

“I feel like I've got a finger in the University, whereas everybody else has got their whole body in it”: Lone parents' experiences of Higher Education (0177)

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Introduction

Students with parental responsibilities, although largely invisible within higher education (HE) policy discourses, play an important part in many government agendas in the UK. Approximately 7% of full-time students in HE and a third of part-time students in HE and FE are estimated to be student parents; a large proportion of these students being mature students (NUS, 2009). Student parents face the unique challenge of juggling their studies with the responsibilities of being a full-time caregiver and provider for their children. These challenges are exacerbated in the case of single parents, who, in many cases, shoulder these responsibilities alone (Hinton-Smith, 2009). Currently, the HE sector lacks an understanding of the proportion of student parents and single parents within institutions, making it difficult to support such parents without this data (NUS, 2009).

Single parents find their dual roles in constant conflict with each other, leading to stress, anxiety and ill-health (Moreau & Kerner, 2015). Family and university have been described as “greedy institutions”, task-based rather than time-based, placing no limit on the amount of effort one could put in to do them better (Edwards, 1993; Hinton-Smith, 2009). Moreover, in considering HE study, some lone parents face increased risk of financial hardship and problems integrating in academic and social aspects of university life (Edwards 1993; Parr, 2000). As a group, lone parents are prone to financial hardship and debt (Callender, 2002; Jenkins & Symons, 2001) and this coupled with the unusually high cost of childcare in the UK, means that it is only feasible for single parents to work, if employed in relatively high paying jobs (Horne & Hardie, 2002). The incidence of low educational levels among single parents makes this difficult to achieve, resulting in many single parents finding themselves in a poverty trap (Millar & Rowlingson, 2001). HE participation is then arguably one of the key routes to improving the quality of their lives and those of their children.

This study aims to explore the experiences and aspirations of single parents at a post-1992 university, specifically seeking to uncover issues that relate to transition, study and support.

Methodology

A focus group was conducted to uncover key issues of significance to single parents. Based on the themes identified in the focus group, a survey consisting of both closed and open-ended questions was developed in Survey Monkey and distributed across the university. 135 responses were received. Broadly, the survey included questions about transitions to HE, students' childcare arrangements, daily routines, teaching and learning on their programmes, engagement with co-curricular activities, financial support available to them and their perceptions about the family-friendliness of the university, inviting suggestions for improvement.

Findings:

Motivation

A recurring theme when describing their motivation for HE study was the opportunity to build a career which would result in a better quality of life for themselves and their children. However, entwined with these instrumental motives was a passion and eagerness for learning, a desire to act as a positive role model for their children and to give back to society in a meaningful way.

86% were able to identify a trigger point which led to their decision to pursue a HE degree. These included being made redundant at a job, an accident or sickness, or gaining funding to study. For many, becoming a single parent in itself was a trigger to further study. They found the responsibility of being the sole provider for their children empowering, forcing them to become independent and to stop ignoring their ambitions.

Transition

To 14% of the respondents, university life was not as they expected it to be. Those who had completed an access programme to HE felt better prepared. Even so, some reported they had not anticipated just how challenging juggling study with parental responsibilities would be, the financial burden they would incur and the guilt they would feel for the time spent away from family.

While 79% were satisfied with the information about fees and funding opportunities they received prior to beginning their course, only a little over half the respondents thought the information provided about course workload, timetable and placements was sufficient. 30% of the respondents had received information about the university childcare provision, however, they did not receive much else guidance about other matters of relevance to single parents (grants, tax credits, local childcare services etc.).

Main challenges

Timetabling – Over 43% reported timetabling to be very problematic, and it was occasionally a challenge for another 45% of them. Lack of availability of timetables in advance, last-minute changes and lectures scheduled to end after 6 pm, all made childcare difficult to arrange. These issues were compounded for the many students who faced a long commute to and from university.

Placement – This posed a considerable challenge to 75% of the students in terms of childcare and expenses when it involved travelling to distant locations. There were cases when placements were so far away that a daily commute was not feasible, causing single-parents stress about where school-going children could stay overnight.

Assessment deadlines - The stress of juggling roles was apparent in the difficulty some single parents reported with meeting deadlines, especially during difficult times such as a child's illness. 36% found this a challenge very frequently and 38%, at times.

Finances - Around 60% of the respondents were in a financially worse position compared to when they started HE study. While many received bursaries and grant towards tuition and maintenance costs (92%), a lot of this money went in to paying for childcare.

Concluding comments

Single parents are by no means a homogenous group and their experiences of HE differ vastly. However, a majority struggle with juggling roles as a student and lone parent. This group could benefit greatly from targeted support services and information. Dedicated spaces for parents to work with children on campus, some flexibility in placement structures, more e-learning opportunities, assistance with

travel expenses, representation within the Student Union and a single parent network within the university are examples of support structures which could be very useful to single parents.

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