

# **Tracking student mothers' higher education participation and early career outcomes over time: initial choices and aspirations, HE experiences and career destinations**

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**LITERATURE REVIEW**

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## LITERATURE REVIEW

*Foreword:* A literature review was conducted as part of a larger, three-part research project, funded by the Nuffield Foundation, to examine the experiences of a large and diverse group of student mothers aged over 21 during and after Higher Education (HE), whether or not inequalities break down as a result of HE and whether or not student mothers can achieve social mobility, in comparison with other students of similar ages without children.

### Introduction

There has been an emphasis in recent years on widening participation in Higher Education (HE), particularly by the New Labour governments of 1997-2010, but while the sector as a whole has had some success, there is still a much higher proportion of students from higher than from lower social class backgrounds attending Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). There are also vast differences by social class in the proportion of students attending the highest tariff HEIs and in the subjects studied. Although widening participation in HE is undoubtedly important, questions still remain about whether or not HE remains an effective route to social mobility and integration, “a force for opportunity and social justice, not for the entrenchment of privilege” (DfES, 2003: 71, cited in Atfield and Behle, 2010). For example, there has been relatively little focus on how students from different backgrounds and with different circumstances experience HE and on their access to labour market opportunities (e.g., Elias and Purcell, 2004; Crozier, 2008; Greenbank and Hepworth, 2008). In addition to class differences, there are large gender differences in the subjects chosen at HE, which have the potential to lead to differential returns for men and women within the labour market, even though girls continue to out-perform boys at school and are more likely to stay on in full-time education after GCSEs.

In searching for articles and reports for the literature review undertaken for this research, it became apparent that there were relatively few articles based on UK research which specifically related to the experiences of student mothers. Some focused on part-time students which often included limited information on mothers; others focused on mature students which again sometimes included data on mothers. Here, we include a review of the most relevant articles and reports from 2000 onwards which have been updated over the course of the project. In some cases, we draw on research from other countries where it relates, or is relevant, to the overall experience of student mothers in the UK. In other cases, we include articles from before 2000, if particularly relevant. For details of search strategies, please see the Appendix.

### Issues of access and the decision to enter HE

Several of the studies included in the review touched briefly on issues relating to the decision to enter HE, although only a few focused specifically on these decisions and upon issues of access to HE for student parents. Marandet and Wainwright (2009, 2010) found that student mothers were more likely than student fathers in the UK to report that their desire to embark on a degree had been triggered by a change in their personal lives and family circumstances, such as separation from a partner or a child entering school. As with other research, becoming a role model for their children was an important factor for student parents choosing to study, although this was also gendered (63 per cent of women v 33 per cent of men). Just under half of the student parents in the study gave reasons of personal interest and fulfilment. Specific course availability was also gendered, with men much more

likely than women to report this as a reason (61 per cent compared with 30 per cent, respectively). Lone parents were even less likely to cite this as a reason for choosing a particular university. Proximity to home was cited by 63 per cent of the student parents when asked about choice of university.

Gonzalez-Arnal and Kilkey (2009) also reported on the importance for mature students of the location of university and that, for many, the local university was the only choice possible, due to children's schools and the proximity of support networks for care.

These findings are similar to Reay's (2002, 2003) study of mature, working-class female students. Non-students might be able to make judgements about academic quality and the long-term marketability of their degree, but one of the most important criteria for student mothers is location, as well as the "family-friendliness" of the HEI. Against the background of widening participation in the UK, Reay and colleagues drew on the experiences of 23 mature access students in an inner London further education college to explore opportunities and constraints involved in making the transition to HE. The first article focuses on the narratives of the seven students who failed to complete the access course, whereas the second article focuses specifically on 12 working-class women from the wider study. Of the 23 students in the study, eight were white English, three were Scottish or Irish, eight were from Black or Asian backgrounds, three were (other) Europeans and one was Australian. Two thirds were female. Only four were from professional middle-class backgrounds. Ethnicity, gender and marital status appear to intersect with, and compound, the consequences of class, and this makes the transition process particularly difficult for working-class, lone mothers. For the 23 students, doing the degree itself was more important than 'instrumental goal orientation'. Twelve wanted to 'give something back' and make a contribution to society, wanting to go into teaching or social work. Many had few choices, relating to location of course due to travel costs, as well as time away from family. Regardless of whether students were parents or not, they were trying to balance a desire to study, to meet domestic responsibilities and to earn money. In this sense, the 'traditional' student lifestyle was deemed 'unthinkable'. Most had precarious financial situations and most of the parents had no time for themselves. Like many previous studies, the students saw themselves as being good role models for their children, although children were often the main difficulty for parents, especially mothers, when it came to competing demands. The single mothers were those most at risk of difficulties balancing children and study and tended to take longer to complete their access courses than other mature students. There were also issues relating to ethnicity, with many of the students not wanting to go anywhere that was "all white". Mature students generally found a community spirit in the experience of studying, and many saw failure to access HE as an individual failure, rather than a structural problem (reflecting the individualisation of HE). Finance, childcare and time difficulties were the main reasons for students dropping out.

In an article using data taken from a larger research project reported by Brennan and Osborne (2008), Osborne and colleagues (2004) describe how mature applicants weigh the advantages and disadvantages of HE: sub-groups of students were identified as a) delayed traditional; b) late starters; c) single parents; d) careerists; e) escapees and g) personal growers. For single parents, juggling work, home and family was a major negative factor in their decision to become mature students, and this was the group with the largest number of barriers (major concerns were timetabling and the provision of childcare, with grandparents often called upon to help). Almost all applicants were motivated by the prospect of getting a better job, but the majority were ill-informed about the financial implications of entering HE. Many were also worried about their ability to learn.

Many US studies have focused on student mothers from working-class backgrounds and single mothers, arguing that HE for these women can be particularly transformative. For example, Johnson (2010) explored the relationship between race and welfare reform and

how this has affected African-American single mothers' access to HE (this is set against a background of long-standing discrimination, in terms of welfare payments and access to good jobs, as well as negative attitudes towards black single mothers in particular). Prior to the 1996 welfare reform act, many poor women were able to access HE and later got good jobs, with a corresponding benefit upon their children. Bill Clinton's administration then began a 'safety net' version of welfare, in which people were expected to seek work or train for it; after two years, most healthy adults would be required to work. This policy developed into the Work First programme which required poor people to work before receiving any benefits. In effect, this has limited poorer people from pursuing HE which is not considered "work" (college enrolments among welfare recipients have dramatically decreased as a result).

Haleman (2004) similarly focused on ten US single mothers studying and also receiving welfare benefits, set in the context of negative images of single mothers, viewed as passive recipients of welfare, rather than active participants in creating their own experiences. As with the later Lynch (2008) study, this research identified three primary purposes of education held by the women: (1) education as instrumental; (2) education as transformative; and (3) education as modelling desirable outcomes for children. All participants were enrolled in the Single Parent Programme with close links to a local university (the aim of the programme was to get women to study and become self-sufficient). However, there were particular difficulties balancing parent, student and provider roles for single mothers.

In an attempt to compare traditional college-age student mothers with older student mothers in the US, Wisley (2013) administered a questionnaire to 95 student mothers in a US women's university, assessing the reasons for enrolment and views on how their enrolment affects their children. Previous research undertaken on the same campus indicated that student mothers have a positive view of how enrolment affects children (Burns and Gabrich 2001) and Wisley argues that although children can act as an additional stressor in completing higher education, they can also serve as a significant motivator. The mothers were aged between 18 and 59 (76 women were aged over 23), and 46 per cent were African-American. Younger mothers were more likely to enrol on a full daytime programme whereas the older mothers were more likely to enrol on evening or weekend courses on a part-time basis (only 21 per cent of younger mothers worked full-time, compared with 68 per cent of older mothers). The most commonly cited reason for entering HE for both groups was to improve their working situation (68 per cent of younger and 57 per cent of older mothers): most wanted to change their careers or to obtain better jobs. Others wanted to provide a better life for their families (34 per cent of younger and 13 per cent of older mothers). As none of the younger mothers were married, they were significantly more likely to emphasise the fact that HE was their ticket to a more independent lifestyle, allowing them to set up a household of their own. Older mothers were more likely than younger mothers to cite personal and academic goals.

A further US study examined the reasons for women entering HE, as well as the family relationship outcomes associated with that decision (Sweet and Moen, 2007), focusing specifically on adult student mothers (i.e., those aged over 25 at the time of enrolment) and a sub-set of this group, "returned students" who re-enrolled or re-entered HE after a discernible break in their educational careers. In an overview of role conflict studies on female student mothers, the authors highlight research which has shown that the student role appears to add to conflict, that the division of household work remains unchanged, that those with children under age 13 report the greatest overload and that older students are less likely than younger students to attend classes regularly and to socialise frequently with friends. Other studies show that the student role can be associated with an enhancement and enrichment of women's lives, for example, by commanding greater respect from others, being less bored, having more resources and more meaningful lives. Using a life course

approach, the authors argue that ambivalence can occur when taking on a student role identity, in that it can be both rewarding *and* a source of stress. Additionally, ambivalence can serve as a motivator for changing role definitions and interpersonal relations, which is the focus of the outlined research. For many women, the return to study tends to signify a point at which they are attempting to pursue personal or occupational goals, often put off for family responsibilities. For this reason, the authors hypothesise that any negative impacts on personal relationships may be “life stage specific” (2007: 235).

In a UK study focusing on ten women with children, five of whom were lone parents, Lister (2003) researched the importance of lifelong learning, particularly in the field of social work and for those with few qualifications wanting to upskill later in life. There is a recognition that, for women carers to participate in lifelong learning, provision must be tailored to their needs. Few concessions are made to female carers in HE, however. For those who do participate, the experience is often negative, with the challenges of having to straddle the worlds of two ‘greedy institutions,’ family and education (Edwards, 1993: 62). Lister highlights previous research identifying the particular needs of female carer students once they have enrolled, as well as in accessing HE (e.g., flexibility in learning programmes, childcare, better transport and finance). Learning flexibility includes IT, remote learning and shorter teaching days. However, Lister urges a degree of caution in promoting lifelong learning as a push towards vocational learning and women’s traditional gendered occupations such as social work. Creating flexible study programmes is then more likely to be taken up by women which may serve to perpetuate their carer roles. Nevertheless, analysis of equal opportunities monitoring forms suggests that women carers are attracted to a qualification in social work and block modules which work alongside school terms. All participants in the study were enrolled on the Mature Carers Programme: the organisation of the programme around childcare responsibilities was given by the participants as the primary reason for applying (the particular course covered in this research operates around a shorter working day, allowing for better childcare provision). The emphasis on caring commitments in the literature also attracted and surprised student mothers, who were encouraged to see that this was a pre-requisite for the course. The programme design was also cited as a positive feature, creating a positive learning environment (many had previous negative experiences of studying with young children, e.g., ad hoc arrangements for leaving lectures early, caring commitments seen as a personal problem, etc.). The experience of role conflict seemed less severe overall for these women than for other female student carers. Engagement with the learning process and feedback was also important, including the lecturers’ value of the women’s previous experience and participatory methods in the classroom. The induction programme was highlighted as very important for female carers, as many start HE with a sense of alienation. Between 98 per cent and 100 per cent of those women participating in the programme were in employment after completion.

### **University and government support for student mothers**

Universities vary in the degree of support they offer to student mothers and much of the research focuses on the differences between older and post-92 universities, whereas others have provided cross-national comparisons. For example, Brooks (2012) drew on data from four different higher education institutions (HEIs) in the UK and Denmark (a social democratic regime, in which services are commonly provided on a universal basis and high value is given to achieving social equality). Set against the background of the previous UK Labour government’s commitment to widening participation in HE, particular attention was paid to structural issues, as well as cultural and attitudinal differences, in relation to student parents. In comparison with Denmark, UK student parents received low structural support (high tuition fees, little or no free childcare, no automatic right to parental leave and little flexibility in modes of study, such as taking time off for a sick child). Any support tended to be given to low-income parents and was often at the discretion of academic staff. In

Denmark, support for student parents was generally set within legislation (e.g., e-learning packages to enable students who had children with long-term illnesses to study at home and thus complete their courses on time) and was supported by the funding mechanisms used by the government: as universities receive payment for students who successfully complete their courses, there are considerable rewards for offering flexible modes of study. In the UK, there were some differences between the older and newer universities (e.g., some childcare provision was offered by the older university in the study, but not the newer one). In Denmark, there were many affordable childcare facilities with available places which were close to the HEIs. Brooks argues that "...it seems likely that policies to promote a 'dual worker' (instead of a 'male breadwinner') model, in place in Denmark since the 1970s, may well help to explain the attitudinal and cultural support provided to student-parents with Danish universities" (2012: 432). In the UK, however, the shift to a more equal "adult worker" model has been slower. As legislation underpins the support offered to student parents in Denmark, there were few institutional differences. On the other hand, commercial concerns tended to determine any support offered in the UK, e.g., the interviewees from the newer university gave no sense that they were trying to anticipate the needs of student parents.

Callender's body of work (e.g., 2010, 2012) suggests that, due to the widening participation agenda, older HEIs need to attract more non-traditional students, especially those from poorer backgrounds. However, more traditional attitudes to student parents in older universities mean that greater resources do not necessarily lead to a more supportive university culture. Archer, Hutchings and Ross (2003) have suggested that certain 'spaces' within the HE sector, such as within post-92 universities and on part-time courses, have sometimes been constructed as working class. The institutional culture within UK HEIs has produced a more polarised system (the UK has some of the very best HEIs in the world, as well as some of the worst), unlike countries such as Denmark, where universities are more equal (Brooks, 2012).

Findings from another UK study involving ten case studies of English HEIs demonstrated that, on the whole, national and university policies do not address the needs of students with children (Moreau and Kerner, 2012). In each university, interviews were conducted with members of staff working in student services and with student parents. Drawing on the concept of intersectionality, the authors argue that the experiences of student parents cannot be understood through the sole lens of their 'student' or 'parent' status. Highlighting three levels of analysis: the macro-social level (i.e., policies and discourses of education and care at national level), the meso-social level (i.e., institutional level) and the micro-social level (i.e., individual level), the authors find that non-traditional students tend to be concentrated in the less prestigious HEIs and tend to study "newer" subjects. Widening participation has clearly not led to greater equality between students from different backgrounds and circumstances and very little priority has been given to student parents in policy development. Three scenarios were identified from HE policy within the ten case studies: universities offering no or little provision to student parents; universities with some provision; and universities mainstreaming student parent policies. Scenario 1 is characterised by the "invisibility" of student parents and support for parents is not embedded into policy (even though it may exist). In Scenario 2, barriers can remain even when some provision is in place, for example, when on-site nurseries have long waiting lists or high fees, which make them inaccessible to many student parents. This scenario draws on an 'add on' approach, in which HE widening participation policies attempt to attract 'non-traditional' students while continuing to model their policies around the needs of 'traditional' ones. Scenario 3 highlights some institutional policies which aim to challenge the construction of the traditional student, moving towards students with caring responsibilities as the 'default'. As with Brooks (2012) there was some indication that pre-1992 and/or high-ranking universities are in a slightly better position when it comes to student parents, with older universities offering more, possibly due to their more secure financial position. On the other hand, students with lower levels of economic and cultural capitals are concentrated in the post-1992 sector and, as

such, are less likely to receive such support. Support is often down to the good-will of individual members of staff (i.e., informal practices), but triggered by legislation, e.g., the Equality Act. There was a widespread view among student parents that universities offered them little support but it was recognised that this presented a problem relating to “otherness” and difference from more traditional students.

Using a survey and semi-structured interviews with student parents in a 1960s London university (both undergraduate and postgraduate), as well as interviews with university services and academic staff, Marandet and Wainwright (2009, 2010) highlighted the recent changes to HE which have meant greater difficulties for non-traditional students. “Indeed, under the individualised ‘risk and responsibility ethos’ (Beck, 1992) promoted through the current education and widening participation policies, students are ...viewed as the ones responsible for taking advantage of the new opportunities opened to them, regardless of how these opportunities have been modelled around the needs of a more traditional intake of students without caring responsibilities” (Burke, 2006, cited in Marandet and Wainwright, 2010: 788). Although the government focus has been on widening access to HE, it has done little to support the retention and progress of non-traditional students. Student parents are often abstracted from the context of their private lives and some students find themselves internalising their home situations to try and fit in at university. However, as with Moreau and Kerner’s later study, a number of staff and students articulated the need for special treatment and flexibility for student parents as a matter of fairness. Importantly, this would contribute to a shifting of the blame for any problems experienced from the students themselves to the system, thus challenging the logic of the neo-liberal model, as described above. However, many students expressed a difficulty in sustaining this level of differential treatment.

A later UK study involved 77 interviews with lone student mothers (Hinton-Smith, 2012) from diverse backgrounds, undertaking a variety of study methods (e.g., distance learning, undergraduate, postgraduate study, etc.). Parents were interviewed once a fortnight over the course of a year. Hinton-Smith argues that if HE is to be anything other than “survival of the fittest,” where only those with substantial support networks can cope with the demands of studying and motherhood, adequate support structures are vital at both government and institutional level. Those HEIs in the pre-1992 sector are those which need to change the most if they are serious about supporting lone mothers and providing positive experiences. A “greater dialogue” between benefits agencies and HE providers, as well as improving awareness amongst housing associations and local authorities, would also go some way to improving the experiences of lone mothers in HE, as would improved information and advice for those who are considering studying at HE. Suggestions for such advice include a friendly reception and information area within the university, which lone mothers would feel able to access, or community-based services which provided more information at the local level. Financial problems or concerns were particularly acute among lone mothers, who expressed a need for clearer advice on student finance, providing more information on childcare support as a priority. The New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP) raised several issues relating to a lack of consistent support and the need for heavy reliance upon individual case workers. There was also a distinct need for HEIs to embed family-friendly assistance for lone student parents into their overall policy, instead of the need to rely on individual staff members for help. More help was also required in easing the transition from FE to HE, e.g., by preparatory modules which have already been shown to be advantageous. Once within the system, there were many highlighted examples of ways in which lone student parents could be helped, e.g., making registration at the beginning of each year and each term quicker, especially for those who may have to bring along young children. The ability to secure low-cost (and family-friendly) campus accommodation was also highlighted as being of particular importance for lone student mothers (many mothers resorted to living at home with their own parents due to a lack of suitable accommodation close to campus). Although this arrangement often allows help with childcare, it can also be a source of stress. Due to a

greater prevalence of low self-esteem and depression among lone student mothers, access to good counselling services was also crucial (many had to join lengthy waiting lists). Other recommendations included the facilitation of networks of student mothers by the HEIs, as well as greater provision of childcare facilities, seen to be one of the key reasons behind high rates of student drop-out among lone parents. Other key issues related to better timetabling of courses, flexibility and support and remote access to services. Attitudes towards non-traditional students also need to be revised, moving away from the “traditional”, bachelor-boy image of the HE student and requiring a “deep-seated change in institutional cultures” (2012: 227). Broadening the model from a 3-year full-time course to support the needs of the non-traditional student would also help in recruiting and retaining lone student parents.

Although not specifically focusing on student mothers, Leathwood and O’Connell (2003) focused on UK widening participation debates and the ‘new’ or under-represented student in HE, commenting upon the contradictory nature of widening participation among working-class students while simultaneously increasing tuition fees. The authors discuss the identity of the new student, moving away from ‘student’ to ‘learner’ as an active consumer of educational services, taking responsibility for their own learning: this reflects a masculinist conception of the individual based on a “fantasy of classlessness” and the “myths of meritocracy” (Young 2001). The construction of the so-called “normal” student persists, making the “other” student “non-traditional”. The authors refer to two surveys by Universities UK on student debt and how this is of greater concern to lower social class, older, and Muslim students, and those with dependent children.

### **Particular barriers and difficulties for student mothers**

The majority of articles, by far, relate to the problems and particular difficulties faced by student parents. Moreau and Kerner (2012) interviewed university staff who identified childcare as crucial to student parents, as well as timing, the isolation of student parents and the difficulties juggling varying responsibilities. International student parents and single parents were seen as facing even greater difficulties. Interviews with student parents highlighted the particular problems of the conflicting time demands of being a student and a parent, as well as, in some cases, undertaking paid work and caring for other dependents. Financial difficulties were also important, especially when childcare costs were an issue. The health and emotional aspects of being a student parent were described, e.g., guilt, as well as mental and physical health issues, such as sleep deprivation and depression. Many reported missing out on ‘being a student’ and ‘not fitting in’ which led to isolation. The construction of care as a private issue meant that many students relied on informal support from individual staff members or family. However, many others had not sought out any support. Apart from on-site childcare, other things considered helpful and supportive were institutional financial support, accommodation and student parent peer groups. Timetabling was not always family-friendly and late announcements of timetabling or changes were common (with particular implications for childcare).

Marandet and Wainwright (2009, 2010) found that a lack of time and ‘discordant time’ were the most commonly stated barriers for student parents and women’s personal lives were often sacrificed as a result of studying. Almost half expressed difficulties in attending classes and there were also problems with short notice relating to class times. A total of 42 per cent expressed financial difficulties as a main barrier to study, with 39 per cent finding it difficult to pay for childcare (51 per cent of lone parents). When asked what would help them complete their degree, ‘support with childcare costs’ ranked highly and, when asked what would improve their experience the most, 70 per cent cited information targeted at students with children. Most student parents were studying full-time due to the financial penalties of studying on a part-time basis but were finding this difficult. Problems with childcare included



issues of flexibility, affordability, availability and suitability, e.g., the childcare needs of student parents were often at odds with nurseries and childminders. A system of work placements also raised problems for parents.

Shuetze and Slowey (2002) conducted a study on mature and non-traditional students across nine OECD countries, and similarly found that lack of financial support, lack of time and lack of childcare facilities remained important barriers to entering HE. Over a quarter of students felt that they should not be at university (an earlier study by Cullen, 1994, found that this can impact on retention) and many reported a lack of time to socialise with other students and the importance of knowing other students in a similar situation to themselves. A fifth of student parents cited a lack of confidence (often due to a lack of earlier schooling) and many felt they needed more tutor support as a result. However, even though many student parents faced such problems, they were reluctant to talk to support staff. A lack of 'traditional' students' skills often accentuated student parents' alienation (e.g., referencing, essay structure skills, computer literacy, etc.).

Alsop and colleagues (2008) focused their research on mature student carers (a key target group of the widening participation strategy) and highlighted the 'disjuncture between the challenges confronted by students in negotiating their responsibilities as students and carers, and policy's framing of the care challenge' (2008: 623), with care still viewed as predominantly women's work. Using two studies, both undertaken with students at the University of Hull (85 per cent of whom were female), they found that lack of time and lack of money were the main obstacles that mature student carers had to overcome upon entering university, but other aspects of their caring responsibilities were also mentioned, e.g., the cost that their decision to become a student had on the emotional aspects of their caring role and the changes that being a student imposed on their identity as mothers. Difficulties balancing demands of the roles as students and parents were the major problem identified in the quantitative study carried out. Flexibility from the department and individual staff was crucial in supporting their study, particularly in relation to assignment deadlines and absences to look after sick children. Timetabling and location of classes were a particular issue, e.g., those with young children had to find additional childcare if they had early morning or late afternoon classes (with corresponding organisational and cost issues involved). The cost of transport and time taken to get to university was also an issue and many limited their trips to university as a result. Part-time students were more likely to feel isolated and unable to join in full university activities due to childcare and other responsibilities. The authors conclude that, despite the greater presence in universities of students with caring responsibilities, and despite mature and part-time students remaining explicit targets within the widening participation strategy, their particular challenges tend to be ignored at university and at national policy level.

Using the same data, Gonzalez-Arnal and Kilkey (2009) found that many mature students faced financial barriers: among those who considered dropping out, having money worries was the biggest reason cited. While in general mature students are less likely than their younger counterparts to perform paid work during term time, mature students with children are more likely to do so and also tend to have longer hours of paid work which negatively affects their academic outcomes. In this study, 93 per cent of part-time and 63 per cent of full-time student carers were in term-time work. The authors also note the limited options available to them after graduation, arguing that "just as caring responsibilities render mature student carers geographically immobile when it comes to choosing where to study, it also restricts their future job-search area... Their future wage levels were also destined to be affected by the need to find jobs and patterns of employment that would enable them to reconcile paid work and caring responsibilities (2009: 99)"

The issue of limited choice available to student parents is also raised by Brennan and Osborne (2008). This study examined the student experience of learning in 15 institutional

'cases' covering bioscience, business studies and sociology. (A wider survey also broadened the analysis to include five additional subjects.) Data were collected from 'entering' and 'exiting' cohorts of students at each case, using a mixture of qualitative and quantitative methods over a two-year period (see also Brennan and Jary 2005). The three types of experience was summarised as follows:

- Type A: Shared experience and high student diversity
- Type B: Shared experience and low student diversity
- Type C: Individualised student experience (usually older, local with domestic commitments, and limited engagement with the HEI).

Students who had been in a Type C setting differed from the others in a number of respects: they reported lower gains in self-confidence, were less likely to expect to retain university friendships after graduation, were more likely to feel that they 'never fitted in' and very much more likely to feel that the 'qualification was the main thing' and that life outside of university remained the more important aspect of their lives. They were, however, rather more likely than other graduates to believe that they had a clearer view of the future than when they commenced their course. All types said that the two most important things about the university experience were gains in self-confidence and feeling able to get on with a wide range of people. For Type C, however, the third most important thing was life outside university: "For this latter group of students, the experience of university study was something which was lived in parallel with other lives, lives quite full of other responsibilities" (2008: 187).

Walkup (2005) conducted research specifically on student mothers: using data from twenty Year 1 and ten Year 3 mothers from one Midlands university, she found that Year 1 mothers in HE were preoccupied with their children's needs and were strongly influenced by ideological expectations about the role of mother. In addition, they found it difficult to reconcile the competing demands placed upon them within the available time but at the same time seemed to accept these as inevitable. Although the Year 3 student mothers raised similar issues in terms of 'time poverty' and concerns about management and being a 'good mother', there was some suggestion that they had become more concerned with their own interests and development over the course of their three years in higher education. Peer support was very important to the mothers, in spite of some blanket regulations imposed by the university which made life more difficult (e.g., limited parking and incompatible lecture times).

Similarly with some of the other literature outlined above, Walkup also refers to some of the negative experiences of being a student mother, most particularly the theme of feeling excluded by the rest of the group and the difficulties and frustrations of working with younger students. Walkup concludes that 'students who are mothers are a distinctive group within higher education who have additional needs in terms of institutional support. This needs to be acknowledged both at local and national levels if 'inclusion' is going to be a reality rather than a fictive construct' (2005: 11).

Brown and Watson (2010) conducted a qualitative study with eight doctoral student mothers at a post-1992 HEI in the UK; some had other caring responsibilities as well as being mothers. The authors found that being a mother had profound implications for doctoral-level study. The timing of study was dictated by domestic demands and balancing home and academic life was a source of great stress, with women being torn between their roles as wife/mother and student. Attendance at conferences was very problematic for these women, and, for many, impossible. "This will mean that women are less embedded in their university research culture than their male colleagues and will help to sustain the masculine culture that exists in most universities" (Leonard 2001, cited in Brown and Watson 2010: 398). This also contributes to feelings of loneliness and isolation. Previous research has shown the importance of the supervisor's gender in terms of support but in this research, personality of

the supervisor was a more important factor. Previous research has also shown that student mothers start their doctoral studies later and take longer to complete them (Nerad and Cerny 1999). Lack of time is a major issue for female part-time research students (Leonard 2001), and this was also clear from the study here. The negative impact of stress in terms of health and quality of life was often highlighted. The authors refer to US data which shows that PhD student female parents often have professional husbands, who travel more, making it more difficult for them to complete their studies.

The author of a US study focusing on women's fertility decisions while at graduate school argues that mothers' original "token" status within graduate school has changed somewhat, with more and more women seeing this as a time when studying can be combined more easily with childcare (Kuperberg, 2009). As such, there should be greater scope for women to change the institutional culture which typically discourages women from having children while studying. Financial incentives for HEIs and reputational penalties for high numbers of drop-outs would seem to support the view that universities would be increasingly open to change, and more recent research from the US shows that there are a greater number of on-site crèches, collaborative writing groups to reduce isolation and a higher availability of part-time work for graduate mothers (Kuperberg 2009: 478). The author hypothesises that this "institutional effect" should increase motherhood among more recent female graduate students, relative to earlier years. Findings showed that although there was an increase over time, women with graduate degrees demonstrated a later fertility pattern than women with lower education levels, and while at graduate school their motherhood rates are significantly lowered. Kuperberg argues that "maternity leave policies and childcare options available to graduate students may explain part of this puzzle" (2009: 496). Improving policies for graduate student mothers may prevent women from 'leaking out' early in the pipeline of their elite careers and thereby increase their opportunities later in life.

Sweet and Moen's 2007 study used quantitative data from the Ecology of Careers Study of highly-qualified, middle-class couples in upstate New York (1998-2000) alongside qualitative data from the Couples Managing Change Study (2002-2004): due to data complications and limitations, the quantitative data was restricted to comparisons of those couples in which the wife has never returned to school (N = 866) with couples in which the wife had currently returned to school (N = 124). A further 422 were couples in which the wife had returned to school but was not enrolled at the time of the study (these tended to be older and earned considerably more than the other two groups). However on a number of other variables, this group was most similar to the never returned group, suggesting that the return to school might be most dramatically experienced among those where the wife is currently enrolled. Groups were sub-divided into life stages (young non-parents, those with pre-school children, school age children and the "shifting gears stage", where the youngest child is an adult). For the qualitative study, 24 women were sampled who had stayed in school between 2002 and 2004: 13 (54 per cent) were doing a Master's degree, two were doing a Bachelor's degree, two were doing an Associate's degree and eight were doing extensive vocational training. Only two were currently not working and all but two women were enrolled part-time. The qualitative data showed that women unanimously expressed a positive impact of studying on personal satisfaction but also expressed ambivalence, viewing it as an inevitable dilemma in balancing their various roles. Few changes were shown in the division of domestic labour or childcare, with women in all groups doing more than men, and little difference was shown when compared to non-returned women. The quantitative analysis revealed that only the shifting gears stage couples adopted an approach of scaling back expectations, with the women in such partnerships doing less housework than women in the other groups. Couples with school-age children reported significantly lower marital satisfaction than their non-returned counterparts. Husbands in such couples also expressed lower family satisfaction. In the interviews, 62 per cent of women reported that their return to study had had a negative impact on their marriage (only two women reported positive outcomes on marriage quality). Much of this dissatisfaction with marriage quality emanates from failures to re-work the

division of domestic labour and childcare to accommodate the wife's return to HE. The authors conclude that neo-traditional divisions of labour, predicated upon unequal prioritisation of partners' careers, and enforced by societal norms and expectations, prove intractable and difficult to change, even in the face of life course changes. Current job demands of wives and husbands also provided a barrier to a more equal sharing of domestic labour and childcare.

Another US study explored the combination of motherhood and being a counsellor education doctoral student (Trepal et al., 2014). The ten respondents came from a variety of backgrounds and regions in the US, with varied ages of children and marital status. Open-ended interviews were used to promote a phenomenological approach to data collection. The main theme emerging from the data was expectations, with three sub-themes of a) self, b) counsellor education and c) society. Within the "self" sub-theme, participants expressed a lot of guilt, often double-edged to describe not being fully present as either a mother or a student. Professional goals were also included under this sub-theme, with many mothers hoping for a career which would allow them more flexibility and freedom, so providing a motivation to complete their studies. Under the expectations of counsellor education, participants reflected upon a variety of experiences, many supportive but others less so. There were, however, perceived parallels between parenting and the profession which they hoped to enter, giving them credibility when teaching or supervising other students. The participants felt that they were able to make connections with their students who were also mothers. In terms of societal expectations, mothers expressed inequality in terms of gender roles (male doctoral students were freed from primary caregiver responsibilities). Some respondents also voiced concerns that children often acted as a barrier to their career progression, due to the preference for men over women in certain teaching positions.

In another US qualitative study similarly focusing on doctoral student mothers, Lynch (2008) argues that the "cultural script" of intensive mothering in the US contributes to high attrition rates for these mothers (motherhood is defined as the route to personal fulfilment and an essential part of female identity). The author also examined external structural factors which may affect attrition (e.g., childcare and financial support), as well as socio-cultural identities. Respondents complained of little financial support, which slowed down their progress. Many switched to part-time status after the birth of a child but felt that this cost them in terms of career and future eligibility for funding. There was also a feeling that this led to negative perceptions about their commitment to studying. Many took out government loans which led to further worries and the majority fell back on family and husbands for support, experiencing a loss of independence as a result. All the women talked about finding affordable childcare, as the majority of on-site childcare facilities were too expensive and the operating hours too restrictive. Many of the women relied upon other family members or spouses for childcare as a result.

In terms of 'socio-cultural identities', the symbolic nature of mother and student roles is often in conflict. Respondents therefore devised strategies aimed at avoiding cultural conflict and ensuring success in both roles. Such strategies included downplaying the maternal role in the academic realm ('maternal invisibility') as well as downplaying the student role outside of academia ('academic invisibility'). Many reinforced the cultural expectation that only mothers' care was good enough, with many excusing their male partners. "The combined effect of these practices is to publicly segment the women's student and mother identities. Therefore, although respondents privately define themselves as 'student mothers', they rarely present their blended identities, either to the academe or to the culture at large. The stress of maintaining a dichotomous identity can result in motivational conflicts (Mills 1959) for student mothers, and can be a factor leading to increased attrition" (2008: 599).

Lynch did find, however, that there was no difference in support for student mothers from either male or female advisors/supervisors. "Mutual respect and praise, time spent together,

acknowledgment of the student's private life, and networking on the student's behalf are factors commonly reported by respondents as both supportive and encouraging". 28 out of the 30 women would like to see greater sensitivity to the demands of combining education and motherhood and mutual support was important, with those women who knew other mothers feeling more supported than those without. Two women mentioned a student support group set up by the university which was very beneficial and included meetings, online chat groups, webpages containing tips and advice.

Moss (2004) focused on 17 women in the UK (not necessarily mothers) who were interviewed after their finals, in order to explore their experiences and perceptions of HE. A third of the sample was made up of black women. From the sociology of time and space, Moss develops three concepts which draw attention to different 'levels of events' (Foucault, 1980) or 'different depth levels of social reality' (Gurvitch, 1990, p. 71) in women students' lives. Cuts in social security and the introduction of student loans had forced many women to work, with a major source of employment for the women students being care work, often fitting this in around studying, and working at nights and weekends. Many faced scrutiny by other family members and often had to justify the time spent studying. Many also felt under more pressure to justify any absences at college. 'Students ... suffered the effects of increased student numbers, semesterization, and limited access to staff at crucial times, for example when assignments were due. These experiences reflect a contemporary higher education culture that is characterized by an emphasis on individuality, enterprise and time related production' (2004: 289). In spite of the push by New Labour to increase HE among under-represented groups, the material conditions which would allow students to study effectively (greater time, space and money) were being reduced. For these women, 'space and time for studies had to be snatched from space and time for paid work, home, leisure and community' (2004: 290). The earning capacity of women students and how money was managed within the home was also important, with parents and/or partners withholding money from those who deviated from expected, traditional roles. Most of the women continued to do the same amount of household labour as before, echoing US studies (e.g., Sweet and Moen, 2007). There was also a need for the women to justify the value of HE to the household, although those who were also involved in paid work had more power over the decisions within the home. Leisure time was often conceived as something to be earned, with other activities taking precedence. Conceptualisations of HE varied: student mothers often received contradictory messages from their own mothers regarding the value of HE, whilst at the same time they provided care for grandchildren and allowed their daughters time to study. Some partners viewed HE as the women's own leisure time, whereas some of the women viewed it as similar to paid work. As Heward (1996) argues, examining women's experience of HE in the context of a linear occupational career does not convey the reality of the process for many. 'Age, mother status, residence, dis/ability, colour, religion, geographical heritage, class and sexuality intersect differently with dominant normative expectations. Individual women's feelings and experiences arise in relation to their specific position and cannot readily be generalized to other women' (1996: 299).

In 2009, the NUS produced its important and influential report *Meet the parents*, focusing upon the experience of students with children in further and higher education. Extensive research was conducted between 2007 and 2008 and included focus groups, interviews with student parents, advisors, academics and campaigners, and a survey of over 2000 student parents. The report begins by highlighting the difficulty of gauging the experiences of student parents as data is not routinely collected on parental status of students. The research found that 92 per cent of respondents did not move to study, which inevitably affects their overall experience of HE. Many student parents were on vocational courses which involved placements, causing particular difficulties in terms of childcare and additional costs. Most of the barriers experienced by student parents involved the mis-match between childcare and timetabling, holidays, deadlines and placements. Around 60 per cent of respondents had thought about dropping out (65 per cent of lone student parents). Staff in institutions were

described as vital in student parents' experience, with individuals often at the mercy of 'beneficent tutors'. Having little money and time make it difficult for parents to get involved with student life and one in ten said they felt isolated. Many also face financial pressures, especially lone parents. Seventy-six per cent received no childcare funding, even though they are entitled to benefits (the rules are often overly complicated and many have to change between benefits and support several times a year). Only 18 per cent felt they had received enough information about their financial entitlements to make an informed decision about becoming a student parent and only 14 per cent felt that they had received sufficient information about childcare. Accessing good childcare was a constant barrier and 79 per cent had regularly relied on friends and family while at university (students were not generally considered good customers by childcare providers, due to their unpredictable hours and last-minute changes). Half of all students had missed or been late for a class due to child illness. The report makes several recommendations including better data collection of student parents, financial support and help with childcare, changes to timetabling and help in training for those dealing with student parents, as well as greater engagement with other students.

A later report by the NUS and Million+ (2012) focused more specifically on mature students, who now make up around a third of all undergraduate students (10 per cent in 1980). Mature students are classified as those aged over 21 at the time of entry to a course. Using a review of the academic and policy literature, analysis of key data, an online survey of current mature students (2011) and a series of workshops with mature students and other key academic staff, the report highlighted that many mature students come to HE with a variety of work and personal experiences, bringing different skills. Mature participation in HE helps to raise aspirations and skills, as well as social mobility. Mature students are a very diverse group, however. Compared with young students, they are more likely to study part-time at modern HEIs and FE colleges, undertake online and distance courses, are female and from lower SES groups and BME groups than younger students, as well as studying locally. The report highlights concerns that the new funding regime and changes to access may negatively affect mature students, with numbers already declining. Mature students are also more likely to drop out, even though the majority really value the opportunity to enter HE.

Baxter and Britton (2001) examined the experiences of mature students over a period of time (graduating in 1995). Almost all of the participants had children. Changes in identity brought about by HE were more challenging for working-class students than for middle-class students, and managing change in family relationships was more problematic for female than male students. Female partners of male students appeared to respond more positively to changes in family life than male partners of female students (male partners of female students often expected their female partners to remain responsible for the domestic chores when they enter HE, representing a double shift). The authors conclude that HE was particularly hard for working class women, who feel and are constrained by the exigencies of family life. They argue that Beck (1992) assumes a model of selfhood which may be appropriate for men, but less so for women (Britton and Baxter, 1999).

### **Positive experiences and outcomes of HE**

Moreau and Kerner (2012) found that, among a range of barriers and negative experiences, the positive aspects of being a student parent included being a positive 'role model' for one's children and finding yourself after being 'just a mum'. In spite of highlighting many difficulties, the NUS study on student parents (2009) similarly reported that 75 per cent of respondents said that being a student had been a positive experience, both for themselves and for their families, which included being a good role model for their children.

In a study which included Year 1 and Year 3 students, Walkup (2005) discussed how student mothers changed over the three years of studying. Mothers commented upon becoming 'much more critical' and 'intrigued' about learning, as well as changed reactions and increased self-esteem. Other women reported greater determination and energy as a result of a successful engagement with HE. Whilst still seeing children as important, some were now putting themselves first and seeing their own lives as significant in their own right. Walkup reflects upon these various responses, saying that 'the discourse of motherhood reinforc[es] connections between the two processes of self-development and mothering. It also suggests that whilst this has been a sometimes difficult and painful experience, but also productive and creative one which is essentially personal and rewarding' (2005: 7).

In a US study (Wisley, 2013) asked 95 mothers how enrolment had affected their children: 33 mothers said that their children had become more motivated and diligent at school as a result of their own HE studies (4 young mothers and 29 older mothers). Thirty-three mothers also said that their own enrolment would spur their children on to apply for HE themselves. Two younger and 20 older mothers felt that through their studying, they were acting as good role models. The only negative effect voiced by mothers was less time spent with their children, although they were overwhelmingly positive overall. To conclude, Wisley argues that, although the HE experience was positive for the majority of mothers, the needs of younger mothers tended to be overlooked as they were enrolled during the daytime, alongside non-mothers of a similar age. As such, they did not receive any particular support or advice and many were unaware that any such advice existed. On the other hand, the older mothers articulated specific needs and sought out specific forms of support to a greater degree than the younger mothers, even though such support was more likely to be available during the day.

O'Shea and Stone (2011) reported on an Australian study of female student parents, with interviews conducted several times over the study period. The women started their courses as a means of improving their career options but later found that HE represented a means of personal achievement and also a means to restore identity. Many felt they had missed opportunities in the past. Many had re-negotiated their relationships with partners and traditional domestic roles, but implicit in the women's stories was a willingness by the women to accommodate their partners in order to avoid active resistance. There are strong similarities here to Smith's study (1996), in which she found that 'patriarchal values towards women's role in the family' (1996: 68) created a situation where women 'expected to receive little emotional support [and] had to judge their husbands/partners' moods before broaching the subject of returning to study' (1996: 70). All women showed increasing confidence and wellbeing over time, however. Many talked about a change in identity and being a good role model for their children, echoing UK research (e.g., Reay et al., 2002).

### **Key findings from the literature:**

Previous research on student mothers has varied in focus, but the following key findings emerged from the literature review highlighted above:

- The demands of juggling childcare and domestic work with studying, and in many cases, with paid work, are particularly difficult for student mothers. The division of domestic work and childcare appears unchanged for women who continue to take on the majority of such responsibilities, even with the addition of a student role.
- Partners and other relatives vary in their responses to women taking on the student role, and support from significant others appears patchy, although important.

- Most student mothers are limited in their choice of HEI, choosing to study locally in order to manage childcare, children's education and partners' work.
- Universities vary in their response and level of support, with many students having to rely upon individual staff members, and others missing classes or turning up late, due to child sickness or difficulties with course timetabling, which often change at short notice.
- Those universities with the greater resources appear to have better facilities and structural supports (e.g., on-site crèches) but student mothers are less likely to attend such HEIs.
- How HEIs respond to the needs of student mothers can have the (potentially adverse) effect of maintaining and highlighting the 'otherness' of students with childcare responsibilities. However, until student parents are recognised as having unique needs and requiring specific support, they may remain invisible and isolated, with a greater risk of dropping out.
- Single student mothers are most at risk of negative outcomes, both in terms of the level of demands placed upon them, but also in terms of financial hardship. Many rely heavily upon grandparents and friends for childcare support.
- Most of the student mothers in the various articles and reports outlined study to improve their career prospects, but many increase their self-confidence and esteem as a consequence of HE. Many also report on the importance of acting as good role models for their children.
- The experiences of student mothers tend to vary by many different interlinking factors, including social class, ethnicity and marital status.

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## APPENDIX: SEARCH STRATEGIES

The literature search began in August 2013 and was updated several times over the course of the project, ending in August 2014.

Searches were limited to 1995 onwards, in English. The initial search from IBSS yielded over 37,000 hits so was then limited to the UK or England only.

Search terms		Items
Higher Education and	Mother(s) and/or Parent(s) and/or Father(s) and/or Child(ren)	
University and	Mother(s) and/or Parent(s) and/or Father(s) and/or Child(ren)	
Student(s) and	Mother(s) and/or Parent(s) and/or Father(s) and/or Child(ren)	
Mature women students		
Databases:	IBSS	14+4
	Education Research Complete	53+111
	British Education Index	0
	ERIC/Proquest Educational databases, including AEI, BEI, ERIC	0
	Scopus	0

Initial articles collected were then checked for any relevant articles or book chapters within their bibliographies and further references were added, if the above criteria were met, regarding date and language, as well as relevance. All articles were read and assessed for suitability, and retained if deemed relevant.