



Who cares?
Student parents in higher education

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From the White, middle class male student to a more diverse student population

- The student population has radically transformed over the past decades, in the UK as in other Western countries, from academia being the preserve of unencumbered, White, middle-class male students to a more diverse population
- Social divides remain, with 'non traditional' students concentrating in the less prestigious subjects and institutions (Leathwood & Read, 2009)
- Yet academia now includes significant proportions of working-class, minority ethnic, female and mature students

Physics Research Students June, 1898.



O.W.Richardson. J.Henry.

E.B.H.Wade. G.A.Shakespear. C.I.R.Wilson. E.Rutherford. W.Craig-Henderson. J.H.Vincent. G.B.Bryan.
J.C.McClelland. C.Child. P.Langevin. Prof.J.J.Thomson. J.Zelensky. R.S.Willows. H.A.Wilson. J.Townsend.

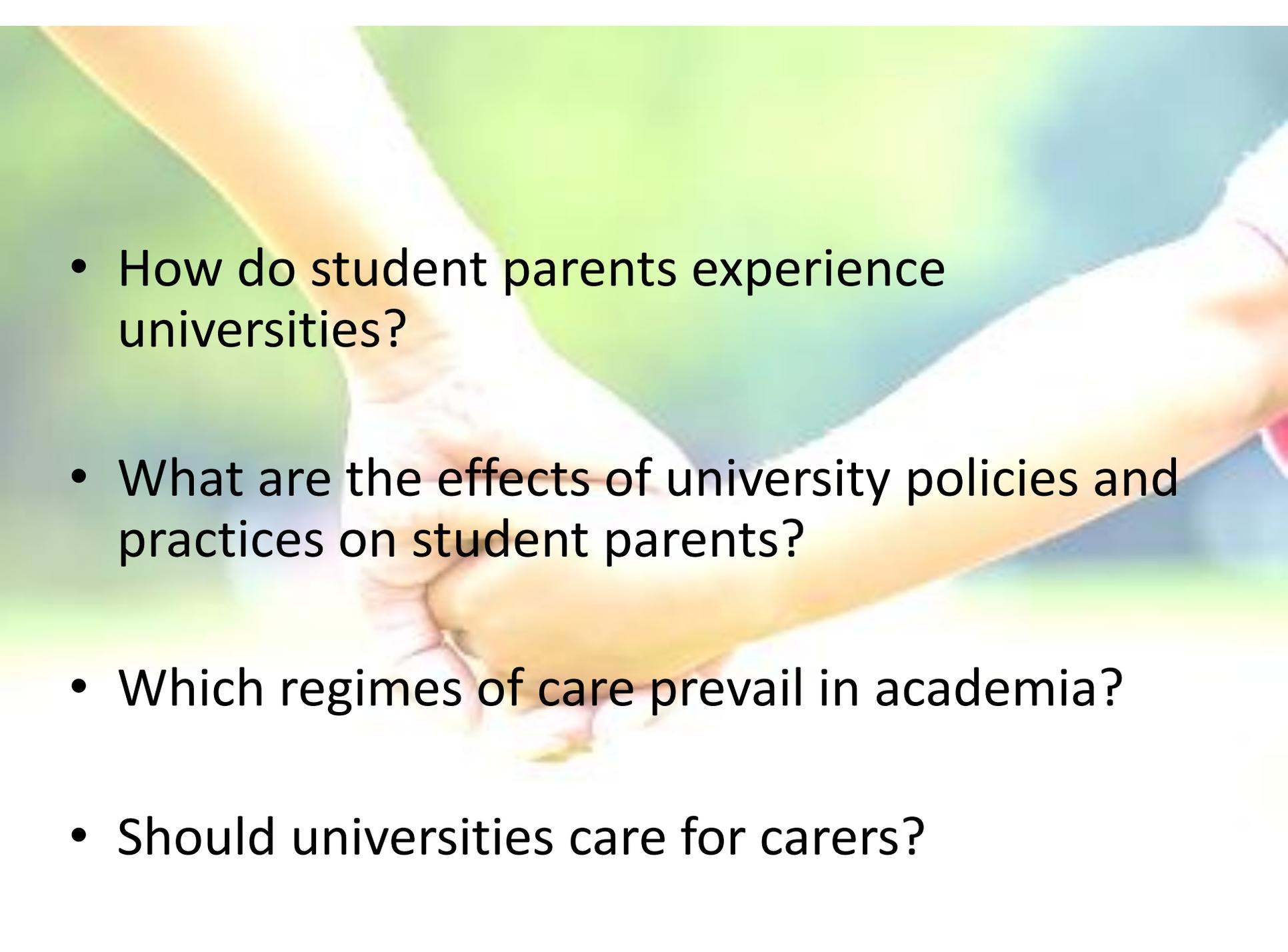
Research students at the Cavendish Laboratory



Student Parents:

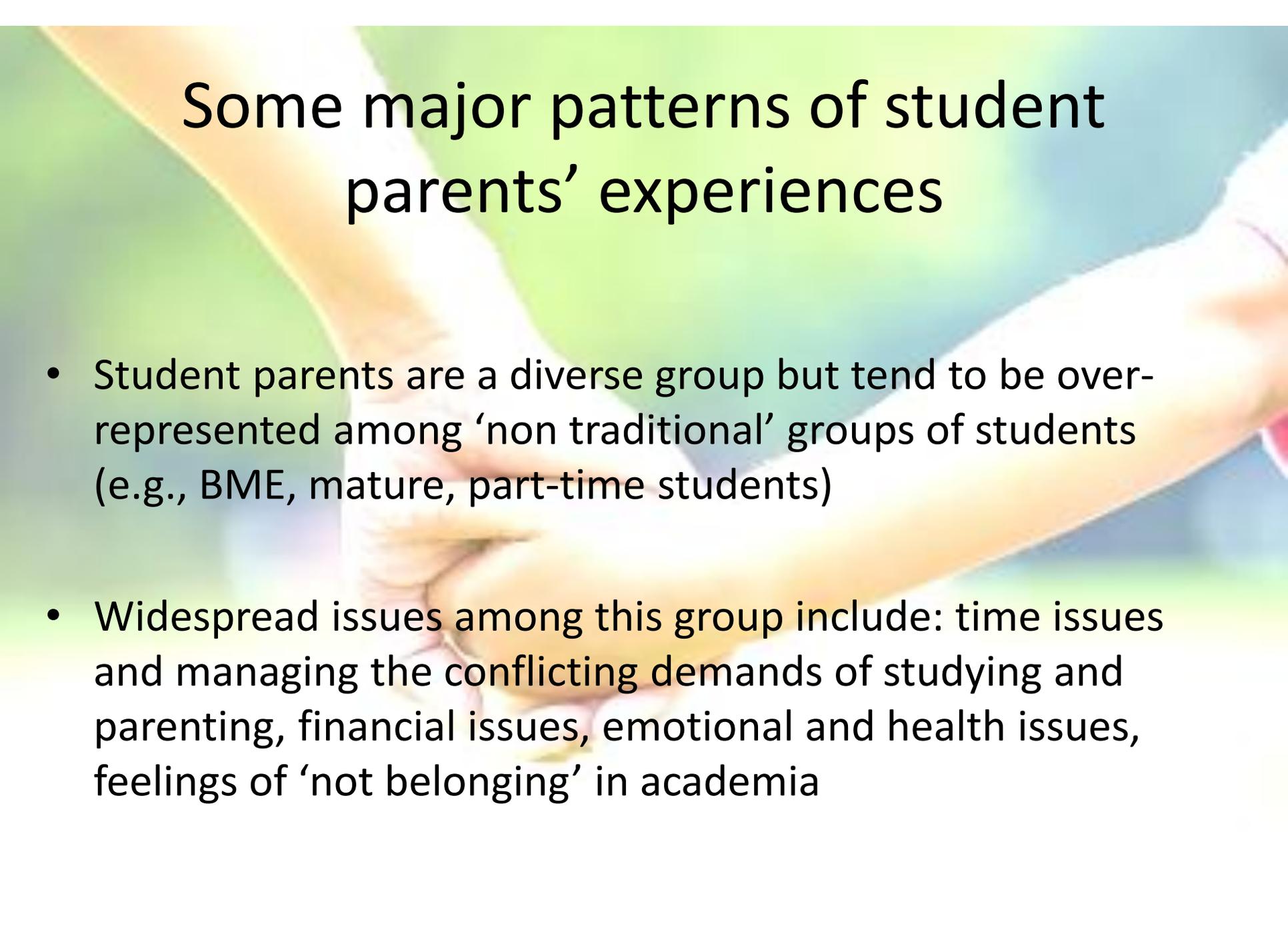
A growing but invisible presence

- Since the publication of the Dearing report (National Committee of Enquiry into Higher Education 1997), 'widening participation' has been at the forefront of English Higher Education policies – under New Labour (DfEE 1997, DfES 2003) and under the Coalition (DBIS 2011)
- Student parents have remained relatively absent from this agenda (see, e.g., DfEs 2003, DBIS 2011, Hughes 2011)
- This discourse of invisibility prevails at national and institutional levels, in policy and in research circles
- This invisibility contrasts with the strong presence of student parents in HE:
 - Johnson et al, 2009: 8% and 36% of full-time and part-time students domiciled in England are parents
 - NUS, 2009: a third of Further Education and HE students in England and Wales care for a dependent, with a large majority being women and mature students
- As a result, very little is known about: the number of student parents in academia (no HESA data), their experiences, and the effects of national and university policies and cultures on this group

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- How do student parents experience universities?
 - What are the effects of university policies and practices on student parents?
 - Which regimes of care prevail in academia?
 - Should universities care for carers?

Background to the analysis

- Research corpus on the tensions and ambivalences experienced by 'non traditional' HE students (e.g., Archer et al. 2003, Bhopal 2010, David et al. 2009, Leathwood & Read 2008, Reay et al. 2005), including research looking specifically at student parents (Brooks 2012, Hinton-Smith 2009, Marandet & Wainwright 2010)
- Ten university case studies, including 60 interviews with student parents and university staff and some documentary analysis (e.g. policy statements and websites)



Some major patterns of student parents' experiences

- Student parents are a diverse group but tend to be over-represented among 'non traditional' groups of students (e.g., BME, mature, part-time students)
- Widespread issues among this group include: time issues and managing the conflicting demands of studying and parenting, financial issues, emotional and health issues, feelings of 'not belonging' in academia

Times issues

University and family have been described as 'greedy institutions' (Coser, 1976), which require a full commitment: in the context of hyper-competitive, neo-liberal academia and of 'intensive mothering', there seems to be always room for becoming a 'better' parent or producing 'better' academic work.

*It is a constant balancing act and you can't ever win, if I dedicated as much time to my studies as I wanted to, I would be neglecting my child, if I dedicated as much time to my child as I wanted to, I would be neglecting my studies.
(Katherine, Case Study 1)*

When you are working, you usually know what your timetable is going to be. For most jobs, you know what your requirement is, like you finish your shift and that is the end of your shift... Studying is kind of bottomless in that you could always do a bit more, you could always read a little bit more or do a bit more work and you could always push your grades up a little bit more. There is no final point, but yes, I think I've had to learn what is a good enough point for me, what is a good enough amount of parenting and what is a good enough amount of studying and how I am going to make that balance. (Nesha, Case Study 6)

Financial issues

So the financial side of it is huge, yes. I find I am really struggling, constantly worrying about money. I am just hoping that, at the end of this, I will be able to get a good job and not worry about money anymore. (Natalie, Case Study 8)

- While a number of grants and loans are available (e.g. Childcare Grant, Parents' Learning Allowance, Learning Fund), their availability is restricted to certain groups.
- The threshold for eligibility is sometimes so low that it does exclude some of the students who are financially struggling. Besides, amounts can be modest.
- Student parents' availability to undertake paid work is limited and they have high outgoings, resulting in levels of debt which are often high.

Emotional and health issues

The constant competition between being a 'good' student and a 'good' parent (mother) led to feelings of guilt.

*I always have a guilt complex about time studying and I never have enough time in the day. I feel guilty that my husband has to play second fiddle to my laptop in the evening... you can't split yourself between everybody and achieve everything you want. It is always a compromise.
(Lisa, Case Study 5)*

Emotional and health issues

Student parents often mentioned physical and mental health issues (see also Gerrard & Robert, 2006; Marandet & Wainwright, 2010).

I live in a pigsty, I have no time to do housework and because shift work has proven to really flair up my health problems quite badly and the exhaustion and the stress of the course has kind of added to it all. It is just that, you know, my health has really been wobbling quite badly this year, so I have actually had to cut back the shifts but I still have no time to do housework. (Nicola, Case Study 7)

Student parents as Others

There is considerable evidence that non traditional students often experience a sense of 'not belonging' in academia - this is also typical of student parents. Evidence suggests that their concentration among the non traditional groups, combined with their dual status, may contribute to such feelings, which play out on a social and academic level.

I just do the kids, the university and my job and that's it and nothing else. I am a member of the church but I've had to stop going because of lack of time. So, while I am at university, I've had to give up lots of things like hobbies, leisure and time, you know, seeing friends and going to church and things like that, but I know it is not going to be forever, it is just for the next three years. You have to make some sacrifices. (Amber, Case Study 7)

I don't think I get any support for being a student parent, I would get grudging acknowledgement but it's in this: 'Oh yes, I suppose you'd have to go to that wouldn't you?', not really good enough, not really focused on the task. 'Come on now lady, you're doing a PhD, where are your priorities?' is what I feel is the line, so you have to pretend and get round it. (Lauren, Case Study 5)

Student parents as upwardly mobile subjects

- Being a student parent can also be read as an act of resistance and a source of empowerment as by combining caring and studying these students do disturb the care/academia binary.
- Being a student parent is part of a wider project of upward mobility, with students emphasising a range of aspirations and anticipated benefits for themselves and for their family, particularly in terms of accruing cultural and financial capital – being a student parent as a way of ‘bettering’ oneself.

University cultures and student parents



- Which regimes of care prevail at institutional level, e. g. which provision is available for student parents at institutional level and which representations of this group circulate in academia?
- Strong diversity of the provision in place and of the representations of this group

Three institutional scenarios

Scenario 1:

No formal provision/policy in relation to student parents; student parents mostly invisible in institutional documentation; tackling issues relating to care is left to the individual and/or to the good will of individual staff; policy 'impact' will depend on capitals and other forms of support available to students.

Three institutional scenarios

Scenario 2:

Some provision for student parents, e.g. on-site nursery, run by the university or privately, sometimes with discounted fees for students, holiday playgroup scheme, support to a student parent group, family accommodation, student parents as a priority group for financial support, breastfeeding room, guidelines for staff/students, etc.

The provision in place can make a huge difference, yet barriers can remain (e.g. cost, availability of provision). Student parents risk being constructed as 'special'. The effects of generic university policies are often left unaddressed.

Three institutional scenarios

Scenario 3:

Mainstreaming of issues faced by student parents in university policies – i.e. policies reviewed in the light of how they can affect different groups of students; usually combined with some specific provision for student parents (such as on-site nurseries); associated with some awareness of student parents' issues and other equality issues among staff; and supported by discourses which tend to challenge the construction of the traditional student: 'student parent' as the 'default' student.

Regimes of care



- Institutional and formal policies are only one aspect of regimes of care
- Pervasive effects of practices and underpinning representations, which are however more difficult to grasp but are nevertheless very powerful

Discursive constructions of student parents among staff

- High level of diversity among staff in terms of their views of student parents
- Discourses of student parents as 'heroes' or 'problem' students
- Discourses of student parents are underpinned by wider social democrat or neo-liberal discourses of higher education, leading to different rationales for (non-) intervention

The social democrat discourse of student parents

To not provide support to student parents would be to single out a group of people and not support them. Student parents deserve the same educational opportunities as every other group of students. I don't see supporting student parents as being about giving them special treatment or giving them an advantage, it's about making sure that they're not advantaged, making sure that they're treated fairly as individuals and about their individual situation, and making sure that we don't disadvantage people, stop people from seeking their potential because they have a child. I can't see why we wouldn't have a responsibility to support them. It would seem a discriminatory thing to not provide as much support as we could. (Staff, Case Study 6)

The neo-liberal construction of student parents: care as a personal issue

I think it's very irresponsible of a student to go to university and expect the university to sort everything out for them. That's wrong. If you are a parent, you've got responsibilities to your child or children, and if you then make a decision that you want to educate yourself, which is admirable, but you can't expect other people to sort out your issues... If you make a decision, you've got to weigh up the pros and cons of the move you want to make, and if it means sorting out childcare, then you jolly well sort it. It would be helpful if there were more of it on campus, but apart from that I can't see how the university could be responsible for something that is a parent's responsibility... If somebody wants to make a decision, then on their head be it. (Staff, Case Study 8)

Concluding words

- Carers have entered academia, moving from outside to its margins
- Yet the default construction of the student as 'care-free' has not been completely challenged, despite its erosion in some spaces
- The issues faced by student parents are compounded by university cultures and policies which, rather than neutral (Acker, 2006), are geared towards childfree students (e.g. 'generic' policies, such as health and safety and timetabling)

Concluding words

- Should care be the responsibility of the State, the institution, the individual, all of these?
- Is there a rationale for an intervention at institutional level?

Concluding words

A social justice rationale:

Equal opportunities are enshrined in the law - this agenda has been increasingly transferred at institutional level. Currently, the current association between academic excellence and the childfree student mean that universities are more likely to address the needs of childfree students.

The diversity of provision across institutions and the prevailing pattern of limited provision also raise some equality concerns in terms of consistency of support to student parents between and within institutions.

Last, the invisibility and lack of reward associated with care work in academic cultures raises further equality issues for staff and has some gendered implications in light of the cultural association between women and care work (Lynch, 2010).

Concluding words

A business case

Some universities put forward a business case to support an intervention around student parents. While the 'subordination of education to economic imperatives' risks relying on a narrow conception of learning processes (Ball, 2008: 9) this view does not imply that a business rationale should be completely dismissed.

In the context of an increasingly competitive and differentiated higher education market, addressing the needs of student parents may help universities to attract and retain a group of dedicated students and, more generally, improve the quality of their experiences.

Concluding words

A legal case

By making 'pregnancy and maternity' a 'protected characteristic', the Equality Act 2010, which applies to all users of public services, thus to students, makes clear that universities should not discriminate against expecting students, new parents or their partner.

Moreover, most student parents are women and gender constitutes another 'protected characteristic' under the Equality Act - the less favourable treatment of student parents may represent a case of indirect discrimination.

There are however limits to how much change can be brought on by equality legislation – an appropriate level of resources is crucial and a deeper cultural shift is also required.

Thank you!

Related outputs:

Moreau, M.P., Towards the family-friendly university? Research evidence on student parents and implications for higher education policies, Stimulus Paper Series, Leadership Foundation for Higher Education, online access: <http://www.lfhe.ac.uk/en/research-resources/commissioned-research/leading-equality-and-diversity/index.cfm#child-friendly>.

Moreau, M.P. & Kerner, C., Care in Academia: An exploration of student parents' experiences, British Journal of Sociology of Education (*iFirst* article: <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/03057925.2013.876310#.UxnF0a5wNIA>).

Moreau, M.P. & Kerner, C., *Supporting Student Parents in Higher Education: A policy perspective*. London, Nuffield Foundation, 2012. Available online: <http://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/sites/default/files/files/Moreau%20Student%20Parent%20report%20-%20Full%20report%20October%202012.pdf>

Moreau, M.P. Student parents: what support should universities be providing?, Guardian, Higher Education Network section, 13 december 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/higher-education-network/blog/2012/dec/13/student-parents-university-support-care>

Moreau, M.P., Care, the elephant in the (class)room?, Gender and Education Newsletter, 2013 [available online: <http://www.genderandeducation.com/issues/car/>].

NUS Supporting student parents in HE. Social Policy Briefing. SPB/20/12. 2012. <http://nuffieldfoundation.org/sites/default/files/files/NUS%20SPB%20Supporting%20Student%20Parents.pdf>

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