

**WESTERN SYDNEY
UNIVERSITY**



**Vice-Chancellor's
GENDER EQUALITY FUND
Final Report 2020**

**A Reconciliation of Parenting
and Studying: Supporting Student
Mothers During COVID-19 and Beyond**

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Contents

RECOMMENDATIONS	2
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	3
PROJECT HISTORY	3
PRESENTATION OF PRELIMINARY RESULTS.....	3
<i>Rapid-response Recommendations</i>	3
ITEMISED BUDGET EXPENDITURE	4
RESEARCH REPORT	5
THE AUSTRALIAN CONTEXT AND BEYOND	5
AIMS	5
METHODOLOGY.....	6
EMERGING THEMES	6
(i) <i>Student-mother Demographics at Western</i>	6
(ii) <i>Student-mother Identity and Recognition</i>	7
(iii) <i>Student-mother Pressure Points</i>	8
(iv) <i>The Postgraduate Student-mother Experience</i>	13
(v) <i>WSU Student-parent Union</i>	14
CONCLUSIONS	14
BIBLIOGRAPHY	15
APPENDIX	18
1. QUANTITATIVE SURVEY DATA.....	19
2. SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE	21
3. PROMOTIONAL FLYER FOR FOCUS GROUPS	32
4. GUIDING QUESTIONS FOR FOCUS GROUPS	33
5. VCGEC DISCUSSION PAPER	34

Recommendations

The following recommendations stem from both the final core findings of the project, as well as earlier discussions on the project's emerging themes that took place at the VC's Gender Equity Committee meeting on 26 November 2020. They build on the foundational measures that were recommended to the committee (as outlined in this report's Executive Summary) and look towards longer-term strategising around how the University can best support its student-mothers to ensure equity of participation in HE study at Western. These recommendations further seek broader inclusion of the full WSU student community when identifying and addressing gender inequities within the institution.

1. *Future Gender Equity Planning at Western*; future gender equity strategies and action plans at WSU should formally reflect and recognise the University's student community as integral to its ambitions to promote an organisational culture and environment that is inclusive and fair to all genders. It is recommended that this strategic planning include as a priority focus **reducing gender barriers to equal participation in HE study at Western for all students**, as well as facilitating and promoting a flexible and responsive student support environment that enables student-parents to balance study and life responsibilities. Research into **student gender equity issues should also be listed as an ongoing targeted gender equity initiative** via the VC's GEF in order to encourage this type of research and ensure that funds are available.
2. *Targeted Postgraduate Student-parent Support*; while the findings of our research indicated significant commonality between undergraduate and postgraduate student mothers, it is clear that there are some unique challenges in the gender equity space for parenting HDR candidates. It is recommended that **this report is shared with GRS** and that **gender inequities relating to, in particular, scholarships and employment caps are highlighted as a priority focus**.
3. *Student Representation*; this report acknowledges and applauds the VC's recommendation that 2 student representatives should be included as members of the VC's GEC and **it is further recommended that student representatives should be considered for membership inclusion on all School EDWPs**. These committees and working parties should also consider including standing items where appropriate for student representatives to raise relevant gender equity issues and discussions, as well as be **offered support in linking to relevant student groups to facilitate discussion and identification of core issues**, e.g. Student Parent Union, Student Representative Council, Women's Collective, Queer Collective.
4. *Study Flexibility*; the findings of the report suggest that **study flexibility is key to reducing inequities over participation for student-mothers but, crucially, different modes of teaching are required to accommodate this flexibility**. While online study during COVID-19 clearly exacerbated existing inequities for student-mothers and highlighted the need for on-campus teaching and learning, for example, there were also significant advantages for some students to this online mode of study, especially post-lockdown. **It is thus recommended that this report is shared with Associate Deans, Learning and Teaching, across all Schools and that both hyflex and more traditional modes of learning and teaching** be encouraged and explored in light of the specific challenges for student-mothers at Western.

Executive Summary

Project History

This project stems from a wider research project on the career cycles and experiences of academic mothers returning to work after one or more periods of maternity leave, including the ongoing impact of COVID-19. This research forms part of several research initiatives conducted through the Engaged Parent Network via different internal funding initiatives (WSU Summer Scholarship; VC's GEF; WSU Research Theme Grant Assistance Scheme; and, SHCA Collaborative RIF). The research team operate collaboratively across several Schools – Business, Health Sciences, Medicine, Humanities and Communication Arts – and have been centrally supported by the Writing and Society Research Centre. During 2020, the team also included 3 WSU student RAs.

The current project extends this ongoing research to the experiences of student-mothers at Western with a view to better understanding the challenges student-mothers face at university and the gendered barriers to effective participation in their studies.

Presentation of Preliminary Results

On 26 November 2020, a paper based on the preliminary findings of the project was presented to the VC's Gender Equity Committee with a series of initial recommendations designed to enhance the student-parent experience at Western. The recommendations focused on viable rapid-response implementation of key measures intended to both build a foundation for a longer-term equity strategy and attempt to mitigate the most urgent effects on student-mothers of the COVID-19 pandemic and its immediate aftermath. These recommendations are summarised below and repeated in full in the Appendix (5) to this report, which includes the original Discussion Paper.

Rapid-response Recommendations

1. *Student-parent Identification*; in order to provide, make visible and successfully promote strategic support for student-parents, this minority cohort needs to be **formally identified at first-point entry to the University and thereafter where students become parents during the course of their studies.**
2. *Student-parent Verification*; University policies and procedures (e.g. pre-tutorial allocation, placement allocation, applications for extensions and Special Consideration) need to be streamlined for student-parents. **Identification at entry-point or thereafter should be accompanied by an opt-in request to formally verify a student-parent's carer status.** This verification can then be utilised to access and streamline student support services.
3. *Online Information Hub*; a **centralised online information hub** is needed to bolster the existing successful support infrastructure provided by the Student Parent Union. This could be integrated with the University's current **"Parenting Toolbox"** for staff.
4. *Staff Training*; given the distinctly *ad hoc* nature of staff awareness and understanding of the circumstances of student-parents, **the positionality of student-parents should be included in the University's existing cultural awareness training programs** for both academic and professional staff.

Itemised Budget Expenditure

Date	Activity / Item	Cost (GST incl.)
June – Dec 2020	CEA Hollie Hammond 48hrs @\$55.96+on costs	\$3,113.17*
June – Dec 2020	CEA Jaime Vassallo 48hrs @55.96+on costs	\$3,113.17
October 2020	Gift vouchers for focus group participants	\$1,014.00
Total expenditure:		\$7,240.34**

* note that this includes an approved final payment of 2hrs @\$55.96+on costs for Ms Hammond which is scheduled for payment on 24 December 2020.

** there will be a final remaining underspend of approximately \$232. The project had budgeted for between 15-18 focus group participants and the final participant numbers were at the lower end of that estimation.

Research Report

The Australian Context and Beyond

Literature on the experiences of student-parents in HE has emerged significantly in the last 10-15 years but still remains somewhat understudied in comparison to (and indeed within) broader research on gender equity and HE. In both Australia and internationally, the findings collectively indicate that, even before COVID-19, student-parents led “highly complex lives with conflicting responsibilities to juggle,” which included “families and full- or part-time study” (Burton, Lloyd & Griffiths 2009). Along with other social, racial and economic factors, these “conflicting responsibilities” often had a negative impact on the ability of student-parents to effectively pursue their studies.

In Australian universities, mature-aged students are predominantly female; in 2016, women’s participation in HE was 37% greater than that of men amongst the 25-65 age group and almost double amongst the 35-55 age group” (Stone & O’Shea 2019). This cohort of “older female returners” invariably commence their studies with “complex and significant obstacles to learning” which include their role as carers (Stone & O’Shea 2019); “amongst students aged 25 and over in Australia, women remained disadvantaged in their studies by their traditional role as carer” (Chesters & Watson 2014; Mallman & Lee 2016).

This is due, in large part, because women in Australia continue to carry a much larger share than men of the responsibility for caring for others, both in the family context and the Australian workforce (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2018). When women return to study, they are likely to do so “within the constraints of their competing responsibilities for households, partners, children and possibly other family members” (Stone & O’Shea 2019). These constraints are further compounded by the need for paid work whereby many women returning to study are often forced to manage a “complex balancing act between wanting to study, meeting domestic responsibilities and needing to earn money” (Reay, Ball & David 2002).

Various case studies both in Australia and globally that have surveyed student-parents have begun to illustrate in more detail the particular and often very localised institutional difficulties that arise because of this “complex balancing act”. While it has been beyond the time and budget scope of this project to provide a fuller literature review, the Bibliography for this report contains a preliminary listing of the most recent national and international research on the experiences of student-parents and mature-age learners in HE.

With regard to the effects of the global COVID-19 pandemic on the experiences of student-mothers, there is yet to be published any formal research but current public and media discussion indicates that the crisis has exposed the lack of institutional support for student-parents, heightened their existing challenges, and underlined the vulnerability of this minority student cohort. This report gives a first insight into the pre-existing challenges for and experiences of student-mothers at Western, as well as the additional issues and support structures that have arisen within the institution in light of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Aims

The core aims of this project are to better understand the experiences of both undergraduate and postgraduate student-mothers studying at Western and, subsequently, to identify and evidence key gender inequities and barriers to effective participation in university study for this cohort. The project also seeks to make recommendations to the University in light of these findings to enhance the broader student-parent experience at

Western through strategic policy and practice support, as well as enhanced levels of recognition and representation of student-parent voices in the University's broader conversations and ambitions around gender equity. In so doing, the project hopes to contribute not just to improving gender equity for students and student-parents at Western, but also to enhancing the University's well-recognised reputation and leadership in the sector on gender equity and its strategic focus to be student-centred.

Methodology

In light of the proven gender inequities around women's share of caring responsibilities in Australia and the impact on equal pay and career progression, this project focused its data collection on student-mothers at Western. It utilised two key qualitative methods for exploring the experiences of student-mothers at the University and the key findings detailed in this report are based on (i) an online Qualtrics survey issued to students at Western via various internal social media, the Student Parent Union (SPU), and WSU's online teaching platforms (see Appendix 2), and (ii) 3 online focus groups comprising volunteers who responded to the call for additional participants, including those who had already completed the survey (see Appendix 3 and 4).

60 student-mothers participated in the survey (39 members fully completed the survey; 21 members completed approximately 85% of the survey). Focus groups were organised post-survey with 15 volunteer student-mothers who responded to the additional call for participants, which comprised 3 x 1hr online sessions with 5 participants in each session. Both the survey and focus group methodology employed open-ended questions to encourage depth of response.

It should be noted that the University currently holds no official data on how many student-mothers (or student-parents more generally) are studying at Western, so this report has been unable to ascertain what percentage of student-mothers at Western took part in the survey and focus groups. The SPU's current membership figures are approximately 119 student-parent members. Many participants were members of the SPU but several participants were not and, again, it is unclear what proportion of student-parents are represented by SPU membership in relation to overall student-parent numbers at Western.

Emerging Themes

The findings of the research coalesced around a number of core emerging themes which revealed and evidenced a series of significant gendered barriers to equal and effective participation in HE study for student-mothers at Western, as well as enabled a first-time snapshot of the demographic background of student-mothers at the University. The data further identified existing positive support models and staff behaviours and attitudes at Western that assisted student-mothers in their study and helped to mitigate some of the worst effects of the gendered barriers that they face.

(i) Student-mother Demographics at Western

Specific quantitative data on the emerging demographics of student-mothers who took part in the survey and focus groups are provided in the Appendix (1) to this report. The following is a brief qualitative summary of those demographics.

Survey results give a first-time indication of the demographic and social spread of student-mothers at WSU. Participants came from across 10 Schools at Western with over half coming from just 3 Schools – Nursing and Midwifery, Humanities and Communication Arts, and Psychology. A large majority (nearly 80%) were undergraduate students with the

remaining participants engaged in postgraduate study; the data did not identify whether participants were domestic or international students.

Participants demonstrated a considerable variation in age (under 1 – 25) and number (1 – 6) of children; several participants were parents of up to 4, 5, and 6 children and were managing large households with a broad age range (young adults, teenagers, and primary school children) while studying. At the other end of the spectrum, many parents were negotiating smaller (1 – 3 children) but younger families (babies, infants and toddlers) with their studies. There was only a very small indication of gender diversity in participant responses (<1% identified as “non-binary”); the remaining participants identified as “female” and all participants identified as “mothers” and “biological parents”. Over 70% of participants also hailed from one or more diverse social, racial and linguistic backgrounds (low SES background; first in family; English as second language; first/second generation migrant; Aboriginal; Torres Strait Islander).

While there is room for further iterative analysis of the data, there is little to indicate at this stage that student-mother experiences were more positive or negative overall for a particular social or cultural group. With significantly uneven numbers participating across Schools – and sometimes only 1 or 2 students from an individual School – it has also been hard to indicate whether there are significant differences in experiences across Schools. Further research and a wider pool of participants would be required for this level of analysis.

(ii) Student-mother Identity and Recognition

Despite representing a clearly vulnerable minority student population group, student-mothers often go unrecognised by staff – “they probably don’t know I am a parent” – and are not formally identified within the University. Participants noted this on an individual level within their courses/classes – “I do feel as parents, we are the minority in the student cohort” – but also on an institutional level.

“the definition of ‘carers’ within the University ... does not include parents ... there’s no mechanism (that I’m aware of) within the University to identify and offer support to parents. As a demographic variable, none of that is collected anywhere.”

There was an overriding sense in participant responses that this lack of recognition has led to a lack of targeted support and understanding for student-parents more generally.

“I do not feel supported as a student parent. Everything at WSU is aimed at younger students without children.”

“There is no compassion given to fact that you might be balancing a lot of difference things, that you might have kids.”

In addition, there was a palpable sense that this lack of recognition and understanding resulted in feeling let down by the institution, which was doubly distressing given the difficult and complex circumstances student-mothers had to daily overcome, as well as the personal and financial sacrifices they had to make to pursue their studies.

“There seems to be no support or no value that we’re undertaking this journey.”

These comments coalesced with how students expressed their identity as student-mothers,

repeatedly noting the ways in which their multiple identities – student, mother, wife/partner/carer, employee – often clashed or created additional life pressures.

“There is no break in between being a parent and student.”

“You have to look after the kids, you have to cook, you have to clean, and you have to submit assignments as well. Also keeping in mind that my GPA doesn’t go down.”

Participants further noted how their dual identity as mother and student altered how they are perceived by their student peers, as well as by their tutors and lecturers. Participants had both positive and negative feelings about this external perception.

“I went into campus to talk to a lecturer and she asked how I was. She meant the pregnancy and I told her about my exam stress.”

“When they know you are a mom, they don’t see you as another student.”

(iii) Student-mother Pressure Points

Participants revealed a number of common pressure points for student-mothers that have a significant bearing on their ability to participate equally in their studies with their non-parent counterparts. It is also clear from the data that during COVID-19 these pressure points were significantly heightened and had a detrimental impact on the ability of student-mothers to continue studying effectively, as well as on their physical and mental wellbeing.

a. Time Management

Participants repeatedly and collectively noted that they are exceptionally time-poor – “time is always a challenge” – and that their family commitments were a priority. Many participants additionally noted that they are not just trying to juggle parenting and studying but also employment. As a result, their “commitment” and “availability” for study was “very limited”. Study often took place “late at night” after children were in bed; “I have to be super organised to fit everything in and keep on top of university”.

b. Lack of Flexibility over University Processes and Policies

A significant number of participants reflected that academic staff had been “brilliant”, “supportive and accommodating” with regard to the challenges and “unique circumstances” that student-parents often face, especially over class allocations and requests for extensions and special consideration. The University’s counselling and disability services were also frequently cited as assisting student-mothers with some of these challenges, even where the situation was somewhat outside their usual remit.

“Counselling was very helpful and supportive ... particularly around figuring out how to shuffle my course progress around [to] finish my degree on schedule.”

“I’ve found [Disability Services] incredibly helpful, both with my AIP but also they fought for me when I needed permission to breastfeed during an exam.”

However, while the overall data suggests that there is clearly a lot of goodwill from both academic and professional staff in this space, there is an equal lack of consistency. A large number of participants indicated that support is distinctly *ad hoc* and reported experiences where staff were really supportive and understanding, but

also incidences where staff members were entirely dismissive. The broader indications of participant responses suggest that support from staff mostly depends on individual sympathies and understanding.

“I have had flexibility from some and none from others. It really does depend on which staff member you get. It made it hard to do some of the units.”

“I've been incredibly lucky in that I've had a lot of UCs who are mothers (and some who are not but have just been very supportive and sympathetic). By and large they've been really supportive and understanding. I did have an experience in 2016 while I was still trying to study science where I'd reached out to an academic because I was so ill with the pregnancy and he was incredibly dismissive.”

Of significant concern are instances where academic staff have inappropriately singled out student-mothers to make a point of either noting that their circumstances do not merit flexibility or support, or assuming that their circumstances make them ineligible for full-time university study.

“One academic ... made it very clear that child responsibilities/childcare issues were ‘no excuse’ in this course! He looked directly at me while saying that. He went on to advise the cohort that two people are involved in making a baby and we need to prioritise the Masters program.”

“[A] teacher I had ... told me I shouldn't study full time at all [because] I'm a single mum and I'm silly if I think I'll manage or be able to actually do it.”

Participants also frequently highlighted the “red tape” and “time” required for requesting extensions or applying for special consideration, which often deterred student-mothers from making these kinds of applications even where they were warranted and much needed.

“There's so much red tape ... I haven't asked for any extensions or special considerations because I just think there's just so much red tape, too, at the time that I'm spending trying to get that extension. I should just cram and do it.”

Other participants were concerned that making these kinds of requests would affect their standing with academic staff and, again, were deterred from making “legitimate” applications.

“Despite there being some legitimate parenting circumstances which have affected my studies (sick kids etc) I have never used being a parent for ... extensions or special cons ... I worry how this will be viewed by academic staff.”

A majority of participants further noted that they had to “try and get class times that fit around family” in order to fully participate at university but that this also limited their choices; “I need to be very selective when choosing ... classes”. It's clear from the data that flexibility over timetabling and class allocation is crucial for student-mother participation but many participants expressed frustration at the lack of options and, sometimes, empathy for their situation.

“You can't be put in a 5pm tutorial. Kids childcare close at 5pm or 5:30pm and

there is no real consideration on not choosing that time. That's sort of the rule and when you bring it up, it's just like, well, that's life."

"The system doesn't provide enough flexibility and support for parents like me."

As with applications for extensions and special consideration, many participants seemed unaware of their options or the validity of their circumstances and were thus deterred from seeking or requesting flexibility with regard to class times; "I don't know if [parenting responsibilities] would be seen as reasonable."

c. Social Isolation

A large number of participants commented on their social isolation at the University by virtue of being a student-mother and/or their mature age; "I was mostly alone as I had more responsibilities than the average student". Participants frequently suggested that other students found it "hard ... to relate" to student-parents and that "it's difficult to establish solid connections with younger students that don't have children". As a result, many participants felt "very out of place" and remarked that it's hard to "feel a part of the [University] community."

"I feel like an oddball sometimes because a lot of the other students do not have the busy schedule that children bring into your life. It is very different to being an undergrad where you can get involved in campus life, instead I see a lot of University events I would love to be involved in and I just have to pass them up because of time or already being too exhausted."

Several participants additionally noted that Western's "social media is all aimed at young students". It was also clear from a majority of participants that social isolation had been exacerbated during COVID-19 (see d. below).

d. COVID-19 and Online Learning

The majority of participants indicated that the pressure of juggling online study with childcare and home-schooling during lockdown had been "horrible" and "relentless".

"During lockdown, attending classes online and home schooling were a bad mix."

"During Covid there were no special considerations for parents who were undertaking online learning with children."

"I had to drop to 1 unit because I wasn't coping with home schooling the kids ... I also had to learn new technology & try & juggle zoom classes with kids at home."

For many, this had an adverse effect on their ability to effectively pursue their studies due to exhaustion, stress and lack of time, motivation and focus; "I couldn't get 5 minutes to study without interruption." Several participants had to defer their studies and/or drop units as a result of COVID-19 disruptions and felt that this was "the only option [the University] have for parents." Participants also repeatedly stressed that during COVID-19 their children and families had to be their priority and this placed a huge amount of pressure on their studies.

"I have needed to drop units, defer a semester, and halt postgraduate aspirations."

I have no access to my support network and no access to childcare, and my partner needs to work. My child's needs must be prioritized which sadly means study is coming in very much at the tail end of my priorities."

However, some participants noted the advantages of online learning under normal circumstances or shared a more mixed response over online and hybrid teaching and learning models in general.

"Life is both easier and harder because I can attend classes from home ... [but] I also learn better in person."

"It would be nice to be able to meet other people face to face on campus, but on the other hand it's been fantastic being able to study anytime when it suits me."

"I think the online thing is quite positive ... it is saving me a lot of travel time."

Equally, other participants lamented the loss of face-to-face teaching and learning and described online tutorials as "awful", especially the lack of engagement from other students in the online classroom.

"I find it hard during the tutorial in regards to input and communication. I'm sometimes put into breakout groups where no one wants to discuss."

"I don't feel like I'm getting collaboration with other students in class or able to develop relationships. I feel less motivated and more distracted."

"Screens, while helpful, cannot replace human interaction."

These participants also found their ability to learn impeded by online models of teaching and missed "being able to discuss issues and ask questions face to face."

Furthermore, there were strong indications that a majority of participants felt increasingly isolated and that the lack of engagement during online teaching and learning also reduced potential for social connections with their peers, tutors and the institution.

"I feel less engaged and less socially connected to peers."

"It feels like I could be studying anywhere, no real sense of being at Western."

"I don't really know the peers in my class this year."

The physical teaching, learning and study spaces available on campus were also crucial for many student-mothers in terms of effectively participating in their university work. Several participants reflected that not being on campus denied them valuable "baby free" time and "personal space away from family" to study and work on assignments. Furthermore, it was noted that the neurodiversity needs of students more broadly in social and learning environments were not being met where flexible learning was solely viewed as a mode of online learning. Flexibility to be taught, study and learn on campus was considered by some to be equally as important as the time and travel flexibility that comes with online models of teaching and learning.

Some University provisions were also highlighted as problematic for on-campus learners, such as the difficulties in securing casual childcare, car-parking, and the accessibility of breastfeeding and childcare rooms, especially for student-mothers who brought male partners onto campus to assist with childcare.

“I needed to pump and store baby things, so I had to organize with my School to let me use their [baby room] which wasn’t easy and accessible.”

“some parent rooms were locked and I had to contact Welfare.”

“my husband struggled to find some way to change our son on campus [and] he ended up at the back seat of the car.”

“parking was impossible, I just got dropped off at uni because I knew if I was going to drive, I would have to park on the other campus and was going to walk across the highway with a newborn baby.”

e. Wellbeing

Of significant concern, and one of the major impacts of COVID-19 on participants, has been the negative impact on their mental and emotional wellbeing. Participants noted that the combination of lockdown, home schooling and online learning placed enormous mental and emotional pressure on student-mothers who are already time-poor and often lack private home space to study and participate in online learning effectively.

“My mental health took a dive when schools were closed and I had to reduce my workload. My studies are very important to me so to be forced to have them take a backseat in favour of schooling my kids was very difficult.”

“I actually started crying during a live zoom tutorial because my children were having meltdowns.”

A large majority of participants reported a considerable deterioration in their mental health with increased levels of stress, anxiety and depression, as well as physical exhaustion and decreased overall physical fitness and health. As parents, many participants felt that they had to support their families during the crisis, which left them little time to care for themselves.

“I can't even begin to describe the amount of mental, physical and emotional distress this experience has put me through. But when you're a mother, you don't even have time for a mental breakdown ... this has been the worst year of my life.”

Those with existing or past mental health issues noted a deterioration or reoccurrence of their conditions, including eating disorders, general anxiety disorders, and depression. Several participants reported that they had had to increase anti-depressant medications and seek counselling.

“These past two or three weeks my anxiety has increased. My medication dose has been increased and I am having difficulty sleeping.”

Others found themselves newly diagnosed with depression and prescribed medication. With little time to engage in counselling, medication was often a last resort or the only coping mechanism available.

(iv) The Postgraduate Student-mother Experience

While many of the challenges facing student-mothers were common amongst undergraduates and postgraduates, postgraduate student-mothers recorded higher levels of satisfaction in terms of support from academic staff, especially their supervisors.

“My supervisors and most staff have been very supportive and accommodating ... My supervisors are parents too, so they completely understand my situation ... They have scheduled meetings around my caring responsibilities and are happy for my son to attend meetings/workshops if required.”

One participant felt that the positive support received at Western was unique; “Western is brilliant with this, I don’t feel like I’d get this kind of understanding at Sydney Uni.”

However, when it came to administrative support, participants were less enthusiastic about their experiences, often finding themselves passed between centralised undergraduate student services and the Graduate Research School when seeking support or flexibility over postgraduate reporting processes, e.g. annual progress and milestone reports, or even basic communication over these same processes. Given that student-mothers often have to keep to tight schedules and plan their research ahead of time due to childcaring commitments, delays in GRS processing or communication were seen to very quickly throw these schedules into disarray and significantly hamper research progress.

“You submit something, and it says you will hear back from them in five or ten days but three months later, you are chasing them up for answers.”

“You feel like a troublesome student, but all you want is basic communication.”

Postgraduate responses also reflected the difficulties of studying within a system that assumes or unintentionally privileges full-time participation, which was equally noted at the undergraduate level, especially with regard to scholarships and merit awards. Some undergraduate participants had to resort to the University’s counselling services to resolve these problems.

“I had some communications with Counselling and a Welfare Officer. Both have been very supportive in helping me maintain a scholarship, which I stood to lose in Spring 2019 as I only did one unit the semester I gave birth, and I was supposed to do two.”

For participants who paired study with employment at the University, the cutbacks on allowed work hours also caused significant distress for student-mothers reliant on University employment for financial security during their studies.

“I got a job as an RA for the uni but the uni’s changed the rules on how many hours HDR students can work. So, as a parent, how do they think I am going to feed my children? ... how can somebody in an office tell me that even though I’ve been working on this project for ages – and the work is there, it is funded, the money is there – that I’m not allowed to work? ... do they not want mums to come to uni? ... I’ve got to go and get a job somewhere else because my kids still need to eat.”

(v) WSU Student-parent Union

Participants overwhelmingly highlighted the WSU Student Parent Union as a vital and successful support service and community space for student-parents; “lovely space run by great people.” The SPU was seen to offer “extremely important” advice, as well as provide a space where student-parents can constructively share their experiences and institutional knowledge to empower and advocate for each other. Building a sense of community was a crucial outcome of the group that was frequently noted by participants and the diversity of that community was also applauded.

“I don’t feel so alone anymore ... I feel a sense of belonging and understanding.”

“It’s nice to have a diverse group of students, it’s not a mother’s group only, it is also inclusive of queer parents.”

The SPU was further perceived as motivational with regard to the study-work-life juggle – “Having a group is having a hype man to keep us going when we struggle to remember why we do this” – and clearly plays a mitigating role in the mental wellbeing of its members; “I feel a sense of relief after finding out about this group today.”

Participants were also encouraged that the SPU could play a significant role in raising “awareness” amongst other students of the unique circumstances of student-parents and assist in “nurturing a more inclusive community” across the University. It was also evident in participant responses, however, that many students were unaware of the SPU, even those connected to the Western Life platform.

Conclusions

As one participant summed up, “WSU is progressive in a lot of ways [compared to] other universities but there is still room for improvement.” This report has illustrated the ways in which student-mothers at Western share in the gendered disadvantages common to this cohort in both Australian and international HE settings, but it has also demonstrated some of the unique institutional barriers to participation at Western alongside the behavioral and structural support within the institution that assists in mitigating these barriers. It further recognizes that the negative impacts of COVID-19 have been disproportionately felt by student-mothers at Western. The core findings of the report suggest that the fragile life-work-study balancing act of these students has long suffered a lack of institutional recognition and support and that the global pandemic has further aggravated the complex circumstances surrounding these students and their efforts to engage in HE. This has had severe consequences for the study progression of this cohort.

The report’s recommendations are based on the project’s findings but have largely avoided individual, or even collective, instances of inequity and have rather targeted wider systemic structures, policies, practices and behaviours that have a combined impact on student-mother experiences and, with future amendment, will stand to have the biggest impact on reducing inequity in this space.

The project has also thrown up broader issues around student gender equity and the need for inclusion of student voices in the University’s conversations and formal strategising to enhance gender equality across its communities and working environments. While this study was confined to student-mothers, its findings further suggest applicability to all student-parents while also recognizing the likely distinctions that will arise with the inclusion of student-fathers.

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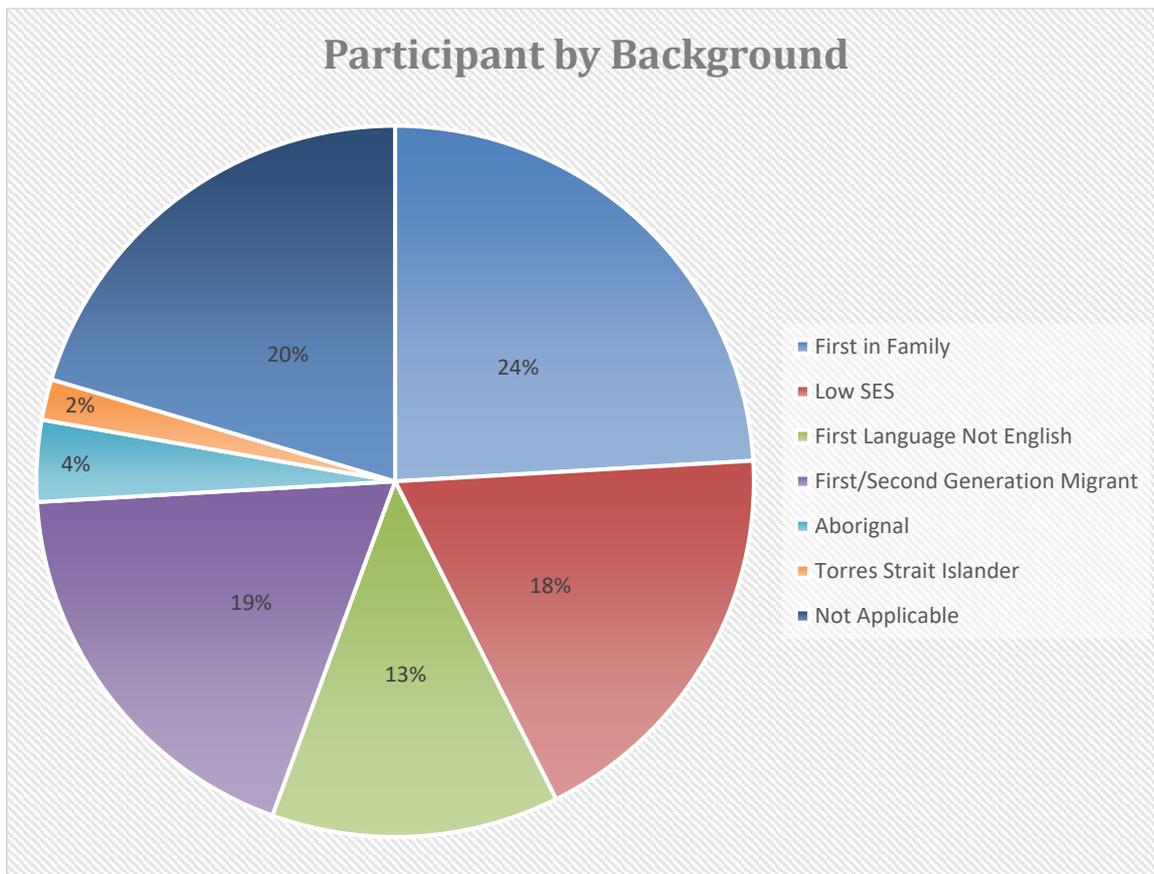
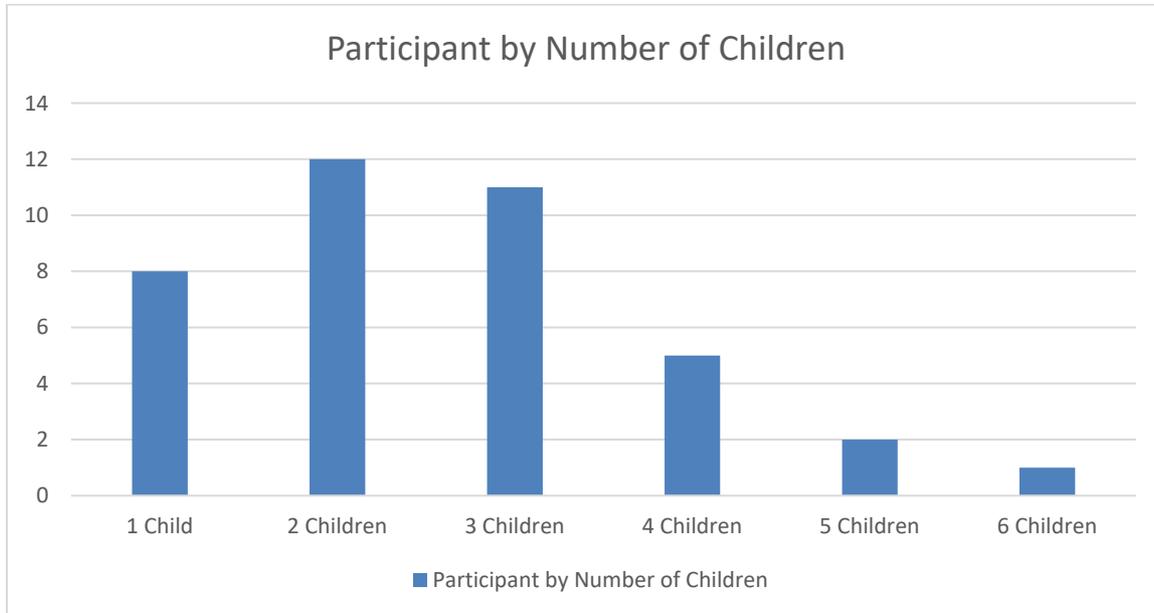
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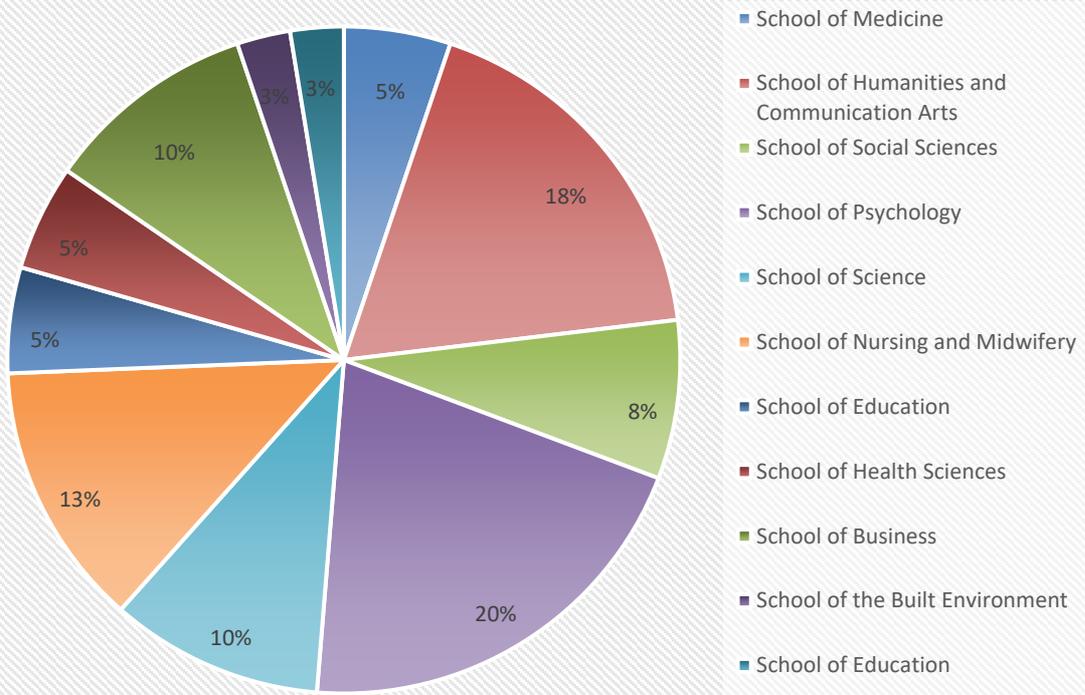
Appendix

1. Quantitative Survey Data

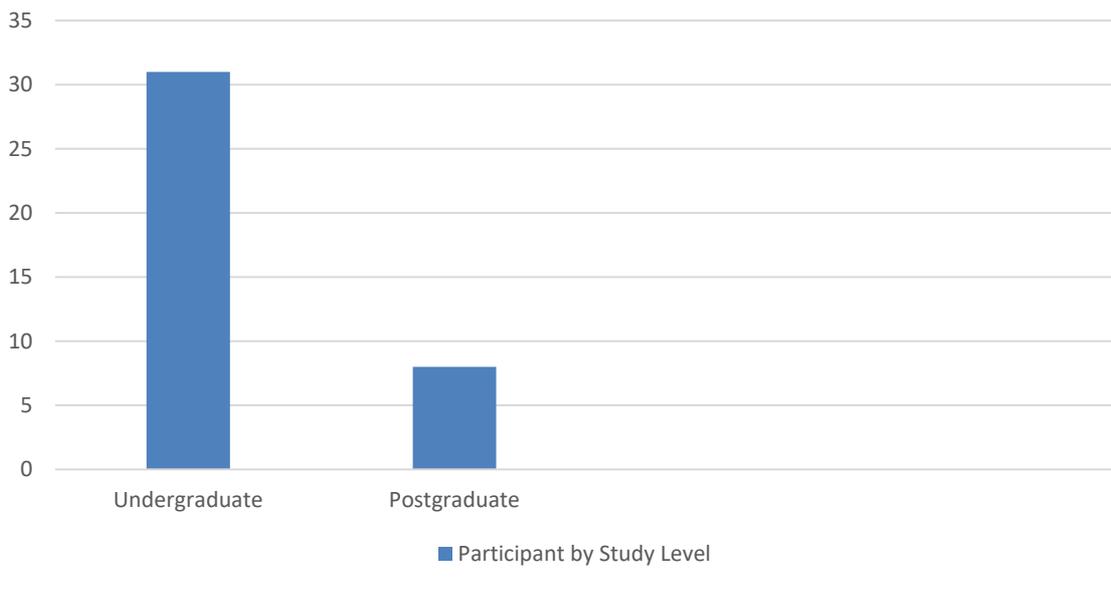
Total Participants = 39



Participant by School



Participant by Study Level



2. Survey Questionnaire

Default Question Block

Investigating the Experience of Student-Parents at Western Sydney University



Participant Information Sheet – Academic Motherhood

Project Title: Academic Motherhood

Project Summary: You are invited to participate in a research study being conducted by Dr Dorothea Bowyer, Dr Anne Jamison, Dr Chloe Taylor, Dr Tinashe Dune, Dr Melissa Deitz, Dr Erika Gyengesi, Miss Jaime Vassallo and Miss Hollie Hammond. The research seeks to understand the ways in which motherhood, identity, professionalism and academia intersect. This research will examine the unique experiences and career trajectories of student mothers. The project will also investigate the role university policies play in supporting student parents, identifying potential gaps and making recommendations.

How is the study being paid for? The research study is being funded by the Vice Chancellor's Gender Equality Committee through the Gender Equality Fund.

What will I be asked to do? For this research you will be asked to complete a survey about your experiences as a mother studying at Western Sydney University. You will be provided with a questionnaire looking at identity, environmental and personal factors, support and career opportunities and your experiences during COVID-19.

How much of my time will I need to give? The time this takes to complete will vary between participants depending on how much (or little) detail they provide. We estimate this will take between 20 minutes and one hour. Participants are also welcome to compose or save their extended answers in a Word document to avoid any loss of progress if there are any internet connectivity issues.

What benefits will I, and/or the broader community, receive for participating? There are no immediate and direct individual benefits. However, the research will contribute to the development and better implementation of the practices underpinning existing policy frameworks at the University in ways that actively encourage and support the experiences and lives of Western Sydney University student parents.

Will the study involve any risk or discomfort for me? If so, what will be done to rectify it? It is possible that some of the themes that may arise with regards to motherhood and/or academia could involve recalling difficult circumstances or events which could result in some psychological discomfort. You are reminded that your participation is voluntary and that you may withdraw from the research at any time. Western Sydney University offers a counselling service, which is a free service for all Western Sydney University staff and students. Any

participant who experiences distress over the course of the research is encouraged to use this service and will be assisted in doing

so. https://www.westernsydney.edu.au/currentstudents/current_students/services_and_facilities/

Identifiability is a risk factor in this type of research, particularly within the closed environment of a University. We will ensure that the member of the research team reading your responses has no links to you in terms of teaching/learning or research. Should we identify sections of your responses that might lead to you (or a person you write about) being identified then we will use the following steps: 1) remove any descriptors that might identify an individual, 2) extract the sentence(s) required and embed them amongst discussion of a theme that includes excerpts from a series of different narratives and 3) all members of the research team (unless linked by teaching/research) will check every research output to provide an extra measure of assurance that individuals cannot be identified. In no instance would an entire response, or even sections longer than 3 sentences, be made available to anyone outside of the research team. Upon submission of your questionnaire you are also encouraged to flag with the research team whether any specific parts need treating with increased sensitivity.

How do you intend to publish or disseminate the results? It is anticipated that the results of this research project will be published in peer-reviewed journals and the media. In any publication and/or presentation, information will be provided in such a way

that individual participants cannot be identified.

Will the data and information that I have provided be disposed of? Please note that minimum retention period for data collection is five years post publication. The data and information you have provided will be securely disposed of after this 5-year period.

Can I withdraw from the study? Participation is entirely voluntary and you are not obliged to be involved. If you do participate you can withdraw at any time without giving a reason. If you do choose to withdraw, any information that you have supplied will be securely disposed of.

Can I tell other people about the study? Yes, you can tell other people about the study, asking them to contact Dr. Chloe Taylor at c.taylor@westernsydney.edu.au to obtain a copy of the information sheet.

What if I require further information? Please contact Dr. Chloe Taylor, Dr. Dorothea Bowman or Dr. Anne Jamison should you wish to discuss the research further before deciding whether or not to participate.

Dr. Chloe Taylor: c.taylor@westernsydney.edu.au

Dr. Dorothea Bowman: d.bowman@westernsydney.edu.au

Dr. Anne Jamison: a.jamison@westernsydney.edu.au

What if I have a complaint? If you have any complaints or reservations about the ethical conduct of this research, you may contact the Ethics Committee through Research Engagement, Development and Innovation (REDI) on Tel +61 2 4736 0229 or email humanethics@westernsydney.edu.au.

Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated fully, and you will be informed of the outcome. If you agree to participate in this study, you may be asked to sign the Participant Consent Form. The information sheet is for you to keep and the consent form is retained by the researcher/s.

This study has been approved by the Western Sydney University Human Research Ethics Committee. *The Approval number is H13877.*

I hereby consent to participate in the above named research project.

I acknowledge that:

- I have read the participant information sheet (or where appropriate, have had it read to me) and have been given the opportunity to discuss the information and my involvement in the project with the researcher/s
- The procedures required for the project and the time involved have been explained to me, and any questions I have about the project have been answered to my satisfaction.

I consent to completing a questionnaire on my experiences of academic motherhood

I consent for my data and information provided to be used in this project and other related projects for an extended period of time

I understand that my involvement is confidential and that the information gained during the study may be published and stored for other research use but no information about me will be used in any way that reveals my identity

I understand that I can withdraw from the study at any time without affecting my relationship with the researcher/s, and any organisations involved, now or in the future

I understand the above information and agree to participate in this study

Please select the item that best describes your parenting situation

Please let us know more about your parenting situation in the box below

Please indicate your gender identity

Please let us know your gender identity in the box below

How many children do you have?

Please indicate the age of your oldest child

Please indicate the age of second child

Please indicate the age of your third child

Please indicate the age of your fourth child

Please indicate the age of your fifth child

Please indicate the age of your sixth child

If you have more than six children, please indicate their ages here

Please indicate whether you're currently enrolled in undergraduate or postgraduate studies

Please indicate which School you're primarily based in

Please let us know which School or Institute you're based in

Please check all that apply to you

- I identify as Aboriginal
- I identify as Torres Strait Islander
- I am the first in my family to attend university
- I come from a low SES background

- I am a first or second generation migrant
- I am a refugee
- English is not my first language

This part of the survey relates to parenthood and your *sense of identity*. Please feel free to provide as much detail as you'd like!

How has being a parent shaped or changed your identity in general?

How has being a parent affected your identity as a university student specifically?

How do you navigate the two identities of student and parent?

For example, do you try to keep them separate, do you try to merge them - or do you do something else entirely?

This part of the survey relates specifically to your *experience of studying as a parent* - again, you're invited to share as much (or as little) detail as you are able to

Has being a parent influenced your approach towards your studies?

- Yes
- No

Please let us know more about how being a parent has influenced your approach to your studies below

What are some of the *key aspects* of your experience of studying as a parent?

How have unit coordinators, lecturers and other academic staff typically engaged with you as a student parent?

Have you experienced flexibility from academics within the university due to your parenting responsibilities?

This section is about what support you have available throughout your student parent journey

Do you have personal supports in place to assist you with your studies? If so, what kind of supports do you have, and how have they helped?

Have you engaged with any of the University's support systems, such as mentoring, peer support, counselling, etc.?

Yes

No

Please tell us more about the support systems you've engaged with and how you did (or did not) find them helpful

Have you noticed any gaps in the support that is offered to student parents by the university?

- Yes
 No

What are some of the gaps you've noticed?

In an ideal world, what sort of support do you think universities would offer to student parents?

This section relates specifically to your experience as a student parent throughout COVID-19. Please share as much as you feel comfortable to

How has COVID-19 impacted your student experience?

Have you had to scale back any of your study, drop units or defer as a result of COVID-19?

- Yes
- No

Tell us more about the changes you've made due to COVID-19?

Have you had more difficulty separating your home and family life due to COVID-19?

- Yes
- No

What have been some of the key aspects of this difficulty?

Has being unable to go to campus for classes and study had an impact on your work output?

- Yes
- No

Can you tell us more about how not being able to go to campus has impacted your study?

Have you experienced any changes to your sense of connection during COVID-19?

- Yes
- No

In what ways has your sense of connection changed?

How has COVID-19 impacted your health, mental health and wellbeing?

This section is about the Student Parent Union, which was recently started by a group of student parents at Western Sydney University

What do you think the role of such a group should be within the university?

Do you think such a group is helpful to students?

- Yes
- Maybe
- No

Why, or why not?

And, finally...

What has been the best part of your experience as a student parent?

What has been the most challenging aspect of your experience as a student parent?

If you'd like to receive information about the findings of this study, please include your email address below:

Powered by Qualtrics

3. Promotional Flyer for Focus Groups



FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS WANTED!

STUDENT MOTHERS

*A project investigating the experience of student mothers at
Western Sydney University*

ARE YOU A STUDENT AND A MOTHER?

WE'D LOVE TO HEAR FROM YOU!

If you are a **student mother** and you're available to **attend a 1-1.5 hour focus group** in one of the following sessions, please contact Hollie at 16727869@student.westernsydney.edu.au ASAP

- **Tuesday Oct 13th at 1pm**
- **Wednesday Oct 14th at 1pm**
- **Thursday Oct 15th at 1pm**

Participants will also be offered a GiftPay voucher in appreciation of their time

THIS PROJECT IS FUNDED BY THE VICE CHANCELLOR'S GENDER EQUITY FUND

4. Guiding Questions for Focus Groups

1. Prior to COVID-19, were you a face to face or an online student, and have the changes post COVID-19 been positive or negative?
2. Have you had to adjust your expectations of yourself as a student, parent or both as a result of COVID-19? Follow up: how has this affected your identity as a student-parent?
3. With the onset of COVID-19, has that presented any challenges for you with adjusting your work or study commitments to accommodate a changed financial situation?
4. What has the impact of studying while pregnant, parenting or both this year been on your physical and mental health, if any? Follow up: have any of the University support systems been helpful or available to you?
5. What are your thoughts on the WSU Student Parent Union? Follow up: how has it supported you, or can you be supported better by it?
6. Do you feel that University events are child friendly? Follow up: have you ever missed University events that you otherwise would have liked to attend due to lack of childcare? e.g. postgraduate information evenings, etc.
7. Do you feel recognised by the University for all the hard work and effort you put into your study while pregnant, parenting or both?

5. VCGEC Discussion Paper

ITEM 4.1



VICE-CHANCELLOR'S GENDER EQUALITY COMMITTEE MEETING: 26 November 2020

SUPPORTING STUDENT-PARENTS AT WESTERN POST-COVID AND BEYOND

Securing Success alignment:

A dynamic and Innovative Culture that Secures Success

Purpose

To provide the Committee with an overview of preliminary findings from the GEF-funded project, "A Reconciliation of Parenting and Studying", and outline key strategic recommendations to support student-parents at Western in light of both ongoing barriers to equal participation and the more immediate disruptions of the COVID pandemic.

Background

Project History

This project stems from a wider research project on the career cycles and experiences of academic mothers returning to work after one or more periods of maternity leave, including the ongoing impact of COVID. This research forms part of several research initiatives conducted through the Engaged Parent Network via Western's GEF scheme. The current project extends this ongoing research to the experiences of student-parents at Western with a view to enhancing the student-parent experience at the University and beyond.

The Australian Context and Beyond

Literature on the experiences of student-parents in HE has emerged significantly in the last 10-15 years but still remains somewhat understudied in comparison to (and indeed within) broader research on gender equity and HE. In both Australia and internationally, the findings collectively indicate that, even before COVID, student-parents led "highly complex lives with conflicting responsibilities to juggle," which included "families and full- or part-time study" (Burton, Lloyd & Griffiths 2009). Along with other social, racial and economic factors, these "conflicting responsibilities" often had a negative impact on the ability of student-parents to effectively pursue their studies.

In Australian universities, mature-aged students are predominantly female; in 2016, women's participation in HE was 37% greater than that of men amongst the 25-65 age group and almost double amongst the 35-55 age group" (Stone & O'Shea 2019). This cohort of "older female returners" invariably commence their studies with "complex and significant obstacles to learning" which include their role as carers (Stone & O'Shea 2019); "amongst students aged 25 and over in Australia, women remained disadvantaged in their studies by their traditional role as carer" (Chesters & Watson 2014; Mallman & Lee 2014). This is due, in large part, because women in Australia continue to carry a much larger share than men of the responsibility for caring for others, both in the family context and the Australian workforce (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2018). When women return to study, they are likely to do so "within the constraints of their competing responsibilities for households, partners, children and possibly other family members" (Stone & O'Shea 2019). These constraints are further compounded by the need for paid work whereby many women returning to study are often forced to manage a "complex balancing act between wanting to study, meeting domestic responsibilities and needing to earn money" (Reay, Ball & David 2002).

While there is yet to be published any formal research on the effects of the global COVID pandemic on the experiences of student-parents, academic public discussion indicates that the crisis has exposed the lack of institutional support for student-parents, heightened their existing challenges, and underlined the vulnerability of this minority student cohort.

Key Project Findings

The project's key findings are based on (i) an **online survey** issued via Qualtrics to student parents who are currently members of the Student Parent Union at Western, and (ii) 3 online **focus groups** comprising volunteer participants from those who took part in the survey.

The SPU's current membership figures are approximately 119 student-parent members; **60 members participated in the survey** (39 members fully completed the survey; 21 members completed approximately 85% of the survey). Focus groups were organised post-survey with 15 volunteer student-parents from the survey participant cohort, which comprised 3 x 1hr online sessions with 5 participants in each session. Both the survey and focus group methodology employed open-ended questions to encourage depth of response.

While the project team still need to carry out a more detailed iterative data analysis of the survey and focus group responses, the following findings represent a preliminary data analysis to identify key emerging themes.

Student-parent Demographics at Western

Survey results give a first-time indication of the demographic and social spread of student-parents at WSU with a majority of participants hailing from one or more diverse social, racial and linguistic backgrounds (low SES background; first in family; English as second language; first/second generation migrant; ATSI). Participants demonstrated a considerable variation in age and number of children; many were parents of up to 4, 5, and 6 children and were managing large households with a broad age range (young adults, teenagers, and primary school children) while studying. At the other end of the spectrum, many parents were negotiating smaller but younger families (babies, infants and toddlers) with their studies.

Student-parent Identity and Recognition

Despite representing a clearly vulnerable minority student population group, student-parents often go unrecognised by staff – “they probably don't know I am a parent” – and are not formally identified within the University. Participants noted this on an individual level within their courses/classes – “I do feel as parents, we are the minority in the student cohort” – but also on an institutional level;

“the definition of ‘carers’ within the University ... does not include parents ... there's no mechanism (that I'm aware of) within the University to identify and offer support to parents. As a demographic variable, none of that is collected anywhere (I've certainly never been asked).”

There was an overriding sense in participant responses that this lack of recognition has led to a lack of targeted support for student-parents; “I do not feel supported as a student parent. Everything at WSU is aimed at younger students without children.”

Student-parent Pressure Points

Participants revealed a number of common pressure points for student-parents that have a significant bearing on their ability to participate equally in their studies with their non-parent counterparts. It is also clear from the data that during COVID these pressure points were significantly heightened and had a detrimental impact on the ability of student-parents to continue studying effectively, as well as on their physical and mental wellbeing.

(i) Time Management

Participants repeatedly and collectively noted that they are exceptionally time-poor – “time is

always a challenge” – and that their family commitments were a priority. Many participants additionally noted that they are not just trying to juggle parenting and studying but also employment. As a result, their “commitment” and “availability” for study was “very limited”. Study often took place “late at night” after children were in bed; “I have to be super organised to fit everything in and keep on top of university work”.

(ii) Lack of Flexibility over University Processes and Policies

A significant number of participants reflected that academic staff had been “brilliant”, “supportive and accommodating” with regard to the challenges and “unique circumstances” that student-parents often face, especially over class allocations and requests for extensions and special consideration. The University’s counselling and disability services were also frequently cited as assisting student-parents with some of these challenges, even where the situation was somewhat outside their usual remit;

“Counselling was very helpful and supportive...particularly around figuring out how to shuffle my course progress around so that I might still finish my degree on schedule.”

“I’m registered with disability services and I’ve found them incredibly helpful, both with my AIP but also they fought for me when I needed permission to breastfeed during an exam.”

The overall data suggests that there is clearly a lot of goodwill from both academic and professional staff in this space but, equally, a lack of consistency. A large number of participants indicated that support is distinctly ad hoc and reported experiences where staff were “really supportive and understanding”, but also incidences where staff members were “incredibly dismissive and unsupportive.” The broader indications of participant responses suggest that support from staff mostly depends on individual sympathies and understanding;

“I have had flexibility from some and none from others. It really does depend on which staff member you get. It made it hard to do some of the units.”

Participants also frequently highlighted the “red tape” and “time” required for requesting extensions or applying for special consideration, which often deterred student-parents from making these kinds of applications even where they were warranted and much needed. Other participants were concerned that making these kinds of requests would affect their standing with academic staff and, again, were deterred from making “legitimate” applications;

“Despite there being some legitimate parenting circumstances which have affected my studies (sick kids etc) I have never used being a parent for formal processes (such as extensions or special cons) as I worry how this will be viewed by academic staff.”

A majority of participants further noted that they had to “try and get class times that fit around family” in order to fully participate at university but that this also limited their choices; “I need to be very selective when choosing ... classes”. It’s clear from the data that flexibility over timetabling and class allocation is crucial for student-parent participation but many participants expressed frustration at the lack of options and, sometimes, empathy for their situation;

“You can’t be put in a 5pm tutorial. Kids childcare close at 5pm or 5:30pm and there is no real consideration on not choosing that time. That’s sort of the rule and when you bring it up, it’s just like, well, that’s life.”

As with applications for extensions and special consideration, many participants seemed unaware of their options or the validity of their circumstances and were thus deterred from seeking or requesting flexibility with regard to class times; “I don’t know if [parenting responsibilities] would be seen as reasonable.”

(iii) Social Isolation

A large number of participants commented on their social isolation at the University by virtue of being a student-parent and/or their mature age; “I was mostly alone as I had more responsibilities than the average student”. Participants frequently suggested that other students found it “hard ... to relate” to student-parents and that “it’s difficult to establish solid connections with younger students that don’t have children”. As a result, many participants felt “very out of place” – “an oddball” – and remarked that it’s hard to “feel a part of the [University] community” and that Western’s “social media is all aimed at young students”.

(iv) COVID and Online Learning

The majority of participants indicated that the pressure of juggling online study with childcare and home-schooling during lockdown had been “horrible” and “relentless”. For many, this had an adverse effect on their ability to effectively pursue their studies due to exhaustion, stress and lack of time, motivation and focus; “I couldn’t get 5 minutes to study without interruption.” Several participants had to defer and/or drop units as a result of COVID disruptions and felt that this was “the only option [the University] have for parents.”

However, some participants noted the advantages of online learning under normal circumstances, or shared a more mixed response over online learning in general;

“Life is both easier and harder because I can attend classes from home ... [but] I also learn better in person.”

“It would be nice to be able to meet other people face to face on campus, but on the other hand it’s been fantastic being able to study literally anytime when it suits me.”

Equally, other participants lamented the loss of face-to-face teaching and learning and described online tutorials as “awful”, especially the lack of engagement of other students in the online classroom. These participants also missed “being able to discuss issues and ask questions face to face.” Some participants further reflected that not being on campus denied them valuable “baby free” time and physical space to study and work on assignments.

(v) Wellbeing

Of significant concern, and one of the major impacts of COVID on participants, has been the negative impact on their mental and emotional wellbeing. Participants noted that the combination of lockdown, home schooling and online learning placed enormous mental and emotional pressure on student-parents who are already time-poor and often lack private home space to study and participate in online learning effectively;

“My mental health took a dive when schools were closed and I had to reduce my workload. My studies are very important to me so to be forced to have them take a backseat in favour of schooling my kids was very difficult.”

“During Covid there was no special consideration for parents who were undertaking online learning with children. I actually started crying during a live zoom tutorial because my children were having meltdowns.”

A large majority of participants reported a considerable deterioration in their mental health with increased levels of stress, anxiety and depression, as well as physical exhaustion and decreased overall physical fitness and health. As parents, many participants felt that they had to support their families during the crisis, which left them little time to care for themselves;

“I can't even begin to describe the amount of mental, physical and emotional distress this experience has put me through. But when you're a mother, you don't even have time for a mental breakdown”.

Those with existing or past mental health issues noted a deterioration or reoccurrence of their conditions, including eating disorders, general anxiety disorders, and depression. Several participants reported that they had had to increase anti-depressant medications and seek counselling;

“These past two or three weeks my anxiety has increased. My medication dose has been increased and I am having difficulty sleeping.”

Others found themselves newly diagnosed with depression and prescribed medication. With little time to engage in counselling, medication was often a last resort or the only coping mechanism available; “I’m on a low dose of antidepressants because there’s literally nothing else I can do”.

The Postgraduate Student-parent Experience

While many of the challenges facing student-parents were common amongst undergraduates and postgraduates, postgraduate student-parents recorded higher levels of satisfaction in terms of support from academic staff, especially their supervisors;

“My supervisors and most staff have been very supportive and accommodating ... They have scheduled meetings around my caring responsibilities and are happy for my son to attend meetings/workshops if required.”

One participant felt that the positive support received at Western was unique; “Western is brilliant with this, I don’t feel like I’d get this kind of understanding at Sydney Uni.”

However, when it came to administrative support, participants were less enthusiastic about their experiences, often finding themselves passed between centralised undergraduate student services and the Graduate Research School when seeking support or flexibility over postgraduate reporting processes, e.g. annual progress and milestone reports. Participant responses also reflected the difficulties of studying within a system that assumes or unintentionally privileges full-time participation, which was equally noted at the undergraduate level, especially with regard to scholarships and merit awards. For participants who paired study with employment at the University, the cutbacks on allowed work hours also caused significant distress for student-parents reliant on University employment for financial security during their studies;

“I got a job as an RA for the uni but the uni’s changed the rules on how many hours HDR students can work. So, as a parent, how do they think I am going to feed my children?”

WSU Student-parent Union

Participants overwhelmingly highlighted the WSU Student Parent Union as a vital and successful support service and community space for student-parents; “lovely space run by great people.” The SPU was seen to offer “extremely important” advice, as well as provide a space where student-parents can constructively share their experiences and institutional knowledge to empower and advocate for each other. Building a sense of community was a crucial outcome of the group that was frequently noted by participants;

“I don’t feel so alone anymore. I suffered alone for so long and now I feel a sense of belonging and understanding in the group.”

The SPU was further perceived as motivational with regard to the study-work-life juggle – “Having a group is having a hype man to keep us going when we struggle to remember why we do this” – and clearly plays a mitigating role in the mental wellbeing of its members; “I feel a sense of relief after finding out about this group today.” Participants were also encouraged that the SPU could play a significant role in raising “awareness” amongst other students of the unique circumstances of student-parents and assist in “nurturing a more inclusive community” across the University. It was

also evident in participant responses, however, that many students were unaware of the SPU, even those connected to the Western Life platform.

Recommendations

The preliminary findings of the study potentially throw up complex challenges for Western in how to best support its community of student-parents and ensure equity of participation for all. This will potentially require long-term thinking, planning and implementation. However, the following recommendations focus on viable rapid-response implementation of key measures that will both build a foundation for a longer-term strategy, and attempt to mitigate the most urgent effects on student-parents of the COVID pandemic and its immediate aftermath.

1. In order to provide, make visible and successfully promote strategic support for student-parents, **this minority cohort needs to be formally identified at first-point entry to the University**. The process of identification could potentially be rolled into the existing collation of other demographic data on students when they enrol at Western, allowing student-parents to self-identify their parenting status.
2. **University policies and procedures (e.g. pre-tutorial allocation, placement allocation, applications for extensions and Special Consideration, inclusion in 2021 hybrid online provisions) need to be streamlined for student-parents** in recognition of their unique set of complex and potentially handicapping circumstances. Student-parents currently don't fit the University (and other Government) definitions of "carer"), which would otherwise give them access to helpful support services at Western and simplify a number of policies and procedures. This issue has already been raised in other University forums (e.g. Academic Senate) but appears to be a sticking point. Rather than further pursue an amendment to the definition of "carer", identification at entry-point could be accompanied by a self-elected request to formally verify a student-parent's carer status for those who require it. Similar to an AIP, **certification of student-parent status via a Student-parent Verification Statement could then be utilised to access and streamline the support services from which student-parents are currently blocked**, or for whom they are too onerous. The existing process and infrastructure for issuing AIPs might provide a pathway for implementing this, though further discussion would be required over how verification would be certified. In addition, this would also reassure student-parents that their parenting circumstances are valid extenuating circumstances.
3. A **centralised online information hub** is needed to bolster the existing successful support infrastructure provided by the SPU, as well as mitigate the confusion (or simply lack of knowledge) for student-parents over available support services. This could be integrated with the University's current "Parenting Toolbox" for staff.
4. Given the distinctly ad hoc nature of staff awareness and understanding of the circumstances of student-parents and the importance of additional support for these circumstances, **the positionality of student-parents should be included in the University's existing cultural awareness training programs for both academic and professional staff**.

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