

The experiences of student-parents within higher education: national and institutional variations (0029)

Background

The extant body of literature on ‘student-parents’ – though small – has played an important role in highlighting some of the difficulties faced by those who enrol on a degree programme while having caring responsibilities for one or more young children, for example: the challenges of juggling the temporal demands of being both a student and a parent of a young child, the paucity of on-site childcare facilities, and acute financial pressures (Alsop et al. 2008; Marandet and Wainwright, 2009). Research has also highlighted the tension experienced by many women between their identity as a mother and their identity as a student; indeed, Alsop et al. (2008) note that ‘the fact that women have been traditionally the carers in the family, and that students have been conceptualised as male and non-carers, influences...the ways in which they are perceived by others, and also the manner in which their own identity is reconstructed’ (p.629). It is argued that such tensions result in complex identity practices, as women downplay their mother role in academia and their student role when they are outside the university (Lynch, 2008).

Implicit in much of this work is an assumption that many of the problems faced by student-parents are inextricably linked to the wider political and social context within which universities are operating. However, as work to date has tended to focus on single-institution studies within one country only (typically the UK and US), it has been difficult to explore the impact of the wider social and political context on higher education students with parental responsibilities. In an attempt to address this gap, this paper compares the support for and understanding of student-parents in two countries with contrasting welfare systems.

Research methods

In order to explore the impact of the wider political and social context on the support offered to and experiences of student-parents, research was conducted in two European countries with significantly different ‘welfare regimes’ (Esping-Anderson, 1990): the UK and

Denmark. The UK is an example of a 'liberal' welfare regime in which emphasis is placed on market supply of many welfare services and state involvement is typically through the provision of means-tested benefits to those on the lowest incomes. In contrast, Denmark is a 'social democratic' welfare regime, in which services are commonly provided on a universal basis, and high value is accorded to achieving social equality. Within both the UK and Denmark, data were collected at two HEIs with contrasting histories, market positions and geographical locations.

Within each HEI, three main methods of data collection were used. Firstly, the universities were asked to provide copies of any policies or other material that focused on student-parents, childcare provision and/or sources of financial support. Secondly, individual interviews were conducted with two or three members of staff in each institution with responsibility for student welfare. Thirdly, individual interviews were conducted with between 15 and 20 student-parents from each of the four institutions.

Results

The data indicate that there are considerable differences, by nation, in the support offered to student-parents within higher education and also in attitudes towards this group of students. Clear disparities between the UK and Denmark were evident in relation to financial support, childcare provision, parental leave and availability of flexible modes of study. Cultural and attitudinal differences also emerged. Danish institutions appeared to be more sensitive to potential diversity within the student body than their UK counterparts. Moreover, there was no evidence of Danish members of staff problematising student-parents in ways that were reported by some of the UK respondents. In large part, these patterns seem in line with the broader literature on the experiences of parents in the two countries. Scholars have highlighted considerable differences by 'welfare regime', including the high level of support for employed mothers and dual-earner families within social democratic regimes, such as Denmark, and the much lower levels of state support evident within neo-liberal regimes such as the UK. Indeed, Denmark spends a greater proportion of its GDP on childcare (2.4 per cent) than any other country in the OECD (Bonoli and Reber, 2010). As a result, it is able to offer parents very affordable nursery places (Ranch, 2007) and has the highest proportion of children under three years of age in formal daycare – 62 per cent, compared with 26 per cent in the UK (Saraceno, 2011).

However, the research has also revealed important cross-national differences in the extent of inter-institutional variation. Despite differences in their history, geographical location and subject specialism, both Danish universities approached student-parents in very similar ways. In contrast, within the UK, significant differences were apparent between the two HEIs in the sample. Although a number of studies on working parents have emphasised differences within countries (e.g. Crompton et al., 2007), they have contended that such differences are evident across all nations – even those with a strong social democratic or neo-liberal orientation. In contrast, with respect to student-parents specifically, this study suggests that variation is much more likely in the UK than Denmark. In developing this argument, it is suggested that this is because of the differing political contexts within which Danish and English HEIs are operating. As a consequence of the market-driven, neo-liberal orientation of the UK system, universities have more discretion about the level and nature of any additional financial support they provide to students and are incentivised to develop policies and practices that fit their perceived ‘market segment’ rather than the more general student population. Moreover, the highly internally-differentiated nature of the UK HE sector has been shown to militate against social diversity within the student body, which is likely to have a strong bearing on institutional culture. Within this context it is perhaps unsurprising that the relatively high levels of support for student-parents evident within the Danish institutions were not replicated in their UK counterparts.

References

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