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A balancing act: supporting students who are parents to succeed in Australian higher education

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- Lisa Andrewartha, Senior Advisor, Research and Strategy, Centre for Higher Education Equity and Diversity Research (CHEEDR), La Trobe University
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- Hannah Beattie, (formerly) Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP) Coordinator, CHEEDR, La Trobe University.

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Abbreviations

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
CHEEDR	Centre for Higher Education Equity and Diversity Research at La Trobe University
CSMC	Council of Single Mothers and their Children
DSS	Department of Social Services (Australian Government)
EAS	Educational Access Scheme
EPHEA	Equity Practitioners in Higher Education Australasia
HILDA	Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey
LSAY	Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth
NUS	National Union of Students
NCSEHE	National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education at Curtin University
NCVER	National Centre for Vocational Education Research
QILT	Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching
SEW	Survey of Education and Work
TAC	Tertiary Admissions Centre
TAFE	Technical and Further Education
UAC	Universities Admissions Centre
UCAS	The University and Colleges Admissions Service based in the United Kingdom
VET	Vocational education and training

Definition of key term: ‘student parents’

For the purposes of this report, we have adopted a broad definition of student parents as people who provide care for at least one child while studying in higher education.

Executive summary

The advantages associated with higher education are well documented, however students who are parents face many obstacles to success at this level. Juggling caring responsibilities alongside study requirements places high demands on the time and energy of student parents, many of whom have additional employment commitments. Financial constraints create an additional barrier to success, with groups at particular risk of disadvantage including young parents, single parents, and parents from low socio-economic backgrounds. Given these challenges, the traditional nature of higher education study may not adequately accommodate the specific circumstances of student parents. Improved processes and support mechanisms could encourage more parents through higher education as a pathway to building knowledge, improving employment prospects, and gaining independence.

Despite the barriers faced by student parents, a specific focus on this group has been largely absent from the Australian student equity agenda. There is limited literature on student parents' access and achievement in Australian higher education. To address this gap, we sought to establish the first major evidential base of student parents in Australian higher education. For the purposes of our research, we adopted a broad definition of student parents as people who provide care for at least one child while studying in higher education. Our project explored the self-identified motivations, challenges, and strengths of these students. Findings are based on an examination of available datasets, a desktop review of related institutional policy and practice, and a national survey. The research was conducted by La Trobe University, in collaboration with the Council of Single Mothers and their Children, and funded by the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education at Curtin University. Our report contributes new insights for the development of strategies to better support student parents to access and succeed in higher education.

We found a general lack of data on the parenting status of higher education students. Snapshot data from the 2016 Census suggests that the student parent population is large, with 12.7 per cent of students enrolled in a university or other tertiary institution caring for their own children. The same dataset indicated almost a third of students who were studying part time were parents. The paucity of current data on the size and geo-demographic profile of this group, however, presents a major barrier to providing meaningful support and policies for parents who study. It would be constructive to introduce a system to confidentially identify parents at the time of application or enrolment so strategies can be targeted to this group.

Our desktop review of publicly available information on Australian university websites revealed support for students who are parents to be narrow and inadequate. While on-campus childcare facilities were common, places were often scarce and expensive. General parenting facilities, such as feeding and baby changing rooms, were also in short supply and difficult to access. Additional parent-specific forms of support, such as peer networks, resource guides, and reserved parking bays, were only evident at a small number of institutions.

Through our national survey, student parents revealed that they were highly motivated to succeed in higher education. Participants possessed a range of skills and qualities developed through their parenting roles that were translatable and beneficial in their studies. These students had developed time management and communication skills, and showed enhanced commitment, patience, empathy, resilience, and determination. Student parents also improved the broader student experience by sharing different perspectives and life experiences and taking on leadership roles. Despite these strengths, balancing parenting and study produced considerable time pressure and financial constraints and affected wellbeing. Single parents tended to have exceptionally high demands on their time and an increased likelihood of economic hardship, including housing issues.

We found that the COVID-19 pandemic caused additional challenges for many student parents, including significant disruptions to their own study arrangements and restricted childcare options. Transitions to remote learning for school-aged children and impacts on employment activities were demanding and stressful. As a result of the crisis, parenting responsibilities increased, mental health was negatively impacted, and financial pressures worsened. A substantial portion of student parents were forced to reduce their study load to manage their changed family and domestic commitments.

In general, student parents noted a lack of understanding and accommodation of their needs across the higher education community. Studying was often made more difficult by inflexible course structures and study requirements. Timetabling was overly rigid and applying for special consideration could be onerous . Compulsory placements were difficult to organise satisfactorily, especially when they were unpaid and inflexible towards parenting schedules. Participants highlighted a range of initiatives that could promote their success, including specific scholarships and bursaries, and increased flexibility around study arrangements, special consideration, timetabling, and placements.

Additional research is needed to further understand student parents' issues, and to identify, support, and monitor the success of these students. It is clear from our research that the requirements of student parents are different from those of the general student population, and these students can readily convey their issues and suggestions if given the appropriate forum. Greater awareness and appreciation of this often disadvantaged group is needed.

Collectively, evidence suggests that higher education institutions could formulate specific policies around student parents to improve their success levels. These students are an asset in higher education due to their many strengths and wide-ranging experiences, yet effective support and understanding is lacking. There exists a clear opportunity and obligation to attract and retain student parents who are committed to achieving a higher education.

Recommendations

Higher education institutions

1. Collect and report on student parent data at the time of application or enrolment, via confidential means, if targeted support can be offered and progress monitored.

2. Promote institutional awareness of the likelihood that a high proportion of higher education students have parenting responsibilities. Develop communication strategies and professional development activities that highlight the unique strengths and challenges of student parents, with direct input from student parents themselves.

3. Extend traditional university outreach activities beyond secondary schools to adult settings, community groups, and networks that serve parents. Foreground alternative entry pathways and consider employing student parents as outreach officers.

4. Encourage transitions from vocational education and training (VET) programs and participation in taster courses, enabling programs, and foundation studies where needed to increase preparedness for university study, especially for parents transitioning to higher education later in life. Ensure enabling and foundation programs are available part time and taster courses and experiential opportunities do not coincide with school holidays.

5. Recognise the strengths and qualities of parents and their contributions to family and community in contextual admissions schemes.

6. Advocate, mobilise and coordinate resources and expertise to support student parents through peak bodies such as the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE) and Equity Practitioners in Higher Education Australasia (EPHEA).

7. Consider student parents' needs when designing flexible study and assessment arrangements, including: preferential access to timetables; streamlined special consideration processes; learning access plans that recognise parenting responsibilities as an added challenge in meeting learning goals; support services that are accessible remotely; and flexibility around assignment extensions.

8. Include student parents in targeted financial support measures, including tuition fee waivers and cost-of-living scholarships for those most in need.

9. Encourage student parents to confidentially disclose their parental status at the time of application or enrolment and provide these students with information about enrichment opportunities (e.g. leadership, mentoring) and institutional support (e.g. financial assistance, academic support, and counselling).

10. Identify student parents who have made the transition to higher education successfully and use these students as mentors, where possible, and as case studies that outline how effective accommodations and support can promote achievement.

11. Support the establishment of (online and asynchronous) peer groups for student parents to promote the wellbeing and success of student parents.

12. Expand winter and summer subject offerings, and double credit point subjects, to enable student parents to complete their degrees in a shorter timeframe.

13. Create accessible placements which can accommodate parenting responsibilities and provide student parents with preferential choice of placements where possible.

14. Create dedicated study spaces for student parents, with safe and age-appropriate play areas for children.

15. Reserve a sufficient number of on-campus accommodation places for student parents and their families.

16. Create dedicated car parking bays for students who have parenting and other caring responsibilities.

17. Ensure there are adequate parenting facilities, feeding rooms, parenting rooms, rest rooms and baby change rooms, that are clearly signposted and easily accessible to students as well as staff.

18. Apply to the Australian Breastfeeding Association's (ABA) Breastfeeding Welcome Here program. Consider requesting a free site inspection by the ABA to join other higher education institutions who have the accreditation as a Breastfeeding Friendly Workplace.

National and state/territory governments

19. Work with higher education institutions to develop a website and online clearinghouse for prospective student parents. Include provision for student parents in the Beyond School Study Guide and consider more age inclusive language.

20. Commission further research that captures the voices of student parents nationally to inform higher education policy. This work could actively involve student parents in the design and conduct of the research.

21. Increase financial support for parents who are studying, especially single parents. Offer financial incentives for parents to engage in education within the ParentsNext program and consider doubling the Education Entry Payment (EdEP).

22. Introduce additional childcare subsidies for parents who are studying.

Service providers and peak bodies for parents

23. Promote education-specific resources on parenting websites and through helplines to encourage and support access to tertiary education.

24. Access and profile the voices of student parents who have made the transition to tertiary education successfully and use these people as mentors where possible.

25. Consider a tailored social media campaign to recognise and celebrate student parents at important times in the course application cycle.

Introduction

Project overview

This research project was led by La Trobe University's Centre for Higher Education Equity and Diversity Research (CHEEDR). Funding was provided by the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE) at Curtin University. The project was undertaken in collaboration with Victoria University and the Council of Single Mothers and their Children.

This project was designed to establish a national evidential base for analysing student parents in Australian higher education. We adopted a broad definition of student parents as people who provide care for at least one child while studying in higher education. We aimed to explore the motivations, strengths, and challenges of student parents, and to examine targeted policies and strategies to encourage their success. Through this project, we sought to increase the visibility of student parents and inform future policy development and research. We framed our study around four research questions:

1. What barriers do student parents face in accessing and transitioning to higher education?
2. What are the experiences, challenges, and strengths of student parents enrolled in higher education?
3. How have student parents managed, and been affected by, the COVID-19 pandemic?
4. How can universities better support student parents to access, and succeed in, higher education?

The project comprised data analyses, a desktop review, and a national survey. Publicly available datasets were examined for potential insights into the student parent population. The desktop review was conducted to determine the nature and type of institutional support currently available to student parents in higher education. The national survey captured the voices of parents who had studied in higher education.

Report structure

Our report begins with brief context around the national student parent population and a review of the limited literature on parents in Australian higher education. This section includes comparative context focussed on the United Kingdom (UK), which has progressed further than Australia in research and policy development for student parents. We subsequently outline our methods, including data analyses, a desktop review, and a national survey. Our national survey findings are then described in relation to: the transition of student parents into higher education; their experiences once enrolled in higher education; the specific effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the experiences of student parents in 2021; and the level of institutional support provided to student parents in higher education. We then discuss the implications of our findings and summarise the major trends emerging from our research. Finally, we present higher education guidelines for staff working with students who are parents and for prospective students who are parents.

Context

Australian context

Many parents in Australia face educational and employment disadvantage due to caring responsibilities, time pressures, and financial constraints. Within the higher education system, parents often encounter processes and structures that have not been designed to cater to their unique strengths and needs. Supporting parents to access higher education is important as higher levels of study are linked with improved employment prospects and financial security (Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 2013; Norton, Cherastidtham, & Mackey, 2018). Success in higher education is likely to have a positive impact on parents, their families, and the economy more broadly.

Higher education provides a potential pathway out of disadvantage for parents at risk of welfare dependency, including young parents, single parents, and parents from low socio-economic backgrounds. Some parents and guardians of young children are eligible to receive income support via the Australian Government, known as the Parenting Payment (Australian Government Department of Social Services [DSS], 2016a). Data within the Australian Priority Investment Approach to Welfare (APIA) report showed that people receiving the Parenting Payment are likely to remain on income support for many years, costing the economy $441,000 per person (DSS, 2016a,b). Additionally, the APIA analysis showed that young parents (aged 18 and under) are at further risk of long-term welfare dependency, costing the economy $547,000 per person. The Council of Single Mothers and their Children undertook a national survey of over 1000 single mothers, which demonstrated that increased education levels reduced reliance on government payments as a primary source of income (Sebastian & Ziv, 2019).

While the advantages associated with higher education are clear, parents face many obstacles to accessing this level of study. Access for many parents is hindered by high demands on time, financial costs, and the inflexible nature of study requirements. Despite these barriers, student parents have been largely absent from the Australian student equity agenda. The higher education equity framework does not identify students who are parents as an equity group (Harvey, Burnheim, & Brett, 2016). The equity groups identified by the framework include people from low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds; people from regional and remote areas; people from non-English speaking backgrounds (NESB); Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders (also referred to as Indigenous peoples); people with a disability, and women in non-traditional areas, such as science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (Department of Education, Employment and Training, 1990). Much of the student equity funding, policy, data collection, and research has been focussed on these six equity groups, while other groups, such as student parents, have received relatively little support and attention. Importantly, higher education institutions collect longitudinal data on access, participation, success, and retention of the six equity groups (Bradley et al., 2008). In contrast, there is a dearth of data about student parents in Australian higher education.

There is limited literature focussing on student parents in Australian higher education. Several studies have focussed more broadly on mature-age students (aged 21 years and over), however, and captured student parents within these larger groups. While acknowledging that gender is not binary, these studies highlight the persistence of traditional, and socially constructed, gender roles of women as ‘carers’ and men as ‘breadwinners’. In one study of mature-age students, Stone and O’Shea (2013) found that men and women used and perceived time differently. A major challenge for women, particularly those who had children, was finding enough time to care for their families, keep up with domestic responsibilities, and meet study demands. In contrast, men indicated that study time was given special significance within their families and kept separate from other demands. In related research, Stone and O’Shea (2019) explored the experiences of female mature age students who were studying online and found that choices were greatly

influenced by family and caring responsibilities. Family members could be a source of inspiration and encouragement for study, and supportive partners could facilitate success. Competing responsibilities often took priority over study, however, with the identity of 'student' sitting behind other identities such as 'parent' or 'carer'.

With the global COVID-19 pandemic, these challenges are exacerbated for mothers. Wood, Griffiths, and Crowley (2021) found that women are experiencing a 'triple whammy' during the COVID-19 crisis as, compared with men, women were more likely to lose their jobs, more likely to take on additional unpaid work, such as supervising children who were learning from home, and less likely to receive government support in the form of JobKeeper due to the exclusion of short-term casual employees. Research suggests that female students with young children were particularly impacted by COVID-19. Looking at domestic higher education students, Norton (2021) found that, between 2019 and 2020, enrolments by women with children aged 14 years or younger decreased by 19,000, while enrolments by women without young children increased by 28,000.

A small number of Australian studies have examined the experiences of student parents exclusively, often concentrating on smaller subgroups such as postgraduate students and/or single parents. Bosch (2013) completed a doctorate thesis on postgraduate mature age mothers in Western Australia. Findings showed that the main challenges experienced by mothers were timetabling and childcare issues and a lack of support to succeed at university. Nevertheless, the mothers in this study overcame these challenges due to a strong motivation to succeed, excellent organisational and time management skills, partner support, and reduced sleep and recreation time. Higher education provided these mothers with an enhanced sense of confidence, freedom, achievement, and professional identity. Additionally, the children of students benefitted by having a strong educational role model, and a parent with additional skills and improved career prospects.

Relatedly, Corkish and Shaw (2018), who surveyed 81 postgraduate student parents, found that two thirds of these students had never used existing parenting services, such as childcare centres, parenting rooms, change tables in bathrooms, and late-opening parking stations. Top priorities for improvement were more affordable childcare, parking permits for part-time student parents, and shorter-term childcare options. As part of a pilot study, Szalkowicz and Andrewartha (submitted 2020) interviewed 18 student parents, comprising a mix of undergraduate and postgraduate students, and emphasised the need for more flexible institutional policies and practices and increased targeted support for these students.

Australian studies investigating the experience of students who are single parents have found additional obstacles to success. Hook (2016) found that postgraduate mothers who were single parents faced additional barriers because responsibilities for household duties, finances and childcare could not be shared or divided. All ten mothers in this study had experienced difficulty accessing on-campus classes or seminars. The participants were also reluctant to share their single parent status in the university context for fear that they would be judged negatively and misunderstood. Beattie (2019) interviewed five single student parents and found that, while single parents faced significant educational disadvantages, they drew on personal strengths and alternative forms of cultural capital to help them succeed at university.

Additionally, research by Andrewartha and Harvey (2020) on university students who provided unpaid care to friends and family members also provided some insights of relevance to the current project. The majority of students in this study were providing care for a child and/or parent with a disability, illness or other additional need. Findings showed that students who were carers were often pressed for time and finances, and university systems and processes were found to be excessively rigid and inconsiderate of the needs of students with responsibilities outside of study.

Comparative context from the United Kingdom

Compared with Australia, there has been a greater focus on researching and supporting student parents in the United Kingdom. Studies from the UK show that student parents are highly motivated to complete higher education. Parents often seek higher education to improve their financial security, change careers, be a positive role model for their children, and pursue a study interest (Brooks, 2013; Hinton-Smith, 2016; National Union of Students, 2009; Moreau & Kerner, 2015; Osborne et al., 2004). Studies show single parents, in particular, see higher education as a passport to financial security, and are often motivated to reduce their reliance on government benefits and combat negative stereotypes around lone parents (Hinton-Smith, 2016; Osborne et al., 2004; National Union of Students, 2009). Indeed, research by Hinton-Smith (2012; 2016) highlighted how becoming a single parent can be a catalyst for the reassessment of priorities and a return to learning.

While student parents can be a diverse group, research from the UK shows that they encounter a number of common difficulties. The major obstacles for student parents have been shown to be financial difficulties and excessive time demands (Alsop, 2008; Hinton-Smith, 2016; Moreau & Kerner, 2012; 2015). As noted by Moreau and Kerner (2012) financial difficulties are not unique to student parents, however, compared to other students, student parents tend to have relatively high expenses and limited availability for paid work.

Another common issue among student parents is a feeling of guilt associated with their dual roles (Brooks, 2013; Moreau & Kerner, 2012; Osborne et al., 2004). Moreau and Kerner (2012) described how parenting and study are both 'open-ended commitments' and "there seems to be always room for becoming a 'better' parent or producing 'better' academic work." (p. 220). Along with feelings of guilt, student parents have expressed feelings of missing out on, and not fitting in with, the 'traditional' student lifestyle due to the constraints on their time (Moreau & Kerner, 2015; National Union of Students, 2009).

Along with the challenges described above, evidence from the UK also shows student parents could be at increased risk of attrition in higher education. A survey of 2,167 student parents in the UK found that as many as 60 per cent had thought about discontinuing their studies (National Union of Students, 2009). This figure rose to 65 per cent for single parents. This research also noted pregnancy as another reason students may take time out of study. It was found that, while pregnant students can be supported to study, the default expectation was that they would discontinue or defer their studies.

The UK has progressed further than Australia in supporting student parents in higher education. To support the identification of student parents, the UK's University and Colleges Admissions Service recently introduced a question for those applying to postgraduate courses, 'Are you a parent or do you have parenting responsibilities?' with parents advised to select 'yes' if they are 'a parent or responsible for the care and wellbeing of a child aged 17 or under' (UCAS, 2021a). There are plans to add this question to the undergraduate application in future.

In the UK, UCAS also has a dedicated webpage that outlines support and advice for students with parenting responsibilities (UCAS, 2021b). The webpage details available government support including tuition fee and maintenance loans, the Childcare Grant, and the Parents' Learning Allowance. Prospective students are advised to inform universities about their parental status, and to detail the transferrable skills they have gained through parenting in their personal statements. Additional advice includes booking a childcare place, even before a university offer is confirmed, and investigating baby changing and feeding facilities. In addition, many higher education institutions have their own student parent webpages that clearly signpost relevant programs and policies, including childcare options, accommodation, flexible arrangements, parental leave, and financial support.

Methods

Ethics approval for this research project was granted by the La Trobe University Human Ethics Committee (HEC20440). Information for this project was collated from the following sources: publicly available datasets; a desktop review; and an online national survey.

Firstly, given there was no national data on the parenting status of higher education students, four publicly available datasets were examined for potential insights into the size and geo-demographic profile of the student parent population. These datasets were: the 2016 Census of Population and Housing; the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY); the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey; and the Survey of Education and Work (SEW).

Secondly, a desktop review was conducted to ascertain the nature and type of institutional support currently available to student parents studying at the 39 universities that are members of Universities Australia (including both public and private universities) (Universities Australia, 2021). The review was conducted in March 2021 and involved a systematic search of information that was publicly available via Australian university websites, using the search terms ‘parent’ and ‘parenting’.

Finally, the voices of parents were captured via a national survey of parents who had studied in higher education, including students who were currently studying, students who had discontinued their studies, and students who had graduated. The survey comprised 56 questions and was administered via the QuestionPro online survey tool. Topics covered included: demographics; parenting role; transition to higher education; experience in higher education; future plans; the level of support available; and the impact of COVID-19. A number of questions included in our survey mirrored those in the Student Experience Survey which allowed some comparisons between our student parent sample and the broader university student population (Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching [QILT], 2021).The survey comprised a mix of question types, including questions requiring participants to select one option, select as many options as apply, or enter free text comments. Questions were not mandatory, allowing participants to skip questions they did not wish to answer. As such, the number of responses (‘n’) differs slightly for each question.

The online survey was opened on 14 April 2021 and promoted widely online, including via social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, and via peak bodies such as National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE), the Council of Single Mothers and their Children (CSMC), Equity Practitioners in Higher Education Australasia (EPHEA), and the National Union of Students (NUS). Recruitment materials specifically targeted people who had studied at higher education level at an Australian university, or other higher education institution, while providing care for at least one child. The survey was closed on 22 July 2021 with a total of 578 survey responses.

Findings

National data on students who are parents

We found a general lack of publicly available information about higher education students who are parents in Australia. Given that no formal higher education dataset includes parenting status, alternative datasets were interrogated for answers as to the size and nature of this population. Based on our research questions, our criteria sought to include parents, including foster parents and kinship carers, and sought to exclude paid and informal childcare. Datasets that capture information on Australian parents include: the 2016 Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Census of Population and Housing survey; the Longitudinal Survey of Australian Youth (LSAY); the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey; and the ABS Education and Work survey. While none of the four public data sources canvassed provided a complete picture, we were able to gain some insights.

Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Census of Population and Housing Survey

The first major data source investigated was the ABS national Census data from 2016, which gave a high level snapshot of the number of parents who were studying. Of the four datasets examined, the Census data was the most useful and comprehensive but was also, at the time of writing, the least contemporaneous. The 2016 ABS Census is published in accessible format to researchers using Census Tables. The data was in non-identifiable form and freely available for community and academic use. The researchers using the data registered and agreed to the conditions of use. Tables were constructed using TableBuilder Basic from the ABS. Topic-based data cubes were accessed which included classifications such as age, education, marital status and domestic status, family structure, and studying status. Table 1 presents data on people studying in tertiary institutions while caring for their own children.

Table 1: People studying in tertiary institutions while caring for their own children

	Single and cared for own children	Single and cared for own children % of total students	Cared for own children	Cared for own children % of total students	Total students
Total students	31,170	2.7%	147,186	12.7%	1,160,619
Full time	13,853	1.7%	51,987	6.2%	839,267
Part time	17,124	5.4%	94,480	29.8%	316,775

Notes:

1. 2016 Census - Employment, Income and Education; STUP Full-Time/Part-Time Student Status by MSTP Registered Marital Status and MDCP Social Marital Status by CHCAREP Unpaid Child Care by TYPP Type of Educational Institution Attending. Counting: Persons Place of Usual Residence
2. Cared for their own children total includes single and partnered
3. Cared for own children includes ‘cared for own children and others’
4. ‘Single’ includes those never married/not married, never married/not applicable, widowed/not married, widowed/not applicable, divorced/not married, divorced/not applicable, separated/not married, separated/not applicable.

Table 1 shows that, in 2016, for students enrolled in a university or other tertiary institution, 12.7 per cent had cared for their own children in the previous fortnight. Furthermore, 2.7 per cent of enrolled students were single and had cared for their own children – a group that can be considered as single parents. The differences between full-time and part-time study were stark, with 29.8 per cent of part-time students having looked after their own children compared with 6.2 per cent full-time students.

Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY)

Administered by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER), the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY) seeks to understand key transitions and pathways in the lives of young people and surveys them annually for ten years between ages of 15 to 25 years (NCVER, 2020a; 2020b). Given that the dataset focuses on young people, and extant literature shows that parents can often return to study at later period, there are limitations to its usefulness for our purposes. Nevertheless, being a cohort study there are some advantages to this dataset as participants can be traced and prevalence of life events better understood.

We were able to explore the data using existing unit record data files and focused on the fields which were: social/number of dependent children XCHIYYYY and XCEL2013 (derived: current qualification level). Exploratory analysis of LSAY was undertaken for this project and data were extracted for 2009 LSAY cohort at their Wave 5 and 6 to determine what respondents with children were doing at age 20 (Wave 5 in 2014).

We noted that there were attrition issues in the dataset which impacted very specific queries and the overall proportion of the number of parents in the cohort was not reliable enough to be reported. Instead, what LSAY investigations helped illuminate was how many of respondents with dependent children were studying.

- 4667 respondents were found who had one or more dependent children at that point
- 3265 of those with children were studying
- 2497 of those with children were studying Bachelor degrees
- 2 of those with more than one child were studying Bachelor degrees.

These data show that a large proportion of the parents who are aged 20 and have dependent children are studying, and most are undertaking Bachelor degrees. In contrast, very few parents who are aged 20 and have more than one child are undertaking Bachelor degrees.

Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey

An additional data source we analysed was the University of Melbourne based Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey (Melbourne Institute, 2021). The survey is a cohort study and the panel comprises nearly 17,000 Australians. Our partner institution, the Council of Single Mothers and their Children (CSMC) has found this dataset useful in understanding family life, gendered labour, how households operate, and economic and personal well-being. We hoped to find out how many families with dependent children were studying. However, our initial analysis revealed that the number of parents studying in the higher education sector was less than 100 in number, which meant no further analysis was possible using this dataset.

Survey of Education and Work (SEW)

The national Survey of Education and Work (SEW), run by the ABS, is part of the Monthly Population Survey and reports on engagement and employment. While it is a rich data source reflecting the labour force, and can be very helpful for insights about economic activity, it does not record parental status nor caring responsibilities in a way that would enable meaningful extraction to support our research.

Existing support for student parents in Australian higher education

Our desktop review of support for student parents in Australian higher education found that support varied considerably between institutions and was often limited and difficult to locate. We found that universities generally had clear provisions for staff and students who were parents within their Human Resources **policies** and flexible work arrangements, however these policies were often listed under staff webpages and therefore difficult for students to find or access.

Almost all universities had a website with information about **childcare facilities** (on campus, or nearby). However, we noted that many childcare facilities did not offer occasional/casual care, meaning students would have to pay full day rates even if they only needed childcare for one tutorial. The cost of childcare was also particularly striking, often costing over $100 per day, and therefore likely only accessible to parents with higher incomes.

Most universities had information on their websites about **parenting facilities**, including feeding rooms, parenting rooms, rest rooms and baby change rooms. These rooms often had items such as a change table, fridge, microwave, and bottle warmer. However, we found that in some cases parents had to send an email to request access to this room, make a booking, or ask the security team to unlock the room. Such processes do not account for the often immediate need that parents have for these facilities. Many universities also only had a few parenting rooms across large campuses making it impractical and time consuming for parents to access these rooms.

Approximately one in four universities had a **dedicated webpage** outlining support for student parents. The quality and depth of these webpages varied considerably. Some webpages simply had a link to childcare and feeding rooms, while other webpages offered detailed information and resources including student parent guides, information about flexible study arrangements, and video interviews with student parents.

A small number of universities had **peer networks** for student parents, which often catered to students who were carers and/or parents. La Trobe University, for example, had established a parents and carers meet-up group (LTU, 2020). Some universities also adapted their peer network groups during COVID-19. For example, Australian National University's Postgraduate and Research Students' Association offered online and socially distanced events (ANU PARSA, 2021) and Edith Cowan University's parent and carer network had an online community group and virtual check-in meetings (ECU, 2020).

A small number of universities had **tailored resources** for student parents, such as guides, toolkits, and checklists. The University of Southern Queensland developed the Studying Parents Zone comprising online articles and resources (USQ, 2021a). A similarly small number of universities had **reserved parking bays** for student parents and/or pregnant mothers.

It appeared that approximately a quarter of universities offered **grants and bursaries** tailored specifically to student parents, with a greater number offering general equity or access grants that included caring or parenting responsibilities as one of the eligibility criteria. A small number of universities offered a grant that was specifically for single parents. The University of Canberra's 'Lorna May Award' assisted mature-age female students who were single parents and undertaking their first degree of undergraduate studies at the university (UC, 2021). Very few university scholarship websites had a tick box for parents, making it difficult for student parents to find relevant scholarships. In contrast, there were often numerous tick boxes for other student groups and circumstances, including financial difficulty, regional students, and students from a refugee background.

A handful of universities featured **interviews and videos** with student parents. For example, Griffith University's website has a video interview with a sole parent student, and her

motivations for study, higher education experiences, and advice (GU, 2021). USQ has an article written by student parent Kahlie on ‘parenting and studying – how I cope with mummy guilt’ (USQ, 2021b). Other **innovative supports** included parent study spaces, monthly playdates for student parents’ children (ANU), the ‘Kids in Class’ program (Victoria University), and recruitment videos that highlight parents as students (USQ, 2021c).

Overall, we found that most universities had some information about childcare options and parenting rooms on their publicly available websites, but additional forms of support, information and resources for student parents were limited. These findings suggest that student parents are not considered ‘traditional’ students, and their circumstances are not routinely considered in admissions policies, timetabling, campus services, course structures, or study requirements. While our focus was on publicly accessible websites, it is probable that there were additional references to parents made within diversity and inclusion strategies and on staff and student intranet pages. Nevertheless, the lack of publicly available information indicates that student parents are institutionally marginalised and somewhat hidden in higher education.

National survey of student parents

A total of 578 student parents responded to the survey. The majority of participants identified as female (93 per cent), were living in a household with children (76 per cent), and were current higher education students (73 per cent). Table 2 presents a summary of participant characteristics.

Table 2: Characteristics of student parents who responded to the survey

	Number	Percentage
Gender (n = 577)		
Female	536	93%
Male	41	7%
Prefer to self describe	0	0%
Current age (n = 567)		
18 - 24 years	6	1%
25 - 29 years	33	6%
30 - 34 years	118	21%
35 - 39 years	135	24%
40 - 44 years	117	21%
45 years and over	158	28%
Geo-demographics (n = 578) *(able to select multiple options)*		
Living in a household with children	441	76%
Living in a regional or rural area	164	28%
Identify as having a mental health condition	144	25%
Born overseas	139	24%
From a non-English speaking background	47	8%
Identify as having a disability	30	5%
Identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander	28	5%
Identify as LBGTIQA+	24	4%
International student	19	3%
Spent time in out-of-home care (including foster care, residential care, kinship care, and/or being a ward of the State)	16	3%
From a new migrant/refugee background	10	2%
None of the above	21	4%
Prefer not to disclose	4	1%
Level of study undertaken while caring for child/ren (n = 578)		
Diploma	23	4%
Advanced Diploma, Associate Degree	0	0%
Bachelor Degree	288	50%
Bachelor Honours Degree, Graduate Certificate, Graduate Diploma	62	11%
Masters Degree	132	23%
Doctoral Degree	51	9%
Other	22	4%
Current education status (n = 578)		
Current higher education student	423	73%
Higher education graduate	135	23%
Former higher education student who discontinued study prior to completion	20	3%

Most student parents had cared for more than one child while studying (75 per cent). Nearly one third of the student parents in our sample were single parents (31 per cent). Nearly one third of participants were caring for at least one child with additional care needs (e.g. disability, mental illness, chronic condition, terminal illness) (30 per cent). Most student parents also engaged in paid or unpaid work, other than parenting, while studying (80 per cent). Table 3 presents a summary of parenting and additional work responsibilities.

Table 3: Parenting and additional work responsibilities

	Number of participants	Percentage of participants
Single parent (n = 576)		
Yes, with sole custody	118	21%
Yes, with shared custody	60	10%
No	398	69%
Number of children cared for while studying (n = 578)		
One	147	25%
Two	266	46%
Three	114	20%
Four or more	51	9%
At least one child had additional care needs (n = 576)		
Yes	175	30%
No	401	70%
Pregnant while studying (n = 577)		
Yes	166	29%
No	408	71%
Prefer not to disclose	3	<1%
Care arrangements while studying (n = 576) *(able to select multiple options)*		
My care arrangements include my partner/spouse (children's biological parent)	372	65%
My care arrangements include paid care	326	57%
My care arrangements include my extended family	232	40%
My care arrangements include my partner/spouse (not children's biological parent)	25	4%
Other	69	12%
Engaged in paid or unpaid work, other than parenting, while studying (n = 577)		
Yes	462	80%
No	115	20%
[If engaged in work] Hours of paid or unpaid work a week (n = 462)		
Less than 20 hours	200	43%
20 – 29 hours	202	44%
40 hours or more	60	13%

The transition of student parents into higher education

Pathways and applications to university

Student parents were motivated to attend higher education for a combination of reasons. The most common motivating factors were improving future employment opportunities (reported by 82 per cent of participants) and pursuing a degree in an area of interest (70 per cent). Financial considerations were also important, with many student parents motivated by the opportunity to improve their future financial security (62 per cent) and/or increase their earning capacity (54 per cent). Another common reason for parents to pursue higher education was to provide a positive role model for their children (59 per cent). One student parent described a number of these motivating factors in the following example comment:

> *I chose to study at uni not only for my own enjoyment and career progression but as a way to model commitment and work ethic to my daughters.*

Some student parents had experienced a non-linear pathway into higher education and returned to study later in life. Before commencing higher education, 16 per cent of student parents had completed a vocational education and training (VET) qualification at a technical and further education (TAFE) institution or other registered training organisation (RTO). Nine per cent of student parents had completed a university bridging/foundation/enabling program before entering higher education study.

Student parents had chosen a range of fields of education, the most common being teacher education (26 per cent), followed by humanities, culture and social sciences (15 per cent), nursing (13 per cent), health services and support (10 per cent), and business and management (9 per cent).

While it was evident that many student parents had gained valuable skills and life experiences prior to entering higher education, these qualities were not routinely taken into account. This point was illustrated by the following student remark:

> *[Please stop] treating me like an 18 year old with no experience. So many subjects assumed I hadn't done anything or was straight out of school. There was no Recognition of Prior Learning, or if there was, it was very difficult to prove.*

Prospective students can apply to higher education institutions directly or via state-based tertiary admissions centres (TACs). Nearly three quarters of student parents applied for higher education via direct application (73 per cent), while the remainder applied via a TAC. Of those who applied via a TAC, very few parents reported that they had completed the forms for an educational or special entry access scheme as part of their application (only 6 per cent). Given many student parents would have been eligible for these schemes, due to financial hardship for example, this appeared to be an unusually small proportion. Further, there was a number of participants who recorded that they were ‘unsure’ if they had utilised an access scheme and so it is possible that they were uncertain if they had done so or misunderstood the question.

Transition support

Only one third of student parents reported a smooth transition to university (33 per cent). As Table 4 shows, only a minority of student parents felt prepared for study; received support from their institutions to settle into study; felt that induction/orientation activities were relevant and helpful; and had a sense of belonging at their institution. Table 4 compares the results of our survey with those of the National Student Experience Survey 2020, using per cent positive ratings (i.e. the proportion of participants responding ‘quite a bit’ or ‘very much’ to each statement) (QILT, 2021). While not a perfect comparison, these data suggest that student parents were less satisfied with their transition to university than the broader student population. Such findings suggest a need for more targeted transition support for student parents, along with broader initiatives to foster a sense of belonging among this group.

Table 4: Transition to university for student parents and the broader student population — per cent positive ratings

	Student parents	All undergraduate students	All postgraduate coursework students
Felt prepared for study	47%	63%	69%
Received support from your institution to settle into study	36%	60%	63%
Felt induction/orientation activities were relevant and helpful	28%	56%	62%
Had a sense of belonging to your institution	35%	41%	43%

Disclosure of parental status

Only one in ten student parents had disclosed their parenting role as part of their higher education application. The most common place to share this information was via a personal statement. Fifty eight per cent of student parents had not shared the fact that they were a parent as part of their university application, while the remaining 32 per cent were unsure if they had done so. In some cases, parents may not have perceived a clear opportunity or benefit to sharing this information, while others might have chosen to keep this information private. It was apparent from these findings that higher education institutions did not have processes in place to routinely capture parental status and any advantages associated with supplying this information had not been clearly articulated.

During their studies, 90 per cent of student parents did disclose that they were a parent to others. Most commonly student parents disclosed their parenting status to academic staff (78 per cent), followed by other students (71 per cent), and other staff, including library and support staff (28 per cent). Interestingly, a small proportion of student parents never told anyone that they were a parent (10 per cent). The most common reasons for not sharing parental status included never being asked, not having the opportunity to disclose this information, feeling it was not relevant to study, and/or feeling that it would not make a difference to study requirements or support levels. These findings suggest that institutions could do more to create opportunities for students to share their parental status in terms of this being an asset to study.

The experiences of student parents enrolled in higher education

The value of university study

Overall, student parents were positive about their experiences in higher education. The majority of participants (94 per cent) indicated that they would recommend higher education to other student parents. Nearly all of the student parents who were currently enrolled in higher education indicated that they were planning to complete their current course (98 per cent). Only 2 per cent of parents were not planning to complete their course, citing reasons relating to family responsibilities, offers of paid employment, and mental health.

When asked what they had gained from higher education, many student parents described a sense of accomplishment, increased independence, and a sense of identity outside of being a parent, as well as increased academic skills and knowledge and improved career prospects. Parents also described additional benefits for their children. As one student parent explained:

I couldn't work in my field without a higher degree, so education has given me my livelihood, improved the financial situation of my family, allowed us access to better housing. I've made friends and overall feel that my life has greater purpose.

Transferable skills and qualities

Student parents reported a range of skills they had developed during their parenting role that helped in higher education. The most commonly mentioned skill was effective time management, with multi-tasking and prioritising being important as both a parent and a student. An example of a typical comment from a parent was:

> *As a parent, I am super organised and get things done in advance. I like to be prepared for the unexpected, for example a child sick the night before something is due.*

Student parents also commonly possessed useful qualities such as patience, empathy, resilience, and determination. Having gained life experience through parenting was also found to be beneficial to higher education studies. One participant summed up several of these qualities in the following statement:

> *I think my general life experience, work history and role as a parent made me a better learner and probably more tolerant and open.*

The presence of student parents at university was perceived to improve the broader student experience. Student parents were asked to describe the ways that other students, university staff, lecturers and tutors benefited from the skills and qualities they had developed in their parenting roles. Many student parents reported that the life experience and maturity associated with being a parent could be harnessed to assist other students. An increased capacity for understanding and empathy among parents meant that they were willing to support their student peers in times of need, as demonstrated in the following student quote:

> *During the pandemic I was a shoulder for a lot of younger students. I had more life experience and I was more willing to engage the course coordinators to get answers to our issues.*

Several student parents also recalled how their parenting role gave a different perspective to share in class discussions. One parent described these useful qualities in the following observation:

> *I think I can add a different perspective to many discussions. I am empathetic and can listen to all sides of a story then present it in a way that others can understand. I feel that I have been helpful to my classmates when they have been stressed, as I like to offer advice and encouragement.*

On a practical level, parents often took on leadership roles in group work where they could demonstrate their skills to the benefit of the team. One student, who was a mother, described her strong leadership skills in the following manner:

> *I'll become the 'Mum' or 'boss lady' of a group or team, give good advice, care for the members, and keep everyone on track and moving forward.*

Challenges

Table 5 shows the main challenges experienced by student parents that negatively affected study.

Table 5: Circumstances that negatively affected study

(n = 576) *(participants were able to select multiple options)*	Number of participants	Percentage of participants
Lack of time due to parenting responsibilities	500	87%
Concern/worry relating to parenting responsibilities	425	74%
Time spent thinking about your child/ren	335	58%
Financial hardship	278	48%
Issues organising childcare	261	45%
Mental health issues	220	38%
Inflexible placement rules	156	27%
Physical health issues	121	21%
Housing issues	70	12%
Pregnancy related issues	69	12%
Breast feeding related issues	61	11%
Family law matters	52	9%
Conception / Fertility related issues or treatment	15	3%

As presented in Table 5, an overarching challenge for student parents was lack of time. Student parents spent a considerable amount of time fulfilling their parenting role and worrying about their parenting commitments, which limited their ability to focus on study. Many student parents had difficulty finding sufficient time to study, and it was common for parents with younger children to wait until their children were asleep. Additionally, student parents experienced interruptions to study due to the unpredictable nature of caring for others. Several participants commented on the feeling of guilt associated with splitting time between caring for children and studying. This concept was articulated in the following reflection from a student parent:

> *It's incredibly difficult to prioritise and as a parent. You feel guilty for spending time with your studies [rather] than with the kids...*

Financial hardship was another cause of concern. As shown in Table 5, nearly half of student parents experienced financial hardship and 12 per cent experienced housing issues. Indeed, approximately half of the participants received financial assistance through the Australian Government's Centrelink program (52 per cent) (please see Table 6). The most common forms of financial support were Family Tax Benefit (FTB) Part A and Part B. Most respondents had not received a scholarship or bursary to study at university (77 per cent).

Table 6: Financial support received as a parent

	Number of participants	Percentage of participants
Financial support from Centrelink (n = 578)		
Yes	300	52%
No	278	48%
[If received financial support] Type of financial support (n = 300) *(able to select multiple options)*		
Family Tax Benefit (FTB) Part A	238	79%
Family Tax Benefit (FTB) Part B	217	72%
Childcare subsidy	159	53%
Parenting Payment Single	107	36%
Pensioner Education Supplement	62	21%
Austudy/ABSTUDY	38	13%
Parenting Payment Couple	35	12%
Jobseeker/Newstart allowance	35	12%
Education Entry Payment	26	9%
Youth allowance	1	0%
Other	29	10%
Scholarship or bursary to study in higher education (n = 578)		
Yes	133	23%
No	445	77%

For the 23 per cent of student parents who received a scholarship or bursary to study in higher education, much of this financial support was provided by the Australian Government (e.g. Australian Postgraduate Awards/Research Training Program) or provided by universities internally. This funding was mostly used to cover living expenses, purchase equipment and materials for study, reduce the number of hours spent in paid work, and relieve financial stress. Several students commented that study would have been impossible without the scholarship or bursary. One student explained the intergenerational benefit of this form of financial support:

> *[This scholarship] enabled me to complete my degree while continuing to pay my mortgage and work part time. Otherwise I would never have justified accumulating a HECS debt and continuing with my postgraduate degree, which led to full-time employment in a professional role. This [qualification] then enabled me to put both my adult children through university so they could secure full-time employment themselves.*

As previously shown in Table 5, mental health issues and physical health issues were common among student parents. When asked to describe the biggest challenges they had experienced, many student parents referred to times of stress and/or sleep deprivation (11 per cent). Along with their own health issues, a substantial proportion of student parents referred to the times when their children were sick as being particularly challenging and disruptive to study (12 per cent). Several parents had difficulties due to the lack of flexibility around timetabling, assessment, and attendance. Unpaid and compulsory placements were a frequent cause of concern for student parents.

Student parents often experienced a narrower student experience than their peers with fewer outside commitments. More than half of student parents found that being a parent limited their ability to participate in extra-curricular activities while studying, including overseas experience, volunteering, and work experience (60 per cent). Several student

parents were frustrated that they could not spend more time with other students, which they felt led to a less fulfilling student experience. One student outlined the feelings associated with being unable to participate more fully in student life:

> *I got a $10,000 scholarship … and I couldn't take it up as I couldn't meet their deadline due to pregnancy/birth. I missed a conference as I was unable to travel as a parent. I lost all contact with other students/friends as I had no time for extra uni activities and just studied at home. I am so lonely and out of touch.*

Single parents

It is worth noting that many of the challenges described above were particularly acute for single parents who had exceptionally high demands on their time and an increased likelihood of financial hardship. Parents who were single were also more likely to have housing issues and family law matters that negatively impacted their study. Reflections from single parents included:

> *It is so hard to be a single parent and raising children let alone studying! … This is so hard I am trying to contribute to my life, my children's [life], and the Australian economy.*

Single parents felt a marked lack of understanding and accommodation from higher education staff and systems. These parents felt especially disadvantaged with inflexible assignment deadlines and unpaid work placements. For example, one single parent explained:

> *[There is a need for] understanding that children don't follow university submission deadlines. They have meltdowns whether you have an assignment due or not. As a single parent, you have no other options sometimes.*

How student parents have managed and been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic

Current students were asked how they had been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated lockdowns and border restrictions. It was evident that the crises had a disruptive and unpredictable effect on the lives of many student parents and their children. One of the main consequences for student parents was that their study transitioned from face-to-face to online, sometimes for extended periods of time. Concurrently, many parents had to assist their children as they transitioned from school-based learning to remote learning. Lockdowns and border closures also meant it was more difficult to obtain assistance with childcare. Paid employment was also impacted by the crisis. Specifically, as a result of the coronavirus and associated restrictions:

- most student parents reported that their parenting responsibilities had increased (69 per cent)
- just over half of participants reported that their mental health had worsened (55 per cent)
- 38 per cent of the student parents reported that their financial situation had worsened.

Despite the above challenges, 80 percent of student parents reported that they had not received any additional support to help with their studies since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, such as increased financial, counselling, or academic support. The following statements highlight the stress and anxiety associated with managing competing responsibilities during the pandemic:

> *I feel very stressed about my ability to prepare for and sit exams when the children are not attending school during lockdown.*
>
> *I feel more anxious over the unknown of the pandemic, which has affected my ability to concentrate with study and remain calm with children at times. The border closure has meant my extended family have been unable to visit and provide childcare relief. I worry that the economic downturn will mean I won't easily gain employment after I graduate.*

Participants were asked what changes, if any, they had made to their enrolment as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and restrictions. Approximately 30 per cent of students reported that they had made no changes to their enrolment, especially if they were already studying completely online, and about 30 per cent of students did not provide a free-text comment in response to this question. Around 10 per cent of student parents had reduced their study load, for example by withdrawing from specific subjects or changing from full-time to part-time study. About seven per cent of student parents reported that they had discontinued their study during the pandemic, including by deferral, taking a leave of absence, and withdrawing. As a result of these changes, it will take additional time for these students to complete their current courses.

The need for additional support for student parents in higher education

As described above, our desktop review revealed that support for student parents was limited and not particularly visible or accessible to students. Our survey found that nearly two thirds of student parents were 'unsure' if their university had any support services, programs, or organisations specifically for parents (65 per cent). Only 9 per cent of student parents reported that their university did have such support. These students were typically referring to onsite childcare and described the challenges of limited places and long waiting lists. It appeared that institutions were not proactively promoting a range of support measures to student parents, which left them to investigate options themselves. As one student parent noted:

> *I'm not 100 per cent sure of the nature of support but apparently there is [some]. I just haven't had a lot of time to look into it.*

Participants were asked what types of support higher education institutions could offer to help student parents succeed. Responses highlighted the importance of a range of additional support measures (see Table 7). Many student parents were in favour of targeted scholarships or bursaries and flexible study arrangements.

Table 7: Additional support to help student parents succeed

(n = 551) *(participants were able to select multiple options)*	Number of participants	Percentage of participants
Scholarships or bursaries for parents	359	65%
Flexible study arrangements	354	64%
Increased awareness and understanding of parenting experience by lecturers and tutors	299	54%
Preferential access to class timetables for parents	263	48%
Simplified processes for special consideration and extensions	259	47%
Institutional webpage outlining the supports available for student parents	255	46%
Study space where children are welcomed	239	43%
Local options for placements, internships and work experience	226	41%
Student parent peer groups	224	41%
Affordable on-campus childcare options	223	40%
More online study options	210	38%
Mentoring from successful student parents	185	34%

The findings presented in Table 7, suggest that student parents would benefit from a suite of support programs and flexible options to suit their needs. One student parent summarised the need to:

> *[Provide] scholarships directed at parents [and] special consideration for carer responsibilities when things such as classes are compulsory. Provide recordings of lectures, increased flexibility with parents due to the nature of caring responsibilities, as well as parent-friendly facilities at universities, such as childminding services that run during lectures.*

Placements were a key area where students expressed the need for increased flexibility, along with advanced notice around placements to help with childcare arrangements, and the option to swap placements with other students, if mutually beneficial. Another specific area of concern was around having to repeatedly request extensions and special consideration,

which was seen to be burdensome and could be stigmatising. Student parents suggested that it would be helpful if such processes were simplified and automated as much as possible. As one student parent explained:

> *You should not need to ask for, and prove, you require an extension on an assignment, … emailing lecturers requesting this, and providing medical certificates to prove your child has been sick, etc. It's another hurdle and sense of shame when I have to do this.*

Three quarters of the former student parents who had discontinued study prior to completion reported that the institution could have done something to encourage them to stay, including providing more flexibility, showing an increased understanding of parents and their commitments, and offering additional support. As one student recalled:

> *Lack of affordable, quality childcare and student placements that did not fit with parenting responsibilities meant I quit my studies.*

Some student parents recalled individual lecturers and other staff members who were very understanding of their situation. However, there was evidence of entrenched attitudes and expectations based on the 'traditional' student who has more time and fewer competing priorities. In general, student parents expressed the need for greater understanding and a desire for supportive attitudes and behaviours to be more commonplace. The following comments sum up these sentiments:

> *Lecturers were okay for me to bring very young baby to class when she was still exclusively breastfed as she didn't transition to the bottle easily. Some lecturers loved it and even wanted cuddles.*

> *[More] compassion during periods of COVID lockdown would have helped. I find female lecturers with children much more understanding.*

These findings highlight the need for professional development activities and communication tools focussed on the strengths and needs of student parents, which harness the voices of parents themselves.

Participants were also asked what support governments could offer to help student parents succeed in their studies. The need for improved financial support from governments was an overarching theme, mentioned by more than two thirds of the respondents. Some participants felt that strict benefit caps and exclusions could be reviewed, and that parents could be offered financial incentives to study in higher education, including tax deductions. It was commonly suggested that childcare could be made more affordable and accessible, including increased governmental entitlements to in-home childcare and extended-hours childcare. Concerns about compulsory and unpaid placements were reiterated, and participants thought governments could improve childcare options and increase financial benefits to help parents complete their placements.

Discussion

Our findings show that student parents possess a range of valuable competencies and qualities that help them succeed in higher education. These attributes are also beneficial to the wider student population. Balancing the responsibilities of being a parent and a student, however, is associated with high demands on time, energy, and financial resources. The COVID-19 pandemic imposed added pressure on many student parents through disruptions to their own study arrangements, combined with remote learning and increased care requirements for their children. A lack of targeted policy, legislative, and institutional support for student parents in Australia contrasts to places such as the United Kingdom.

The paucity of Australian data on the parenting status of higher education students limited our ability to accurately determine the size and geo-demographic profile of the student parent population. Nevertheless, the ABS Census data from 2016 gave a high level snapshot of the large number of parents who are studying. Specifically, as many as 12.7 per cent of students enrolled in a university or other tertiary institution had cared for their own children in the previous fortnight. Student parents therefore comprise a large and important group worthy of specific policy and research attention.

We found existing support for student parents to be limited and variable between institutions. Support services for the general student population were often inadequate for the unique needs of student parents. While on-campus childcare facilities were common, accessibility was an issue as places were in short supply and could be expensive. Basic parenting facilities, including feeding rooms, parenting rooms, rest rooms and baby change rooms, were also limited in number and often difficult to access. More parent-specific forms of support, such as peer networks and specific resources and guidelines, are needed and could be developed and instigated in consultation with student parents. Reserving a sufficient number of conveniently located parking bays would be most advantageous for student parents travelling to and from campus.

It was evident that student parents had a strong drive to succeed in higher education. Consistent with previous research, the participants in our study were highly motivated to improve their future employment opportunities and financial security, pursue an area of interest, and provide a positive role model for their children (Brooks, 2013; National Union of Students, 2009; Moreau & Kerner, 2015; Osborne et al., 2004). Through their studies, student parents reported gaining a sense of accomplishment, independence, and identity beyond being a parent.

We found that major challenges for student parents were time shortages and financial constraints, which aligns with evidence from the UK literature (Alsop, 2008; Moreau & Kerner, 2012; 2015). Overall, nearly half of the participants reported that their study had been negatively impacted by financial hardship and approximately one in ten experienced housing issues. These challenges were even more pervasive for single parents. Perhaps not surprisingly, mental and physical health issues were relatively common. Being pushed for time was associated with feelings of guilt when dividing time between their many roles and commitments. A sense of guilt has also been a theme in international research (Brooks, 2013; Moreau & Kerner, 2012; Osborne et al., 2004). The COVID-19 pandemic made circumstances even more difficult for student parents. Many student parents faced increased family responsibilities, poorer mental health, and worsening financial situations.

It was clear from our research that student parents often experienced a more restricted higher education experience than their peers who had more time available and fewer outside responsibilities. Sixty per cent of the participants reported being indirectly excluded from extra-curricular activities, such as overseas study, volunteering, and relevant work experience. Opportunities to enrich their education and socialise with their peers were rare for students with parenting commitments. These findings correspond with research from the

UK which highlighted how a lack of support means parents can miss out on the 'traditional' student lifestyle (Moreau & Kerner, 2015; National Union of Students, 2009).

Our findings highlight that the challenges student parents experienced could be intensified by the rigid nature of course structures and academic requirements. Of particular concern were difficulties with organising adequate childcare, meeting inflexible assignment deadlines, and attending compulsory, unpaid work placements. Student parents also found it exhausting having to repeatedly request, and justify, extensions and special consideration due to the unpredictable nature of parenting. Andrewartha and Harvey (2020) found that students who were unpaid carers had similar difficulties with arrangements around timetables, submission dates, assessments, attendance, and placements. Taken together, the level of inflexibility encountered shows an insufficient understanding and consideration of students who have responsibilities outside of higher education.

Limitations

It is worth noting several limitations of the current project. While we were able to gain some insights on student parents from the 2016 Census data, this dataset was five years old at the time of writing. It would be interesting to repeat the data extraction with 2021 data when available. The desktop review of institutional websites was conducted in March 2021, and thus represented a snapshot of publicly available information at that time. It is possible that some of this information was out-of-date and that additional information was accessible to students and staff at each institution, for example via password protected portals. The vast majority of the participants in our survey were female and, while data show that women take on the bulk of childcare and domestic activities (ABS, 2018), we were limited in our ability to include meaningful gender comparisons. Further, few of our participants were aged between 18 and 25 years, and so we could not provide specific findings related to younger parents in this report.

Conclusion

Our project contributed to a deeper understanding of the motivations, strengths, accomplishments, and challenges of student parents across Australia, and revealed a scarcity of strategies and policies targeted at this group. These findings have implications for higher education institutions, governments, and peak bodies. Multi-pronged and coordinated strategies are needed to better identify, monitor, and support parents to succeed in higher education. Increased flexibility is crucial. There is a need to address entrenched systems and expectations and demonstrate greater awareness and accommodation of students who have substantial and unpredictable commitments outside of higher education. Please see the guidelines in the following section, along with our full list of recommendations presented at the beginning of this report.

Further work is required to increase the visibility of student parents and inform future policy development and research. Future studies could further investigate the impact of variables such as gender, age, socio-economic status, single parent status, and cultural background on the experiences of student parents. It will be important to actively involve student parents in the design and conduct of this research. It is evident that parents bring a suite of valuable skills and qualities to their studies and supporting their participation in higher education is beneficial for the whole academic community. Giving student parents the best opportunity to succeed in higher education can have wide-ranging benefits for individuals, their families, and the wider Australian population.

Higher education guidelines for professional and academic staff working with students who are parents

A coordinated approach

Disclosure of parental status

Introducing a method of identifying student parents through application and/or enrolment processes enables universities to proactively contact student parents with the support available to them.

Wrap-around and embedded support

Wrap-around support requires strong links between higher education services, including career, counselling, academic, financial, and student union services. By embedding support across the institutions, support for student parents is more likely to be sustainable. Embedded support also raises awareness about the needs and strengths of student parents among staff and students.

Student parent webpage

It is useful to have a webpage with details of, and links to, the support that is available for student parents both on and off campus. This could include information on application and admission processes, and links to academic and financial support, feeding rooms (with screened-off areas for breastfeeding), on campus and local childcare options, special consideration processes and forms, peer support groups, and any other tailored support (e.g. reserved car parks for parents, parent study spaces).

Transition to higher education

Outreach

Staff and students can deliver a range of activities on and off campus to increase understanding of higher education study options. Universities can also engage current student parents and past student parents as outreach facilitators. This approach provides prospective student parents with relevant role models and knowledge sources and also provides student parents with employment opportunities both during and immediately post study.

Pathways

Pathway programs, including bridging, enabling, and foundation courses, which are completed before commencing study, might prove helpful for some student parents. These programs may be particularly useful for student parents who have not previously studied in higher education.

Preferential access to timetables

We found that most student parents are juggling extensive work and family commitments (including school drop offs and childcare arrangements). Institutions could consider preferential access to timetables to increase attendance and engagement for student parents.

Higher education support

Financial assistance

We found that approximately 50 per cent of student parents report that their study is negatively affected by financial circumstances. Student parents, and specifically single parents, can face financial hardship as they balance daily expenses and the costs of childcare, school fees, and study materials. Many single parents work part time alongside their study and caring responsibilities. Student parents might benefit from scholarships and bursaries to assist with the costs associated with studying. Some universities offer tailored scholarships and bursaries to support student parents.

Peer groups and social events

Many student parents feel isolated during university study, and feel they have different experiences and perspectives to other students. Some universities have developed peer support groups (in person and online) to provide opportunities for student parents to form social connections and share their experiences. Universities could offer orientation events for student parents, peer network groups, and (child friendly) parent study groups. Student parents can also be encouraged to join other clubs and societies through student unions and associations.

Career development

Career development services based in higher education institutions are particularly useful for student parents to help them understand the range of career opportunities available to them, articulate their capabilities in job applications, and make employment decisions. Professional career counselling sessions may also support parents to find useful and flexible employability activities that can support their career development, including virtual experiences and asynchronous engagements. Career practitioners need appropriate understanding of parental needs and can help students to plan a balanced approach to their work and studies, which takes into consideration financial, caring, and accommodation issues.

Flexible study arrangements

Where academic staff can provide flexibility, this helps student parents engage with course content amidst the competing demands on their time and the needs of their children. Recorded lectures and online content can be particularly useful for students who are unable to attend certain classes. Students who are unable to meet face-to-face should also be offered the option of Zoom or Skype calls. In providing placements and internships, employers should be aware that there are protections against discrimination in employment in relation to caring responsibilities and flexibility should be a priority.

Special considerations

Some student parents are eligible for special consideration. Special consideration enables compensation for educational disadvantage during exams and assignments. At many universities, special consideration is specifically intended to support students who have recently experienced short-term, adverse, and unforeseen circumstances that substantially impacted on their ability to complete an assessment task to the best of their potential. It is important to familiarise student parents with the special consideration process, and required documentation, in case they need to apply due to sick children, emergency childcare arrangements, family court hearings, and other such matters.

Higher education guidelines for prospective students who are parents

How do I find the right pathway to higher education?

There is lots of information available that can help you find out where to apply for a higher education course and the best way to get there. You can find out about choosing courses on a range of websites which have career information, articles about how to get to higher education, links to available support, and information on alternative pathways.

- studyassist.gov.au
- yourcareer.gov.au
- myfuture.edu.au

There are sites where you can look at the courses available to you and the ratings that previous students have given in relation to student experience and graduate outcomes:

- QILT.edu.au
- gooduniversitiesguide.com.au

How do I pay for higher education?

Almost all higher education places charge tuition fees. Study places are available where the government pays part of your tuition fees. This is called a Commonwealth supported place (CSP), otherwise there are places where you pay the whole amount of your fees. The amount that you have to pay is called the student contribution amount.

As an Australian citizen or permanent resident, your tuition fees can be paid upfront, sometimes in instalments or via a HECS-HELP loan. There are also loans for other reasons, including for students studying higher education outside a university.

Government support when studying

Many Australian citizens or permanent residents who are studying more than 75 per cent can get financial support from the Commonwealth Government if they meet certain conditions. It's worth investigating whether you can get Austudy or Abstudy and there are student profiles available that you can read which show how these allowances work. As you are studying, you may also be eligible for other parenting related payments and you should check all the payments available for families and what entitlements you may have.

Scholarships, bursaries, and other support

Most universities have a range of merit (academic, sport, community volunteering) and equity scholarships available to students. There are also often bursaries (which are usually smaller than scholarships) available for placement, exchange opportunities, and even emergency or hardship situations.

Discounts for students

Many companies and organisation offer discounts for higher education students if they have a certain study load and you should check if you are eligible for a Health Care Concession card, public transport reductions, book purchasing discounts, computers and software special prices, gym membership reduction, insurance and car registration discounts, cheaper tickets to movies, and event and club memberships. These concessions are usually available when you show your student card from your higher education institution.

Why study in higher education?

- Greater access to a wide variety of jobs after graduation, and the capacity to earn more money
- The opportunity to role model tertiary study to your children
- Learning and pursuing an area of interest
- Developing skills that are useful for employment, volunteering, and life
- Gaining confidence through experiences and achievements
- Making friends and connections
- The opportunity to be involved in clubs and societies that suit your interests.

Where do I go to for help?

Study, and life, can be stressful at times. Universities have a range of support services and staff who can point you in the right direction. There is assistance available to all students, including academic advisors and learning advisors who can assist with study related concerns and assignments. Counselling services are available and are a confidential and private service for all students focussing on social and emotional wellbeing. Many universities also offer self-help resources for dealing with stress and anxiety, relationship concerns, and study habits. It is also worth talking with your tutor about anything that might be standing in the way of your studies – they can often point you in the right direction. Peer groups and clubs and societies may also offer a sense of support and community. There are some student parent unions at university as well, so ask your student union. You may be asked to pay a Students Services and Amenities Fee and you can get a loan for this amount along with your HECS-HELP. The National Union of Students is a peak representative and advocacy body for post-school students.

What happens after I finish my degree?

Throughout your degree, it is good to meet with professional career practitioners to discuss employability opportunities, including placements and internships. Career practitioners can also provide advice on developing your application, networking, job applications and potential careers. You could also consider postgraduate study. Many universities allow you to access their career services up to a year after graduating.

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