

A guide to supporting student parents at university: part one

The first in a three-part series provides an overview on how student parents can be supported to succeed at UK universities

For many years, student parents have been under-represented and under-supported in higher education. However, things are looking up for this committed and motivated cohort:

1. Providers in England must now consider (and commit to addressing) risks to student-parent success as part of their access and participation planning following the 2024 inclusion of this cohort in the OfS' Equality of Opportunity Risk Register
2. All UK universities now have data on which of their incoming students have disclosed parental responsibility, thanks to the tick box on UCAS application forms introduced from 2023 entry. More than 22,000 students starting university in September 2023 disclosed parental status, representing more than 4 per cent of the national intake.

I have worked closely with student parents to explore their experiences and perceptions of higher education over the past three years. Between 2021 and 2022, I carried out a small-scale research [project](#) and in 2023 launched a national [project](#) which sought to explore the lived experiences of undergraduate student parents across the UK.

Our survey says...

The three main themes emanating from the small-scale study were the time pressures felt by student parents, the guilt associated with balancing study and childcare and a feeling of not belonging to the university ecosystem. The findings revealed student parents needed two things from their providers to address these challenges:

1. flexibility (in terms of the time, and place, of study); and
2. to feel a sense of belonging on campus (via understanding and support on the one hand, and reassurance and connection on the other).

The findings of the nationwide project supported these conclusions and provided a sector-wide insight into student parents' feelings and motivations for starting university and their perceptions of the pastoral and academic support offered by their providers. The headline findings are as follows:

- For every one student who felt positive about starting university, there were two who felt negative about this transition (and 93 per cent of those ascribed their negative feelings to their parental status, citing concerns around balancing study and parenthood, practicalities of childcare and feeling a lack of belonging);

- Most student-parent concerns and challenges trace back to time poverty:
 - 77 per cent reported needing personal tutor support with issues such as mitigating circumstances, timetables, dealing with absence and time management;
 - When recounting the most difficult points in the academic year, 100 per cent referenced the dual pressures on time that arise from being a parent and a student (e.g., assessment deadlines and inflexible mitigating circumstances policies; childcare challenges and late release of, and changes to, timetables).
- Overall, student parents are let down by university pastoral systems, with 17 per cent ranking their personal tutor experience as just “okay”, 29 per cent as “poor” and 12 per cent noting they did not think they had a personal tutor.

What can we do about this?

The research findings have informed a series of three evidence-based toolkits that translate the learnings from the research studies into practical guidance to assist providers, personal tutors and student parents in navigating the student-parent journey through higher education.

My [Eight Steps to Identifying, Supporting and Celebrating Student Parents](#) toolkit aims to give providers and departments guidance on the concrete steps they can take to better support their student-parent cohort. Grounded in the findings of the first research study (and supported by the national study’s findings) these eight practical recommendations are summarised below and will be explored in more detail in the second resource in this series:

1. Identify incoming student parents
2. Equip personal tutors
3. Provide effective induction
4. Clarify (and amend where possible) policies disadvantaging student parents
5. Facilitate effective planning
6. Establish a peer support group
7. Provide peer mentoring/buddying
8. Ensure equitable access to extra-curricular activities.

[The Personal Tutor Guide to Supporting Student Parents](#) is informed by the findings of the second research study and provides personal tutors with six step-by-step “keys” to supporting their student parents to settle into university, feel a sense of belonging, manage their time and succeed in their studies. Peer reviewed by student parents before publication, this toolkit will be explored in detail throughout this series. The six keys aim to support personal tutors on a practical level with the following:

1. Understanding student parents’ circumstances, fears and motivations

2. Ensuring effective induction and transition
3. Providing support with timetables, attendance and time management
4. Dealing with assessment and navigating exceptional circumstances
5. Understanding childcare, including childcare funding for student parents
6. Providing emotional support and facilitating connections for their student-parent tutees.

[The Student Parent's Guide to Navigating University](#) is housed on the UCAS website. Grounded in the research and peer reviewed as above, the simple five-step guide is written for and speaks directly to, student parents. It is designed to be used as a companion during the higher education journey, helping student parents to settle into university, manage the challenges they will face and understand the level of support they can expect from their provider. It also contains an induction checklist and suggested time-planning templates for student-parent use. I recommended that universities link to this document from their pre-induction platforms and that personal tutors signpost to it. A video explaining the guide is available [here](#).

When used together, these three toolkits provide a 360-degree approach to supporting student parents to access, progress through and succeed in HE.