

'They don't realise how hard it is'. Investigating the lived experiences of higher education students with parental responsibilities during the Covid-19 pandemic

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Abstract

Anecdotal reports of student parents' challenges during the Covid-19 pandemic prompted this explorative study; investigating the lived experiences of UK student parents and the provision of Higher Education support. Data was derived from 91 online surveys, 20 follow-up interviews, and analysis of 100 university websites. This occurred during the pandemic lockdowns when the stresses, challenges and opportunities of balancing their simultaneous roles of parent and student were intensified due to school closures. The *Double ABC-X* model provided a framework for examining participant's lived experiences, and the role that Higher Education institutions could play in effecting positive coping and adaptation. Findings indicate that universities need to implement strategies to enhance support for this sector, including greater awareness of the vulnerabilities and challenges involved, more flexibility and adaptability in the university ethos, formal and informal policies and structures to provide more effective support and advice for juggling these simultaneous demands.

KEYWORDS

coping mechanisms, Covid-19, higher education, parental stress, student-parents

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Ανεπίσημες αναφορές γονέων φοιτητών σχετικά με τις προκλήσεις τους την περίοδο του covid-19 παρακίνησε αυτήν την διερευνητική έρευνα- που εξετάζει τις ζωντανές εμπειρίες των φοιτητών γονέων στο Η.Β. και των παροχών υποστήριξης της Ανώτατης Εκπαίδευσης. Τα δεδομένα αφορούν 91 διαδικτυακά ερωτηματολόγια, 20 συνεντεύξεις και ανάλυση από 100 πανεπιστημιακές ιστοσελίδες. Αυτό συνέβη κατά την περίοδο καραντίνας στην πανδημία όταν το άγχος, οι προκλήσεις και οι ευκαιρίες εξισορρόπησης των ταυτόχρονων ρόλων ως γονείς και ως φοιτητές εντάθηκαν λόγω του κλεισίματος των σχολείων. Το διπλό ABC-X μοντέλο αποτέλεσε ένα πλαίσιο για την εξέταση των ζωντανών εμπειριών των συμμετεχόντων και του ρόλου που θα μπορούσαν να παίξουν τα Ανώτατα Εκπαιδευτικά Ιδρύματα επιφέροντας θετική αντιμετώπιση και προσαρμογή. Τα αποτελέσματα δείχνουν ότι τα πανεπιστήμια έπρεπε να θέσουν στρατηγικές για να υποστηρίξουν αυτόν τον τομέα, δείχνοντας μεγαλύτερη επίγνωση της ευπάθειας και των δυσκολιών, περισσότερη ευελιξία και προσαρμοστικότητα στο πανεπιστημιακό ήθος, τυπικές και μη τυπικές πολιτικές και δομές ώστε να παρέχουν περισσότερο αποτελεσματική υποστήριξη και συμβουλή για να ανταπεξέλθουν στις ταυτόχρονες απαιτήσεις.

1 | INTRODUCTION

The Covid-19 pandemic was said to accentuate experiences and highlight situations, which had existed prior to the pandemic (Del Boca et al., 2020; The British Academy, 2021). Parents were highly impacted by the pandemic-related additional childcare responsibilities (Huebener et al., 2021). Whilst it was a very stressful season for parents generally (Cluver et al., 2020; Lebow, 2020), this paper explores specifically the experiences, implications and coping mechanisms of parents who were simultaneously studying at UK Higher Education (HE) establishments. Prior to Covid-19, it was documented that students with parental responsibilities experienced stresses and challenges due to balancing their responsibilities (Moreau & Kerner, 2015; Scharp et al., 2020). The subsequent lockdown-related school closures, alongside limited formal and informal childcare opportunities, intensified these stresses and challenges (Gromada et al., 2020). The sudden shift to online learning in Higher Education was highly impactful on student parents (Brown et al., 2022). This paper therefore aims to uncover insights into the ever-present pressures on student parents, and the elements which may be beneficial, to inform the HE sector of how they could more effectively be supported in their learning. The findings and ensuing recommendations could be transformative to the structures and practices integral to HE provision within the UK, and beyond.

1.1 | Student parents experiences

Student parents are a specific sub-population of adult learners with unique circumstances and challenges, experiencing a myriad of uncertainties born out of their dual roles as students and parents (Scharp et al., 2020). They constantly engage in a balancing act between their roles of parent and student, negotiating their time, needs, expectations and aspirations (Moreau & Kerner, 2015). The main challenges relate to time, finance and health and emotional issues (Moreau, 2016). Financial issues derive from high childcare costs and tuition fees (Moreau & Kerner, 2015). Indeed, Hinton-Smith (2016) emphasised the modest financial resources associated with both studentship and lone parenthood. Further struggles include high levels of sleep deprivation (Marandet & Wainwright, 2010), high occurrence of depression (Gerrard & Roberts, 2006), as well as feelings of guilt, of 'missing out' and 'not fitting in' regarding family life and studies (Moreau & Kerner, 2015). They have also reported uncertainty-induced stress related to their transition to academia and parenting that, in turn, has been associated with adverse mental and physical health outcomes (Gerrard & Roberts, 2006; Scharp & Dorrance Hall, 2018). Scharp et al. (2020) identified three types of uncertainties experienced by this sector: transition uncertainties; exacerbated uncertainties (time management, financial), and intersectional uncertainties (overlapping identities, network uncertainty).

Student parents' experiences exhibit a gender bias, connected with Western constructs of parenthood. The long-lasting connection of women to care (Springer et al., 2009) and expectations to prioritise their children concurs with Hays' (1996) notion of 'intensive mothering'. Care is culturally constructed as a 'feminine' activity, with gendered implications. Estes (2011) found that both mothers and fathers adopt the cultural expectations related to mothering and care when accounting for their role as parents. Student mothers are expected to maintain the main responsibility for domestic duties, whilst in the case of student fathers, their female partners were more likely to change their lives to favour their partners' needs (Baxter & Britton, 2001). Similarly, Alsop et al. (2008) found that female students were expected to keep their role of carers unchanged when they become students; this expectation came from themselves and their wider social circle.

Student parents adopt a range of strategies to overcome any conflicts or tensions between their two roles. They tend to study when children are in school, childcare or sleeping, hence restricting the time dedicated to activities other than studying and parenting; connecting with boundaries as to what is 'good enough' (Moreau & Kerner, 2015). Cutting down on 'time for oneself' is a common pattern for mothers engaged in paid work and/or HE (Moreau & Kerner, 2015) and for single/lone parent students (Hinton-Smith, 2016). Scharp et al. (2020) also identified three mechanisms which student parents often use to manage their dual identities. They seek support from their social network and try to be productive by formulating goals and scheduling to push through their uncertainty, and they take a break, in the sense of putting uncertainties aside for a finite amount of time before returning fresh.

1.2 | The Covid-19 pandemic

The Covid-19 pandemic intensified pre-existing pressures (Del Boca et al., 2020), particularly for parents. Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, research of stressful parental situations primarily centred around disability, illness and Special Educational Needs, alongside broader aspects of uncertainty and fear of the future (Reinaldo et al., 2018) and parental juggling of work and family life (Boss, 2002). However, the unique and unpredictable situation of the pandemic (Price et al., 2017) increased parental burden and impacted every sphere of family life, resulting in social, marital, familial and emotional problems, in turn impacting on the family (Bayat et al., 2011). Hence, the effects permeated through the structures and processes of family systems (Prime et al., 2020), resulting in highly stressful conditions for families, with direct impacts including bereavement, anxiety, emotional implications of reduced physical contact, employment and financial concerns (Lebow, 2020). The temporary school closures created a predicament for parents,

requiring balancing of family and work life (Gromada et al., 2020; Meejung et al., 2020), which was a daunting prospect for many (Cluver et al., 2020). Working parents struggled to balance the demands upon their time, greatly compromising the well-being of themselves and their families (Cheng et al., 2021). Sevilla et al. (2020) stated that mothers and fathers alike were required to reduce the time devoted to paid work to accommodate increased childcare needs, although Meejung et al. (2020) argued that there were clear gender differences in fulfilling household and childcare roles, with a disproportionate burden being placed on women (Sevilla et al., 2020; Del Boca et al., 2020; Etheridge & Spantig, 2020; Gromada et al., 2020). The social and economic impacts of the pandemic are likely to be longstanding, akin to natural disasters or war (Prime et al., 2020). Consequently, The British Academy (2021) called for policymakers to be attentive to issues arising and address policy accordingly to mitigate the effects.

1.3 | Parental stress and coping

Balancing work and family are known to result in high stress levels within families (Boss, 2002). Whilst this seems universal, the impact seems to depend upon the family's perception of the situation and their coping ability (Price et al., 2017). Forms of stress management, leading to regaining of emotional equilibrium after a stressful experience, are vitally important (Jaiswal et al., 2018). To date, literature regarding coping of families is largely focused on experiences of disability, special educational needs, illness in the family context and tragedies such as war and drought (Arenliu et al., 2020; Caldwell & Boyd, 2009; Cuzzocrea et al., 2016; Das et al., 2017; Hastings et al., 2005; Jaiswal et al., 2018; Munthali, 2002). Within these examples, coping behaviour involves the management of various dimensions of family life simultaneously, such as communication, family organisation, independence, family coherence and unity and social support (McCubbin et al., 1982). Support from family members directly and indirectly is highly valued by many parents (Reinaldo et al., 2018), and the availability of social support externally is an equally valuable resource for parents (Cuzzocrea et al., 2016). Studies of families with a disabled child have found that internal parental locus of control is associated with reduced stress (Cuzzocrea et al., 2016). Indeed, the unpredictability of a disability can lead to feelings of hopelessness (Jones & Passey, 2004), although Cuzzocrea et al. (2016) argued that modifying cognitive appraisal and negative beliefs may help parents emotionally. Furthermore, the wellbeing and adjustment of parents and children is not unidirectional but is mutually reinforced within lived experience (Prime et al., 2020). Alongside this, Hastings et al. (2005) emphasised that coping is context dependent. For example, financial strain can be a contributory factor Duran et al. (2020). Overall, greater stress levels seem to be associated with the use of dysfunctional coping styles, whilst stressful perceptions are reduced through effective coping skills (Cuzzocrea et al., 2016). Regular and dependable rituals, such as activities, meet-ups and family dinners, have frequently been observed as central in facilitating resilience through difficult times (Lebow, 2020), and acceptance and optimism have been shown to ease parental stress (Norizan & Shamsuddin, 2010). The mindset of parents also seems important, as to whether a stress is viewed as suffering or a learning experience (Reinaldo et al., 2018). During crises such as the pandemic, Mahdi et al. (2020) suggested that small changes in perception towards the crisis may aid total wellbeing.

This literature indicates that the effects of the pandemic on student parents are likely to have been considerable, impacting upon parental wellbeing and family life amongst many other factors. Therefore, this research investigated the role of HE institutions regarding support structures provided during this time.

2 | METHOD

2.1 | Research design

This explorative study sought to (a) investigate the lived experiences of UK student parents during the pandemic school closures, (b) consider the coping strategies adopted by this sector in both pandemic and

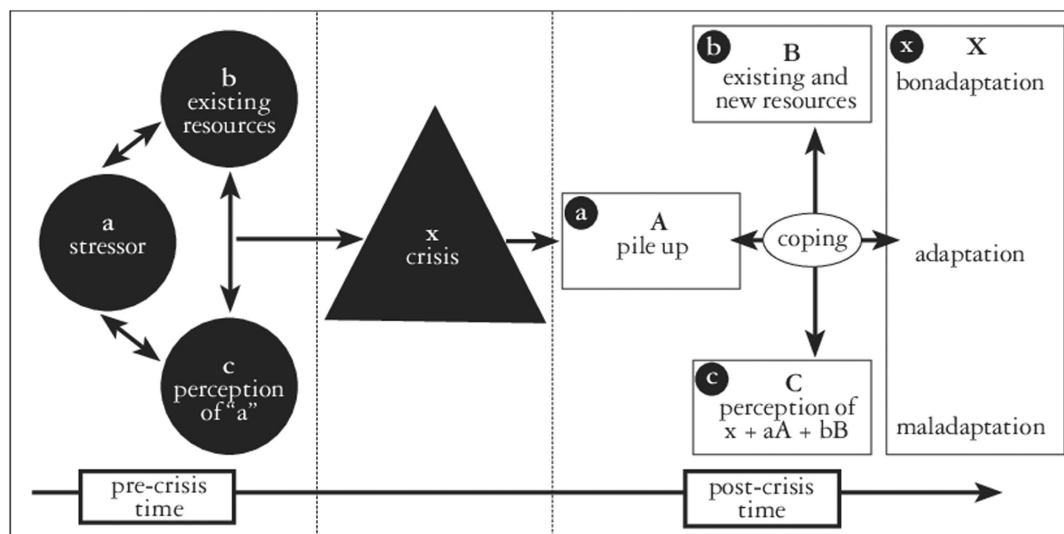


FIGURE 1 Double ABC-X model (McCubbin et al., 1982).

non-pandemic times and (c) examine the ongoing provision of support specifically for this sector by HE institutions. The family stress framework (*ABC-X model*) provided a basis for exploring how the pandemic stressor had impacted participant families, and the effects of the coping measures which they had adopted (Hill, 1958). The pandemic school closures could be represented by 'A' (the stressor event), 'B' denoted the family's resources or strengths, and 'C' equated to the definition or perception attached to the pandemic school closures by the family. However, the modified *Double ABC-X model* (McCubbin et al., 1982) was adopted as the framework for data analysis in this project as it developed this further and more fully enabled investigation of how participant families had coped with the stressor, their perceptions of any new resources and how they had adapted to the crisis (Figure 1). Of key interest was the role which HE institutions had played in these lived experiences, coping and adaptation.

2.2 | Data collection and analysis

The project gathered data in three phases. Data collection was limited to the UK to ensure parity of pandemic experience, since at the time of the empirical research the school closure measures were in place nationally. Firstly, an in-depth online survey was launched in February 2021, which was a time of lockdown within the UK; hence, participants' responses would be capturing very recent experiences. The survey invitation was disseminated via UK university administration channels, Students Union communication pathways and student-focused organisations and social media pages. Participation was invited regardless of institution, gender, age, geographical region, level or subject of study. The aim was to capture a range of these attributes to provide a rich and varied data set. The survey participants ($n = 91$) were from twenty different UK HE institutions. Six respondents were male and 85 females, 55 were undergraduates, 33 postgraduates and three 'unspecified'. The sample comprised 71 fulltime and 20 part-time student parents. At the time of data collection, Covid-19 restrictions prevented face to face contact and online surveys proved beneficial in capturing this hard-to-reach group (Parsons & Lewis, 2010). Hence, online surveys enabled rapid data collection from a large sample of parents at a time of extreme pressure on parents, which rendered other methods of data collection to be of limited uptake (Colizzi et al., 2020; Neill et al., 2021). To gain a broad understanding of the experiences of student parents, the survey design was

intentionally comprehensive, with the awareness that the longer time required by respondents could be a barrier and reduce participant numbers but yet would gather more insightful data. The desire to capture broad and in-depth insights therefore resulted in inclusion of nine open-ended questions about the respondent's family experiences, HE learning experience during this phase, their sense of identity and balancing multiple identities, support structures and coping mechanisms implemented, the perceived challenges and benefits of the pandemic circumstances and their reflections on what they could have done differently and what new life patterns they would retain. These questions supplemented six multiple-choice questions enquiring about the student's experiences, support and coping strategies. At the end of the survey, respondents were invited to provide their contact details if they wished to be interviewed.

The second phase of data collection was interviews of HE student parents, with the interviews taking place three months after the survey to capture participant reflections of their experiences once school attendance had settled somewhat. Similar questioning to the surveys was carried out, although probing of participants was possible within the interviews, adding to the validity of the survey data. Twenty participants opted to be interviewed, from a range of institutions, eighteen of which were female and two male. Four were PhD students and the remainder were undergraduates, with one of these being enrolled on a distance learning course and the remainder on campus-based courses. The interviews all took place on zoom and were recorded and transcribed for subsequent analysis.

Thirdly, data were collected from university websites to map the provision of support services. A systematic analysis was carried out on the websites of the 100 top universities¹ in respect of the nature of support services detailed on their page entitled 'student support', 'student welfare' or 'student wellbeing'. Content analysis of websites proved beneficial in revealing current institutional strategies and resources (Chadha & Toner, 2017; Lazetic, 2018). Therefore, analysis of these university webpages illuminated the areas which each university perceived as requiring support and hence included in their provision. It is conceded that informal support may be provided within the university in addition to this; however, this technique sought to discover the official, prominent priorities and focus areas for student support conveyed by each institution. The websites were scrutinised, and each of the categories of support offered was noted. The detail or effectiveness of support available was not compared (Wilson, 2015); merely the presence of support in each category was logged (Figure 4).

The project met with the ethical scrutiny of Liverpool Hope University, ensuring that informed consent was obtained, and confidentiality and anonymity ensured. The survey was completed anonymously to mitigate power relations. Participants were asked at the end to provide the name of their institution, although this was optional, and it was made clear that this was purely to ensure that the study captured a representative spread of institutions.

Once collected, the survey data were analysed thematically (Braun & Clarke, 2012) using MAXQDA software to facilitate coding of the responses. For each of the open-ended questions, the qualitative responses were analysed and codes formulated to represent and capture the essence of each response. Many of the responses generated multiple codes if they conveyed numerous different emotions or experiences. These initial codes were then sorted into categories (clusters) of similar meaning, and these cluster codes were then sorted into themes arising from this process. For example, analysis of question four (how would you summarise your overall experience of pandemic lockdown?) pinpointed 181 different phrases regarding their overall pandemic experience, so these were identified as the initial codes. These were then refined to 26 codes, since many were stating the same meaning with slightly different wording. These codes were then clustered into ten categories of experience (Figure 2), which revealed five clear themes about parent experiences. Each question was analysed in a similar manner. The interview data were analysed using the same process, although the interviews were transcribed first to enable this process to occur.

Clustered codes	Number of responses which were allocated this code.	Themes
Too much, pressured, overwhelmed, suffocating	19	Very challenging and overwhelming experience
Exhausting, depleting, guilty, failure	17	
Hard, challenging, stressful, frustrating, busy	61	Challenging and stressful experiences
Isolated, unsupported, anxiety, hectic,	33	
Tension, juggle, torn	7	
Distressing, sad, depressing, emotional, bad	10	Sad and distressing feelings
Bored, fed up, dull, demotivating	6	
Not as bad as others, fortunate	3	Mildly negative experience
Learning experience, do-able, manageable	5	
Good, ok, family time	14	Positive experience
Relaxed, safe at home, enjoyable, fun	4	

FIGURE 2 Overall pandemic experiences.

3 | FINDINGS

3.1 | Online survey findings

3.1.1 | Overall pandemic experiences of student parents

Analysis of participant responses pinpointed 181 different phrases regarding their overall pandemic experience ('x' in Figure 1), which were refined to 26 codes (Figure 2). Of these, 14% were positive and 86% conveyed negative impressions. Forty-two percent reported that they had found it difficult, hard or stressful, whilst 14% stated that they had felt overwhelmed, trapped or pressured by the circumstances, 12% reported feeling lonely, unsupported or isolated, 9% described themselves as exhausted or depleted and 8% described worried or anxious feelings. Figure 2 also shows that 5% said that they had struggled with the tensions of juggling or balancing their different roles and three percent reported that they felt guilty or a failure due to the pandemic experience. Three percent described their experience as 'chaos', emotional or sad. Other responses that were only mentioned once were: bad, full on, uncertain, demotivating, triggering, busy and expensive. Regarding positive elements, some respondents reported that whilst it was a difficult experience, it had been 'manageable'. A few remarked that their experience had 'fortunately not been as bad as that of others' and therefore labelled it 'ok'. One said that they had felt safe at home, and another said that they had been relaxed. A few felt that it had been a good learning experience, and the remaining positive comments referred to the benefit of increased family time.

3.1.2 | Balancing parent and student roles

Regarding balancing of their parent and student roles; 76% stated that it was hard or very hard, with 26% explaining that they had not found a balance, 13% expressed that they had 'just done enough' or 'got through', 19% reported they had needed to reduce their study time to meet the needs of their family, and 30% noted that they worked during anti-social hours, which left them feeling exhausted and many felt this pattern was detrimental to their mental health. Five percent of the sample had received extensions, although a few expressed that whilst helpful in the short term, it simply delayed the pressure. The positive elements included 22% benefiting from support of others (a co-parent, Grandparent or support bubble), 22% had allocated time segments to create a routine, although many emphasised that this needed to be flexible to accommodate changing demands. Some recounted that their schedule considered live sessions as a priority, since pre-recorded content could be accessed outside of core teaching time, often the evenings. This ability to be flexible with their study time was beneficial to many participants. The data highlighted that parental stress and adaption (Xx in Figure 1) was significantly reduced if effective coping mechanisms were implemented ('bB' on Figure 1).

3.1.3 | Gender differences

Participant responses indicated that mothers and fathers had experienced the pandemic lockdowns differently (79%), although 8% reported that the demands had been shared equally. The most frequent response ($n = 35$) was that mothers had experienced more pressures or challenges during lockdown than fathers, whilst 33 responses conveyed an assumption that mothers would by default fulfil this role and 13 felt that mothers naturally took responsibility for family logistics. Sixteen participants reported that the mothers had carried out the childcare, home-schooling and household tasks due to the father being the main income provider. In three cases, the father had reduced their workload to enable the mother to maintain employment. Conversely, two mothers stated that they had been furloughed so that they could home-school their children, and one mother explained that she had to take responsibility for home-schooling because her child's father did not have the skills to do so. One participant stated that fathers were doing a lot more with their children during lockdown than they usually did, but five expressed that the fathers had continued with the working life outside of the house in a similar way to usual so had not experienced much difference in pressure. This all connects with pre-existing and new perceptions (Cc in Figure 1), which impact on the level of adaption (xX in Figure 1).

3.1.4 | Coping strategies and support mechanisms during the pandemic

With regard to personal coping strategies ('bB' in Figure 1), 61% stated that prioritising tasks had been beneficial (Figure 3), and many described routines as highly effective. Most had utilised 'anti-social' hours to complete their studies. Whilst not ideal, many had found the flexibility to do this helpful. Despite many of the students reporting feeling exhausted, and some presenting anxiety and mental health issues, 36% reported that self-care had been an important coping strategy for them, with 33% labelling exercise and 34% perceiving positive thinking as effective coping tactics. Eighteen percent stated that their religion had been a support and 26% reported that they had avoided things. This avoidance tended to be for the duration of lockdown to focus on priorities and 'get through.' A range of participant mindsets was evident, with the majority stating that whilst it was a very difficult time they had persevered because they knew it was for a finite time. The data in Figure 3 reveal that 44% had found chatting with others to be beneficial. However, it is notable that this was not in the form of mutual student support, which was minimal. Indeed, the participants described their support being from outside of the University, such as family and close friends.

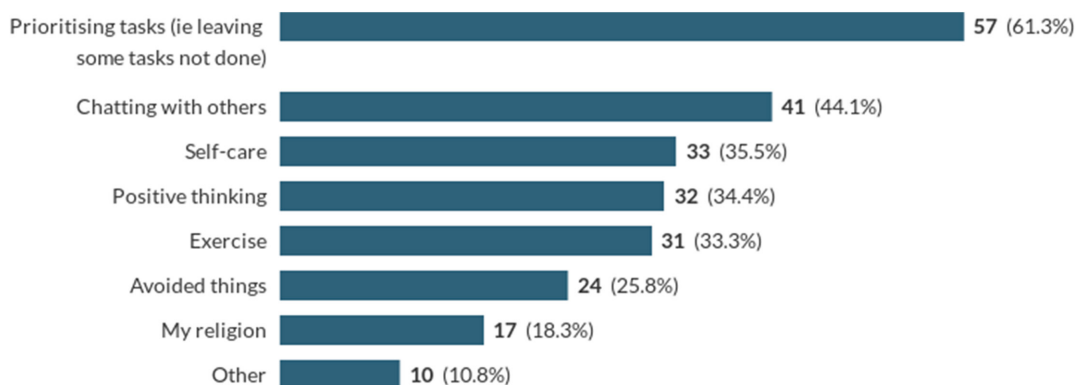


FIGURE 3 The coping strategies reported by participants.

3.2 | Interview findings

3.2.1 | Coping strategies and support mechanisms

The interview participants universally reported that they had found their tutors and general university structures to be much more supportive and beneficial to them during Covid-19 than usual ('bB' in Figure 1). Many appreciated additional 1:1 sessions, which tutors had provided or additional information being made available to support completion of assessments. However, the majority ($n = 16$) reported that whilst individual tutors were very supportive, the underlying structures were not, which these students found frustrating, indicating that their 'hands were tied' by the institutional structures and policies. Examples were given of flexibility of deadlines for those with learning disabilities or mental health issues, which was not available to student parents, unless as one parent reported that they had been advised to access a medical note to say they had mental health difficulties in order to gain flexibility for the fact that they had pressures of being a parent. Further to this, five participants explained that pre-pandemic, as a student parent, they had not been entitled to recordings of the sessions if unable to attend, but those with learning difficulties were. This was deemed unfair and unsupportive by the participants. Further to this, a clear discourse was the extent to which informal support from peers was present. There were very polarised views expressed about how supportive friends had 'got them through', but conversely the lack of understanding within the student body had often made student parents feel isolated. An extension of this was that six participants explained occasions when the timetable had been changed with little notice, and it was extremely difficult to arrange childcare accordingly, since most provisions require considerable notice of changes.

There were positive aspects highlighted in the interviews, such as no need for travel, resulting in more time for their family. All participants expressed that lecture recordings and online access to live sessions during the pandemic had relieved stress and logistical difficulties. This had enabled the student parents to complete their work in the evenings or early mornings, so that they could commit appropriate time to their children during the day. Some had found extensions helpful, although many had not required them. Six participants reported semi-formal support groups as being beneficial, such as WhatsApp or Facebook groups to gather student parents or mature parents, and hence to facilitate mutual support.

Looking ahead, the participants frequently stated that many of the structures implemented by their university during pandemic would be beneficial to retain, such as flexibility in teaching hours and modes of accessing teaching content, alongside access to broader online resources and information. This, they felt, required changes to the underlying policies and processes of the university so that these changes could be embedded across the student body and be available to all student parents, regardless of the individual tutors they were connected with. Alongside this, more organised peer support was something which participants felt would be highly beneficial.

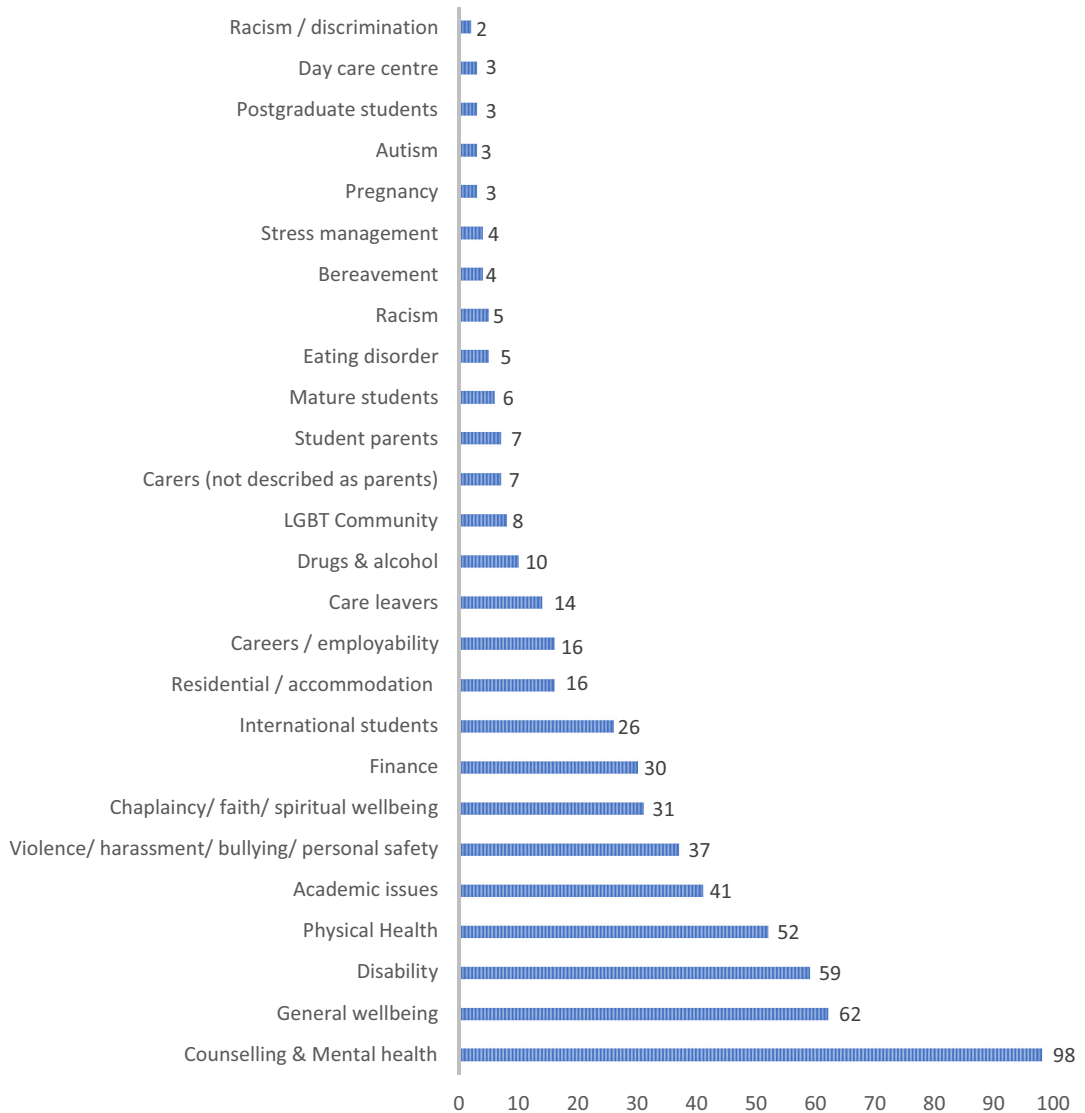


FIGURE 4 Provision of student support signposted on university student support pages (numbers of university websites with evidence of this category of support).

3.3 | Website content

The content of the 100 universities was analysed to determine the nature of support listed under the banner of 'student support', 'student welfare' or 'student wellbeing'. Initially 33 codes were generated, although these were refined to 26 upon clustering of similar codes. Figure 4 shows that 98 of the Universities indicated support for student mental health and/or counselling on their student support pages ('B' on Figure 1). Physical health ($n = 52$), wellbeing ($n = 62$) and support for those with disabilities ($n = 59$) were also very frequently listed. There was a range of other targeted provision, including for specific groups such as international students ($n = 26$), care leaders ($n = 14$), LGBT ($n = 8$), carers ($n = 7$), mature students ($n = 6$), postgraduate ($n = 3$) and autistic ($n = 3$). Student parents were listed as having support in seven of the 100 universities surveyed, although a further three listed 'day care setting' on their pages, which is a gesture of support to those who are parents. The seven institutions

who specified support for student parents primarily focussed on practical support, such as signposting childcare (in some cases on university premises) or schooling, financial information regarding grants and housing benefits, and in two cases advice for pregnant students and a maternity and paternity policy. One setting stood out as having extensive resources and advice for student parents on their website. This included information pages tailored specifically for student parents at different stages, including new students who are student parents, and provided copious study skills advice and other tailored resources. They also provided an online session for student parents near the start of the academic year: 'Finding a balance: student and parenting responsibilities', and this included contributions from student parents and the Student Parents Representative, sharing their experiences and tips. Aside from this, only one other university provided information and advice about time management for student parents and balancing study time with quality family time.

4 | DISCUSSION

The *Double ABC-X Model* framework (Figure 1) was used to analyse this data with 'a' referring to the ongoing stressor of balancing the demands of both student and parent roles, which the pandemic related school closures appeared to intensify (denoted by x in the model) and which resulted in the 'pile up' situation for participants (A). The aspects denoted as Bb (new and existing resources) and Cc (participant perceptions of the stressors and resources) will be discussed in the light of adaptation of participants and hence consideration of how effective these approaches were. Consequently, the dominant themes drawn from this data reveal areas where HE institutions could enhance their provision and support for student parents outside of pandemic times. The role that universities had within the component features of B and b in the *Double ABC-X Model* was therefore analysed with a view to examining how they could better serve this student sector in the future.

4.1 | Existing and new resources and structures (Bb)

Analysis of the survey and interview data demonstrated that each family context was different and hence opted for different coping mechanisms in this time of crisis. However, the data indicate that the participants largely desired to utilise their existing resources (B) as part of their coping strategies in the event of a crisis. The caveat to this was that despite family members ordinarily being valuable in times of distress (Cuzzocrea et al., 2016; Reinaldo et al., 2018), the pandemic restrictions limited their availability substantially, particularly with regard to grandparental care (Del Boca et al., 2020). Furthermore, prohibitions of informal socialising across households impeded what would usually aid resiliency through difficult times (Lebow, 2020). Therefore, these pre-existing support structures were virtually inaccessible to student parents at the time of the survey, and very little alternative support was available. This seems to be the primary reason for the maladaptation (xX) reported by many. Hence, Huebener et al. (2021) proposed that in any similar event, crisis teams should be established at regional and national levels to include prioritisation of keeping schools and day care centres open, family counselling and additional support for parents. These crisis teams and policy planners should also be aware of pre-existing vulnerabilities within families (Prime et al., 2020) since these could increase susceptibility to disruption and chaos during stressful events. Indeed, many participants called for improved recognition and awareness of their issues and challenges, both amongst staff and students. Consequently, raising awareness in HE institutions of the vulnerabilities of student parents as part of a university's ongoing teaching would be beneficial (Brown et al., 2022), prompting consideration of effective intervention and support strategies for student parents in times of crisis. This would seem valuable as many of the interviewees perceived that they were excluded or isolated from their peers due to their family responsibilities. Perceptions such as these (Cc) may have influenced how they perceived and experienced the pandemic stressor. To this end, some participants suggested that including awareness of this within

university induction programmes could improve support within their staff and student body, rather than them having to seek support primarily externally. Incorporating this into wider HE culture outside of crisis times would be effective, so that student parents would generally feel more included and understood as part of the student cohort, consequently improving their experiences and outcomes.

There was an underlying discourse that awareness and support was available for other sectors, such as those with learning disabilities, and yet the needs of the student parent sector were largely overlooked and unrecognised by staff, students and university structures alike. Indeed, the website analysis of service provision for student parents concurs with the reports from participant student parents that existing support for this sector is minimal and there was not awareness of the potential vulnerabilities of this group. Hence, the data are indicating that the existing support structures provided by HE institutions (*B*) are inadequate, with the consequence that participants were required to seek support through other routes. This underlying discourse seemed to impact participant's perceptions of the stressor (*Cc*), as many deemed that they were in a pre-existing detrimental position as a result. The desire amongst participants therefore was to have greater support structures through both formal and informal structures and embedded into policy implementation to better meet the needs of this sector and hence foster 'bon-adaptation'. This could include awareness of the demands and expectations regarding the hours of time spent studying alongside the other commitments which student-parents have, flexibility within weekly timetables, such as an asynchronous approach, incorporating access to recorded teaching materials and online supplementary resources. Other suggestions from participants were having the option to attend online rather than in person if childcare issues arise, provision of a tiered system of the course requirements (e.g., essential, recommended and optional elements) and availability of extensions. Conversely, many asserted that extensions must be used with caution as they often merely delay the inevitable pressure, so in many cases are not ultimately helpful to student-parents.

This aligns with the notion reported of the need for flexibility and adaptability, concurring with some of the explorations of blended learning (Huang et al., 2022). Such approaches would ensure that underlying issues may be identified and resolved in a way which helps student parents in the future (Arowoshola, 2020). Furthermore, these data supported previous findings that stressful events may be perceived as less severe if effective coping skills are employed (Cuzzocrea et al., 2016). To this end, it could be advantageous to the whole student body if training and resources are available to facilitate students in formulating their own personalised coping strategies and mechanisms to build resiliency through difficult times (Lebow, 2020). Ultimately, it is also important that this is a dynamic process since stress and family adaptation varies considerably as a child grows and develops, so that parents' experience of stress will invariably change over time (Hastings et al., 2005), and therefore, the university systems must be flexible and responsive to their challenges. Building these aspects into the formal structures of universities would be of great benefit to this growing sector of the student body and could contribute to improved adaptation (*xX*) in times of crisis.

4.2 | Perceptions of stressors (C)

Many respondents reflected on their experiences as being a process of discovering how best to balance the demands upon them, reflecting the notion that being a parent and student requires a continuous dynamic process of reinterpretation and rearticulation (Estes, 2011). This echoes the notion of family resilience being key to growth during times of stress (Price et al., 2017). Indeed, it seemed that where participants had a mindset of engaging with this process of learning (*Cc*) and developing as a parent and family unit in order to cope with the stressful scenario, parental stress was reduced. This concurs with the findings of Reinaldo et al. (2018) that viewing an experience as a learning opportunity rather than suffering is highly beneficial. It also connects with the assertion of Price et al. (2017) that stressor events do not necessarily increase stress levels to the point of crisis, particularly if the family's stress level can be managed so that the family can return to a new equilibrium.

This emphasises the need for a positive mindset and optimism amongst the student parents (Mahdi et al., 2020; Norizan & Shamsuddin, 2010). Such positive perceptions could counteract the frequently reported feelings of guilt or sadness of being unable to spend as much time studying as desired or needed, concurring with the findings of another study that they could not 'do justice' to either role (Arowoshola, 2020). This further emphasises the role that perceptions (Cc) play in coping and adaptation.

To this end, Mahdi et al. (2020) suggested that small changes in perception towards the crisis may have helped to bring about a state of total wellbeing, whilst Norizan and Shamsuddin (2010) found that acceptance and optimism reduced parental stress. This could serve to reduce the uncertainty-induced stress of student parents (Gerrard & Roberts, 2006; Scharp & Dorrance Hall, 2018), concurring with an Italian study which revealed that perception of the difficulty of quarantine was a crucial factor that undermined both parents' and children's wellbeing (Spinelli et al., 2020). It would therefore be beneficial for HE institutions to have greater awareness (amongst staff and students alike) of how some families coped better than others during the pandemic lockdowns, so that they may be proactive and strive to prevent crisis points being reached by student-parents, which may have otherwise required intervention (Mahdi et al., 2020; Price et al., 2017). Exploring and addressing student needs more broadly, rather than focussing solely on learning objectives is part of teaching being successful (Noddings, 2013). This posits that universities should bolster their ethic of care for student parents as part of ongoing student development (Huang et al., 2022). Furthermore, equipping student parents to attend to their own self-care and wellbeing through such mindset changes could be highly impactful and support more beneficial perceptions of stressors (Cc). Indeed, White (2020) observed that when circumstances seem too overwhelming and unconquerable, people are at risk of feeling unable to pursue their goals, which could lead to inability of students to fulfil the course requirements or ultimately student attrition. Hence, embedding such a dialogue and ethos into university systems and cultures could help retention of this cohort in the long term.

Implementation of specific training, guidance and ongoing support for student-parents may mitigate the impacts of the continuous juggling of demands which they experience. This could take the form of mentorship programmes (Mahdi et al., 2020). These early intervention strategies could endeavour to support skill development of devising routines, organising and allocating time for their various demands, eliciting support from others and how to effectively use support networks and modes of self-care. The underpinning understanding of such provision must be to guide student-parents in actively and intentionally engaging in the process of finding a mode of balancing which is tailored to their specific context and is therefore effective for them individually, rather than providing a 'one size fits all' strategy. This will enable them to develop positive perceptions towards stressors (Cc) and strategies of coping. Communicating that this is an evolving process is key to mitigating feelings of failure, ensuring that students do not adopt avoidance or passive strategies, and fostering a mindset of continual learning and development.

4.3 | Student parents adaptation to the crisis (xx)

Whilst small numbers of participants reported positive experiences, the majority described the pandemic school closures negatively. Many reported feeling exhausted and overwhelmed due to the demands upon them, connecting with the findings of Savage et al. (2020) that the mental health of UK university students dramatically reduced. The previously reported sense of a balancing act for student parents (Moreau & Kerner, 2015) was significantly intensified by the pandemic circumstances. Cheng et al. (2021) found that parent well-being was significantly compromised by substantial demands. However, it has been shown that families with significant pressures can adapt successfully to demands through the development of coping strategies either individually or as a family unit (Hastings et al., 2005). Indeed, this research showed that where the student parents were able to successfully balance their roles, by utilising existing resources (B), parental stress was significantly reduced, concurring with an Italian study of parents which reported that the more difficulties parents had in dealing with quarantine, the more

stress was evident (Spinelli et al., 2020). Hence, it follows that if university structures could build upon the existing resources available (*Bb*), providing guidance to equip and empower student parents in more effectively balancing their roles, and also support more positive perceptions (*Cc*) of arising scenarios, this could be transformative in reducing stress and improving wellbeing.

Within this data set, it was overwhelmingly expressed that mothers had largely fulfilled the increased demands resulting from the pandemic lockdowns. This concurs with other research findings (Cheng et al., 2021; Cluver et al., 2020), building upon literature prior to the pandemic which found that mothers generally exhibited larger decreases in satisfaction with family life and with life in general than do fathers (Huebener et al., 2021). Whilst some did report that fathers had been more involved than usual, the mothers tended to carry the weight of increased demands in addition to their studies, despite often also having their own paid employment. This was heightened if the father did not 'work from home', a finding supported by Del Boca et al. (2020). Since the respondents were all students, it is more likely that the household was dependent upon the partner's paid employment. This may therefore have impacted upon the dynamics and choices regarding allocating roles during this season, since the data highlighted that when juggling many demands, paid work was always prioritised over university studies. Nevertheless, the paid work of mothers was also more impacted than that of fathers, concurring with the findings of Sevilla et al. (2020). The data revealed that this impacted on both the university learning and mental health of participants, presenting as maladaptation (*xX*) in many cases. Whilst the prevailing Western constructs of parenting undoubtedly informed the perceptions (*C*) of participants, leading to adoption of these forms of adaptation to the stressor, it is proposed that policymakers within Higher Education must consider how these prevalent discourses could be challenged and adjusted within the university structures and rhetoric. Furthermore, in future times of crisis, it may be appropriate for HE institutions to encourage and facilitate students to negotiate with their partners employers to discuss the possibilities and opportunities available for accommodating this more effectively.

This data set has reinforced the fact that each family is unique and all student-parents will therefore interact differently with this balance of demands, leading to a broad range of outcomes. It is therefore of critical importance that university policies reflect this, seeking to equip and empower student-parents as individuals whilst they develop their own techniques for balancing the demands upon them, according to the specific needs of their own personal context (Mahdi et al., 2020). Ultimately these students will always need to make their family a priority and there needs to be greater understanding and awareness of this within university policies, staff ethos and student culture. Nevertheless, it is clear that supporting student-parents in effectively balancing their dual roles seems to reduce parental stress, which can contribute to improved wellbeing.

5 | CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Whilst these findings are limited by the snapshot nature of the data collection, the interviews do capture reflections of participants about their experience pre-pandemic also. Hence, the findings convey some of the general experiences of student parents, rather than the pandemic phase in isolation. The findings may only be tentative since it would be beneficial to develop this study further with a larger sample size. Nevertheless, the ability to triangulate the survey responses with interview and website data enables the findings to be more robust.

This research revealed that the pandemic-induced school closures (*x*) merely intensified the pressures which already existed for student-parents (*A*). Yet it also revealed the minimal awareness and specific support which is available to this sector (*B*). It is imperative that Higher Education institutions have greater awareness of the significant demands which are upon student-parents as a group, and implement tangible measures into institutional ethos and systems to improve provision of support to improve adaptation of this sector in times of stress or crisis. This may be through:

- Enhanced availability of support for student parents, such as integrating into induction programmes tools to equip students to develop their own bespoke techniques and arrangements for balancing the varying demands upon them, availability of a designated counsellor or peer support group to provide a 'sounding board' for student parents to access as required, signposting and advice of services, which may be relevant and of help to their specific needs.
- An improvement in the general ethos and accommodation of student parents amongst the staff and student body. This may be achieved through greater visibility of provision for this sector on university websites, university-wide profiling of semi-regular peer-support or training events for students, and training for staff to aid understanding of the challenges faced by this cohort and how they as tutors could support and accommodate them.
- A review of university structures and policies to consider how greater flexibility could be incorporated to better support student parents.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors have declared no conflicts of interest for this article.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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ENDNOTE

¹ According to *The Guardian League Table* (2020), The best UK universities 2021 – rankings | University guide | The Guardian.

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