

The experience of student parents in Higher Education during COVID

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Introduction

Covid-19 changed the way UK universities delivered learning, and the experience of students. The challenges faced by Higher Education (HE) students has been widely reported, but the focus has been on young, single students living in halls of residence. This does not fully reflect the very diverse body of HE students, particularly 'mature' students over 21 years (37% of all undergraduates in England) attending post-1992 institutions, many of whom are working parents (Bhopal 2018:88; UCAS 2017:3; Hubble and Bolton 2021). In 2019/20, fully 69% of undergraduate students were mature, and 64% women (London Metropolitan University, 2022a). Unfortunately, universities are not required to collect information on whether students have children, so it is not clear how many of these students are parents.

While some challenges may be temporary, the Covid-19 pandemic is likely to lead to longer term changes in UK HE, particularly in terms of remote learning, and it is important to consider how these will affect different types of students. This research therefore contributes to London Metropolitan's Education for Social Justice Framework (ESJF), particularly in relation to 'accessibility', 'relationships' and 'identity' (London Metropolitan University, 2022b).

Our findings reflected existing research on student parents in that time (or more precisely, lack of time) was a key factor in the learning of student parents (Allison 2017). The findings also highlighted that Covid-19 had provided more time at home with their children, but this had made 'space' a critical factor in how parent students experience HE. A lack of a suitable learning space provided practical challenges, but also undermined the participants' sense of identity as students.

Methodology

This paper sets out the impact of Covid-19 on student parents, who have been navigating their way around learning activities and new technology. The research team conducted 19 semi-structured in-depth interviews during pandemic lockdowns between March and July 2020 with student parents aged between 28 and 49 years old. The participants included 16 women, with 14 from BAME communities. All had dependent children aged between 4 and 11 years old. The sample reflected the diversity of students at this post-92 university.

Context

Successive UK governments have promoted widening participation to Higher Education. This process involved increasing student numbers, and widening access to groups that have not previously benefited from Higher Education (Office for Students 2019). Part of the widening participation policy message was that 'caring responsibilities for a young child should not be seen as a barrier to engaging in education and training' (Brooks 2012:423).

Discussions of the advantages of attending university have tended to focus on increased social mobility and earning potential (Britton et al 2020; Allison 2016). However, it has also been argued that benefits 'ripple out' to families and communities (O'Shea 2015), and potentially contribute to a fairer, more civic-minded and socially mobile society (Brynnner and Egerton 2001; Secretary of State for Education (SOSE) 2019).

Despite good intentions, the benefits of HE are not evenly spread. There are significant differences between students in terms of retention, achievement, access to 'elite' Russell Group universities, and higher-paid employment (SOSE 2019). These differences have been identified by academic researchers (Reay 2017; Bhopal 2018; Thompson 2019) relating to gender, ethnicity and social class, but are identified less frequently in terms of the experience of student parents (for example, Moreau 2015; Brooks 2012). This is partly because universities are not required to identify or collect information on students who have dependent children.

Existing research on student parents (for example, Moreau and Kerner, 2018; Strange et al 2018) indicates that they face a series of barriers to learning. Some of these intersect with the experience of other students, such as commuter students and mature students (Webb and Turner 2019), but other barriers are particular to students with children. Common themes such as juggling time is often highlighted, with female student parents in particular facing a 'second shift' of domestic duties following their academic work (Moreau and Leathwood 2006). The responsibilities of parenting and the unpredictable nature of family life mean that student parents sometimes attend only their core teaching classes, potentially missing out on various academic learning communities and extra-curricular social activities. This may impact inadvertently on both their academic achievement and on employability once they leave the university (Christie, Munro and Wager 2005; Millburn 2012).

Findings

Time

To some extent, our interviews reflected existing research (Allison 2016; Moreau 2016), with participants identifying time as a key factor affecting their learning. Initially, a number of participants felt a sense of relief during lockdown, as they were no longer required to juggle taking children to and from school, and getting to campus on time. Lockdown also alleviated to some extent the financial burden of childcare and travel. However, students working at home faced additional burdens such as home-schooling their children:

It was very difficult; it was very hard for me. You know, being a mother, you are a tutor, a mother, a teacher at the same time, the kids are sent home, they need time for them, they have got their school activities and I help support them, I have to do my activities in my assignment, to attend the lecture... So, most of the time I have to do my studies at night (Female, two children)

These children were often of different ages, and sometimes had additional educational needs. Parents also faced the expense of buying IT equipment, and some were forced to share devices with their children:

During the first lockdown the kids have to stay at home. ...I can honestly say it was nearly impossible because ... I was doing my work, and [attending] all my lectures, but at the same time, we have exams... ...And my kids were being taught on Zoom as well...So, I'd have my lecture going on, [with] one of my kids sitting on their computer doing their Zoom (Female lone parent, four children)

Space

The second major challenge was lack of space to study. Covid-19 further exposed the challenges of learning at home, and issues of 'space' have become more critical to their learning experience (as per Reay 2020). Overcrowding had several psychological and pedagogical impacts. There was a sense of unease that Covid would spread quickly within the family and also the challenge of sharing space with their children to do academic work:

I was helping them with their homework so it was really, really challenging...having all four together with me made it so difficult, and very, very, very challenging. I have to be the one to prepare their food...I relied on school to have their breakfast club...in Covid I had to be responsible for all 3 square meals, and then concentrate on my studies (Female, three children)

It was tough...we had deadlines from April. Being in such a small space made it so difficult for me to, you know, be able to focus on the assignments. This was one of the hardest parts of, you know, the, the, the confinement, and then beside as you also remember, then we because the kids also stopped school, we had...to homeschool them (Male, two children)

Space to work in libraries was mentioned in all the interviews. For student parents, the university library was a place they could study in peace, and work effectively with other students in group projects. The closure of the university library and public libraries was felt keenly by these students:

I missed the library because... it would be my place of where I would have run to, to get support in terms of devices, in terms of books... I miss the library and I miss talking to the lecturer directly because when we are face to face, you get more information from the lecturer so I missed that (Female, 4 children)

While space was a significant practical issue, it was also critical in terms of developing a student identity. Remote learning has to some extent dissolved the walls of the university, for good or ill. But it has also blurred the boundaries of academic and home life, particularly for female student parents, who felt the responsibility of domestic tasks. They could do academic work remotely, but the campus was the place they could be students, even if they had a limited time there:

I found at one stage, I was just, I was about to go into labour. I was listening to lectures, but had it on my phone, on my headphones walking around and doing the washing up and I'm like washing up or walking around doing something else, tidying up (Female, one child)

It's just ongoing whereas when you're at university you're just you're there, you know you can give your all to studies and you don't have to worry about anything else. And that's why I feel it was really better for us to be there (Female lone parent, one child)

Conclusion and recommendations

To some extent, the learning experience of student parents is informed by a number of different identities such as age, ethnicity, gender and social class. However, Covid-19 has exposed and reinforced some of the particular problems they face as students. Tinto (cited in Moore, Sanders and Higham 2013) argues that 'access without support is not true opportunity'. Universities therefore have a responsibility to ensure that these student parents can achieve their full potential.

London Metropolitan University, in common with many other UK universities, has developed a strategy to embed equality and social justice in the delivery of teaching, learning and assessment. This research on student parents indicates that, for student parents, key barriers to reaching their potential lie in the context to learning, as well as in the teaching and learning process itself. We would therefore make three recommendations in terms of student networks, the need for study space and in the collection of information about students:

1. Student success has been linked to student integration in university life. But it could be argued that it is the responsibility of *universities* to integrate with *student* lives. Student parents have the advantage of existing networks of support among extended families and friendship groups outside the university, and universities should take steps to engage these networks to support students.
2. Interviews with student parents revealed a critical need for space for quiet study and for working with other students during lockdown and beyond. The re-opening of university libraries to some extent addresses this. However, a move to blended learning may release some teaching rooms, which could provide alternative study space on campuses.
3. In order to start this process, universities should collect information on access, retention, achievement and employment among student parents. However, there should also be holistic support systems that specifically provide advice and help to these students.

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