_____

Let's get visible: evidence-based interventions aimed at supporting, empowering and celebrating student-parents in higher education

Andrea Todd
University of Chester, UK

Abstract

This paper analyses the findings of a two-stage small-scale research project investigating the needs of undergraduate students with dependent children ('student-parents') studying in a post-1992 university. The findings of Stage 1 of the study, using data from semi-structured interviews with student-parents, show that student-parents need two things from their institution: a sense of belonging and flexibility. In Stage 2, a questionnaire survey was used to explore the impact of two interventions piloted during the 2021-22 academic year to address the Stage 1 findings. The paper then presents the next steps in this project: co-creation, with students, of systems designed not only to make visible our student-parent community but also to support, empower and celebrate their identities as student-parents.

Keywords: student-parents; mature students; student mothers; widening participation; access and participation.

Introduction

Although the population of students with dependent children is increasing in post-secondary institutions (Briegel et al., 2021), they are 'relatively invisible in the policy and physical spaces of universities' (Moreau and Kerner, 2015, p.4). The widening participation and lifelong learning agendas of successive governments over the past two decades have encouraged higher education applications from non-traditional student groups such as student-parents, but 'the lack of concern' for this cohort 'has remained a constant', with them being 'ignored or only briefly mentioned in central government reports and speeches'

(Moreau, 2014, p.2). Policies at governmental and institutional level are aimed at encouraging entry into university, but little attention is afforded to retention and progression once there (Marandet and Wainwright, 2009; Moreau, 2014). Comparatively few measures have been introduced at institutional level to help student-parents deal with challenges they may experience during their journey through university (McGivney, 2003), which is a significant oversight given that this journey is geared to the needs of students without caring responsibilities (Burke, 2006).

Student-parents are invisible at national and institutional level. The Higher Education Statistics Agency does not require institutions to collate data on the family circumstances of their students (Moreau and Kerner, 2015), and generally institutions do not take it upon themselves to gather this data. Like ghosts, student-parents slip into the university system and can remain unidentified and unsupported throughout their whole university journey, their 'unique needs unmet' (Briegel et al., 2021, p.1). This invisibility can lead to student-parents slipping out of higher education as silently as they slipped in, but the lack of consistent data collection on student-parents means that it is not possible to see how many either enter or drop out of higher education (Moreau, 2014).

As far back as 2002, calls were made to better understand the experiences and needs of non-traditional students (Reay et al., 2002), and this was followed by a flurry of studies exploring student-parents' experiences and making recommendations for change (e.g. McGivney, 2003; Moss, 2004; Waller, 2006; Alsop et al., 2008; NUS, 2009; Marandet and Wainwright, 2009; Marandet and Wainwright, 2010; Wainwright and Marandet, 2010; Moreau and Kerner, 2012; Hinton-Smith, 2012; Stone and O'Shea, 2013). In Moreau's 2014 stimulus paper for the Leadership Foundation, institutional recommendations were again made to address the needs of student-parents who were still expected to fit into the mould of a 'traditional' student (Moreau, 2014), which for the purposes of this article refers to the 'default construction of the university student as carefree' (Moreau and Kerner, 2015, p.215). Whilst further research since 2014 has explored the experiences of student-parents (e.g. Brooks, 2015; Moreau and Kerner, 2015; O'Shea, 2015; Sallee, 2015; Mallman and Lee, 2016; Parr, 2017; Dickson and Tennant, 2018; Stone and O'Shea, 2019; Scharp et al., 2020; Webber and Dismore, 2020; Briegel et al., 2021), there is no evidence in the literature or elsewhere of Moreau's recommendations having been heeded

in any deliberate or organised way. Several recent studies have focused on the impact of Covid-19 on student-parents (Arowoshola, 2020; Lin et al., 2021; Savage, 2021; Bogossian, 2021; Nikiforidou and Holmes, 2022) and underline the need to support this cohort of students at the institutional level.

The aims of this research project were to understand what student-parents need from their institution to help them succeed, to devise evidence-based methods of meeting these needs at the departmental level, and to gauge student-parents' responses to these interventions with a view to taking them forward in conjunction with student-parents themselves. The discussion that follows explores the findings of this two-stage research project and aims to fill a gap in our understanding of what departments, faculties and institutions can do to make our student-parent population visible, supported and empowered.

Stage 1: what student-parents need from their university

Methods

For Stage 1 of the research project, following receipt of ethical approval, I conducted semi-structured interviews with six student-parents during June and July of 2021. This sample is self-selecting, as these individuals responded to an email call to all Law School students (circa 300) to participate in the study. The research project was conducted within the Law School, as this is the department within which I teach. I had received anecdotal reports from student-parents within the cohort about their struggles during the initial Covid-19 lockdown period in 2020 and was keen to explore these experiences further with a view to understanding how best to support this demographic at departmental and institutional level. All six participants in Stage 1 of the study are female, and Table 1 provides their details by pseudonym.

Table 1. Profile of students interviewed during Stage 1.

	Annie	**Beth**	**Eleanor**	**Helen**	**Lucy**	**Sarah**
Age	36	31	38	41	36	23
Number of children	1	1	1	2	1	1
Age of child(ren)	5	5	6	10, 14	7	3
Mode of study	Full time	Full time	Part time	Full time	Full time	Full time
Lone or co-parent	Co-parent	Co-parent	Co-parent	Co-parent	Co-parent	Co-parent
Level of study	6	6	5	5	4	5
Also working?	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No

This action research study (Arnold and Norton, 2018) employed an inductive approach, helping the researcher to understand what is happening in practice (Saunders et al., 2012) and involving the collection of data and the subsequent emergence of theory and meaning (Stokes and Wall, 2014). All six interviews were conducted via video call on Microsoft Teams to enable student-parents to more easily participate in the research project given their commitments at home. Open questions were used to encourage participants to think deeply about their responses and to enable them to provide rich biographical descriptions. The focus of the questions discussed in the current paper was to gather views on the needs of student-parents and how these could be met by the department and/or institution. The questions used to prompt discussion during the interviews were as follows:

1. What support do you feel student-parents need from their university and/or their department to succeed in their studies?
2. How and when do you find time for your university work?
3. What are the biggest challenges of being a parent studying at university?
4. What were the biggest challenges of the Covid-19 year (defined broadly as from spring 2020 until summer 2021)?
5. What were the benefits (if any) to studying online during the Covid-19 year?

Using the flow model expounded by Miles and Huberman (1994), interview transcripts were thematically coded manually, given the manageable size of the data set, to identify patterns both within and across interviews (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

It is accepted that one limitation of this study is its small scale: it can be challenging to engage with an 'invisible' cohort and given there is no provision at institutional level to gather data on student-parents, it is not possible to know what percentage of the Law School's cohort these participants represent. However, whilst the sample size is small, there are themes emerging which chime with some of those apparent in the literature explored above, and given this similarity, it is submitted that the findings, and subsequent interventions, can assist departments and institutions in their consideration of how best to support their student-parent population.

Results and discussion

The findings from Stage 1 demonstrate the foundational elements that the student-parents interviewed feel must be present to enable them to succeed at university. This is illustrated by Figure 1.

Despite the participants in Stage 1 of the study caring for children of differing ages, and one of the six participants studying part-time rather than full-time, the commonality in the themes raised by the participants was striking.

Figure 1. Foundations enabling student-parent success at university.
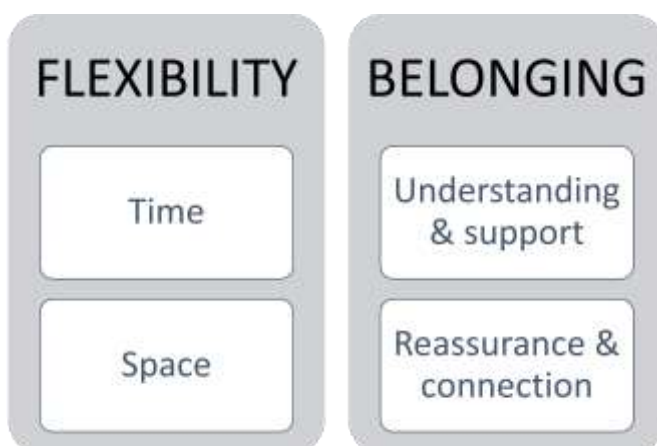
Flexibility

It is widely recognised in the literature that a major struggle student-parents (student-mothers in particular) must contend with is finding both the time and the space to dedicate to their studies (see, for example, Moss, 2004; Gouthro, 2006; Stone and O'Shea, 2013; Webber and Dismore, 2020). A 2015 Nuffield report published by the University of Warwick (Lyonette et al., 2015) found, unsurprisingly, that student mothers need greater flexibility than non-parents, and, as Thomas et al. (2021) note, this is more difficult to achieve in a physical environment than a digital one.

The dual role of student and parent often requires 'skilful planning and juggling' (Moreau, 2014, p.4), and this is certainly borne out by participants' comments in this study. All participants made reference to the challenges and frustrations of finding time to devote to their studies and the need to be 'regimented' (Helen) in their planning of both their studies and family life.

Participants identified the importance of temporal flexibility around assessment deadlines for when circumstances outside of their control, but linked to their children, arise:

> if your child's ill you might need an extension, so having those flexible deadlines [can be] really helpful. (Annie)

> having tutors […] that you can just message and just say at any time 'look, I'm really struggling' or 'sorry my child's poorly, I just need a little bit of time' (Beth)

Three students reported being loathe to use the institutional extensions policy and only doing so in extraordinary circumstances:

> I had not used [the extension system] but in third year with COVID, it was such a lifesaver because it meant that I didn't feel like everything was […] out of control. (Annie)

> [My child] was ill, and then I was just shattered, and I didn't want to get an extension, but I thought 'I'm going to have to'. (Sarah)

Helen described attempts to balance home and student life as a 'juggling game', explaining that she fits in studying 'round the kids […] in the evening, the weekends,

wherever it needs to be', whilst Beth and Annie expanded on how they found time to devote to their studies when the university was open for in-person sessions pre-pandemic:

> while [my daughter]'s been in school and at the after school club that gave me between nine and half four […] to sort of juggle things to get things done […] but I'd try and do a lot of this stuff as well after she'd gone to bed. (Beth)
> I would use the time between lectures and seminars and go to the library and do work there, and then I would often do it when [my son] had gone to bed. (Annie)

Four of the five participants reported that the ability to watch pre-recorded lectures online during lockdown was of significant tangible benefit, enabling them to use their scarce time more wisely. Annie reported that she would 'sort of binge them', and Lucy explained the benefits of being able to work at a time to suit her: 'it can be done at 8:00pm if that's the only time I can do it'. Beth extolled the benefit of not having to be in a particular place: 'it allowed more time to focus on what I actually needed to do rather than having to travel all the way there and then get ready and then sit down […] and then have to come home'.

This study reveals that student-parents appreciate being able to manage the time and place of their own learning activities. This should not be confused with wanting to access everything online; indeed, participants stated how important they felt it was to be able to come onto campus for seminars, as it enabled them to use the library between taught sessions and to socialise with peers which they were unable to do in the evenings due to childcare. In other words, student-parents wanted to make the best use possible of their time.

Belonging

Support and understanding

All participants noted that they felt student-parents needed to feel supported and/or understood to succeed at university, both in respect of the need for staff to appreciate the challenges of student-parenthood, and to demonstrate empathy with their circumstances. Sarah provided an example of her interaction with her personal tutor the previous year:

> I was crying my eyes out on the first day of dropping her off at nursery. My [personal tutor] is Dave and I remember telling Dave 'Oh I'm so sad', and he's not the most emotional, and he was like 'ah, she'll be OK'. (Sarah)

Helen's response was reminiscent of the invisibility narrative around student-parents:

> Just support. Just, you know, a conversation. Simple conversation really. I feel, being mature, we just take a back burner because we've been there, you know, we've lived life, but I just feel that we just need a bit of a push in the right direction. (Helen)

Lucy and Annie both referenced the emotional toll being a student-parent can take, and how a sensitive approach from staff can temper this:

> I think just having that understanding or support, so if [my child] wasn't well and I couldn't come in […] I don't feel like I'd be frowned upon or looked down on. […] You're not worrying as much because you've got that support. (Lucy)

> just, I suppose, more emotional support really. [My module tutor was] a huge support system for me, and I'm not quite sure I'd have made it through third year without [them]. (Annie)

Several qualitative studies indicate a high proportion of student-parents considering leaving university (Moreau and Kerner, 2012), and comments such as those made by Annie reflect the importance of having support 'on the ground' from understanding staff when times are tough. Small interventions have the capacity to make a huge impact, potentially changing the course of a student-parent's path and assisting with retention and progression.

Reassurance and connection

Participants recounted a sense of disconnection with the traditional student cohort within the Law School, eloquently expressed by Lucy:

> Having a child and being older, you look at everything differently anyway, and you speak to people who definitely don't, and you've got a different outlook of how it should be, I think. (Lucy)

There were also reports of a rupture in lines of communication with fellow 'traditional' students:

> A lot of my [university] friends don't have kids. […] There's group chats and stuff […] but it's not [relevant to me]. (Sarah)

> I'd speak to the other people, but there was only one of them that was another parent as well […] so it was a bit more difficult. (Beth)

In their 2010 study, Reay et al. (2010, pp.117-118) identified how 'self-doubt and anxiety around learning was gendered. It was women more than men who felt that they did not really deserve to be in higher education'. Two participants in this study referred directly to experiencing imposter syndrome, with Annie expressing this as meaning 'feeling that you don't belong, feeling that you can't do it all'. Eleanor elaborated on this feeling, but provided some hope, explaining:

> [in] first year I felt like: 'what am I doing here? I've made a huge mistake'. But after […] I met a few friends and spoke to other people, it helped because I needed to see familiar faces for that reassurance and recognition. To think 'yeah, you can do this'. (Eleanor)

This chimes with the findings in Savage's (2021) study of eight student-mothers in one Australian university, in which participants reported that making a connection with other student-parents created a sense of belonging and an environment whereby they could 'vent frustrations, ask questions or get support' (Savage, 2021, p.12).

Two participants in this study independently suggested a support group for student-parents. Interestingly, both were somewhat reticent to put forward the idea and implied that it may be embarrassing in some way:

> if there was like, not a club because that sounds a bit cliché, but maybe something like a parent platform that like-minded people can maybe, I don't know, just thrash around a few ideas or even to talk about problems that they've come across. (Eleanor)

> Maybe some sort of a society or group, but then I think it could be a bit cheesy. (Sarah)

These findings make clear that if student-parents feel connected, reassured and understood, their sense of belonging will increase, and if provided with flexibility, they will better manage the line between being a parent and being a student. Institutions can play a

role in enabling this sense of belonging by making sure their student-parent population is visible not only to staff but also to fellow students in similar circumstances. The interventions set out in the next section were designed to address these findings.

Outcome of Stage 1: two evidence-based interventions

Before considering the interventions themselves, it is necessary to underline one recurring theme that appeared in every interview during Stage 1 of the research study: student-parents are driven to succeed by their children. This is unsurprising, as this phenomenon has been widely documented across the decades (see, for example, Reay et al, 2002; Leathwood and O'Connell, 2003; Marandet and Wainwright, 2010). However, the usefulness of this finding is that it provides a 'hook' to ensure that the potential for student-parents seeing any interventions as 'cheesy' (Sarah) or a 'cliché' (Eleanor) is minimised, and thus that take-up of interventions is maximised. We can capitalise on our student-parents' motivations: their children.

Intervention 1: the personal tutor project

The personal tutor project involved allocating student-parents to a dedicated personal tutor at the beginning of their level 4 studies. In the absence of any obligation for institutions to gather information on this cohort, this pilot entailed allocating incoming students who were aged 25 or over to a personal tutor group headed up by the author of this paper. This was not an exact science, but of the six students allocated to this group, five were indeed student-parents.

Induction activities for the student-parent tutor group in September 2021 varied slightly from the induction that was rolled out to the remainder of the tutor groups. The first personal tutor meeting for the student-parents group involved the personal tutor introducing herself and her children. This was followed by an invitation for the student parents to introduce themselves and their children, to discuss their childcare arrangements and to share how they planned to deal with balancing study and home life (and, in some circumstances, work) during the coming year. The personal tutor also explained that the department would, wherever possible, be understanding of students' parental roles, and

details were provided about how seminar groups could be swapped to facilitate fewer days travelling to campus. In a later session during the first week, the personal tutor explained in detail the rules relating to extensions and deferrals, so they were made aware of the flexibility available to them at this early stage (which is arguably too early for traditional students). Personal tutor catch-up chats during Autumn and Spring were also used to discuss childcare and how best to balance assessment deadlines with parental responsibilities.

Intervention 2: student-parents support group

A student-parents support group was set up for Law School students as a direct result of contributions from participants in Stage 1 of the study. I created a Microsoft Teams site and added the four students who had taken part in Stage 1 of the study and who were still students within the department. The group was named Student Parents and Carers Enhanced Support (SPACES), an acronym decided upon by the members of the support group themselves, which speaks to the headspace that many student parents feel they do not often have. Within its first few days, SPACES posts included:

- Students with very young children sharing their feelings of guilt at using a nursery setting, with fellow students (with school-age children) providing validation of these feelings but noting the sacrifice was worthwhile.
- Discussions around not knowing where to start, with second- and third-year students spurring on and congratulating their first-year colleagues for starting their university journey.

In early October, I placed calls via the department's main Teams site for new members of SPACES. Eight further student-parents identified themselves and joined the group. Correspondence on the site during October concentrated on introducing each other (the author included) to our children by way of sharing photographs, with discussion comparing children's ages, temperaments, and childcare arrangements. The benefit of the Teams group is that it does not take too much time or effort to be involved and to give support to fellow members, given the ability, on the go (via phone), to 'like' (with a thumbs-up reaction) or 'love' (with a heart reaction) the posts that are made on the site. I initiated

posts at October half term, Christmas, February half term, World Book Day and Mothers' Day in March, and in May when the main assessment period was approaching. Often these posts concentrated on congratulating the student-parents for their achievements thus far in the year and prompted discussion of holiday childcare, as well as the sharing of photographs (for example, of our children dressed up on World Book Day). During July, the site was used to share an early draft of the overall timetable for the coming year, with a message (coinciding with many schools requesting parents to make wrap-around childcare choices for next year by the end of July) reminding students that they would be able to swap seminar groups once the institutional timetable was available from 1 September.

The SPACES group is designed to be a positive platform for celebration, enabling student-parents to take pride in their achievements, to openly celebrate their children in a supportive environment, and to feel supported and understood by their department and their fellow student-parents. The site has also proven to be a useful and efficient forum for answering student-parents' practical queries. For example, on one occasion a first-year student posted a query relating to the childcare grant, and within ten minutes a third-year student had responded with practical advice.

Stage 2: feedback on interventions and next steps

Methods

For Stage 2 of the project, following ethical approval, an anonymous survey questionnaire was distributed via the Microsoft Teams student-parent support group that was set up to respond to the findings of Stage 1 of the study. The aim of this survey was to gather student feedback on the interventions put in place following Stage 1 of the study, and to seek their views on how support for student-parents could be developed further. Of the twelve students participating in the support group, five individuals completed the survey. Of these, four were female and one male. As the survey was anonymous (to encourage frank feedback), it is not possible to identify whether those responding to the Stage 2 survey also participated in Stage 1 of the study. All participants responding to the survey have been allocated a pseudonym for identification purposes: Amelia, Ceri, Dinah and Erin for the respondents identifying as female, and Brendan for the male respondent. The survey asked a series of dichotomous questions around the respondents' perceptions of

the SPACES group and the importance, and function, of the personal tutor role in supporting student-parents. It also provided space for students to elaborate on their responses via free text, thus allowing the collection of both quantitative and qualitative data. All survey data was manually analysed, calculating the frequency of each dichotomous question selected and thematically coding the responses to open questions.

Results and discussion

Feedback and next steps: SPACES

100% of respondents agreed that it had been helpful to be a part of SPACES. Echoing Thomas et al.'s (2021) findings that online support groups were important in 'reinforcing role identity as both student and parent' (Thomas et al., 2021, p.8), participants underlined the sense of shared experience that SPACES brought them:

> It's been lovely to have other student parents to talk to, to share experiences and the stresses of completing a degree. (Amelia)

> Just seeing that other people also have the same struggles. (Brendan)

> Knowing that I am not alone gives me hope. (Ceri)

> You definitely feel like you are not the only person going through the journey. (Erin)

Participants all noted the supportive nature of SPACES, with support coming primarily from fellow students within the group rather than the tutor moderator. Amelia thought the best thing about SPACES was 'making new friends and having a laugh', whilst Brendan and Ceri both valued the sense of feeling supported, with 'the support offered by other students' (Brendan) and 'always receiving support through busy exam periods' (Ceri) being identified as their 'best bits'. Dinah reflected that it had been 'a nice space to get to know other students who have family and children relying on them whilst studying too', whilst Brendan shared that he 'speak[s] on a regular basis, daily, with members of the group'.

These results show that SPACES has enabled student-parents to feel supported and understood, providing them with a sense of reassurance and connection. The group has thus provided them with a sense of belonging, which was identified above as one of the two foundations enabling student-parent success.

When asked how they saw SPACES developing in 2022-23, all five respondents mentioned meeting up in person, with three (Amelia, Erin, Brendan) mentioning meeting for coffee/a meal without children, and two suggesting children's involvement:

> Go out for […] events in [town] for example [the theatre] with the kids all together to create that social bond with the other students, which may be great throughout the year as it'd be a great support. (Ceri)
>
> Maybe a start of year or end of year meet up, children […] welcome too. (Dinah)

However, part of the beauty of SPACES is that it allows student-parents to access support in an uncomplicated way, at a time and in a space that is most convenient to them, as Ceri notes:

> The group is always accessible, through Teams someone will always respond [to] the question asked. As [my] parenting schedule is very busy, it's great to have online access, as face to face meetings may be difficult for some. (Ceri)

When taking forward these suggestions into the coming year, it will be vital therefore to retain the easy-access online group as the main focus of support, with in person events and meetings being an optional extra.

A further area for development identified by participants is the provision of mentoring and aspiration building activities. Erin suggested 'a student parent mentor […] specifically for parents, by parents', whilst Brendan highlighted the potential for 'postgraduate success stories, […] talks from mature or parent postgraduates that we can get inspiration from'. These will also be taken forward into next year, with the remit and frequency of these activities, as well as the format and frequency of in-person events, being devised by SPACES members themselves.

<u>Feedback and next steps: personal tutor allocation</u>

Some of the members of SPACES had been allocated to the level 4 'student-parent' personal tutor group when they arrived at the university in 2021-22, but some members were from previous years' random allocations. As such, it was not possible to garner feedback directly on the 2021-22 personal tutor pilot within Stage 2 of the project. However, participants were asked for their views on how personal tutoring fits with student-parent needs, and these findings will shape the future of the personal tutor project. 100% of participants felt it is important for universities to know that their students are parents, and 100% of participants also agreed that it would be useful for this information to be provided to the university prior to their studies commencing. All participants linked their responses to tutors' ability to better support and understand their students, with Dinah noting 'I think it's crucial that this kind of information is shared so that [personal tutors] can support accordingly and relate more to the student', and Erin explaining that 'it would allow [the personal tutor] to better understand the individual's needs'.

To take the personal tutor project forward, therefore, in the absence of any institutional requirement for students to self-identify as student-parents, incoming students will be asked in departmental pre-induction communications to identify themselves so that they can be added, if they wish, to the student-parent personal tutor group and to SPACES. Some individuals may choose not to self-identify, but the findings of this study demonstrate that it is important to give students the option to do so.

The responses to two final questions will further help mould the personal tutor project for the coming year. Firstly, participants were asked what they would include if they were writing the job description of a personal tutor. All underlined the importance of support and understanding for student-parents (expressed succinctly by Dinah as 'someone who understands the journey we are on'), and two specifically mentioned child illness or emergency as being at the forefront of their minds.

Secondly, when asked what universities can do, or do better, to accommodate their student-parents, the theme of temporal and spatial flexibility (identified during Stage 1 of the study) came up again. Amelia and Dinah's comments reflect the feelings of the cohort:

there were weeks this year where I would drive 30 mins for 3 seminars on 3 different days, 2 around school run time so needing to utilise childcare but also not getting any funding for childcare. Personally, if I had 3 seminars on one day it's financially beneficial even if paying childcare. […] Making it clearer that you can switch seminars […] where needed. (Dinah)

Give special deadlines for assignments and exams. This has been very challenging for me. (Amelia)

The ideal would be for institutional central services teams to exercise discretion with regards to extensions and deferrals when the reason relates to the student's child(ren), and to provide tailored timetables for student-parent needs. However, changing processes at institutional level takes time, and where immediate action is needed, it is more realistic to make changes at the departmental level. As such, the suggestions made by participants in this study will inform a toolkit for the coming academic year to assist personal tutors in their support of student-parents, to include sharing with personal tutees during induction (and reinduction) the detailed rules relating to requesting a change to seminar sets and regarding extensions and deferrals. Savage (2021) recommends giving extensions to student-parents automatically. However, this could prove dangerous. When students roll over their assessment deadlines without the benefit of a discussion with a member of staff who has a holistic view of the student's individual circumstances and the assessment landscape for the entire year, they could find themselves with a bunching of assessments at the end of the year. This may simply cause further stress at a later point and may make it difficult to then succeed in assessment. It is suggested that a better approach is to ensure that a detailed discussion is held and that an informed decision is made in conjunction with the personal tutor.

Conclusion

It is 'beholden' (Scott et al. 1996, p.252) on higher education institutions to explore ways to ameliorate the difficulties encountered by widening participation students such as student-parents. It is our duty to do more to enable them to stay and to succeed within our institutions, and, as such, further investigation into the value of 'multiple levels of intervention' for student-parents is warranted (Briegel et al., 2021, p.4). The evidence-based interventions outlined in this paper have made a difference to the experiences of the

participants in this small-scale study by increasing their visibility, and thus feelings of support and belonging, within the cohort of student-parents itself and amongst Law School colleagues. There is more to do in educating colleagues in the needs of student-parents to enable consistent support between colleagues and to facilitate the provision of personal tutor support by members of staff other than the author, but this marks the start of one department's commitment to their student-parent cohort.

Most studies on student-parents' experiences concentrate on a small number of students or a single institution. We need more data to be able to make a national change. As Moreau (2014, p.13) pointed out almost a decade ago, 'a first step would be for HESA to require that universities collect data on students' family circumstances' to 'allow the quantification of student parents' presence in higher education'. No changes have yet been made at the national level, so for the moment the burden is upon departments, faculties and institutions to gather this data for themselves to inform their support of their student-parent cohort. By taking a deliberate and affirmative approach to student-parenthood, we can make this mighty cohort not only visible but supported, understood, empowered and celebrated.

References

Alsop, A., Gonzalez-Arnal, S. and Kilkey, M. (2008). 'The widening participation agenda: the marginal place of care', *Gender and Education,* 20(6), pp.623–637. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/09540250802215235 (Accessed: 20 January 2023).

Arnold, L. and Norton, L. (2018) *Action research: practice guide.* Available at: https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/action-research-practice-guide (Accessed: 20 January 2023).

Arowoshola, L. (2020). 'Medical education engagement during the COVID-19 era - a student parents perspective', *Medical education online*, 25(1), 1788799. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/10872981.2020.1788799 (Accessed: 23 January 2023)

Bogossian, T. (2021) '"I can't get the practical hours": care, course choice and role conflict among student-mothers in higher education in Scotland', *Revista de Sociología de la Educación-RASE*, 14 (2), pp.157-170. Available at: http://dx.doi.org/10.7203/RASE.14.2.16896 (Accessed: 20 January 2023).

Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2006) 'Using thematic analysis in psychology', *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), pp.77-101. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa (Accessed: 20 January 2023).

Briegel, M., Jakubec, S., Shippey-Heilman, A., Bruce, P. (2021) 'Supporting the well-being of student who are parents', *Academia Letters*, Article 3300. Available at: https://doi.org/10.20935/AL3300 (Accessed: 20 January 2023).

Brooks, R. (2015) 'Social and spatial disparities in emotional responses to education: feelings of 'guilt' among student-parents.' *British Educational Research Journal,* 41 (3), pp.505–519. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3154 (Accessed: 20 January 2023).

Burke, P.J. (2006) 'Men accessing education: gendered aspirations', *British Educational Research Journal*, 32(5), pp.719–733. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/01411920600895759 (Accessed: 20 January 2023).

Dickson, M. and Tennant, L. (2018) '"The accommodation I make is turning a blind eye": faculty support for student mothers in higher education', *Studies in Continuing Education* 40 (1): pp.76–97. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/0158037X.2017.1392296 (Accessed: 20 January 2023).

Gouthro, P.A. (2006) 'A critical feminist analysis of the homeplace as learning site: expanding the discourse of lifelong learning to consider adult women learners', *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 24(1), pp.5-19. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/02603704200317310 (Accessed: 20 January 2023).

Hinton-Smith, T. (2012) *Lone parents' experiences as higher education students.* NIACE.

Leathwood, C. and O'Connell, P. (2003) '"It's a struggle": the construction of the "new student" in higher education', *Journal of Education Policy,* 18(6): pp.597–615. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/0268093032000145863 (Accessed: 23 January 2023).

Lin, H.C., Zeanah, P.L., Olivier, D.F., Bergeron, M.M., Lui, C.H. (2021) 'Responding to the pressing yet unrecognized needs of student-parents amid the COVID-19 pandemic', *Journal of American College Health*, 70(8), pp.2276-2280. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/07448481.2020.1870474 (Accessed: 20 January 2023).

Lyonette, C., Atfield, G., Behl, H., Gambin, L. (2015) *Tracking student mothers' higher education participation and early career outcomes over time: initial choices and aspirations, HE experiences and career destinations. Final report*. Institute for Employment Research, University of Warwick, Coventry. Available at: https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/Tracking-student-mothers%E2%80%99-higher-education-participation-and-early-career-outcomes-over-time-Initial-choices-and-aspirations-HE-experiences-and-career-destinations.pdf (Accessed: 23 January 2023).

Mallman, M. and Lee, H. (2016) 'Stigmatised learners: mature age students negotiating university culture', *British Journal of Sociology*, 37(5), pp.684–701. https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2014.973017 (Accessed: 20 January 2023).

Marandet, E. and Wainwright, E. (2009) 'Discourses of integration and exclusion: equal opportunities for university students with dependent children?' *Space and Polity*, 13(2), pp.109–126. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/13562570902999775 (Accessed: 20 January 2023).

Marandet, E. and Wainwright, E. (2010). 'Invisible experiences: understanding the choices and needs of university students with dependent children', *British Educational Research Journal*, 36(5), pp.787-805. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/01411920903165595 (Accessed: 20 January 2023).

McGivney, V. (2003) *Staying or leaving the course*. Leicester: NIACE.

Miles, M.B. and Huberman, A. M. (1994) *Qualitative data analysis: an expanded sourcebook*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Moreau, M.P. (2014) 'Towards the family-friendly university? Research evidence on student parents and implications for higher education policies', Stimulus Paper Series, Leadership Foundation for Higher Education. Available at: https://s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/assets.creode.advancehe-document-manager/documents/lfhe/asset_images_docs/research_resources/research/stimulus_papers/2014/moreau_family_friendly_university.pdf_1572865902.pdf (Accessed: 20 January 2023).

Moreau, M.P. and Kerner, C. (2012) *Supporting student parents in higher education: a policy perspective*. Available at: https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/sites/default/files/files/Moreau%20Student%20Parent%20report%20-%20Full%20report%20October%202012.pdf (Accessed: 20 January 2023).

Moreau, M.P. and Kerner, C. (2015) 'Care in academia: an exploration of student parents' experiences', *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 36(2), pp.215-233, Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2013.814533 (Accessed: 20 January 2023).

Moss, D. (2004) 'Creating space for learning: conceptualizing women and higher education through space and time', *Gender and Education*, 16(3), pp.283–302. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/09540250042000251452 (Accessed: 20 January 2023).

Nikiforidou, Z. and Holmes, S. (2022) 'Student parents or parent students in lockdown pandemic? A Third Space approach', *Journal of Family Issues*, Vol. 0(0) 1–16 https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X211067524 (Accessed: 20 January 2023).

NUS (2009) *Meet the parents: the experience of students with children in further and
    higher education.* Available at: https://www.nusconnect.org.uk/resources/meet-the-
    parents-the-experience-of-students-with-children-in-further-and-higher-education-
    2009 (Accessed: 20 January 2023).

O'Shea, S. (2015) '"I generally say I am a mum first...but I'm studying at uni": the
    narratives of first-in-family, female caregivers transitioning into an Australian
    university', *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, 8(4), 243–257. Available at:
    https://doi.org/10.1037/a0038996 (Accessed: 20 January 2023).

Parr, J. (2017) *Identity and education: the links for mature women students.* Aldershot:
    Ashgate Publishing.

Reay, D., Ball, S. and David, M. (2002) 'It's taking me a long time but I'll get there in the
    end: mature students on access courses and higher education choice', *British
    Educational Research Journal*, 28(1), pp.5–19. Available at:
    https://doi.org/10.1080/01411920120109711 (Accessed: 20 January 2023).

Reay, D., Crozier, G. and Clayton, J. (2010). '"Fitting in" or "standing out": working-class
    students in UK higher education', *British Educational Research Journal*, 36(1),
    pp.107–124. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/01411920902878925 (Accessed:
    20 January 2023).

Sallee, M.W. (2015) 'Adding academics to the work/family puzzle: graduate student
    parents in higher education and student affairs', *Journal of Student Affairs Research
    and Practice*, 52(4), pp. 401-413. Available
    at: https://doi.org/10.1080/19496591.2015.1083438 (Accessed: 20 January 2023).

Saunders, K., Lewis, P. and Thornhill, A. (2012) *Research methods for business students.*
    Essex: Pearson.

Savage, S. (2021) 'The experience of mothers as university students and pre-service
    teachers during Covid-19: recommendations for ongoing support', *Studies in*

Continuing Education. Available
at: https://doi.org/10.1080/0158037X.2021.1994938 (Accessed: 20 January 2023).

Scharp, K.M., Cooper, R.A., Worwood, J.V. and Dorrance Hall, E. (2020) *"There's always going to be uncertainty": exploring undergraduate student parents' sources of uncertainty and related management practices. Communication Research*, 48(7), pp.1059–1084. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/0093650220903872 (Accessed: 20 January 2023).

Scott, C., Burns, A. and Cooney, G. (1996) 'Reasons for discontinuing study: the case of mature age female students with children', *Higher Education*, 31(2), pp.233-253. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02390446 (Accessed: 20 January 2023).

Stokes, P. and Wall, T. (2014) *Research Methods*. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave MacMillan.

Stone, C. and O'Shea, S. (2013) 'Time, money, leisure and guilt: the gendered challenges of higher education for mature-age students', *Australian Journal of Adult Learning*, 53(1), pp.95–116. Available at: https://ro.uow.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1193&context=sspapers (Accessed: 20 January 2023).

Stone, C.M.M. and O'Shea, S.E. (2019) 'My children… think it's cool that mum is a uni student: women with caring responsibilities studying online', *Australasian Journal of Educational Technology*, 35(6), pp.97–110. Available at: https://doi.org/10.14742/ajet.5504 (Accessed: 20 January 2023).

Thomas, L., Talbot, C.V. and Briggs, P. (2021) 'The digital lives of student mothers: a consideration of technologies that support or erode the student/parent boundary', *International Journal of Human-Computer Studies*, 154, Article 102689. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijhcs.2021.102689 (Accessed: 20 January 2023).

Wainwright, E. and Marandet, E. (2010) 'Parents in higher education: impacts of university learning on the self and the family', *Educational Review*, 62(4), pp.449-465. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2010.487643 (Accessed: 20 January 2023).

Waller, R. (2006) '"I don't feel like '*a student*', I feel like '*me*'!": the over-simplification of mature learners' experience(s)', *Research in Post-Compulsory Education,* 11(1), pp.115–130. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/13596740500508019 (Accessed: 20 January 2023).

Webber, L. and Dismore, H. (2020) 'Mothers and higher education: balancing time, study and space', *Journal of Further and Higher Education,* 45(6), pp.803–817. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2020.1820458 (Accessed: 20 January 2023).

Author details

Andrea (Andy) Todd is a Senior Fellow of the HEA and Associate Professor of Active Citizenship at the University of Chester Law School. Since writing this article, Andy has produced an eight-step toolkit to assist institutions in identifying, supporting and celebrating student-parents. The toolkit is available on the website of the United Kingdom Advising and Tutoring Association: https://www.ukat.ac.uk/media/1886/supporting-student-parents-toolkit-andy-todd-jan-2023.pdf.

Licence