Research Article

Examining the Challenges Faced by International Women With Preschool Children Studying for a Postgraduate Built Environment Degree in the United Kingdom

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the academic experiences of five mid-career female international students who were parents of preschool children. These women were studying on a 1-year Built Environment master's degree in the United Kingdom. We applied Tinto's "sense of belonging" as a theoretical framework to interview women who were studying full time while caring for a preschool-age child or children. Results revealed stresses arising from balancing the academic demands of a 1-year full-time degree with childcare, compounded by a lack of appropriate support from the university. Although universities in general were viewed as offering a welcoming environment, this group of students often felt disappointed with their experience overall. Strategies for addressing identified barriers are proposed that contribute to widening existing university policies to address the specific needs of full-time international student parents.

Keywords: Built Environment, international students, preschool children, sense of belonging, student support, student-parents

INTRODUCTION

Often students in higher education are parents who must find ways to balance their education with their homelife. Research critically considering the relationship between family care and higher education has revealed that universities are perceived as child-free spaces. This article examines the academic and family care experiences of five mature female international student-parents with preschool children who were studying in a 1-year Built Environment (BE) master's degree program in the United Kingdom. By exploring the experiences of this group, this article seeks to contribute to the broader perspectives on the support provided by U.K. universities for international postgraduates with caring responsibilities. Such insights are particularly important, as U.K. universities seek to attract increasing numbers of international students. In contrast with most undergraduates, as a consequence of both their age and their career trajectory, postgraduates often have a great multiplicity of caring responsibilities that may impact their participation in higher education (Hook, 2015). A critical understanding of the needs of this group of international students in terms of the appropriate support required to achieve academic success is fundamental to developing parity between the aims of higher education institutions (HEIs) and those of international students (Hook, 2015).

The term "international student" refers to students who have moved from their home country to study overseas or students who are not permanent citizens of their country of study (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2016). "Built Environment" (BE) is the term used to describe the design, development, operation, and preservation of commercial and residential properties, and both professional and higher education courses can be described as BE (Hartenberger et al., 2013). Underrepresentation of women and gender discrimination persist within the BE sector (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2017), and there is a shortage of skilled BE professionals globally. This shortage has renewed interest in increasing the number of women employed within the sector. Only 6% of female graduates studied engineering and construction programs in 2016 (OECD, 2019). Navarro-Astor et al. (2017) argued that there is a need to obtain more significant examples of the constraints experienced by women studying BE and employed within the BE sector.

This research set out to empirically examine the issues experienced by a group of mature female international postgraduate parents of preschool children who were studying on BE programs in the United Kingdom. The study revealed very specific difficulties that call for consideration of why this group felt "like outsiders." We used the conceptual framework of a "sense of belonging" (Tinto, 1993) to analyze these women's experiences of caring while studying overseas as postgraduates. This theoretical framework allowed us to examine rational and emotive aspects of belongingness in relation to prevalent concepts of inclusivity. From the interviews we identified perceptions of invisibility and unwitting exclusion. The study was framed by the following research question: how do the

experiences of international postgraduate women with preschool children impact their academic success in higher education? The findings will contribute to enhancing the academic experience of this group of women and might increase enrollment numbers in BE programs offered in the United Kingdom.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Framework

This study utilized Tinto's (1993) and Hurtado and Carter's (1997) sense of belonging as the theoretical framework to explore the experiences of female international students caring for small children while studying in the United Kingdom. Studies in higher education have explored how students understand a sense of belonging and the issues influencing belongingness. While numerous definitions of belongingness have been offered (Maestas et al., 2007; Strayhorn, 2018; Tovar & Simon, 2010), we use Hurtado and Carter's (1997) definition, which identifies sense of belonging as a person's positioning in relation to the university community or a sense of identification that mirrors a person's outlook, disposition, and feelings. This description also addresses the cognitive and emotional patterns that influence students' sense of belonging.

Higher education research regarding a sense of belonging frequently discusses issues concerning students' perseverance and continuation with their studies. Tinto's (1993) theory about students' withdrawal from their studies concluded that their commitment to a university was based on their perceived shared values with the institution and their integration into the academic and social culture of the university, which reflected a sense of belonging. However, students were more likely to leave if they did not feel engaged with the campus community.

The importance of having good relationships with domestic and international peers and university staff has been studied by several scholars (Strayhorn, 2018; Tovar & Simon, 2010). For instance, Hurtado and Carter's (1997) longitudinal study found that feeling valued exerted the greatest influence on student persistence. Several studies have also demonstrated that high levels of belongingness are linked to positive psychological and academic persistence (Hausmann et al., 2009; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

International Students and Sense of Belonging

Research on international students tends to focus on sociocultural and psychological adjustment (Swami et al., 2010; Wright & Schartner, 2013). For instance, a quantitative study by Glass and Westmont (2014) found that positive belongingness was possible if students participated in cross-curricular activities with their domestic and international peers. Furthermore, belongingness was a significant factor in the academic success of international students; they were expected to perform at the same level as domestic peers but often without appropriate social support. However, although 56% of international student

respondents in the Glass and Westmont study were female, the students sampled were undergraduates, which makes results less applicable to our study sample.

The extant literature concludes that international students should interact with domestic and same-country peers and university staff to feel engaged with the campus community (Hendrickson et al., 2011; Ward et al., 2001). Qualitative research by Trice (2004) identified that university staff appreciated the academic and personal challenges experienced by international students and the impact those experiences could have on their academic performance. International students who are unable to gain a sense of belonging tend to experience apprehension, unfriendliness, lowered self-confidence, social withdrawal, and depression (Williams & Johnson, 2011). Given the challenges that international students overcome in every area of their lives, Glass et al. (2015) concluded that with appropriate support from U.S. universities, international students can gain a sense of belonging. This conclusion also applies to international students studying in the United Kingdom.

International Student-Parents and Sense of Belonging

A lack of belongingness can be exclusion that is the result of differences between groups based on factors such as gender, age, and race. Despite attempts to assess the influence of race on feelings of belongingness on international students studying overseas (George Mwangi et al., 2019), we are not aware of studies that consider age and gender for this group of students. An individual's sense of belonging can be impacted by their age and gender. Taken together, a sense of belonging and caring for small children while studying in the United Kingdom as a mature female graduate on a 1-year program may help to explain how these student-parents perceive their experiences and maintain their roles as students and parents while attempting to nurture a sense of belonging through their everyday interactions and negotiations on and off campus.

While the experiences of international student-parents caring for preschool children are underresearched, several studies have examined these students. A qualitative study by Loveridge et al. (2018) explored the experiences of three international student-parents with preschool children. The study found that university policies need to be revisited as the policies lacked information about specific challenges that this group of students may face. Moreau and Kerner (2015) researched the marginalized experiences of student-parents within the context of perceiving students as carefree scholars. The research included 12 international students with at least one child under the age of 11 and found that the students struggled to study within HEIs. These feelings were amplified when they attempted to reconcile the role of being a parent with that of being a student. Similarly, Murtagh's (2017) case study examined how student-parents could be supported to succeed given that they are often invisible to their tutors. The participants identified explicit barriers that arose during their studies, which included personal crises and a lack of explicit information. They also reported that inconsistent support from their tutors and demands from their relationship with their partner were a drain on their studies. The research on student-parents

indicates that some are reluctant to inform their tutors or peers of their domestic situation and therefore the potential positive impact that they might have had on their peers was prevented. The experiences of the families of international student-parents were also explored by Brooks (2015) through a transformative lens. The female students in the study indicated that they felt constrained by the lack of affordable help within the home and the lack of childcare support from their extended family.

An emerging body of research emphasizes the experiences of single mothers studying in HEIs (Hinton-Smith, 2016). Lindsay and LeBlanc Gillum's (2018) research found that single parents needed university literature to address issues such as the provision of on-campus family housing, on-campus activities for their children, the development of nontraditional student organizations, and appropriate counseling services. In addition, the participants reported juggling multiple roles and feeling time pressured. However, they were also motivated to succeed in a number of other ways, including being role models for their children and preparing for the future of their family.

Overall, the unique needs of mature international postgraduate women with preschool children studying in 1-year intensive courses are not defined in U.K. HEIs. University policies that address the particular needs of mature female international postgraduates with preschool children do not appear to exist. Research suggests that international postgraduate women with children experience challenges in HEIs (Lockwood et al., 2019). However, current studies do not identify the specific challenges that this small group of students studying in male-dominated courses such as BE programs may experience, and the views of lone international student-parents are scarce in the literature. A deficit discourse is often employed when framing the support that is provided for international students, who are often perceived by university staff as problematic (Heng, 2018). Bierwiaczonek and Waldzus (2016) found that the general lack of focus by university student support services on postgraduate students may be due to the short-term nature of postgraduate programs in the United Kingdom, which last from 12 to 18 months. The capacity of HEIs to support international students, such as mature female postgraduate student-parents, through their student support services has become an important issue (Roberts et al., 2018; Walters et al., 2017). As a result, further research is needed to explore issues related to university support services (Ramachandran, 2011).

Research has highlighted factors such as cross-cultural engagement, interactions with university staff, a high level of self-confidence, and supportive peer groups as contributing to a sense of belonging. However, there is limited research that explores the experiences of mature female international student-parents with preschool children studying in 1-year postgraduate programs. The current study attempts to address this gap.

METHOD

This study was located in England, where international student-parents are required to have sufficient funds to cover all childcare costs when children are

below the age of 3. International student-parents with children aged 3 and 4 years are entitled to 570 hours of free childcare or early education each year. Free state school education starts at the beginning of the school year in which the child will turn 5 years old.

The findings were derived from a small-scale purposive study of five female student-parents, a subset of a wider study comprising eight recently graduated students and 25 alumnae. The number of participants in the wider study reflected the small number of international postgraduate women studying in the BE master's degree program at the university. In terms of context, only seven women enrolled and graduated out of a total cohort of 40 postgraduates during 2016–2017; only three women enrolled and graduated in 2017–2018 out of a total cohort of 25 postgraduates.

Within the current study (2018–2019), only two student-parents had enrolled and graduated, and three were alumnae, all meeting the criteria of being female mature students with preschool children who had completed a 1-year BE master's degree. The number of participants in this study does not allow for generalizations to be made.

Research Design

A qualitative research design comprising interviews with recently graduated participants and web-based questionnaires sent to alumnae, was used to examine the underlying research question: How do the experiences of international postgraduate women with preschool children impact their academic success in higher education?

We approached students enrolled in the BE postgraduate program individually during induction at the outset of their program to explain the purpose of the research and the potential timeline of involvement. We sent an email to those who indicated an interest in participating in the study to arrange an interview once their program results had been published at the end of the academic year, together with a participant information sheet and consent form. Each semi structured interview lasted between 45 and 60 min. Given that the participants had just completed a master's degree at a U.K. university, we conducted interviews in English, but we allowed sufficient time for interviewees to locate the correct term or phrase to explain a particular sentiment or situation, with some using translation apps on their mobile phone. Responses were repeated to each interviewee in a summarized form to ensure that there was concordance. The interview transcripts were shared with interviewees (Flick, 2018). Two participants chose to add information to their transcripts at a later date. The interview protocol comprised questions about how they felt about their learning experiences in the United Kingdom; whether they felt that they had changed during their year of study in the United Kingdom, and if so, how; and whether there were any impacting factors surrounding being mature female international postgraduates studying and working in a BE program.

We approached the alumnae via the university's Alumni Association, which provided the email addresses of alumnae for the period from 2008–2009 to 2015–2016 and sent emails that included a hyperlink to a qualitative web-based

questionnaire. The questionnaire was prefaced with details about the study, a participant information sheet, and a consent form.

Data Analysis

The two sets of qualitative data were collected concurrently and obtained ethical approval from the university's ethics committee. A list of thematic codes was developed based on an initial reading of the qualitative survey responses and interview transcripts, deriving the initial codes deductively and inductively from the data. A sense of belonging was included in the framework to ascertain insights concerning belongingness and examples of relevant university policies and practices. As the data were reread and reviewed, we modified the codes using open and axial coding. Once the transcripts and survey responses were coded, it was possible to identify dominant categories for organizing the findings (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Four key themes emerged: the experience of student-parents on campus, time constraints and juggling multiple roles, the complexities of finding appropriate supportive networks, and supportive learning environments based on deferring or interrupting studies.

Participants

The data based on the interviews conducted with two postgraduates and three alumnae were drawn from data collected as part of a larger study. The wider study comprised eight recently graduated international postgraduate women and 25 alumnae. The participants were drawn from 19 countries: Albania, Bangladesh, Egypt, Germany, Ghana, India, Iran, Ireland, Italy, Lebanon, Nepal, Nigeria, Philippines, Sri Lanka, the Netherlands, Trinidad, Turkey, Venezuela, and Vietnam. We use regional first names to protect the identity of each participant. While not ideal, we use the overarching term "Asia" to refer to the participant from a country within this region as an additional protection. The five participants were parents who completed their studies while caring for preschool children aged from 10 months to 3 years and are summarized below:

ALEJANDRA: South American postgraduate, aged 31–40 and married with a 10-month-old baby and a 3-year-old child.

AMELIA: Alumna based in Europe, aged 21–30 and in a stable relationship; had a 1-year-old child.

EMILY: Alumna based in Europe, aged 21–30, and a single parent. Emily began her studies with a 10-month-old baby and had another baby during her year of study.

LUDMILLA: Alumna based in continental Europe, aged 31–40 and married with a 1-year-old child.

MARYAM: Postgraduate from Asia, aged 31 and 40, a divorced single parent with a 3-year-old child.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The research undertaken set out to examine the experiences of mature international postgraduate women with preschool children who were studying in a full-time BE master's degree and the impact that their situation had on their academic success in higher education. The data revealed convergent and divergent reflections regarding their experiences. These postgraduate student-parents studying in the United Kingdom experienced challenges to their sense of belonging related to their interactions with peers, university staff, and the campus environment. Due to the short-term nature of their programs, these student-parents were unable to develop "belongingness" and appeared to perceive themselves as outsiders. Critically, understanding the experiences and viewpoints of these student-parents may be useful to providing appropriate support in U.K. HEIs.

Emergent Themes

Four themes emerged from the analysis that categorized the experiences of the participants: the experience of student-parents on campus, time constraints and juggling multiple roles, the complexities of finding appropriate supportive networks, and supportive learning environments based on deferring or interrupting studies. The following discussion considers how the findings from this study support the lack of belongingness that mature female international student-parents felt on campus.

The Experience of Student-Parents on Campus

The stereotyped perceptions held by others of the image of a traditional student were discussed as initial barriers to belongingness on campus. The international student-parents interviewed had experienced negative pressures from their families before enrollment, which led some to feel like an outsider when they entered a child-free environment. Previous research shows the challenges that international postgraduate student-parents experience (Loveridge, et al., 2018), and for the participants, there was an additional sense that parents with preschool children did not belong on campus. This feeling was reinforced when single student-parents were actively discouraged from attending university by their families and friends. Maryam, a single parent from Asia, reported the emotional pressures that her family and friends placed on her:

> All of them said wait so that your son grow a little bit more. They all didn't want me to do it because they are scared because they know if I didn't do it or if I didn't complete it I would be very bad depressed or unhappy all my life so they were advising me not to do it because they knew if I didn't pass what would happen. They were all scared.

When single student-parents are perceived to behave in ways that are not congruent with the image of a traditional student, their sense of belonging can be negatively impacted even before their arrival on campus. This pressure may

reflect, in part, existing university policies and practices that assume the traditional image of an international student who is young, child-free, single, male, and dependent (Hinton-Smith, 2012). In societies across the world, it is generally perceived that single parents are predominantly women (Hook, 2016), and they are marginalized and perceived as outsiders. Single student-parents engaging simultaneously with postgraduate education and their role as single mothers have the potential to undergo an emotional, social, financial, and political transformation. However, their role is also shaped by the degree of their belongingness on campus and their engagement in particular with postgraduate education. The transformative potential that can be gained by single student-parents returning to study is enhanced by understanding the emotional and spatial influences (Hook, 2016) that may become barriers to their sense of belonging.

The second reason for a lack of sense of belonging was the limited range of support available for student-parents who became pregnant while studying overseas. The literature highlights that HEIs have a history of excluding marginalized groups because they do not represent the image of an international university student as being a "bachelor boy" (Hinton-Smith, 2012). This perception still persists in many academic cultures despite the fact that universities now recruit a diverse range of students that include mature students and student-parents. Amelia, an alumna, reflected on having to interrupt her studies when she became pregnant: "I was living in UK during my MSc and got pregnant during my studies. I returned [to the UK] when [name of her child] was 2 to complete my dissertation module." Maryam, a single-parent international postgraduate, illustrated the impact of becoming pregnant while studying on a previous postgraduate course in the United Kingdom:

> The Master's is always something I wanted to do—I always wanted to do it and because it was part of my mind that I wanted to do it. About 4 or 5 years ago I started a master's degree […] but because I got pregnant and got difficulty with my ex-husband, and so I had to leave the course. I was always unhappy that I didn't complete it.

As a result of her experience of attempting to study overseas while pregnant, Amelia commented: "[I have] advised fellow colleagues to undertake studies prior to starting a family." In contrast, Alejandra, who already had an 18-month-old child and became pregnant during her studies in the United Kingdom, had a different experience:

> My husband was supporting me because I always say I want to do a master and when I become pregnant, he said don't worry you are going to do it. Because I was on maternity leave and before I finish my maternity leave, I start to study and then I quit my job and began my studies. After he was one-and-a-half years old I became pregnant again and now my baby is 1 year, and now I finish.

The above experiences highlight that the provision of a variety of support solutions may help to prevent these students having to leave or interrupt their studies and increase their belongingness. International postgraduate women who

need support while pregnant during their studies find that universities tend to treat them as a homogeneous group, providing them with the option of either deferring or interrupting their studies until after the pregnancy. While this may be suitable for home students, it can create problems for pregnant international postgraduates attempting to obtain a visa to continue their studies. The result of this approach is that these international students become invisible on campus (Hook, 2015). The increase in the number of mature female students choosing to study overseas is related to the rise in the number that are likely to become pregnant during their studies. The lack of appropriate and varied support from universities for pregnant international students could be based on the perception that pregnancy and parenting are private matters (Hook, 2016). As a result, these students appear to be considered outsiders because they bring what may be considered to be private family issues into the public space of the university. This opinion serves to further solidify the perception of the pregnant body as invisible in academia and normalizes the view of what is considered a traditional international student.

Time Constraints and Juggling Multiple Roles

Attempting to juggle different roles as an international postgraduate, mother, partner, and employee led the student-parents to lack a sense of belonging throughout their studies. Amelia, Ludmilla, and Alejandra each reported that they found their experiences while caring for preschool children problematic and nerve-racking and that they eventually resulted in a lack of campus engagement. Amelia stated that the experience was "[v]ery stressful, extremely difficult… had my young daughter during my MSc… was very challenging." She explained that she was juggling different roles as an employee, mother, partner, and postgraduate studying overseas: "You are so busy working, I was an ITU [intensive care unit] nurse. No [extended] family in UK. On days off, was minding my daughter but also working on assignments." Ludmilla commented: "I should have finished my course before having a baby. Juggling both is a real struggle–but I got there in the end." Alejandra explained:

> For me was difficult because my time was limited because of my babies and I have to pay to look after my babies and I have to squeeze the time. I came here just to learn because all the time the other students were going for a drink or something, but I couldn't… I just learn.

The participants reasoned that they were less involved in activities than their peers due to family obligations. Student-parents may be invisible on campus because although they may appear in the classroom to be similar to the majority of their peers, outside of that setting they lack the time to engage socially with them. Consequently, this invisibility may result in the needs and voices of these student-parents being overlooked.

Some participants had English as an additional language while studying, which was an additional burden when combined with caring for small children without appropriate support. Alejandra, from South America, stated:

> I came here with my husband and I was living with my husband and my kids… My husband, maybe yes, of course, because I need to work harder than the other ones because of my language. I need to work double because I read something, and I need to read two or three times to understand better. Even with the writing of course. For example, I was breastfeeding my baby at the same time that I was reading and then I put her to sleep, and when she was crying, I had to run, and I was feeling sleepy, but I had to come back to study.

Alejandra's experience highlights that female international student-parents face unique challenges, which are additional barriers to their sense of belonging. They are often expected to begin their studies on the same basis as domestic students while adjusting to the new academic expectations of their host country without appropriate childcare. This is likely to be further compounded for female international student-parents. Despite being aware of the advantages that may be gained in the long term, participants all indicated that they felt time starved and stressed throughout their studies.

The Complexities of Finding Alternative Supportive Networks

The complexity of managing appropriate childcare support while studying was identified as a key barrier that reinforced the feeling of distance. Hook (2016) suggested that the embedded social construct of women caring for young children is reflected in the lack of appropriate policies in HEIs. Thus, international postgraduate women are often faced with situations where completing coursework and caring for young children conflicted with each other. Alejandra reflected on how she struggled at times:

> To finish my studies was really [sigh] difficult especially because I don't have the time. If I have the time of course I can do a lot of things because I like. At the moment my mother-in-law is here because I needed help to finish the dissertation. The nursery was not enough especially because they very expensive and if I put just 3 days full-time, it is not enough because I need to work during the evenings on my dissertation, during the weekends and with just the nursery it's not enough as I need someone to help me.

Alejandra also explained how her request for appropriate childcare as an international postgraduate was rebuffed by the university: "With the children I went to the Student Support and I was saying please I have children and the childminder is very expensive, do you have something that can help me, but they said no, no, no."

Maryam, a single parent, reported that she obtained financial and emotional support via Skype from her extended family, who were still residing in Asia. However, her family was unable to provide appropriate cultural support for her while she was in the United Kingdom as they were not accustomed to the conventions of the host country. Maryam sought advice from outside the

university when she began to struggle with her studies and her family was unable to help:

> I was thinking of dropping the course because the doctor said that you must be better mum than better student and so if you think that this is coming inside your home and you are feeling that you can't breathe, it is better that you maybe you stay for 6 months or a year, and then go back. I couldn't because with my plan I would be more depressed if I don't finish so it was lots of challenge […] Twice we had someone come and ask the whole class if you have any concerns about study or if you feel that you not having enough treatment with your education, so I think it is a challenge.

The feeling of separation was reinforced for the participants because they did not receive appropriate responses from the university, so they were further distanced by the need to seek relevant support from other professionals unconnected to the university and family members. If female student-parents feel that their studies are embraced and adopted by the family, the burden is reduced and they will be able to focus on their studies without the additional burden of negativity from their family or a lack of appropriate emotional or practical support. While it is possible for women to complete their studies without support from their families or health professionals, the mature international postgraduate women in this study were forced to seek out appropriate support off campus when needed, which added to the feeling of a lack of belongingness on campus.

Supportive Learning Environments Based on Deferring or Interrupting Studies

University policies and practices have the ability to remove barriers that may make some students feel invisible on campus. As mentioned previously, the general support that appeared to be offered by the university for international student-parents experiencing problems while studying was the option to defer or interrupt their studies until their "personal crisis" has been resolved. Emily, a single mother, confirmed that "[i]t was tough at the time of study. I had two children during my studies, but the college was very accommodating and allowed me to defer for a while, then I returned to my studies." Maryam, also a single parent, illustrated the daily routine she had in place to manage her son so that she could successfully complete her studies without deferring or interrupting them:

> I take him at 8 to nursery and come to university and then because the nursery finished at 2:30 I ask his teacher to stay 1 hour or until 4:30 or sometime I had a class at 4:30 I had to ask the teacher to stay until 6:30 and so lots of nice people in the UK… lots of nice people. The nursery they understood me I am doing my studies. Overall, it was very good and then I take him home to bed at 7 or 8 and then when he is in bed I start to tidy up and cook for him for the next day to take to nursery by 10 and then I would begin my studies. Sometimes I didn't get enough sleep, but I really feel it is ok.

These reflections reinforce the feeling of being an outsider, because universities may perceive family-related problems to be issues that need to be addressed away from the campus so that students' private lives do not encroach on the traditional view of student life. The only practical childcare support that Maryam obtained was from a private nursery, which offered to remain open for longer hours to accommodate her as a single-parent international student. However, this arrangement incurred extra financial costs, which reinforced her feeling of a lack of belongingness on campus.

Emily, a single mother with two preschool children, illustrated how she felt the support provided by the host university helped her during her studies to achieve her goal of becoming a BE professional in a traditionally male-dominated sector:

> I finished the course, I became RICS [Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors] accredited… I had my first child [already], and by the time I qualified I had my second. Without this course I would have never qualified and although I have put in a tremendous amount of hard work, without the flexibility of the course, the college… I would have never achieved my qualification. I know the college allows this flexibility to all students, but for a working parent, this was the biggest key to my success.

However, the apparent flexibility of university policies that allow students to defer or interrupt their studies when events in their private lives affect their abilities to continue with their studies, although perceived positively by the international student-parents in this study, was the only support that was available to them. For instance, when Amelia was asked about the role of the university in supporting her, she reported: "They were very understanding, but again it is up to me, my responsibility to learn as I applied alone for course." Thus, Amelia felt that the support she received was a bonus as she felt that she chose to study when she had a preschool-age child and so it was her responsibility if any problems arose. However, it could be argued that the approach adopted by universities in such situations, through their policies and practices, helps to render such family situations invisible on campus.

Alejandra suggested how international student-parents could be supported by universities during their studies: "It doesn't have to be a nursery it could be just something that while you are in the class the children could be for example downstairs in another room with someone just for an hour or so."

Family responsibilities impact particularly on the experiences of mature international postgraduate women and their sense of belonging because it is still generally the custom that the maintenance of the welfare of the family and children is mainly the responsibility of women. When asked what the advantages and disadvantages were of bringing her children to the United Kingdom during her studies, Emily stated:

> Both! Having them with you makes it easier as you are able to study and tend to them; it required flexibility. This made a huge difference and

allowed me to stay with my children, which was one of the main reasons why I finished the course.

Ludmilla had long-term goals for her children as a result of her experiences of studying overseas: "I can apply my knowledge and experience, skills etc. when studying with my children [when they are completing their homework]; and I believe my children benefit from a well-educated mother." Alejandra planned to use her qualifications to help her family: "Maybe because I get a better job and I could provide better opportunity for them [my family], as well because of course I want to help my [extended] family."

The excerpts above articulate the critical role that these women believe they have in their family and the obligations that they feel they have toward their family.

CONCLUSION

The increasing emphasis on recruiting women into BE courses can only be fully supported where universities are cognizant of the experiences of female international student-parents studying at postgraduate level, and importantly, where this leads to the development of inclusive policies that support this group of women. This article has offered insight into the complex factors that impact these students' learning and puts them at risk of not achieving a successful outcome. Four themes characterized the experiences of students in this small-scale study: the experience of being an international student-parent on campus, time constraints and juggling multiple roles, the complexities of finding appropriate supportive networks, and the availability of supportive learning environments based on deferring or interrupting studies. The findings support the research conducted by Moreau and Kerner (2015), which found that the lack of childcare in HEIs presented numerous conflicting demands on international student-parents.

Studying as international postgraduate women with preschool children raises concerns regarding the preparation that host HEIs have in place to support students on arrival. In some cases, the participants struggled to find appropriate private nurseries that were affordable and had flexible opening hours. Critically, one of the participants with two small children felt so stressed by her financial constraints and the need to meet academic deadlines that she attempted to draw the university's attention to the problems that she was experiencing, but she was rebuffed. Although this encounter was distressing for the student-parent, she was unknowingly speaking on behalf of a marginalized and invisible group. The lack of opportunity for these concerned student-parents to speak to the university as an integrated and visible group was a lost opportunity for the university to hear and meet their specific needs. Strayhorn (2018) suggested that the need to belong increases in strange or unfamiliar situations or environments where individuals feel like an outsider. The experiences of female international postgraduates with preschool children attempting to inform host universities of their particular

experiences and the subsequent level of implementation of appropriate support, require addressing.

The study highlights the degree of accountability that HEIs have for increasing the access of mature female international postgraduates caring for preschool children to affordable and appropriate childcare, and, ultimately, for developing positive and inclusive campus environments, including affordable preschool childcare on campus. We recommend that international postgraduates with preschool children and university staff are consulted regarding the emotional and financial impact that the lack of appropriate childcare has on mature female international postgraduate student-parents and on their studies. We suggest that policies concerning the provision of preschool childcare for international student-parents be articulated so that student-parents are aware of childcare provisions and costs before arriving on campus. Additionally, the quality and accessibility of information on U.K. HEIs' websites and in promotional materials concerning the provision of childcare facilities for international student-parents should be reviewed. Incoming international students should feel that a university has an inclusive campus environment, and the provision of preschool childcare can ensure that female international student-parents feel that they belong. Future research could explore the attitudes of partners and family members toward female family members traveling abroad with preschool children to understand the familial and societal tensions that are experienced when making choices to study abroad. Finally, we recommend additional research be carried out on the sense of belonging in relation to female international postgraduates studying in male-dominated programs.

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