

RESEARCH REPORT:

Student-Parents' experiences of academic and non-academic support in UK Higher Education

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This report analyses the findings of a nationwide study of students who are also parents (student-parents).

Carried out between May and August 2023, the study builds on previous small-scale research projects into the needs of student-parents¹ and was undertaken in the context of:

- the introduction of a new UCAS question inviting student-parents to self-identify when applying to university; and
- the introduction of the Office for Students' (OfS) Equality of Opportunity Register (EORR).

This report explores participants' experiences of pastoral and academic support at university. It exposes systemic failures in such support for student-parents across the sector which pose a significant risk to their retention, progression and success.

Parental responsibility is not currently identified by OfS as a standalone characteristic likely to place students 'at risk' at university. However, the findings of this study reveal that student-parents are in fact vulnerable to five of the six 'on course' risks identified in the EORR.

This three-part clickable report provides a compelling evidence base to support the inclusion of parental responsibility in the EORR list of student characteristics.

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¹ Todd 2023a; Todd 2023b

Part 1: context

1.1 Background and Aims

Despite being encouraged into higher education by successive governments' widening participation policies, student-parents have historically been 'invisible' in the physical and policy spaces of universities² and 'impossible to track in terms of entrance to, performance at, or attrition rate from, higher education'³.

The aims of the current study were to:

1. Expand the evidence base relating to the experiences, perceptions and needs of student-parents in the UK; and
2. Gather data from a broad range of student-parents to inform two evidence-based toolkits aimed at (i) empowering student-parents to take control of their university journey and (ii) giving personal tutors the tools to support student-parents to succeed.

1.2 Research Approach, Design and Methods

This inductive⁴ pragmatic⁵ study was focussed on gaining a practical understanding of the issues encountered by student-parents with a view to transforming practice⁶.

The data for this study was collected via an anonymous Microsoft Forms survey and an online focus group. The details of each are set out in Tables 1 and 2 overleaf.

This report explores the data gathered relating to student-parent experiences and perceptions of the support they have encountered at university.

² Moreau and Kerner, 2015: 4

³ Todd, 2023b: 165

⁴ Saunders et al., 2012

⁵ Morgan, 2014

⁶ Biesta, 2010

Table 1: Anonymous survey

| | |
|-------------------------|---|
| Aim | To gather quantitative and qualitative feedback on participants' perceptions of their university experiences via a series of open and closed questions. |
| Ethical approval | Provided by University of Chester Law School Research Ethics Committee. |
| Sample | The survey invited responses from those who, at the time of responding: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ had parental responsibility for a child under 18; and ❖ were studying on an undergraduate degree course in the UK or had completed their course within the previous three years. |
| Dissemination | The survey was disseminated via email to the author's network of student-parents, and to academic and support staff contacts at HEPs across the UK requesting the link be shared amongst their student cohorts. A link to the survey was also shared from the author's LinkedIn page. |
| Dates | The survey was open between 7 April 2023 and 7 July 2023. |
| Participants | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ 42 responses were received: 41 responses were valid⁷ ❖ The valid responses came from individuals studying at 14 UK universities. ❖ Appendix 1 to this report provides the detailed characteristics of the survey respondents. An overview is provided below. ❖ 54% (n=22) reported studying at a pre-1992 university, 44% (n=18) at a post-92 university, and one individual reported a Russell Group background. ❖ 85% (n=35) reported studying in England and 15% (n=6) in Scotland.⁸ ❖ 88% (n=36) of respondents are female. ❖ 63.5% of participants fall within the 30-39 age bracket⁹ ❖ Most respondents had either one (46%) or two (37%) children¹⁰ ❖ Participants ranged from foundation year students to those who had graduated within the last three years¹¹, ensuring a spectrum of university experience to draw upon in their responses. |
| Data analysis | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ <i>Quantitative data</i>: a calculation was undertaken of the frequency of each dichotomous and multiple-choice option being selected in the survey's closed questions. ❖ <i>Qualitative data</i>: open question responses were coded using key words¹² and a thematic analysis was undertaken to identify, analyse and report themes within and across survey responses¹³. <p>All data was coded manually given its manageable size.</p> |

⁷ The invalid response came from an individual who had not completed their undergraduate degree in the UK.

⁸ No responses were received from student-parents in Wales or Northern Ireland, despite dissemination of the survey in these two nations.

⁹ 22% reported being between 20 and 29, 12% between 40 and 49, and 2.5% aged 50 or over

¹⁰ 12% reported being a parent to three children, and 5% had four children.

¹¹ Approximately a quarter of respondents reported being in either third (24%) or second (22%) year, with one fifth (20%) in foundation year and the remainder being evenly spread between first year (12%), fourth year (12%) and recent graduates (10%).

¹² Bryman and Bell, 2015

¹³ Braun and Clarke, 2006

Table 2: Online focus group

| | |
|-----------------------------------|--|
| Aims | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. To peer review the first draft of two toolkits devised using insights from the survey data¹⁴ 2. To garner rich qualitative data to contextualise the themes identified in the survey responses. |
| Ethical approval | Provided by University of Chester Law School Research Ethics Committee. |
| Sample | All respondents to the original survey were invited to volunteer to attend the focus group ¹⁵ . |
| Platform | Microsoft Teams meeting, video recorded and transcribed. |
| Date | 23 August 2023. |
| Participants | Five participants attended the focus group. |
| Respondent characteristics | All focus group participants were female. Participants reported studying at an English (n=4) or Scottish (n=1) university. Four universities were represented by the participants. |
| Data analysis | The transcript was manually coded, thematically analysed and triangulated with the themes arising from the survey. |

1.3 Study Limitation

A limitation of this study is its small scale. Providers are not currently obliged to collect data identifying their student-parents, it was not possible to take a targeted approach to survey dissemination amongst this currently ‘invisible’¹⁶ cohort.

It is worth noting that student-parents did not feature in the TASO rapid review of the literature on barriers to equality of opportunity relied upon by the OfS when building the EORR¹⁷. However, 92% of the 145 sources used in the review relied on samples of more than 500 people. Given the invisibility of student-parents in the physical and policy spaces of providers, it is unsurprising that there is a shortage of ‘significant sample’ research studies available upon which to base conclusions around risk.

Whilst this study’s sample size is small, it provides up to date consideration of student-parent experiences and perceptions from participants at a variety of university settings across differing academic years. There are themes emerging within and across responses which allow for generalisation of some of the study’s findings.

¹⁴ These were finalised in early September 2023 following the focus group. The Student Parent’s Guide to Navigating University is now published via the UCAS website and the Personal Tutor’s Guide to Supporting Student-Parents is published via the UK Advising & Tutoring Association website (see Todd 2023c; Todd 2023d).

¹⁵ 26 respondents expressed an interest in attending the focus group. Perhaps due to timing (the focus group was held during school holidays), many failed to reply to emails inviting them to the focus group, and several sent their apologies due to being on holiday at that time.

¹⁶ Moreau and Kerner, 2015: 4

¹⁷ TASO, 2023

Part 2: Findings

2.1 Transition into University

QUESTION

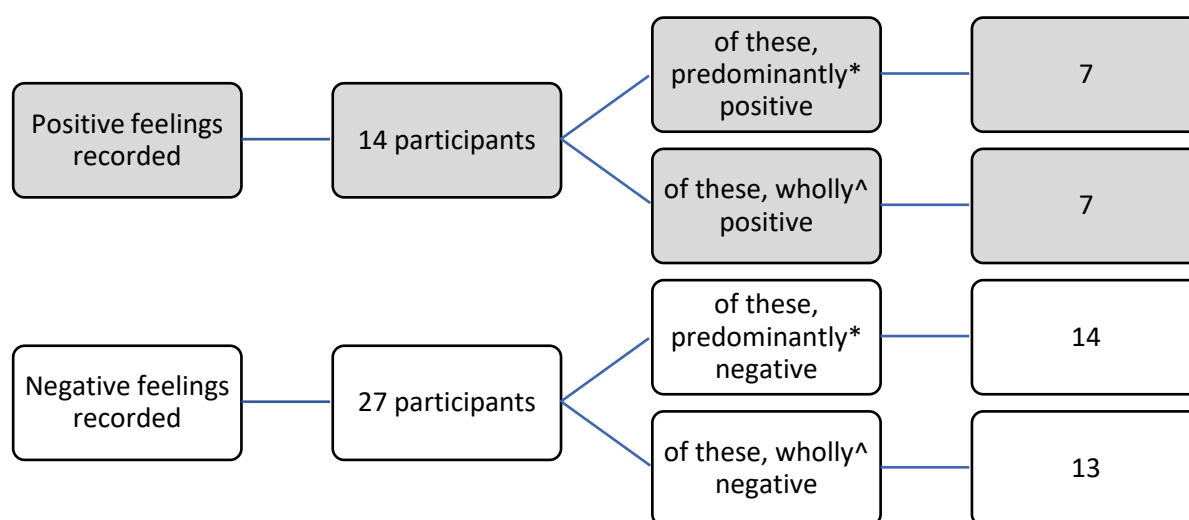
The participants in this study were asked to provide up to three words to describe how they felt when they started university and to explain why they had chosen these words.

RESPONSES

A total of 120 words were reported by respondents: 38 participants provided three words and three participants provided two words. A calculation of the incidence of positive, neutral and negative words was undertaken, with similar words being grouped. A table detailing the individual responses is found at [Appendix 2](#) to this report.

Figure 1 below shows the predominant attitudes expressed by survey respondents when describing their transition into university.

Figure 1: Transitioning into university: survey participant attitudes



*positive/negative words (as appropriate) made up the majority of words provided in an individual's response
^ the individual's response contained only positive/negative (as appropriate) words

FINDINGS

The majority (59%; n=71) of all words provided by the survey respondents were negative.¹⁸

¹⁸ 34% (n= 41) of the words provided were positive, and 7% were neutral (see [Appendix 2](#) for detail). An analysis of the positive words provided revealed that student-parents feel a strong link between university and their future career (and concomitant enhanced prospects for their family) and are motivated to succeed by their children.

Anxiety and apprehension accounted for 44% of the negative feelings recorded, whilst isolation/lack of belonging was recorded by 15% of respondents, and overwhelm and fear each accounted for 11% of contributions.

66% of survey respondents (27 of 41) reported feeling predominantly, or wholly, negative about transitioning into university. 93% (n=25) of those individuals directly referenced their parental responsibility in their qualitative responses. Three key themes arose:

Concern around balancing study and parenthood:



'[it was] a time of uncertainty, not knowing if my responsibilities as a parent would fit around my study and if I was going to be able to give it 100%' (Respondent 37)

'[I was] scared in case I was not able to finish my assignments on time, or to my full potential because of having to also care for my children' (Respondent 19)

Practicalities of childcare commitments:



'[I was] really concerned with how I would make it work with childcare, finances and school runs' (Respondent 25)

'As student-parents we rely heavily on extended family, external childcare settings, and after school clubs which are not always available, close without notice, change operation hours and point blank let us down' (Respondent 23)

A lack of belonging:



'[I felt] out of place because University is still geared towards traditional students' (Respondent 10)

'[I felt] like a fish out of water, [like] I didn't belong and like I was the only mature student with a child' (Respondent 9)

SUMMARY

It is generally accepted that the experience of transitioning into university can be particularly challenging for students from underrepresented groups¹⁹. However, the contributions of the survey respondents reveal the specific and unique challenges faced by student-parents and reflect the findings of previous studies in this regard²⁰. Given these challenges, student-parents need greater levels of support and flexibility than non-parents²¹.

¹⁹ See for example Reay et al, 2002.

²⁰ See for example Moreau, 2014; Briegel et al, 2021; Briegel et al, 2023; Todd, 2023a

²¹ Todd, 2023a

2.2.1 Personal Tutor: Support Needed

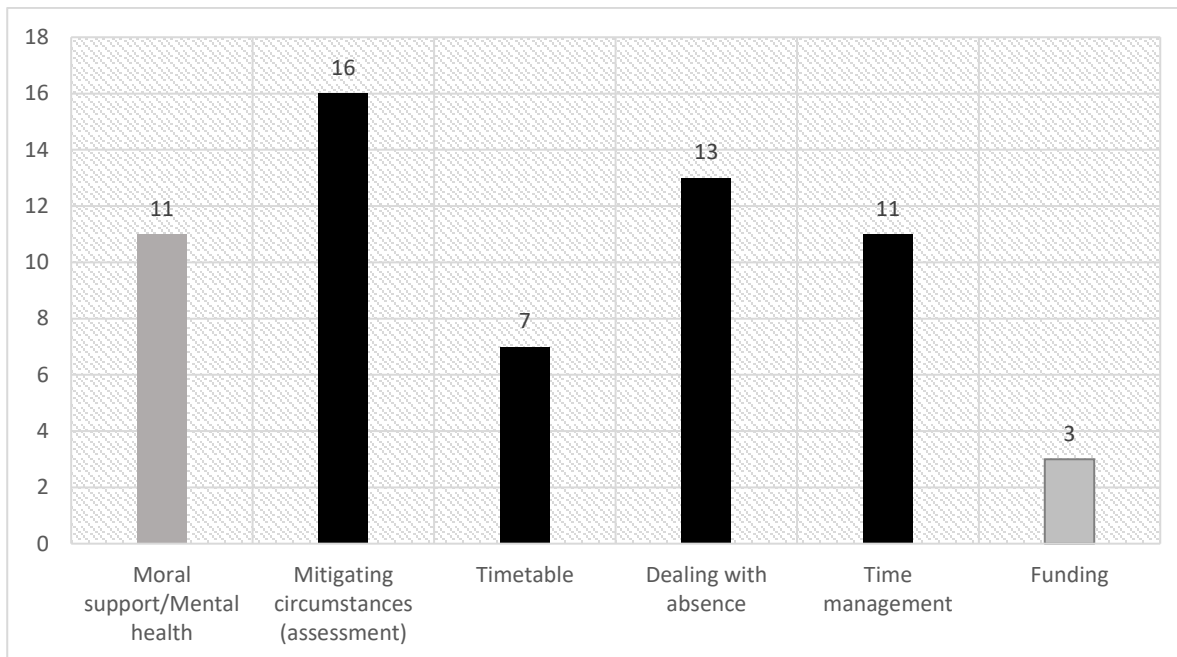
QUESTION

Survey participants were asked to list the reasons for which student-parents need to seek the support of their personal tutors.

RESPONSES

36 of the 41 survey participants responded to this question, with some participants providing multiple contributions. These contributions were coded and split into six themes, shown in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2: Student-parent support needed from personal tutor



FINDINGS

Shaded black in Figure 2, 47 of the 61 contributions (77%) relate to the challenges faced by student-parents face regarding constraints on their time:

- ❖ Just over 26% of respondents (n=16) felt advice and guidance on mitigating circumstances relating to assessment would need to be provided by a personal tutor;
- ❖ Approximately one in five respondents thought personal tutors need to help with dealing with (and catching up following) unavoidable absence (21%; n=13) and with time management more generally (18%; n=11); and
- ❖ Over 11% (n=7) noted personal tutor assistance is needed with changing timetabled classes to assist with childcare.

Respondents also reported the need to seek moral support/support with mental health (18%; n=11) and advice on funding, which links to payment for childcare provision (5%; n=3).

SUMMARY

These responses are unsurprising. They support the findings of several studies undertaken over the past two decades revealing that student-parents face a major challenge in finding the time and space to

dedicate to their studies²² and it is to be anticipated that they would seek personal tutor support with these matters. Given the feelings encountered by student parents on transitioning to university and the challenges in balancing parenthood and study, it is unsurprising that they would need to seek moral support and advice on mental health when navigating their university journey.

2.2.2 Personal Tutor: Support Experienced

QUESTION

Participants were asked to rate their personal tutor experiences on a Likert scale and to provide reasons for their selection.

RESPONSES

All survey participants responded to this question, as shown in Table 3 below.

Table 3: Student-parent perceptions of their personal tutoring experiences

| Perception of personal tutoring experience | Count | Percentage |
|--|-------|------------|
| Excellent | 13 | 32% |
| Good | 4 | 10% |
| Okay | 7 | 17% |
| Poor | 12 | 29% |
| I did not have a personal tutor | 5 | 12% |

FINDINGS

- ❖ 32% of participants felt their experience with their personal tutor had been ‘excellent’, and a further 10% classed it as ‘good’. Some students ascribe their success to the support of their personal tutor:



‘I would not have finished my course with the grades I did without her’ (Respondent 7)

‘I could not have gotten through my undergraduate without her being by my side’ (Respondent 24).

- ❖ 17% (n=7) reported that their personal tutor experience was ‘okay’, with the common theme in qualitative comments being a lack of reliability and/or availability on the part of personal tutors.
- ❖ 12% (n=5) reported, troublingly, that they did not think they had a personal tutor.
- ❖ Almost one in three participants (29%; n=12) felt their personal tutor experience had been ‘poor’, with responses again citing unreliability and unavailability along with a perceived lack of concern from personal tutors:



‘he doesn’t actually care [...] it feels like we are burdening him’ (Respondent 25)

‘When I went to [my personal tutor] I didn’t get support [...] I could understand why some would leave’ (Respondent 15)

‘Throughout my academic studies I have spoken with other parents that feel they must just get on and shut up and there isn’t anyone to take their circumstances into consideration.’ (Respondent 23)

²² See for example Moss, 2004; Gouthro, 2006; Stone and O’Shea, 2013; Moreau, 2014; Webber and Dismore, 2020; Todd 2023a

A contribution from the focus group contextualised the detrimental impact that poor personal tutoring can have on the mental health of student-parents:



'I was pregnant in my second year, but I was really sick. I reached out to my personal tutor [and] her response was "do you think Uni life is right for you as a mother?" And I was like "Wow. I'm 31. I don't want to give up. I've come this far". [...] Not having her support made things a lot harder. I sat two of my exams from a hospital bed [...] I just felt like in those moments I was so alone [...] and that there was nobody there to support me.' (Focus Group Participant 1)

SUMMARY

Personal tutoring in a higher education context is 'an anchor on which the support system of the university rests'²³ and is 'central to enhancing the student experience and fostering student retention'²⁴. Given that the more diverse population of students brought about by the widening participation agenda calls for greater and more structured support²⁵, it is of significant concern that almost six in ten (58%; n=24) of the participants in this study have been failed by sub-standard, or non-existent, personalised pastoral care.

This is not to say that the fault lies exclusively with personal tutor. Prior to the production of the toolkit based on the findings of this study²⁶, there had never been any sector-wide research-informed guidance for personal tutors on how best to support student-parents. Even if there had, it is worth noting Macaskill's²⁷ observation that growth in student numbers coupled with cuts in university funding have had a detrimental impact the student experience given increased demands on staff time, and Walker's reflection that 'in the pressurised metrics-based environment, tutoring, as a cost-effective exercise, is subject to under-resourcing of not only staffing but also support and development'²⁸. Personal tutors have been expected to support both traditional and underrepresented personal tutees alongside a variety of teaching, research, administrative and other duties.

Whilst there are pockets of pastoral good practice within the sector, there is a need to incentivise provider-level investment in supporting personal tutors to provide effective, meaningful and consistent pastoral care given the central role it plays in student retention and success²⁹.

²³ Wheeler and Birtle, 1993: 3

²⁴ McFarlane, 2016: 2

²⁵ McIntosh and Cross, 2017

²⁶ Todd, 2023d

²⁷ Macaskill, 2013

²⁸ Walker, 2022: 66

²⁹ Walker, 2022

QUESTION

Participants were asked to respond to the question: ‘From your perspective as a student-parent, which points in the academic year do/did you find hardest and why?’.

RESPONSES

Some participants provided several contributions in response to this question. These are set out in Table 4 below.

Table 4: Most challenging points in the academic year for student-parents


| Theme | Sub-theme | Count | Total |
|---------------|--|-------|-------|
| Time pressure | Assessment deadlines/periods | 17 | 22 |
| | General | 5 | |
| Childcare | Interfering with attendance or assessment | 9 | 14 |
| | Clash between university and school holidays | 5 | |
| Timetable | Late release | 5 | 8 |
| | Changes | 3 | |
| | | | 44 |

FINDINGS


- ❖ 100% of participants who directly answered this question provided a response which linked to the dual pressures on their time and attention that arise from being at once a parent and a student. These fell into three themes:

Time Pressure:

- ❖ 39% (n=17) of the relevant contributions recorded referred to assessment deadlines/periods as a cause of stress. A recurring concern in the responses related to the ‘bunching’ of assessments and the significant issue this causes for parents whose family commitments must still be met during periods when they are expected to commit significant blocks of time to concentrating on assessment:

 *‘deadlines are piling up but you barely have time to do anything. When you do you’re too exhausted’.* (Respondent 36)

- ❖ Focus Group Participant 2 explained the frustrations caused by institutional mitigating circumstances policies (which often have strict evidence requirements) when assessments need to be deferred for child-related reasons:

 *‘It’s £60 for supporting letter. I haven’t got access to £60 every time I want a letter. It’s frustrating when you’re literally crying out and saying ‘I need this help right now’ and then you have to jump through a further ten hoops’* (Focus Group Participant 2)

Childcare:

- ❖ 32% of respondents (n=14) reported experiencing stress related to balancing university with childcare. Of this:
 - the clash between university commitments and school holidays caused problems for 11.5% of respondents:



'Concentrating on an intense workload is difficult with children in the house' (Respondent 10)

'Christmas [is stressful] when assignments are due as I want to do well but be there for my children' (Respondent 5)

- 20.5% reported the strain caused by childcare interfering with attendance and/or assessment:



'Childcare not being available due to child illness [meant] that I couldn't attend uni or catch up work [which] left me on a permanent back foot' (Respondent 18)

'I have had times when I will be working on coursework and my child would suddenly decide they do not want to go to sleep [...] It's very tiring and it's very stressful.' (Respondent 8)

- ❖ Catching up with work missed also presented a problem:



'I was only getting the slides that would be shown in the lecture, so I wasn't hearing any of the in between that the lecturers do - they tend to fill out a lot more in lectures than what's on the slide. So I was missing a lot of the information. Parents [...] having that little bit [of] extra [information beyond just looking at a set of slides] could help them with their assignments [and could be] key to whether they succeed or not.' (Focus Group Participant 4)

- ❖ Focus group participants noted the anxiety caused by automated notifications when absent due to childcare issues:



'My youngest daughter had a respiratory infection. I was literally receiving daily emails from Attendance to say 'you're not in'. And I was like: 'you are consistently harassing me [...], you're literally barraging me with emails when you know that there's a decline in my mental health, just so that you can tick a box. I'm a person, I'm not just a number, and you have to take into account the fact that people are dealing with stuff that they have no control over.' (Focus Group Participant 2)

'I suffer with anxiety and I was feeling really overwhelmed. Their attitudes are towards school leavers' (Focus Group Participant 3)

- ❖ Academics' attitudes towards child-related absence were also reported as disappointing:



'It was put to me "you wouldn't get away with this [absence] if you were working". And I was like: "No, I absolutely wouldn't, because I would have already had a conversation with my boss [about ways to support me]". We're not robots.' (Focus Group Participant 2)

Timetables:

- ❖ 18% of survey respondents (n=8) reported stress caused by timetabling, notably the frustration caused by the late release of timetables and changes to timetables, given the need to plan arrangements with childcare providers and after school clubs in advance.
- ❖ Timetabling issues were reported to impact not only attendance but also mental health and finances:



'The timetables kept changing and I found it extremely difficult to arrange childcare and for it to change again. [It] affected my mental health' (Respondent 6)

'During the first two years of university, I didn't have a predictable timetable, so my children were in nursery 5 days a week which has caused us a lot of debt.' (Respondent 5)

SUMMARY

This study reveals that parental responsibility significantly impacts a student's ability to attend classes, devote sufficient time to assessment, and thus perform to the best of their ability. It stands to reason that this will impact their attainment, progression and retention, as well as their mental health.

The findings relating to pressures around assessment deadlines are perhaps unsurprising for any student, reflecting as they do the literature on assessments being a trigger point for student stress and anxiety³⁰. However, many responses noting the strain caused by assessment deadlines directly referenced the link between assessments and childcare and/or child illness.

This survey has shown that in many cases, institutional policies and attitudes are, as Burke³¹ recognises, modelled to the needs of students without caring responsibilities. Institutions need to rethink policies, attitudes, assumptions and ways of working if they are to provide fit-for-purpose academic support to their student-parents.

2.4 Link to the EORR

The EORR outlines twelve potential risks to equality of opportunity across the higher education sector, split into three categories: Access (five risks identified); On Course (six risks); and Progression (one risk).

The findings of this study reveal that student-parents are at risk of five of the six risks found in the 'on course' category.

Risk 7: Insufficient personal support

The risk: 'Students may not receive sufficient personalised non-academic support [...] to achieve a positive outcome [and] may be more likely to report lower wellbeing and/or sense of belonging [and] experience poor mental health'³²

³⁰ See for example Galante et al., 2018; Jones et al., 2018; Hill et al., 2019; Jones et al., 2020

³¹ Burke, 2006

³² OfS, 2023a

The reality: This study demonstrates that student-parents are being failed by the pastoral system in terms of personal tutor availability, reliability, and commitment. Given the lack of personalised support evidenced in this study with the matters reported as needing personal tutor input (mitigating circumstances, timetabling, dealing with absence and time management, as well as moral support) a failure to progress on behalf of student-parents would be unsurprising. A decline in wellbeing, a low sense of belonging and poor mental health were all reported by the participants in this study.

Risk 6: Insufficient academic support

The risk: 'Students may not receive sufficient personalised academic support to achieve a positive outcome [when faced with] home difficulties that impact on [their] ability to engage to the fullest extent with their academic studies [and] may achieve a lower degree attainment [...], withdraw from a course [and/or] may experience poor mental health'.³³

The reality: The student-parents in this study reported significant challenges caused by institutional inflexibility when faced with child illness and/or general childcare commitments interfering with their ability to attend, or catch up properly with, classes, or to complete assessments on time or to the best of their ability.

Risk 11: capacity issues

The risk: 'an increase in capacity issues may lead to issues such as [...] less academic and personal support and low availability'.³⁴

The reality: Participants in this study have shared the difficulties caused by personal tutors' lack of availability, late release of/changes to timetables (increased student numbers place higher demands on teaching rooms, which puts pressure on timetables), bunched assessments, and anxiety prompted by institutional rules around attendance policy and mitigating circumstances requirements.

Risk 8: Mental Health

The risk: 'Students may experience mental ill health that makes it hard to cope with daily life, including studying. These difficulties may be pre-existing or may develop during higher education study'.³⁵

The reality: Participants in this study have shared the negative impact that poor pastoral support and failure to provide adequate academic support has had on their mental health. The majority of student-parents report arriving at university feeling negative about their transition into higher education and receive inadequate support to mitigate these feelings. Indeed, some institutional policies, attitudes and ways of working have been shown to actively exacerbate, or even cause, poor mental health.

³³ OfS, 2023b

³⁴ OfS, 2023c

³⁵ OfS, 2023d

Risk 10: Cost Pressures

The risk: 'An increases in cost pressures may affect a student's ability to complete their course or obtain a good grade'.³⁶

The reality: This was evidenced by participant contributions sharing the strain of childcare costs linked to timetabling issues, and the prohibitive costs associated with mitigating circumstances applications.

³⁶ OfS, 2023e

Part 3: conclusions

3.1 Conclusions

This study reveals that student-parents are at risk of five of the six ‘on course’ risks identified in the EORR. Action needs to be taken to address the barriers and challenges experienced by this underrepresented group: without effective institutional measures in place, gaps in support will persist.

It is not enough that student-parents may be picked up by the ‘mature’ student characteristic included in the EORR:

- ❖ Previous research studies³⁷ and the data collated via the current study demonstrate that student-parents encounter a set of unique challenges which cannot be adequately addressed by simply considering their age.
- ❖ In addition, not all student-parents are 21 or over and therefore fit the OfS’s definition of ‘mature’.

Experience shows that the sector is slow to support the student-parent cohort³⁸. Given the many and varied demands on their time and budget, it is unlikely that senior management teams will be propelled into action simply because they now have UCAS data on who their incoming student-parents are, or because good practice guides now exist on how institutions can support this cohort.³⁹

Providers need to be incentivised by sector-wide metrics to invest in interventions to address inequalities of opportunity experienced by student-parents.

3.2 Recommendations

The findings of this study provide a compelling evidence base for including parental responsibility in the EORR.

Doing so would change the national narrative around student-parents, and, crucially, would mean the imperative to support this group filters down from sector-wide priorities into institutional policy by way of Action and Participation (APP) planning.

³⁷ See, for example, Briegel et al., 2021; 2023; Todd, 2023a

³⁸ Many studies have recommended changes in policy to encourage the retention and progression of student-parents (e.g. McGivney, 2003; Moss, 2004; Waller, 2006; Alsop et al, 2008; NUS, 2009; Marandet and Wainwright, 2009; 2010; Moreau and Kerner, 2012; Hinton-Smith, 2012; Stone and O’Shea, 2013; Moreau, 2014; Savage, 2021; Todd, 2023a), but there is no evidence of any shift in policy or practice as a result.

³⁹ Todd, 2023e; UCAS, 2023

Interventions pledged in APPs would incentivise investment in meaningful support. Investment in both money and time could facilitate, for example, adequate training and workload allowance for both personal tutors and module leaders in supporting student-parents, as well as encouraging practical changes to attitudes, assumptions, policies and ways of working in central student support service teams.⁴⁰ The operationalisation of the APP interventions would trickle down via faculties, departments and individual members of staff to ultimately benefit the student-parent cohort and thus bolster institutional metrics regarding access, retention, progression and success, as well as student satisfaction and post-graduation outcomes.

Capitalising on ‘the intensification of pressure on institutions to evaluate their WP activities’⁴¹ and leveraging metrification for the benefit of student-parents makes ‘educational, financial, and ethical sense’⁴² and could represent just the policy shift that is needed to ameliorate student-parents’ equality of opportunity.

With sincere thanks to the student-parents who participated in the survey and contributed to the online focus group

Click for [References](#)

⁴⁰ For example those responsible for timetabling, mitigating circumstances and attendance monitoring.

⁴¹ Crockford 2020: 15

⁴² Todd, 2023b: 171

Survey Respondent characteristics

| | | Number | Percentage (rounded) |
|---------------------------------|------------------------------------|--------|----------------------|
| Gender | Male | 5 | 12% |
| | Female | 36 | 88% |
| Age | 20 to 29 | 9 | 22% |
| | 30 to 39 | 26 | 63.5% |
| | 40 to 49 | 5 | 12% |
| | 50 and over | 1 | 2.5% |
| Number of children | 1 | 19 | 46% |
| | 2 | 15 | 37% |
| | 3 | 5 | 12% |
| | 4 | 2 | 5% |
| Year of study in 2022-23 | Foundation year | 8 | 20% |
| | 1 st year undergraduate | 5 | 12% |
| | 2 nd year undergraduate | 9 | 22% |
| | 3 rd year undergraduate | 10 | 24% |
| | 4 th year undergraduate | 5 | 12% |
| | Graduated within the last 3 years | 4 | 10% |
| Status | Parent | 39 | 95% |
| | Guardian | 2 | 5% |
| University type | Pre-1992 | 22 | 54% |
| | Post-1992 | 18 | 44% |
| | Russell Group | 1 | 2% |
| University location | England | 35 | 85% |
| | Scotland | 6 | 15% |

Student-parent feelings on transitioning to university

| Neutral | No. | % | Positive | No. | % | Negative | No. | % |
|----------------|----------|------|---------------------------------------|-----------|----|--------------------------------------|-----------|-----|
| Challenging | 3 | 37.5 | Excited | 16 | 39 | Anxious /worried | 16 | 23 |
| Curious | 2 | 25 | Determined/motivated | 6 | 15 | Nervous/ apprehensive | 15 | 21 |
| Different | 1 | 12.5 | Happy/positive | 5 | 12 | Outsider/ignored/ isolated/ alone | 11 | 15 |
| Juggling | 1 | 12.5 | Supported/encouraged | 4 | 10 | Overwhelmed | 8 | 11 |
| Hard worker | 1 | 12.5 | Proud/successful/ worthy/fulfilled | 4 | 10 | Scared/ afraid/ terrified | 8 | 11 |
| TOTAL | 8 | | Hopeful/ Optimistic | 2 | 5 | Stressed | 4 | 6 |
| | | | Ambitious | 2 | 5 | Confused/ uncertain | 3 | 4 |
| | | | Enjoyable | 1 | 2 | Unsupported | 2 | 3 |
| | | | Passionate | 1 | 2 | Old* | 2 | 3 |
| | | | TOTAL | 41 | | Disadvantaged | 1 | 1.5 |
| | | | | | | Misunderstood | 1 | 1.5 |
| | | | | | | TOTAL | 71 | |

*whilst objectively a neutral word, the accompanying qualitative comments reveal negative connotations to the word for the respondents

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