WESTERN SYDNEY UNIVERSITY

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Uplifting parents: How WSU can meaningfully support staff and student parents to work and study

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Summary of Recommendations

Supporting parents to work and study is a critical undertaking towards the achievement of SDG 5, which strives to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls. Our project addresses how WSU can meaningfully support two distinct yet intersecting groups of parents (students and employees) maintain momentum in their studies and/or career trajectories. We offer three recommendations for each group as follows:

Students who are Parents

1. Strategic and tactical steps should be taken towards supporting student parents' access, participation and completion of undergraduate and postgraduate studies.
2. Support for student parents should encompass, but not be limited to: the ability to self-identify when enrolling for each teaching period to enable access to; preference for online or classes at a convenient time, the ability to sit deferred exams, access to extensions and advice about material and emotional supports for student parents.
3. Student parents should be included (in all their diverse configurations) in university marketing collateral to raise the visibility of caring at WSU and acknowledge student parents as a part of the cohort.

Staff who are Parents

1. Parents returning to work should be actively supported across all areas of academic life: governance, research and teaching (see report for more detail).
2. Ongoing parenting commitments (beyond birth and babyhood) must be acknowledged and infrastructure must be put in place to support them. This includes: providing access to onsite childcare (with adequate casual care available), assistance in accessing school holiday care, and the ability to negotiate flexible start and finish times for school drop off or pick up.
3. Fathers should be treated as equal parents to mothers and should have the same access to parental leave and return to work provisions. Fathers should be actively encouraged to access institutional supports.

Executive Summary

This report provides key insights into how students and employees who are parents are supported by policy at Australian public Universities to work or study. We have extracted information from Enterprise Agreements and from university websites to capture the policy provisions for parents who are students or employees.

Our results show that the university context offers limited policy support for students who are parents. The absence of policy frameworks, representation and allied supports for student parents contributes to (re)producing a higher education (hereafter HE) context where they are overlooked. Students who are parents deviate from the ideal/normative university student who is "young, carefree and childfree" (a bachelor). Our research found that out of 38 Australian universities just 2 meet our criteria to be classified as family friendly for students, 10 were somewhat family friendly and the majority (n=26) are not family friendly. The construction of care as a private matter, and one which student parents can navigate individually, and independently of the university, serves to minimise the social responsibility universities have in addressing the challenges that student parents encounter by providing structural support to assist their admission, engagement, and degree completion. This report seeks to illuminate the specific needs of student parents, promote a valuing of their lived experience and propose policy supports that would encourage their access to, participation in and completion of HE.

Australian publicly funded Universities have well established policy provisions for employee mothers around the birth of children, however support for dads and ongoing support is more limited. All institutions provide mothers with meaningful periods of paid leave to support the birth, the majority have some level of access to childcare (n=34), however return to work provisions such as grants are more sparse (n=6) and structural support to care for school aged children like school holiday programs (n=0) or the ability to bank flex time to compensate for extra care-giving during school holidays (n=0) are absent. Fathering is unsupported with most Australian universities providing little more than 2 weeks leave. Where other provisioning is made available, the onerous requirements on fathers, combined with societal norms encouraging the breadwinner stereotype limit their take up. We find the level of structural support provided to students who are parents and employees who are parents is insufficient across the HE sector. While WSU provides above average support for employee parents, there are some additional supports that could be easily adopted and would make a substantial difference to this group (see recommendations). Finally, WSU was classified "somewhat family friendly" for student parents, indicating that there is capacity for improvement, which our recommendations address.

Itemised Budget Expenditure

Total funded amount $ *4,959.00*

Date	Activity / Item	Cost (GST incl.)
	Research Assistant	$4,959
Total expenditure:		$4,959

Notes on Expenditure

We fully utilised our budget as planned.

Research Report

Background literature

Gender inequities in Australia

Australian women disproportionately have lower income, less engagement in the workforce and poorer health outcomes than their male counterparts, according to a women's health and wellbeing scorecard report produced by Callander et al., (2022). Although Australia ranks number 1 in the world for women's education, despairingly Australia ranks 70th in the world for economic security and opportunity. The report calls for structural change to redress the gender inequities that are preventing women from translating their educational outcomes into material success and economic security. This sobering finding provides an important context for this project, demonstrating the need and urgency of this work to remedy how we structurally support women, in particular mothers to engage and succeed in the workforce and higher education (HE). The work of by Callander et al., (2022) supports the findings of this report that there are currently limited supports for parents' re-entry to the workplace and no meaningful practical supports for student parents.

A sticking point: Mother's workplace re-entry

It's well established that returning to work following a period of parental leave is often fraught with difficulty (Karanika-Murray & Cooper, 2020), particularly for academic parents (Duffy et al, 2022; Habicht, 2022; Clavero & Galligan, 2021; Farrelly, & Whitehouse, 2013). Mothers are more likely than fathers to leave the workforce upon becoming a parent or reduce their paid working hours in order to meet the demands of familial care and allied domestic labour. (WGEA, 2022). This is evidenced by women's overrepresentation in Australia's 68.5% part-time workforce (WGEA, 2022). For women the effects are manifold and accumulate across the life course resulting in reduced superannuation, less financial stability and can also diminish opportunities for career development and upward mobility (Junker, Hernandez Bark & Gloor, 2020). Previous GEF projects conducted by the authors demonstrate that the re-entry to work is fraught with guilt, internal conflict and a disconnect between policy and practice (Gilbert, Denson, & Weidemann, 2020; O'Shea, Khan & Smith, 2017). More broadly, academia has frequently been experienced as a hostile and discriminatory environment for women (Edwards, 2017; Gilbert et al., 2021).

The difficulty in re-entry to the workplace is associated with meeting workplace and family commitments that at times can conflict with or impact on the other. Mothers are often urged through dominant societal discourses and practices to "bounce back" after having a baby, which renders invisible the new responsibilities and constraints mothers negotiate. Beyond providing a prolonged period of leave to recover from birth and bond with their baby, workplaces often expect

parents to continue to work as they did prior to children, despite their new and all-encompassing commitment to raising a child. Impacts may include insufficient access to childcare, expensive childcare (Tuohy and Edwards, 2019), discrimination because of mothering (AHRC, 2014), part-time employment incommensurate with skill and education level, difficulties ensuring part-time hours are adhered to and mis-matched childcare and paid employment schedules. Further, mothers frequently describe experiencing work life conflict (Hjálmsdóttir & Bjarnadóttir, 2021; Kanji & Cahusac, 2015; Losoncz, & Bortolotto, 2009) together with health and other affects emanating from these conflicts. Whilst the Australian HE sector provides some policies and practices to support the re-entry to work following parental leave, including flexible working practices, transitional phased-return-to-work programs, on-site childcare facilities, and family leave (WGEA, 2018) the provisions are far from universal. The evidence shows that the difficulty associated with re-entry to work persists despite the patchy policies and practices available (Smidt, Pétursdóttir, and Einarsdóttir 2017).

Women bear the majority of the responsibility associated with parenting and are the parent who is most likely to take a prolonged period of leave from the workplace (WGEA, 2022). Thus, mothers are most likely to negotiate re-entry to work following parental leave; as such, we position re-entry strategies as a significant and ongoing gender equity issue. Despite this inequity, there is little research examining employees' return to work experiences in the Australian University sector (for an exception see Gregory, 2020). In particular, there is a lack of research into the policy provisions that exist across the Australian HE sector as they relate to staff returning to work after parental leave. There is a distinct lack of evidence concerning the parental leave policies and supports currently offered to Australian University student-parents. This project provides insights into the supports available, or *not* to university staff who are parents and the HE students who are parents.

University Dads
Before discussing student parents, we wish to acknowledge that fathers in university workplaces are further disadvantaged when it comes to accessing workplace parental supports than mothers are. Too often they are actively precluded from being eligible from a meaningful period of leave and need to go to unreasonable lengths to prove they are active parents to their children. Recent work by Duffy, O'Shea, Bowyer & van Esch (2022) analysed the enterprise agreements of Australian publicly universities and found that fathers are only perceived to be parents if the mother is absent and even then, they receive fewer entitlements than mothers do. Expanding policy provisions and encouraging fathers to access parental leave has been found to improve mother's workplace re-entry (Frodermann, Wrohlich, & Zucco, 2022), increase life satisfaction for

fathers (Kramer, Bae, Huh, & Pak, 2019), children's academic performance (Cools, Fiva, & Kirkebøen, 2015) and promotes marital stability (Olafsson & Steingrimsdottir, 2020).

Students who are parents

Access, participation and completion of higher education provides substantial benefits to the individual and to our wider society. Prior work has equated higher education for student parents as a means of social mobility, fairness and inclusion (Wainwright & Marandet, 2010). Student parents face structural barriers to participation and completion. For example, they are likely to have more substantial financial responsibilities and thus greater work commitments, which study can preclude them from. Although, in the long term HE should assist them to better meet their financial commitments, they may not be able to weather the short-term pain for the long term gain. This is layered with their parental care responsibilities which are weighty and when combined with financial necessity may render HE engagement and completion insurmountable.

Student parents as a group are given limited explicit consideration and remain largely invisible to, HE institutions (Andrewartha, Knight, Simpson & Beattie, 2022). Unfortunately, they may also experience stigma attached to their status as parent (Brooks, 2012; Moreau & Kerner, 2015). However, on the flipside student parents bring the skillset they have acquired as parents, adding value and a diversity of lived experience to the learning and teaching context. Indeed, Wainwright & Marandet's (2010) work highlights how often their status as a parent is highly motivating and can contribute to lifelong learning.

Research conducted by Brooks (2012) investigated cross-national differences in the treatment of student parents between Denmark and the UK. There was much greater financial support, childcare provision, parental leave, and availability of flexible modes of study in Denmark than in the UK. Furthermore, it was found that there were no reports of staff problematising student parents in Denmark, but this did occur in the UK. Visibility is important with Moreau & Kerner (2015) highlighting how students who are parents are rendered invisible in physical and policy spaces at universities and that they frequently report feelings of isolation and a lack of belonging. Although the experience of a student parent is often associated with struggle, it is also a site where student parents have agency resisting and redefining themselves in their own terms (Moreau & Kerner, 2015).

We acknowledge that student parents are not a homogenous group. Rather their lived experiences and interpretations might be positioned as a mosaic of configurations including among others: single parents, culturally and sexuality diverse parents, parents from low, middle, or high

economic backgrounds, their children may be babies, school aged or adults and as such, students who are parents are likely to need different levels of support depending on their own individual circumstances. Additionally, one's status as a student parent may intersect with other categories of difference that may compound or exacerbate the struggles faced. We do not have a clear sense of how many of WSU's student cohort are parents, the impact this has on their participation in and completion of HE, their broader circumstances or indeed how many are enrolled in and drop out of HE Australia wide.

Aims

The aim of this project is to investigate the current state of play for both employee parents and student parents at Australian universities from a policy perspective. We suggest that a first step in understanding parental return-to-work policies in the Australian University context is to carry out a detailed benchmarking exercise to collate, document, and understand what the current status quo is vis-à-vis the policy provisions for:

1. Parents returning to work in Australian public universities &

2. Student parents studying at an Australian public university.

Method

Our design distinguishes between policies for fathers versus policies for mothers. The purpose of creating a benchmarking matrix is to provide an evidence base for future policy development and implementation for employees and students who are parents. This data is publicly available by virtue of universities enterprise agreements (n=36), many of which have been renegotiated in 2021 making this project especially timely. We found information relating to student parents available on university websites and/or in the marketing materials distributed to attract new students from a range of Australian universities (n=38).

We rated the universities in relation to the level of difficulty involved in finding information regarding supports for student parents. The universities were categorised as having information that was either: 'very difficult to find' (n=8), 'somewhat difficult to find' (n=17), somewhat easy to find (n=11), or as 'easy to find' (n=2).

We also categorised the universities as being either: 'not family friendly for student parents' (n=26), 'somewhat family friendly for student parents' (n=10), or as 'family friendly for student parents' (n=2) based on the following criteria:

1. **Not family friendly for student parents**: No or limited details relevant to supports – together with identified issues in terms of a lack of supports. Or, if the institution made

information concerning supports available, there was an absence of detail/it was too difficult to find adequate details of the supports, or the messaging around the supports was not clear or not classed as 'family friendly', or as being genuinely or significantly supportive for student parents.

2. Somewhat family friendly for student parents: Their supports may appear to be genuine and adequately communicated, however, there were some issues with these supports, or there were areas that appeared to be lacking with these supports that impacted the universities 'family friendliness'.

3. Family friendly for student parents: These universities offered all the standard supports, as well as strong messaging around parenting and caring while studying. They also had some visibility of student parents on their website or marketing materials, and they had relatively good levels of accessibility of information in relation to students who are parents. While these universities may also have some room for improvement – they appear to be doing comparatively well.

We have included further details regarding these categorisations in our empirical evidence (see the attached spreadsheet).

Findings

Our findings show that some themes found were consistent across both student parents and employee parents. We will articulate those first and then outline those specific to each group:

1. Having a child is positioned/perceived of as a private choice that is principally managed by the mother.
2. Dads, students and non-heteronormative family structures are absent from policy supports and representations of students & employees.
3. Leave is the primary form of support offered to mothers.
4. Parenting is not valued. There is little to no recognition of the knowledge and skills students and employees develop through their parental care responsibilities and their transferability in HE or work settings

Students who are parents

1. Students with parental care responsibilities parents are largely unsupported by the institution.
2. There is a perception that being a student parent is a 'choice', rather than a decision that is positive and life enhancing.
3. There is an assumption that the ideal/normative student is 'young', 'carefree' and 'child-free' (ie. a bachelor).

4. Support is actively promoted for some groups (elite athletes, carers under the auspice of the Carers Recognition Act, 2010) but support for student parents are not promoted or available in most HE institutions.

5. Flexible work is common for working parents, but flexible study is not readily available for student parents.

6. Onerous approvals and permissions need to be sought to access supports for student parents such that they disincentivise their take up.

7. Leave for parenting purposes is typically available for HDRs, however, there is no specific parental leave entitlement for undergraduate/ non-research students.

Staff who are parents

1. There is a lack of consideration for the long-term caring responsibilities of staff who have children. The singular focus is on pregnancy, birth, by way of parental leave – whereas the need to provide care extends well beyond this time. For example, while most of the universities (n=34) offered childcare either onsite or close to the university, few universities provided evidence of offering vacation care or school holiday programs for school aged children. Furthermore, even in the minority of cases where universities offered child rearing leave (n=4) this leave only related a child who is not of school age. There was a lack of supports for parents of older children who need to get children to and from school and provide or find care for children during school holidays.

2. Staff returning from parental leave may return to lower status or lower paid positions due to caring responsibilities. Supports such as return to work bonuses or other grants may assist these employees with the cost of childcare when returning to work, or for professional development to further in their career. Only a minority of the universities outlined a return-to-work bonus or grants for staff who are parents returning to work (n=6), and these schemes are available under certain conditions.

As identified earlier, dads face additional obstacles to mothers in accessing leave/ career interruption beyond two weeks. Accordingly, we outline below the provision/policy limitations impacting fathers/secondary carers (findings extracted from Duffy et al. 2022, pp 12-13)

1. The "default" leave for secondary carers ranges from 0 days to 20 days. Across Australia's thirty-six universities, the average length is 11 days.

2. The conditions ranged from the employee having no choice when the leave is taken as the leave activates when the child is born, to allowing employees to choose the timing and structure over 1 year.

3. Out of the thirty-five universities who grant fathers leave (one university does not offer any paid parental leave to fathers) twenty-five specify it must be taken within three months of their child's birth. Some universities not only restrict when it is taken, but how by mandating the leave must be taken in a block rather than taken a day a week until it's used, for example.

4. Collectively Australian universities assume the father is not the primary carer. Many universities require "reasonable proof" the father is the primary carer (a birth certificate is typically not sufficient), including letters from their partners' employer detailing the amount of leave they have taken and when they have returned to work and under what conditions in order to ascertain the father is indeed telling the truth that they are the "primary carer".

5. Five universities offer no paid parental leave to fathers who are primary care givers (in contrast all universities offer some form of paid parental leave to mothers). Of the thirty-one who do offer paid leave to fathers who are primary care givers, six of those universities go so far as to restrict the amount of leave offered by deducting the primary carer leave their partner has taken up from an altogether different employer, suggesting that fathers only exist, if the mother is absent.

Ghosts on campus: Students who are Parents

Embedded within many universities messaging was the notion that care work is not considered a genuine 'disadvantage' for students - unless there is a disability or solo parent factor involved. This was evidenced by the fact that few of the universities offered financial supports to students which were specifically targeted to parents (n=13), and when they did, they were often restricted to single parents, those classed as low- income, or those caring for a child with a disability. Furthermore, 'caring' was typically framed as relating to those students who are caring for people with a disability and rarely did a university specifically state that 'caring' was inclusive of parents with primary caring responsibilities (see UTS). In fact, the messaging around supports for student parents was typically underpinned by the notion that parenting on its own is not a legitimate reason to request an extension, alternative arrangement for study or exams, or some other form of special consideration. This overlooks the fact that while parenting enhances a student's life and develops valuable skills, just *being a caregiver* puts students at a disadvantage compared to their peers within HE settings.

Our analysis revealed that, universities typically positioned a student's childcare responsibilities as a private matter, where the onus is on the student parent to ensure that parenting does not interfere with their studies or their HE success. This was evidenced by the fact that while most

(n=34) of the universities provided childcare facilities either onsite or very close by to the university, not all mentioned occasional care spots, and the number varied greatly between universities. Furthermore, although most of the university websites contained information about bringing children on campus (n=33), the common message relating to this provision was that it should only be taken up as a last resort. As such, student parents could bring their child on campus only in an emergency, and only if they were granted formal *permission* by the lecturer or tutor to do so. Additionally, some of the universities had web pages that outlined tips for parents to personally manage parenting and studying – by way of time management and reducing their study load.

There was also an assumption that student parents should and could find any relevant supports they might need on their own, without any assistance from a university to guide or support them through the process. Most of the university's websites did not contain any information about a student parents' group or network (n=24), and when they did (n=14) they were student led, difficult to find details of, did not have regular events or meetings, or they were targeted at HDR students only.

Further, the university does not adequately assist student parents to manage their care and study responsibilities by enabling them early access to class registrations, deferred exams, or any other structural assistance. This was further evidenced by the limited number of universities that offered information regarding flexible study or assessment options for student parents (or those who were pregnant) (n=18). Where they did, the information was often vague, or they were framed as needing to be negotiated privately with university staff members on a case-by-case basis.

In many cases, while on the surface there appeared to be some supports for student parents, when looking deeper these were often not significant supports on offer, they were not widely available, or there were not adequate details regarding these supports. For example, while most universities provided some information about parents' rooms on campus (n =35), not all mentioned students having access to these, and the information regarding these rooms was often limited (sometimes only providing location details and/or a brief description). Further to this, these rooms sometimes doubled up as a first aid room for all students, and some required keys or swipe cards for access. Furthermore, although most universities had either breastfeeding practices, facilities or policies in place that were searchable online (n=32), the degree of support for breastfeeding practices varied substantially between universities, with some offering very minimal information about breastfeeding on campus, and others having no information at all (n=6).

A further issue was that some of the facilities and practices for parents at university appeared to be targeted towards 'staff' but framed as *also available to students* – rather than being designed specifically for students. This was evidenced by the fact that it was much easier to find supports for staff who are parents, while information regarding student parent supports was typically difficult to find, or there were scant details about what these supports entailed or how students could access them – emphasising how student parents are not the 'norm'. For example, some universities only had details of parent's rooms or breastfeeding supports and policies on their staff web pages rather than in a central area, and there was evidence of the breastfeeding policy being framed as facilitating a 'family friendly workplace' with less emphasis on how such supports also aid students.

Students who are parents are not ostensibly valued by universities, and they are not perceived of as the 'ideal student'. Indeed, there are a lack of metrics available regarding student parents, and a lack of representation of these students within university materials online. We were unable to find any evidence of universities who are collecting or measuring any metrics relating to students who are parents. For example, there were no details available regarding how many students parents there are, how many drop out or complete their HE, how often supports are used, what impact they are having, how they could be improved, and how they compare to other universities level of support.

Despite the assumption that the typical student is young and free from caring responsibilities, approximately one third of Australian higher education students are 25 years and over (Australian Department of Education and Skills, 2020) and students in this age range are more likely to have family responsibilities and dependent children than their younger peers (Heagney & Benson, 2017). Indeed, there is evidence to suggest that approximately 13% of all Australian students enrolled in university, and approximately 30% of part-time students, have childcare responsibilities (ABS, 2016).

Although universities have overlooked this group of students, student parents possess a range of essential qualities that are highly transferable to academic pursuits. A recent national survey revealed that these students are highly skilled, highly motivated to succeed, and they demonstrate a high level of resilience and determination (Andrewartha et al., 2022). This suggests that, despite the challenges they face, student parents are an asset for any university, and one that deserves further enquiry and support.

Final Recommendations

We will now provide a more detailed set of recommendations for both staff and student parents formulated with the goal of supporting them to continue studying and working.

<u>Staff</u>

- The language of policy documents should be revised- namely removing the use of primary and secondary carers. Parental leave provisions should be open to all parents and all parents should be encouraged and supported to access a meaningful amount of leave to bond with and care for their children. A birth certificate should be the only proof required and parental leave provisions should be accessible for the first two years of a child's life.
- Returning to work parents should be supported across all areas of academic life: governance, research and teaching. None of these initiatives should be mandatory, but they should be granted on an opt-out basis at the discretion of returning to work parent. Each will be addressed in turn:
  - Governance: The Dean's appointments to committees could be utilised to promote increased visibility of returning to work mothers within their school. This could include: internal research committees, equity and diversity working parties, teaching and learning committees or workplan committees.
  - Research: Career interruption grants should be automatically given to returning to work parents, requiring only a proposal to be submitted so that guidance or mentorship can be enabled.*
  - Teaching: All returning to work parents should be granted a reprieve from teaching when they immediately return to work. This time may then be used to prepare for future teaching periods, to settle back into the workplace and re-establish one's academic career across governance, research and teaching. For the first 12 months it is recommended that a returning to work parent teaches collaboratively with one other academic (eg. Deputy Subject Co-ordinator) for the express purpose that if there is a last-minute childcare emergency, the other staff member may cover for the parent. This will ensure less disruption on students and relieve pressure on the returning to work parent. If desired and possible, returning to work parents should be given the option of teaching online during the first 12 months of the return to work.

*Career interruption grants should have their remit expanded. The parent returning to work should be able to spend the funds on any pursuit that will assist with career activation after a

break. This could include professional development for teaching, school holiday care or a teaching assistant.

Students

- Student parents should be strategically and tactically acknowledged as important and valued by the institution.

- At a strategic level this would involve establishing a policy framework to support their access, participation and importantly their degree completion. A policy framework should extend similar supports to student parents as those offered to elite athletes. When enrolling during each teaching parents, a check box should be included allowing students to self-identify as a parent or carer which should activate a workflow that will establish students status and then enable them to receive: early tutorial registration, assignment extensions, alternative exam times, connection with student parent support groups, discounted gym memberships and connection with childcare services on campus.

- Students should not have to negotiate supports with each unit co-ordinator, similar to the AIP program all course co-ordinators should be sent a letter advising them of the additional supports the student must be afforded access to.

- A student parent network should be supported by the university, and details of this network should be widely distributed. This would provide a platform for student parents to connect with each other, as well as demonstrate that student parent's wellbeing is also a university (rather than only an individual) concern.

- Students who are parents require more opportunities for financial support. These supports should not be dependent upon the student meeting financial hardship criteria.

- Images of diverse configurations of student parents must be included as a priority within university promotional materials.

- By enacting our recommendations WSU will be able to collect data on student parents at WSU, this will ensure supports can be assessed and evaluated for effectiveness.

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