

**Supporting student parents in their transition from Further to
Higher Education**

August 2015



1. Summary

This report summarises the findings from an online mentoring project supporting student parents in Further Education (FE) with the aim of easing their transition to Higher Education (HE). The programme consisted of two forms of support – online mentoring delivered through a secure platform (spanning two academic years), and an online information resource which is still available at www.studentparents.org. Funded by the Nuffield Foundation, the initial two-year project was delivered by Brightside in partnership with five sets of FE colleges and HE institutions in England.

We found it difficult to assess the impact of the mentoring across the whole cohort due to lack of participant engagement in the evaluation. This lack of engagement was mirrored by low engagement with mentoring by most participants, and therefore we cannot draw any conclusions about the helpfulness of intensive and long-term mentoring for student parents at times of transition.

The ongoing popularity of our online resource studentparents.org however, suggests that such easily digestible information, which requires no ongoing time-commitment, may be better suited to this busy and over-burdened group of students.

2. Background

Brightside has long been interested in the power of the internet and online mentoring to reach and support traditionally hard-to-reach, vulnerable or overlooked groups, such as student parents. In May 2009 the National Union of Students published *Meet the Parents*¹, the first piece of UK-wide research into the experience of student parents. This research made the case for the importance of enabling students with children to complete HE, in terms of widening participation and social justice, increasing adult skills, and reducing child poverty, and called for a greater understanding of their needs and more targeted support.

Meet the Parents identified a number of barriers to participation faced by student parents, including the fact that they often lack the information and support they need to make informed decisions and to prepare for, and cope with, the transition to higher education. Once that transition has been made, there are practical challenges of limited time, money and access to childcare, and the emotional challenge of not being able to participate fully in the lifestyle experience of their fellow students.

In response to *Meet the Parents* Brightside sought, with funding from the Nuffield Foundation, to develop a programmatic approach to helping student parents make the transition from FE to HE. The intention was that a cohort of student parents currently studying in FE should receive information and mentoring support at critical points before and after the transition, giving them the confidence, information and skills they need to make informed decisions in order to access and succeed in HE.

Brightside's mentoring platform includes a considerable number of information resources and training activities, and as part of the programme Brightside also developed an online information

¹ Meet the Parents, The experience of students with children in further and higher education. National Union of Students, 2009

resource targeted specifically at the needs of student parents – www.studentparents.org. This included a tailored version of our student calculator (www.studentcalculator.org). Participants in the scheme had access to the materials from within the mentoring platform, while the content was also free to all visitors to the website.

The project specifically targeted women because the majority of student parents are female, research shows that women are more likely to drop out, and because this focus aligned with the Nuffield Foundation’s funding priorities at the time. Furthermore, the intention was to extend the impact of the project beyond the cohort of mentoring beneficiaries by creating an information website for all student parents. It was also intended that the project would provide our partners, researchers and policy makers with valuable insights into the needs of student parents.

The project sought to establish whether online support could provide a cost-effective, scalable and measurable way to give student parents support that was effective, targeted and personalised to their needs.

Initial discussion involved a number of partners, including the Foyer Federation, the National Association of Student Money Advisers, and the National Unions of Students. There were (and are still) no accurate statistics on the numbers of student parents in the UK. Indeed, the Student Parents’ Movement describes them as “not even a statistic”, making it difficult for institutions and other bodies to allocate support effectively. However, we do have clear indicators about the considerable challenges that student parents face in accessing and completing HE courses.

Practical barriers faced by student parents

Informal consultation with student parents suggested that they juggle a range of responsibilities and balance conflicting demands on their time and money. Practical challenges include:

- Lack of available registered and affordable childcare.
- Lack of funding for childcare. This is exacerbated for students doing part-time higher education courses and those who rely on informal childcare.
- Reduced benefits and lack of student support to cover course costs and living expenses, particularly for part-time students.
- Limited time to undertake paid work to supplement their income.
- Limited time to access learning resources, advice and support on campus.
- High travel costs due to long distances between institution and home and childcare.

Information and personal support

It is not only financial barriers that prevent student parents from accessing or completing HE. Many of these problems are exacerbated by a lack of information and support which results in low aspirations and significant amounts of unclaimed support, and prevents many from making the leap into higher education or completing it once they have started. Although the *Meet the Parents* report did not include a representative sample of FE students, it nonetheless found that:

- Over half of respondents would like to be supported to meet with other student parents.
- 87% said that no-one had spoken to them about their childcare options.
- 51% answered ‘no’ or ‘to some extent’ when asked if they had received all the information they needed to make an informed choice about their course.

- 44% felt they had not been given sufficient information about their financial entitlements to make an informed decision about becoming a student parent.

A previous Brightside project in 2008 working with mature students in three FE Colleges found that those students considering the move to HE wanted support in the following areas:

- Study skills.
- Progression routes/course choices/application process.
- Adapting to university life and a new environment.
- Finance – student support and budgeting.

Overcoming the barriers to entering HE is only half the battle for student parents as the difficulties do not stop at the point of access. Student parents are particularly susceptible to non-completion of HE courses; 65% of lone parents and 60% of parents overall in the NUS survey² had thought about leaving their course. Drop out rates are higher amongst mature students (who represent the majority of student parents) and most drop outs occur in the student's first year of university. Gender is also an influencing factor as women are more likely to drop out because of domestic commitments, more likely to apply for discretionary funds, less likely to undertake paid employment, find it harder to get involved with university life, and are more likely to consider giving up their course³. The pressures on time and money also result in family pressures and feelings of guilt amongst students who feel they are neglecting their parenting responsibilities and making sacrifices because of their study.

These findings suggested that during the transition from FE to HE student parents may benefit from:

- Clear, targeted information about finances and what to expect in HE.
- Personal support from an individual or peer network to navigate through this information to make informed, supported decisions and increase the likelihood of completion.

3. Project Design

The online mentoring project was designed to provide support through a mentoring framework, which enabled beneficiaries to access:

- **Information, advice and guidance** - focused information was disseminated at critical junctures (including study skills, budgeting, university life, time management).
- **'Near-to-peer' support from an individual** – beneficiaries ("mentees") were mentored by an undergraduate student parent ('mentor'). The mentors in turn had access to support from a university adviser ('adviser') and a peer-support group, with the intention that through participating in the programme student parents already in HE would also benefit, thereby increasing the project impact.

The project was designed to span two academic years, so that mentees could receive support to help them to make informed choices and prepare for university, as well as to adapt to student life in their first year of study. Through the online mentoring site, mentors were able to access a support network of other student parents at their university as well as a university student adviser.

² Ibid

³ Ibid

The project was designed in partnership with the following Further Education Colleges (FECs) and Higher Education Institutions (HEIs):

- Leeds College and the University of Leeds
- College of North East London (CONEL) and the University of East London
- Liverpool College and Liverpool John Moores University
- Northampton College and Northampton University
- Solihull College and Birmingham City University

Mentoring

Mentoring is widely regarded as an effective way to increase social confidence, and in a synthesis of research into mentoring, it was found that those who develop meaningful relationships with mentors are “more likely to return to education or training and to do well” (Mentoring and Befriending Foundation, 2007).

We used Brightside’s online mentoring platform to deliver the programme, which enabled students to communicate with their mentors whenever and wherever suited them – a factor that we considered critical for student parents. The unique qualities of electronic communications, such as the attenuation of status differences, the ease of thoughtful responses and unprecedented scalability, make it particularly effective as a medium for developing mentoring relationships.⁴

4. The Participants

Mentees

Mentees were Level 3 college student parents who were interested in applying to HE. We matched mentees with mentors who had a similar educational and/or social background, as this has been shown to strengthen mentoring relationships. As well as information, encouragement and help from their mentor and the website, mentees received the following support:

- Face-to-face or telephone/online training: face-to-face training has been shown to increase engagement and therefore impact, but virtual training was offered if attendance was difficult.
- A mentee handbook and direct contact at Brightside throughout the project.

Mentors

Volunteers were recruited from the five partner universities at the end of their first year of study. They were not expected to provide expert advice, but rather act as a support for mentees, signposting them to useful sources of information about specific issues they face, such as their rights, options and advice for the future. The project was intended to be a safe space for participating mentors to share the benefit of their own experience, in order to inspire and inform mentees, and to support them as they make the transition into HE.

In addition to training, mentors were able to access support from:

- A student services adviser to answer specific queries relevant to their university or region.
- Peer support via mentors in their adviser group (five mentors per group).

⁴ Single PB and Muller CB, MentorNET. Electronic Mentoring Programmes: a Model to Guide Best Practice and Research.

- Online coaching activities which they could use to structure and stimulate interactions with their mentees.

Advisers

At each partner university, a member of staff from Student Services provided an extra layer of expert support for mentors and mentees, as a point of contact for mentors should complex questions or issues arise for them or their mentee. For advisers, this project was seen as providing another channel to respond to queries from this cohort of students through a flexible and non-time-consuming means.

5. Evaluation

We intended to evaluate the project as it progressed using a mixed methods approach that included evaluation data collected from participants and their mentors, and from a control group of learners who had no engagement with the online mentoring programme. In order to monitor and analyse distance travelled, the mentee group were surveyed at regular intervals with a set of common survey questions. Our evaluators also intended to conduct closing video interviews with a sample of participants.

The core evaluation themes were:

- Participant experience of the project.
- Participant learning as a result of the mentoring relationship.
- Participant 'distance travelled' – how the project impacted on behaviour and capability.
- Outcomes of the project in terms of progression to and retention at HE.

The evaluation was stymied from the start by very low response rates from participants, which was mirrored by a drop-off in mentoring activity. The initial survey had responses from all 49 mentees and 25 mentors, and from 31 control group participants, the majority of whom were from the College of North East London or Liverpool College. However, response-rates dropped off significantly thereafter, in spite of vigorous attempts to prompt participation from the evaluation team and Brightside coordinators, including the offer of payment for participating in case study interviews. This fact, while frustrating in terms of the evaluation, was nevertheless significant in terms of the learnings from the project. While a control group was recruited there were differences between the groups that undermined the comparison – control group participants were generally older, better educated, and were more likely to have only one child.

6. Summary of findings

Participant characteristics

Participants (n=49) were between 17 and 50 years old, with 55% in the 22-31 age group. The majority (74%) had either one or two children. All were interested in going to university, 80% were studying an access course and most wished to pursue study related to care work, including mental health nursing, adult nursing, child nursing, midwifery or social work.

Concerns at the start of the programme

Mentees

The financial aspects of university study were the main concern of mentees (78%), followed closely

by managing time and fitting it all in (73%). The availability of suitable childcare at university was a worry for 45% mentees, while 31% were concerned about the academic requirements of the course. Issues related to social acceptance and making friends were of no concern to most.

Control group

For the control group (n=31), the biggest concern at the outset was managing time (87%). Finance was of concern to 55% of the group, while 26% were worried about course requirements, and only 7% about childcare.

Engagement

Mentoring

Due to the lack of survey responses the researchers focused on analysing the online conversations between participants. They received 68 records of online exchanges between mentees and mentors across the five sites for analysis. Main topics of discussion were participants' reasons for wanting to go to university, and their apprehension about the challenges of combining study and parenthood. Mentors dispensed practical advice and support, in particular around finance, interview techniques, and study skills. Questions about finance related not just to seeking technical information about funding available, but also concerns about coping on a more limited budget. Conversation analysis suggested that mentees gained from this information exchange, changed their behaviour in terms of improved time-management and benefited in particular from the boost to their self-confidence and self-belief.

Control group

The failure of mentees to respond to the progress survey once in their first year of university meant that data was only collected from the control group. However, the feedback about their experience provided some useful data in its own right. None of the group had made use of university childcare, with 39% making private provision and 39% relying on family members. 45% found the process of applying for funding difficult, or very difficult. They reported that the process was prolonged and complex, information requirements for applications were difficult to comprehend, and the information and guidance issued by funding organisations was less than clear. While two-thirds of the group felt well-prepared for university in their first term, finance problems and logistical worries about not having enough notice to arrange clinical placements and appropriate childcare left a third feeling not at all prepared.

Online resources

Mentees and mentors alike commented on the usefulness of the online information resources, and the mentors in particular felt supported in their role by the availability of a wide range of information.

Overall, between January 2010 and August 2012 30,168 people visited the website. More than half of this traffic came via search engines (58%) while 10% was referred from the student calculator website and 8% from the One Space for Single Parents website.

7. Project learning and legacy

Learning

The most significant outcome of the project were the lessons it taught us about interventions and structure for this group of beneficiaries. As is often the case, hard-to-reach groups are so called for a reason, and student parents proved even more difficult to engage than we had anticipated. Our inclination was that this busy group of people who were older than our usual cohorts of mentees would respond better to being able to dictate the pace and timetable of the mentoring relationship according to their needs. We also assumed that they would need less incentive or intervention to support them in establishing strong mentoring relationships. However, this lack of structure led to non-engagement for some, who never got beyond initial introductions, or engagement that didn't have enough momentum to continue once initial questions and concerns had been discussed.

This also meant that our intention that the mentoring relationship should extend over two years, supporting student parents into and through their first year of university, proved extremely optimistic. While from conversation analysis it is clear that the student parents who did engage got some positive benefit from the interaction, the lack of structure and failure to establish deeper mentoring relationships meant that sustaining those relationships through a number of different stages and educational transitions and across such a span of time proved impossible.

Unfortunately the proposed 'triage' of support between mentors and advisers in HEIs did not work as intended. Here we came up against the problem that advisers in HEIs are spread thinly, and that the best intention to engage often comes unstuck once the reality of term-time kicks in.

Furthermore, here too the unstructured nature of the project meant that incentives and reminders to engage fell rather into a vacuum.

When the project was in the planning stage, following the publication of *Meet the Parents*, there were a number of organisations and representative bodies who were keen to coalesce to support student parents as a group, and who agreed to support and engage with the project. It was disappointing that once the project was underway this help did not amount to anything practical, but we suspect that this is symptomatic of the fact that student parents were not then and are still not a sufficiently recognised group in the way that, for example, disabled students, mature students, or care-leavers are. It is hoped that findings from research projects currently being funded by the Nuffield Foundation, combined with the learning from this project, could re-ignite interest in and shine a brighter spotlight on student parents as a group, in a way that might prompt further and more widespread activities focused on supporting them.

While this was not the outcome we had hoped for at the outset of the project, there is no doubt that if we were to embark on this project afresh we have a very clear understanding of how it could be shaped to ensure much greater success:

- **Opportunities for face-to-face meetings.** The initial mentor and mentee training – which was very well-received - would be supplemented by an opportunity for face-to-face project set up meetings for all participants, in order that they can get to know each other, and to provide an opportunity to reinforce the purpose and benefits of participation to all. There would also be regular get-togethers at key points throughout the programme.

- **Project schedule.** The project would be underpinned by a clear schedule of activities and interactions, with accompanying materials to support the mentoring relationships at each stage. The schedule would be based on a timeline that reflected the various stages and deadlines that the mentees would encounter throughout the year.
- **Project duration.** We would reduce the project length from two years, either offering a series of short-term (12-week) mentoring interactions or exploring a community of support which requires less individual commitment.
- **Project management.** While we remain convinced that involving university advisers in the project is important, both as a means for them to enhance the support they can offer student parents and to increase the impact of the project for participants, we would schedule such interaction into the programme more formally. We would also reduce the burden on them of active project management, instead bringing that in-house, so that the entire project was run by Brightside staff. While this inevitably increases the cost of a project, our experience over the last few years demonstrates that it is guaranteed to improve participation and increase impact, often to a very considerable extent. This is particularly the case when working with the hardest to reach or most disparate groups. In a recent Brightside and NHS collaboration targeting those who were not in education, employment or training (NEET), six months after the end of the 12-week mentoring programme 70% of them had secured employment, training or education opportunities.

Legacy

The website www.studentparents.org proved to be not only the most successful element of the project, highly rated by mentees and mentors alike, but also its lasting legacy. Brightside has committed to maintaining and updating it and the steady traffic it has received since its launch demonstrates the continued requirement for a specific information resource for student parents.

Studentparents.org continues to receive between 2,500 and 4,000 unique visits per month, with a peak of 5,892 in July 2015, which is encouraging given that this group is niche and therefore not huge in number. It also continues to generate a steady number of follow-up enquires emailed to its info@ address. The page explaining the different student finance available is by far the most popular part of the site. 85% of visitors to the site view this page (for comparison, around 45% of visitors to the site view the homepage) and it accounts for a third of all page views. It is also pleasing to note that around 15% of traffic comes from returning visitors, suggesting the site's ongoing usefulness for those embarking on the student parent journey. Brightside is committed to continuing to maintain the site, and to promoting it in relevant forums.

The publication of the *Meet the Parents* shone a light on this cohort of learners but has not seemed in the long run to have increased their visibility. We would like to thank the Nuffield Foundation for funding this initiative, and while we are disappointed that the mentoring project did not have the success we had hoped for, we have established a well-used information site for this group which continues to support thousands of student parents each month. We hope that sharing what we have learned from this work will once again bring student parents and their needs into the wider debate about social mobility and HE, and we would welcome the opportunity to build on our experience of this and many other subsequent projects to create something that really meets those needs.

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The Nuffield Foundation is an endowed charitable trust that aims to improve social well-being in the widest sense. It funds research and innovation in education and social policy and also works to build capacity in education, science and social science research. The Nuffield Foundation has funded this project, but the views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Foundation. More information is available at www.nuffieldfoundation.org

