooms, student rooms down there in one of the colleges where you can have your family. They are family rooms. They are not just student rooms, which is good. I mean if you can afford it then you live with your family in one house, like the way you do at home. I feel that those ones are good facilities for families. (Imani, Case Study 2)

However, most universities did not provide such a service and, when they did, the housing supply remained limited. Moreover, some of the students who used family accommodation found that they had not been designed with the needs of a family in mind.

The university, at least [this university], it didn't design things to host families, really. Even the family flat, we live in a family flat and we are very happy with the flat, but there is absolutely zero preparation of this flat for children, really, you know. (Alfredo, Case Study 2)

So, the accommodation itself, you've got a generic design, so we are living in family accommodation, one of the new ones, it is meant to be a new design and it is the same design for shared accommodation... So even our bedrooms have locks on them, you've got keys to go into your own rooms, it is the same design and with the exception of the bunk beds, it is not truly designed with children in mind at all. (Amina, Case Study 2)

According to the NUS survey, 30% of institutions offer some form of family accommodation and family accommodation represents 0.7% of student accommodation (NUS, 2009). While this is very little, it is worth reminding here that only 8% of student parents move away to study. The same report established that international families are more likely to be interested in family accommodation, as we also found in this study, possibly because they are more likely to have travelled from far away to join their university, but as well because they are usually not eligible for most of the financial support available to UK and other European students.

Some universities in our sample provided some student parent support groups or other family-friendly, campus-based events. Some of these groups had been launched at the initiative of institutions, of the students' union, or of the students themselves. Some had an online presence. Asked what could improve their experiences, interviewees often mentioned such groups.

I think they could do with having some kind of group, specifically aimed at student parents. Whether they are single parents or not, I think the pressures of having a child and trying to do the amount of work and fulfil the university deadlines can be daunting sometimes. (Lynsey, Case Study 7)

It would be nice to set up a support group for the parents, so they could meet up once a month or something like that, or somewhere where the parents can go to for parenting advice or parenting questions. (Amber, Case Study 7)

This is in line with findings from the NUS survey, which also showed similar appreciation of opportunities for meeting up with other student parents (NUS, 2009). 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. Students also expressed an interest in online groups, although where such groups were in place their level of activity appeared to be quite low.

I think there was a coffee morning the other week, I saw that and it said, 'single parents welcome to meet other parents to talk about your experiences, you are welcome to bring children'. But I couldn't attend it because I was in a lecture, I would have gone probably if I could have done. (Becky, Case Study 1)

Student parent support group I suppose would be useful, and you could obviously get that online as a forum as well, and then it could be across university as well if it was a forum thing. But no, I've never massively done forums with parenting issues in my life, but I suppose if I'd have known about it, if it had been promoted, I might have sort of clocked in and been like, 'oh yeah, this is actually cool, it's really nice to know that somebody else that's stationed out in Spain who's got two kids, and her husband is out at work all day, is also studying on the same course as me but at a different university or something'. That might have been, yeah, might be useful. (Danielle, Case Study 8)

5.4. Student parents' views on generic institutional policies

5.4.1. Universities' 'time' policies

As noted earlier, time issues were a recurrent theme of student parents' narratives. These issues are compound by university 'time' policies which are not always 'family-friendly'. Timetabling provides an interesting illustration of generic policies which are neutral in appearance, yet affect students differently whether they have caring responsibilities or not. Timetables fitting around school hours were described by students as the most 'family-friendly', while late morning/evening and Saturday lectures and seminars led to conflicts with family demands. Yet, it is worth noting here that, in many institutions, the rapidly expanding provision of part-time courses often involves attending evening and weekend classes. While such courses are often designed with the needs of those in paid work in mind, little consideration is given to students' caring responsibilities and to the fact that evening and weekend courses may not be suitable for parents.

So we have nine o'clock starts, which is really difficult with school and stuff... I can drop off at nursery at eight at the moment until [child] starts school and then it is going to be difficult, but we have two nine o'clock starts which makes things incredibly difficult for school drop-off. Then we have a four o'clock finish which again is incredibly difficult for school. (Natalie, Case Study 8)

I am lucky at the moment that my timetable fits in around school hours, but when it doesn't, I'm going to have to call on a childminder to cover the time for me. (Kelly, Case Study 1)

They did a lecture at nine o'clock on the Monday and then our last one was four till five, so it made it a really hard day with the kids, which I thought was a bit inconsiderate, because usually I got home by about seven to half past because of the traffic. So dropping them off at seven o'clock in the morning and not getting them picked up till seven to half past, it is horrible. (Stephanie, Case Study 3)

The late announcement of timetables, another aspect of some university time policies, also created some tensions between studying and parenting. It was not unusual for students to receive their timetables a few days before the start of term. This meant that students had limited time to put in place some childcare arrangements and, in some cases, that they were not able to secure a place in/with their preferred nursery/childminder, even, as we commented earlier, in university nurseries where this group was given priority over staff or the local community.

I started the course, it was really difficult to find out what the timetable was and the university wouldn't release the timetable until it was pretty much signed off... We had to use a childminder for the first semester. She had a set number of places and she couldn't just keep all the days open for us indefinitely. So that is quite difficult I think, planning ahead. It is not set up for people who have other commitments. (Katherine, Case Study 1)

We got the timetable Freshers' Week, which gave us a week and, basically, it changes and you have to adjust your childcare, but they don't give you sufficient time to actually do that. (Stephanie, Case Study 3)

They gave us a timetable for two days initially and then added to it as the weeks went by. I was asking people, like I was phoning up the coordinator of [the programme]... 'Can you tell me what the earliest start time and the latest finish time for regular classes are going to be?' And he couldn't even tell me that. 'Is it going to be a nine to five day, a nine to six day? I need to organise childcare'. He couldn't answer. (Nesha, Case Study 6)

We don't actually get our timetable until literally a week before we start. I think that is something that needs to be changed. (Lynsey, Case Study 7)

They gave me the timetable on the day I started, and I said, 'how can I organise childcare?'. I couldn't organise anything because they wouldn't give us the timetable. Then I was the student rep for last year and I brought it up and I said, 'look it's completely disabling for students to not be able to arrange things with their employers or with their child care providers'. So they brought it back so we had it, I think it was three weeks early this year. But three weeks still isn't enough, not for childcare, because the problem with childcare provision is that the childcare providers need to know prior to September so that they know what new people they can take on. (Elizabeth, Case Study 8)

A third problematic aspect of university 'time' policies related to late changes in the timing of lectures and seminars, especially when these were rescheduled for early mornings or evenings.

About six weeks in, we had an email. They'd moved all the times around for the seminars and they'd put me, six days before they said, 'this week, times are changing' and they put me into a 4 till 5 and so I couldn't arrange childcare anyway, six days before, I knew my childminder was full on that day. So I emailed her and said, 'would it be all right to come to an earlier one because I can't get childcare at such late notice?' and he emailed me back and said, 'I don't know if it is possible, you'll have to check with one of the seminar leaders. May I take a moment to remind you that you are a full time student and you are required to attend any time between 8.00am and 6.00pm'. And it went on like that. (Becky, Case Study 1)

Some of the things, like our timetables get changed randomly at very little notice and I think it can impact... I set up my childcare around what the timetable is. I want a bit of warning. I've tried to explain this to people, they still keep changing my timetable, especially when it is things like early starts and late finishes that are outside of the normal nine to five that my normal childcare is. (Nesha, Case Study 6)

We had an initial timetable sent to us in August. I had childcare around that initial timetable. When we started in October and we got the timetable it had all been turned around. That's why I was left, 'oh my god, what am I going to do with my kids?' (Shanice, Case Study 7)

These findings are not dissimilar to previous research on student parents, which identified that timetabling, particularly early and late classes, are problematic for students with children of school-age or younger, and so are late notices in relation to timetable changes (Alsop et al., 2008, Edwards, 1993). In particular, Marandet and Wainwright found that 62.5% of the participants in their study wished that they had received their timetable earlier (Marandet and Wainwright, 2010). The effects of these time policies on student parents are multiple. As well as costs implications (for example, when a student has to arrange childcare to cover for an evening teaching session), this can have an effect on attendance, and potentially on retention and levels of achievement.

I often miss out on the lectures and seminars and things that happen because they often happen quite late in the afternoon or at a time which I can't go. (Nabila, Case Study 2)

Recently, they stuck a class on a Wednesday and we only got told the week before. And because it was a Wednesday at 3.00pm, I couldn't attend it. Because I hadn't arranged childcare for my son on a Wednesday evening or for anybody to pick him up from school or anything like that, so I had to miss it. (Lynsey, Case Study 7)

Students felt particularly strongly about lectures or seminars being cancelled at the last minute as they often had arrangements in place. In some cases, this resentment related to feelings that the level of flexibility that the university required from student parents was not matched by the flexibility offered to them.

Last minute changes are often not communicated. We've argued repeatedly from the very beginning saying that we need to have some kind of system set in place where we are all texted or something like that, because there were a number of times we would turn up for lecture, we'd all be standing outside the door and no-one was there. The lecture should have started already and then another member of staff would come along, 'oh, didn't you get your emails this morning? You should check your emails every day, you know, an email was sent out at eight o'clock to say that such-and-such is ill blah-blah-blah'. Some of the students that are travelling from far away have already set off on their train or some of us are dropping off at nursery at eight, we've already left the house at that time, so of course we didn't get it. (Natalie, Case Study 8)

Flexibility for the lecturers to change it at the last minute, yes. Flexibility for me not to turn up, no, which can make it very difficult because it is certainly not unheard of that they put a lecture on and say you will be in at nine o'clock tomorrow and you get the email at five o'clock the night before, which if you are young, free and single maybe you can cope with that, but even then maybe you'd have plans. (Holly, Case Study 7)

When my kids caught the flu... I had to be at home. You can't send kids with flu to childcare. So I got pulled up for poor attendance. If your attendance falls below 80%, you have to go and see a senior tutor and I got this formal warning. I said, 'look, I'm not skiving classes. I completely understand why classes are important. My kids were sick,' and he said, 'it doesn't matter. You've already missed 80%, if you miss one more class you'll fall below the official barrier and you'll be taken [inaudible] committee, as would anybody else and you'll have to fight for the right to sit the exams and you may not be permitted to sit the exams because your attendance is too low. It doesn't matter what reason.' I just remember thinking, 'this is ridiculous.' (Nesha, Case Study 6)

As I am walking in anything 9.20am after dropping the kids off, you can sense or there is often a comment that lecture starts at 9am. But you can't go wailing in saying, 'but I've got kids.' It doesn't seem very supportive, so I choose not to stroll in at that time because it is highly embarrassing when a lecturer embarrasses you in front of 150 other students telling you what time it is. (Shanice, Case Study 7)

Time issues were also mentioned in relation to extra-curricular activities. Student parents often remarked upon the fact that most 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 seen as reinforcing the default construction of HE students as 'carefree'. Some students also observed that missing out on these activities could have an impact on their academic work, for example when these social events led to discussion of academic aspects of the student experience.

> *An awful lot of conversations that are relevant to my research happen after hours or at lunch time but particularly after hours in the student pub where my department meet. They always meet there after 5.00pm everyday and I can never go and I miss out on a lot of talk about conferences that are coming up and papers that have been published and possible collaborations. I miss all of that which can make it a bit harder because I don't know who is doing what research which makes it a lot more difficult to collaborate. (Nabila, Case Study 2)*

> *They are going to be academic work teams and a lot of the team building is around pub crawls and pub quizzes. So if you are not going on pub crawls and pub quizzes, now that automatically wipes out most of the mature students and most of the students with caring responsibilities, then you are missing out on some of the team building with the people you are doing academic work on. (Nesha, Case Study 6)*

University 'time' policies was an area where respondents thought that the introduction of small changes could dramatically improve their experience. Suggestions included: offering a wider range of options regarding the timing of lectures and seminars, circulating timetables at least several weeks in advance, and introducing more flexibility in relation to missing classes because of illness in the family.

> *I think they need to be a bit more considerate when they are actually planning the timetable so that it fits in around more sensible hours. I mean, I am not saying it is going to suit everybody but, you know, it is not first thing in the morning and last thing at night, for example, lectures, if possible, or stretch it out. (Stephanie, Case Study 3)*

> *If they could give you a timetable at the beginning of the year so that you could give that to your childcare provider that would make life so much easier... If they want to make wider access... then I don't expect them to help me with the childcare but I expect them to be able to provide me with a schedule that doesn't make me look completely incompetent. If you go to work, you get a schedule, you may work shifts but you get a schedule a reasonable period in advance. There is no obvious reason why the university can't, other than presumably somebody isn't organising it quick enough. (Holly, Case Study 7)*

> *I think also with things like illnesses, you know, I'm not always going to get proof for my son being ill... So I think sometimes they could, when it comes to having to provide evidence, because you've got to provide evidence for UCAS if you've missed an assignment or anything. I think on that score, I know sometimes people are always going to play it but most of the time I think your case is going to be genuine that they haven't got any paper backup because it was their child that's ill. I think the regulations on that could be relaxed a little bit, especially if they know that you've got a child or children. (Lynsey, Case Study 7)*

5.4.2. Universities' space policies

Another set of key issues consistently raised across institutions related to what we broadly call 'space policies'. These were, however, of less concern compared with 'time policies'. In some universities, students mentioned that the presence of children was severely restricted. This hindered student parents' experiences in many ways, for example when they wanted to borrow books from the library, drop off an assessment and attend tutorials. This also sometimes furthered their sense of 'not belonging' in academia.

I had a meeting with my supervisor and it was half term... His assistant, she is very nice, she said, 'you can bring [daughter] here to the office and I can stay with her for an hour', but then two days later she said, 'I'm sorry, I didn't know that but, in the office, someone came and said she couldn't stay because it was health and safety, policies and she is not allowed in the office'. (Maria, Case Study 1)

They don't let children in the library which is, I don't know, I just think there is one thing I mean when you are a student parent because sometimes what happens, you are stuck, you've got your child... you need to just get a book or something like that, the child should be able to just wait by the security. Maybe there is somebody just there and they literally have been [inaudible], so you run up and do something, you know that is the only thing, because that, you know that would make so much difference for a lot of people if there was just a waiting area. (Charlotte, Case Study 7)

I came in one time, I had an assignment to hand in by this deadline and it was like 10 minutes to deadline. The work was done, it was printed. I literally needed to walk into the office, hand it in and walk out again and he was one at the time, I had my one year old with me and they wouldn't let me past the gate. They wouldn't let me through the security gate and they wouldn't hand the assignment in because the assignments are... you get a receipt for it so you have to hand it in person. So the security people wouldn't pass it to the office for me and I had no one to hand the child to and it was just quite shocking. I can see why their security policies are there but I am surprised... I hadn't noticed. There is no sign up about it, why would there be a sign up? No other students want to take their one year old into the building, I guess. (Nesha, Case Study 6)

In one case, a member of staff recalled that a student had been asked to leave campus because she had brought her child with her.

From my point of view in the welfare, I've had students bring their children in with them when they come for welfare, that would never be an issue in my office, they would get exactly the same advice as anybody else would get, there would never be an issue of we couldn't advise them because they've got their child with them. We recently lodged a complaint on behalf of a student with the university because she was asked to leave this campus because she brought her baby with her. She was sitting out in the hub area actually waiting for me and I wasn't in, and she was asked by a member of staff to leave and told that the university had a policy that didn't allow children on campus. We looked into that, realised that is not the case at all and I believe she received a formal written apology from the university as a result of that. (Staff, Case Study 7)

Also in relation to university 'space policies', student parents mentioned the lack of facilities for baby change and breastfeeding/extracting milk. A number of students highlighted how they had to use unsuitable rooms (in some cases, the toilets) to extract milk and had to investigate where to store it due to a lack of information. These difficulties in terms of accessing information also echo findings from the interviews conducted with staff. Many of them were not aware of the university policies in relation to providing some space for breastfeeding/milk extracting. As researchers, we also struggled to gain some information on this aspect.

For example, there are only two baby changing facilities on the whole of the campus and it is a campus university, so that is quite appalling. There is no space for breastfeeding or for expressing milk or where you can store your milk if you do so. So it is particularly un-baby-friendly. It can be quite difficult to bring your child to university. (Nabila, Case Study 2)

We don't have changing room, you know, change the nappy. I have to take her to the common toilet to change her, but it is absolutely difficult for baby because she will crawl on the floor in the common toilet, you know, so it is horrible... And then when I do breastfeeding, I have to use the common space for breastfeeding... I even heard complaints about my breastfeeding. (Amita, Case Study 4)

Students made a number of recommendations in relation to university 'space policies', suggesting that this is something that they see as a legitimate area of intervention for universities. Having appropriate changing and breastfeeding facilities (i.e., in a room which is clean, easily accessible and which ensures some privacy) was a widespread expectation. Some also suggested having a room on campus specifically dedicated to student parents.

> *I suppose it is a bit of luxury but it would be nice to have somewhere where you can breastfeed or express milk because I had friends again who have children, who send their children and babies to pre-school when they were breastfeeding and they used to find it quite hard to try and do that and they didn't want to do it in the toilet because it is not very sanitary. And a compromise would be that someone would offer them a room or they would sit in an office. But it is not a proper place to do that. (Amina, Case Study 2)*

> *I think they could put some practical measures into place, at the very least providing changing facilities and a nice room where we could breastfeed or express would be incredible, and some sort of family room that is available maybe every afternoon where, when we are on campus, we have somewhere we can take our children and also to meet other student parents. (Nabila, Case Study 2)*

5.5. Single and international student parents: Views on support and university policies

This section explores how perceptions of support and the influence of university policies on single student parents and international student parents are distinct from other student parent groups. In terms of support available, both groups expressed similar concerns with regard to support at the institutional level. As with other student parent groups, there were general feelings of insufficient support at the institutional level or a lack of awareness of support of this nature. Differences in single student parents' opinions of support became apparent at the national and personal level. However, international student parents were more likely to report dissatisfaction with institutional support than other groups of student parents.

International students expressed particular discontent with support available in relation to housing. Discontent was in relation to the availability and quality of sufficient housing for families provided by the university. Where housing was provided it was often referred to as inadequate. Where family housing was not provided by institutions international students felt that the support they received in finding housing in the private sector was insufficient. This is in line with results from the NUS report which suggested that housing was an issue likely to seriously impact international student parents' experience of HE (NUS, 2009).

> *I need help, I need advice, I don't know the place, I don't know the city... But they couldn't, in the university they have houses that they rent but it is just for students, not for families... I was so disappointed and the people from the accommodation office, they are just trying to do their best but I found it very, I realised it very quickly after two weeks, that all the services are really good for students, younger, that they can share, everything, they don't mind if they are sharing the bedroom and everything else, everything was focused on these kind of students, nothing for mature students, for mature parent students. (Maria, Case Study 1)*

In terms of support available at the national level via welfare provision and student finance, the responses from single student parents varied. Many reported the financial strain associated with being a parent in HE, yet some uniquely reported finding themselves more financially secure in comparison to being a single parent solely on welfare benefits.

> *Financially, I think the government do encourage single parents or parents to go back to education. I do think that it is a good scheme... Financially I think... it is better than being on the dole, put it that way. (Lynsey, Case Study 7)*

> *So I think the support, financial support is quite generous and you also get help with childcare. I think it is up to 80%, if you can find childcare. So financial issues, none at all, it is just that you end up in debt, but hey. (Shanice, Case Study 7)*

This is interesting given previous research has suggested that lone parents are one of the student parent groups which face the highest amounts of hardship. However, this may be unique to groups of single student parents that have entered HE after a period of reliance upon welfare benefits.

One of the most striking differences between these two student groups and other student parent groups were evident in their support received at a personal level and subsequent access to informal childcare. It was apparent through the interview process that there were similarities between international student parents and single student parents, with both experiencing a distinct lack of support available on a personal level to this group.

With reference to single student parents, other student parent groups often reported relying upon spouses as a source of emotional support, which was distinctly lacking in the single student parent group.

> *I am lucky, I've got a wife, I must admit I don't know how you could do it with children and being a single parent, I think that would be really hard, you'd need a lot more support from friends and family definitely. You could do it, you just wouldn't have any life at all, at least I can say I can go out next Friday, she is at home and I haven't got to book a babysitter or anything. (Michael, Case Study 1)*

> *I am single so that also makes a difference because managing on your own is actually quite tough because there is no one there to fall back on. (Natalie, Case Study 8)*

Similarly, international student parents lacked support networks in relation to extended family and friends.

> *I don't have my family here so that is I suppose again another thing which makes it quite hard. When you are a student parent, it is very important for you to have a support network, be it your husband, be it your family or very close friends. I didn't have that at the very beginning. I had my husband of course but if my husband went away, and he did a lot, sometimes for a whole week, I didn't have my mother or my sister, the sorts of people that I would rely on to look after my daughter if I were back home. (Amina, Case Study 2)*

In accordance with the other student parent groups, single student parents reported the same issues in respect to university policies having a detrimental impact upon the university experience. The issues of late evening/early morning/ weekend seminars and late notice timetabling were amplified by the absence of another parent to share childcare responsibilities. Due to the lack of undergraduate participants in the international student parent subgroup, and thus less timetabled activities, these issues were not as obvious.

> *Even the seminars I had to take part to present my work, they were scheduled for Saturdays, that is impossible! But I have to go, it is compulsory. (Maria, Case Study 1)*

In the same respect, health and safety policies relating to allowing children on campus was in some situations more detrimental, as single students were more likely to have no choice but to bring their children onto campus. Additionally, single parents felt particular discontent in relation to applying for extenuating circumstances, as they felt that there was not any specific criteria which reflected their challenging circumstances.

> *… in terms of requesting an extension, there is no criteria which are geared towards people in my position, especially single mums who don't have support. When I am looking on the extension form trying to tick a criteria, it is either illness, death, doctor's certificate, something, something. There is nothing on there that says, 'I need additional support therefore I can't submit this work'. (Shanice, Case Study 7)*

5.6. Recommendations

A key finding in this chapter relates to the fact that most students do not feel they get the support they need. We recommended in Chapter 4 that information on how to access support should be made more easily available to this group as they often struggle to access it. As mentioned in the previous chapter, while some websites exist, they are not always known to student parents and often focus on financial issues. Universities could include a link to these websites on their own websites and/or, as recommended earlier, dedicate a webpage to students with caring responsibilities, with a national website offering some more comprehensive information for students and staff. In addition, an information leaflet including all key information could be produced and made widely available to all student parents, including in an electronic format on university websites. Students often resist asking for help as they fear to be seen as failing. Further embedding of support services in university structures and presenting these as an ordinary part of university experience would help to tackle this.

On-site childcare provision, whether in the form of a holiday play scheme or of a nursery, is usually identified by student parents as the most important factor in terms of institutional provision making a difference. Universities should consider developing/extending such provision. The positive effects of having on-site childcare on students' retention and attainment may compensate for the added cost for institutions. Moreover, finance can be an issue for this group and universities may consider how costs can be reduced for those students ineligible for the Childcare Grant, for example by offering significantly discounted fees or, as we suggested earlier, by reserving some bursaries for this group. Crèche/holiday club facilities should be considered for primary age children during holiday period and school INSET days. University nurseries may also consider increasing flexibility in terms of the sessions they offer. For example, some nurseries offer a mix of morning and afternoon sessions and/or have long opening hours. However, this could have consequences for nursery staff as well (who may also be parents), so it would need to be considered carefully, with the interests of all those involved in mind. Besides, even where students are given priority access, a place is not always guaranteed as some students receive their timetable shortly before the start of the academic year. To address this and, more generally, to give sufficient time to students to arrange appropriate childcare, we recommend that universities inform students about their timetable at least one month in advance and inform them as early as possible when some time-related changes are introduced during the academic year.

In relation to finance, we have already mentioned that grants and loans can be of great help to student parents and thus that universities may consider extending these, although we realise it may not always be possible in the current financial climate. We also recommended that universities and organisations involved in HE finances, such as the Student Loans Company, review the procedures in place as some appear to be very time-consuming, while this group is precisely time-poor. Simpler procedures would also help to minimise mistakes when calculating payments, as in some cases students had to repay grants for which they were not eligible. The two other main forms of institutional support provided by the universities in our sample consisted of: student accommodation for families and support groups. We have commented on the latter in Chapter 4. Family accommodation is much appreciated by students, particularly international students, as it brings multiple benefits, for example minimising the time spent travelling between home and campus. However, supply needs to be increased and family flats/houses should be designed with the needs of a young family in mind. While many student parents go to their local university and may have some prior accommodation arrangements in place, it is not the case for all. Increasing the accommodation supply may encourage parents to go further afield to study, thus providing them with a wider range of education opportunities. As in the case of other provision, this would also mean that, in an increasingly competitive HE sector, universities with such provision may be in a better position to attract student parents. Family accommodation would need to be available throughout the calendar year.

Universities should regularly review their 'time' and 'space' policies to ensure that these are 'family-friendly'. In relation to 'time policies', they should ensure that timetables fitting around school hours are available on most courses, with lectures and seminars taking place early or late during the day or at the weekend avoided when possible. This would also have a positive impact on the working conditions, and possibly retention, of staff with caring responsibilities. When last minute changes to timetables cannot be avoided, universities may use the appropriate software equipment so that students

are immediately informed through a text or email. Also in relation to 'time' policies, we recommend that universities should be more flexible when students cannot attend because of illness in the family and of unpredictable childcare issues (for example when a childminder becomes unavailable at the last minute). Universities should take student parents' circumstances into account when calculating attendance rates, for example. Alternative ways to access the course material should be established (for example, through the university intranet).

Finally, we also identified some areas for improvement in relation to university 'space policies'. In some institutions, the presence of children was severely restricted. This hindered student parents' experiences in many ways, for example when they wanted to borrow books from the library, drop off an assessment or attend tutorials and lectures. While the presence of young children may present some risks in some areas (for example, in laboratories), some universities successfully allow children to access most of the campus, including classrooms. This, as well as the development of facilities for baby change and breastfeeding/extracting milk, should be encouraged. Information on how to access these premises should also be clearly communicated to university staff and student parents.

Conclusion

Historically, in the UK as in most Western societies, care has been positioned at the margins of academia. Consuming and producing knowledge were constructed as matters of the mind, which should be left undisturbed by domestic matters, with the default construction of the scholar as those of the white, male, middle class and, most importantly for this study, childless student. During the 20th century and early 21st century, however, the place of care in society has dramatically changed, and so has HE. In England, where this study was conducted, the widening participation agenda has been associated with the diversification of the student body, although what and where learners study and who they are remain very much marked by social divides (Leathwood and Read, 2009). Parents in particular now represent a significant proportion of the student population in HE (NUS, 2009). Yet, their growing presence in academia has not been matched by an equivalent interest in student parents in policy circles, nor in academic research.

This report is an attempt to shed light on the experiences of student parents, with a particular focus on how university policies impinge on these experiences. This key focus appears timely. HEIs are increasingly becoming a key level of policy-making, with the responsibility for the equality agenda in particular being transferred to intermediary bodies. The socioeconomic and ideological context has not proved particularly favourable to the inclusion of equality matters in policy agendas (David, 2010a). Moreover, while it is too early to discuss the effects of the Equality Act 2010, the Act clearly has implications for university policies, in relation to the way they treat expecting mothers and new parents (Pugh, 2010).

Using a social constructivist theoretical framework, the findings presented in this report draw mostly on a corpus of 60 interviews conducted with university staff and student parents spread across ten England-based HEIs. The general approach acknowledges the complex relationships between national policies, institutional policies, and individual biographies, with a key focus on the institutional level. A major finding in our study relates to the lack of visibility of student parents. This is evidenced in our review of national and institutional policies. While a construction of HE as 'feminised' now predominates, the default image of the university student as 'bachelor boy' remains (Hinton-Smith, 2012, Leathwood and Read, 2009). Many 'texts' referenced in this report (whether policy statements or individual narratives) draw on a construction of the student as 'carefree'. Yet, these discourses of invisibility and of a childfree academia crumble and university policies play a role in such a transformation, in the same way that they play a role in the reproduction of the clichéd image of the student mentioned above. As we have shown through the identification of three different policy scenarios and of the discourses of student parents which underpin these, there are important cross-institutional variations among universities. While some policies and discourses position care outside of HE constituencies, others attempt to bridge over this binary opposition. In the latter case, some policies and discourses draw on an add-on approach, while others argue in favour of a more integrated, mainstreamed approach to care in HE. Overall, however, it is not unusual for student parents to be expected to fit into the mould of the 'traditional' student and university culture, despite how much care giving permeates the student experience and despite the fact that university policies partly compound the difficulties they face.

Indeed, while policies targeting specifically student parents can, unsurprisingly, make a huge difference to their experiences, so do 'generic' policies. Such policies, which apply to all students rather than just student parents and define the way the university works, can indeed produce some 'family-unfriendly' effects, despite being sometimes presented as 'neutral'. Furthermore, the study highlights the risks of establishing simplistic, causal relationships between national frameworks, institutional policies and individual lives. The high level of diversity observed, in relation to institutional provision, to discourses of student parent who circulate within academic sites, and in relation to student experiences, draws attention to the fact that policy effects are hard to predict. This is not to deny the importance of a policy intervention, but to highlight that, if policies play a key role, it is in interaction with many other factors. This is partly because individuals do not passively implement (in the case of staff) or absorb (in the case of students) policies, thus always leaving room for social change.

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Appendix

Appendix 1: Schedule interviews (students)

1. Introduction
Would you like to start by introducing yourself?
Probe: anything they think is important in addition to what is already in the questionnaire, family circumstances, socio-economic background (probe: disadvantaged, 'average', privileged), where do they live, etc.

Do you want to tell me about a typical day in your week?
Probe: what time they start, what do they do, etc.

2. Your personal circumstances
Would you like to tell me about your personal circumstances?
Probe: where they live, who they live with (children and adults), if partner ask for their job and if full-time/part-time, etc.

Do you do any paid work?
Probe: what does your job involve, how many hours, flexibility in working hours, reasons for working, etc.

Are there any other activities you're currently involved in?
Probe: leisure, community work, etc.

3. Your studies
What have you been doing at the university?
Probe: when they started, what and where did they study, how well did they progress

What has been your general experience of university? How satisfied are you overall with your studies?
Probe: what they expected from going to university, progression, what they gained out of it, engagement with the university, social activities, etc.

4. General experiences as a student parent
What's been your general experience of being a student parent?
Probe: positives and negatives

Have there been any particular issues you would like to mention?
Probe: finance, childcare, clashes between conflicting demands, time for studies, family tensions, etc.

5. The support received (informal and formal-e.g., policies)
What kind of support do you receive as a student parent?
Probe: support from
   - relatives
   - friends and/or other students
   - local community/organisations
   - state support/national policies
Probe: nature of support, e.g. financial support, moral support, help with childcare and domestic duties, etc.

Do you receive or have received some support from the university?
Probe: financial support, childcare provision, help from tutors, other students, etc.

Among those sources of support you mentioned, which one is your main source of support as a student parent?

If you need help as a student parent, who do you turn to first?
Probe: relatives, friends, other student/student parents, tutor, student services

How satisfied are you with being a student parent in this university?/Do you feel that you receive the support you need?
Probe: why?

Are you aware of any university policies/practices in place to support student parents in this university?
Probe: financial support, flexible times, on-site nursery, etc.

Do you use student services?
Probe: which services have you used in the past? How helpful have they been?

Are you aware of any general university policies that may be detrimental to student parents?
Probe: work placement, lectures and seminar times, library opening times, late notice of time changes, access to campus forbidden to children, etc.

Do you have any suggestion to improve the experiences of student parents?

How could the university best support their student parents?

Any questions, things you would like to add?

Anybody they know we could interview?

Thank you

Appendix 2: Schedule interviews (staff)

1. Introduction
Would you like to start by introducing yourself?
Probe: anything they think is important in addition to what is already in the questionnaire, etc.

2. Working with students/student parents
Do you want to tell me about your work for the university?
Probe: job title, main responsibilities, etc.

How many people work in the unit/department?

What services does your unit /departments provide to students? Do you provide any specific support to student parents?

3. Awareness regarding student parents
What is your experience of working with student parents?

What is the support available to student parents in this university?

Are you aware of any general university policies that may be detrimental to student parents?
Probe: work placement, lectures and seminar times, library opening times, late notice of time changes, access to campus forbidden to children, etc.

What do you think are the main issues faced by student parents? Do you think some groups of student parents are more vulnerable than others?

Do you see it as the role of the university to support them?
Probe: why?

Do you have any suggestion to improve the experiences of student parents?/ How could the university best support their student parents?

Do you think the ongoing changes in higher education policy will have an effect on student parents' experiences?

Any questions, things you would like to add?

Thank you!

Appendix 3: Questionnaire for students

Please, circle one answer for each question. All the information is **confidential** and will be used for research purposes only. If you are not comfortable with some questions, feel free to ignore them.

Thank you!

FAMILY CIRCUMSTANCES

Apart from you, how many other **adults** live in your house?   ……….

Please, indicate the relationship for each adult living in your house (e.g., partner, mother, father...):
....
....
....

How many **children** live in your home for whom you are the primary carer? ....

How old are they? ....

YOUR STUDIES

University: ....

Subject: ....

Level/programme of study: ....

Do you study: full-time   part-time

OTHER

Do you usually undertake paid work?   Yes   No

Do you work: Part-time   Full-time

Gender: Male   Female

Age: ....

How would you describe your ethnicity? ....

On a scale of 1 to 10, how easy would you say it is to be a student parent? (1 being very difficult, 10 very easy) ....

On a scale of 1 to 10, how well do you think this university accommodates the needs of student parents? (1 not well at all, 10 very well) ....

Thank you very much!

Appendix 4: Questionnaire for university staff

Please, circle one answer for each question. All the information is **confidential** and will be used for research purposes only. If you are not comfortable with some questions, feel free to ignore them.
Thank you!

YOUR WORK

Who is your employer?
....

Job title:
....

Highest qualification:
....

How long have you been in your current post? .... years.

OTHER

Gender: Male   Female

Age: ....

How would you describe your ethnicity?
....

On a scale of 1 to 10, how easy would you say it is to be a student parent? (1 being very difficult, 10 very easy) ....

On a scale of 1 to 10, how well do you think you university accommodates the needs of student parents? (1 not well at all, 10 very well) ....

Thank you very much!

Appendix 5: Description of the sample of participants to the study (students)

Pseudonym	Institution	Number of children	Level of study	Full/part time	Gender	Age
Katherine	Case Study 1	1	UG[6]	Full time	Female	35
Maria	Case Study 1	1	PhD	Full time	Female	52
Jennifer	Case Study 1	2	UG	Full time	Female	28
Becky	Case Study 1	1	UG	Full time	Female	27
Michael	Case Study 1	3	PGCE[7]	Full time	Male	38
Kelly	Case Study 1	2	UG	Full time	Female	43
Amina	Case Study 2	1	PhD	Full time	Female	26
Alfredo	Case Study 2	2	PhD	Full time	Male	33
Nabila	Case Study 2	1	PhD	Full time	Female	26
Imani	Case Study 2	3	PhD	Full time	Female	37
Tiffany	Case Study 2	1	PhD	Part time	Female	28
Nazma	Case Study 2	1	PhD	Full time	Female	31
Stephanie	Case Study 3	4	UG	Full time	Female	42
Suzanne	Case Study 3	1	Diploma	Full time	Female	23
Judi	Case Study 3	3	PhD	Full time	Female	41
Amita	Case Study 4	1	PhD	Full time	Female	31
Akila	Case Study 4	1	PhD	Full time	Female	31
Lauren	Case Study 5	2	MPhil/PhD	Part time	Female	43
Lisa	Case Study 5	3	PhD	Part time	Female	37
Marta	Case Study 5	1	PhD	Full time	Female	31
April	Case Study 5	2	PhD	Full time	Female	37
Sandra	Case Study 5	2	PhD	Full time	Female	35
Nesha	Case Study 6	2	UG	Full time	Female	33
Tahera	Case Study 6	2	UG	Full time	Female	27
Claire	Case Study 6	4	UG	Full time	Female	44
Linsey	Case Study 7	1	UG	Full time	Female	34
Shanice	Case Study 7	3	UG	Part time	Female	36
Holly	Case Study 7	2	Level 3 diploma	Full time	Female	40
Amber	Case Study 7	3	Diploma	Full time	Female	32
Christine	Case Study 7	1	UG	Full time	Female	37
Nicola	Case Study 7	3	UG	Full time	Female	40
Tina	Case Study 7	2	Diploma	Full time	Female	32
Charlotte	Case Study 7	1	UG	Full time	Female	40
Rachel	Case Study 7	6	PhD	Part time	Female	34
Natalie	Case Study 8	3	UG	Part time	Female	40
Elizabeth	Case Study 8	3	UG	Full time	Female	46
Irina	Case Study 8	2	PhD	Full time	Female	42
Danielle	Case Study 8	1	UG	Part time	Female	29
Anna	Case Study 8	2	Masters	Part time	Female	45
Aleine	Case Study 9	1	PhD	Part time	Female	36

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[6] Undergraduate.

[7] Postgraduate Certificate of Education.