Supporting Parents Through Their Studies: Insights from the University of Chester and QAA

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The cost-of-living crisis has had major impacts on people across the country, not least our students, as has been highlighted by **a series of events run by** QAA Scotland **which have focused on 'Supporting our learners to thrive'.**

Meanwhile, recent headlines have emphasized the need to help those who are currently economically inactive to return to the workforce. Initiatives to promote the successful participation of students who are parents in higher education can play a significant role in this – and enrich campus communities with the diverse experiences and perspectives those students bring.

2023's nationwide Student-Parent Study surveyed 41 student-parents from 14 UK universities and revealed that only a third of respondents felt positive about their transition into university, with 93% of the remainder attributing their negative feelings on starting university to concerns related to their parental status.

While 42% of respondents reported positive experiences with personal tutors, more than half expressed dissatisfaction with the level of pastoral care they received, with many feeling that their university experience hadn't been sufficiently tailored to their needs. One participant reported that many student-parents 'feel that they must just get on and shut up and that there is no-one to take their circumstances into consideration'.

The big issues

The issues most often raised in the Student-Parent Study related to the pressures of time in balancing childcare with studies and in-person attendance on campus.

These findings make clear that student-parents need early, targeted advice and guidance around timetabling, time-management, negotiating absence, and mitigating circumstances mechanisms, for example, on occasions when childcare (including emergency childcare in the event of child illness or the illness of another family member who shares caring responsibilities) has interrupted a student-parent's preparations for assessment.

An ongoing collaboration between the Student-Parent Study and QAA Scotland – including via a series of events exploring how providers can maintain the quality of the learning experience for students impacted by the cost-of-living crisis – has helped us to share the study's findings and refine our recommendations.

Keeping to time

A significant issue raised by student-parents was timetabling, both in terms of the late release of timetables hampering childcare planning, and late-notice changes to agreed timetables interfering with established childcare arrangements.

Across the country, creative initiatives to address such issues are underway. Dr Emily McIntosh, the University of the West of Scotland's Director of Student Success, has, for example, introduced a scheme whereby timetabling teams and teaching staff work together to find ways to meet the specific needs of their students. Approaching timetabling as a learner-focused process can have a hugely positive impact on student-parents' capacities to engage with and succeed in their studies.

Meanwhile, the Dean of Students at the University of East London, Dr Michelle Morgan, has introduced pre-arrival questionnaires for new students, allowing for the timely gathering of key information to support effective timetabling and delivery. This is particularly important for student-parents who may feel reticent about flagging their parental status during the UCAS application process due to concerns about how this information may be used.

We'd recommend several approaches to timetabling which foster learning environments in which student-parents – indeed all students – can prosper:

- Pre-arrival information-gathering allowing the early production of student-centred timetables;

- Early publication of timetables, assisting student-parents in planning childcare well in advance;

- Protocols allowing for online/hybrid delivery of rearranged sessions to avoid the detrimental impact of last-minute timetable changes;

- Mechanisms allowing student-parents to request a permanent move from one timetabled group to another, thus minimising the days on which they are required on campus and/or ensuring their teaching takes place during their childcare day.

The adoption of timetabling systems which exploit advances in artificial intelligence will, it is hoped, mitigate time-consuming complexities which such approaches may involve.

Assessment

Another major issue identified by our respondents relates to assessment – and finding the time to do it.

Many providers coincide mid-term reading weeks with school half-terms. While this can be convenient in many ways for students and staff alike, it's not always helpful for student-parents who would otherwise be able to use this time to prepare for their assessments. One study participant noted that her provider's 'reading and reflection' weeks came at the precise points at which she had no time to either reflect or read due to her children being home from school.

To address the issues many student-parents face with assessments, we'd recommend that providers adopt practices which promote the early release of assessment briefs – except in cases where time-constrained assessments are justified (for example, to meet the requirements of Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Bodies). Such early release will help student-parents to plan their assessment preparation around childcare commitments.

We'd also recommend that providers consider whether 24-hour time-constrained assessments provide equitable opportunities for student-parents, given the potential for childcare to fall through and/or for child illness occurring on the day set aside for that assessment.

And it's vital that providers consider childcare emergencies in designing mitigating circumstances policies which are both flexible and fair. It is, for example, worth considering whether institutional policies can accommodate flexibility in terms of the evidence student-parents are required to provide in support of applications relating to child illness.

Guidance and support

Student-parents should of course share induction processes with their peers, but the Student-Parent Study revealed that additional bespoke orientation sessions add further value, providing early guidance relating to such topics as mitigating circumstances, peer and institutional support groups, managing assessment and time management. For institutions considering such orientation, the [Personal Tutor Guide to Supporting Student-Parents](#) (designed to address the findings of the Student-Parent Study) includes step-by-step guidance on induction for personal tutors.

Best practice is to ensure that such guidance is also available in recruitment materials and at open days – and to ensure that applicants are aware of the advice and guidance offered on the UCAS website (which hosts the [Student-Parent's Guide to Navigating University](#) and the [Student-Parent Guide to Open Days](#), both outputs from the Student-Parent Study).

Providers should also be clear in advance about their attendance expectations and monitoring mechanisms. One of the study's participants commented that automated attendance alerts are designed with teenagers in mind, rather than adults with family responsibilities. Providers who permit personal tutors to disable such alerts where appropriate and who recognise reasonable apologies as a form of engagement will also help alleviate the stresses caused by unavoidable absence.

In addition to institutions providing the necessary training and resources for personal tutors, peer groups can prove a lifeline for student-parents. Some involve large-scale institutional initiatives whereby student-parents get together regularly for social gatherings and family-focussed events. [Others](#) simply use departmental Teams groups bringing student-parents together to offer mutual support and promote wellbeing and belonging.

Educators may benefit from ensuring that other positive practices adopted during Covid-19 are continued, in order to support non-traditional learners. This may, for example, include the live streaming of co-curricular events (such as industry talks) which take place outside standard timetabled hours.

Providers – and students' unions – should also be mindful that not all students are available during evenings to take part in extracurricular and social events and should schedule these wherever possible to accommodate all students.

Finally, and most importantly, we need to remain aware, as we continue to develop our Access and Participation Plans, that if we're to give any group of students the support they deserve, that will require the commitment of appropriate resources – even, and especially, in these extraordinarily challenging times.