

Scottish Parliament Social Justice & Social Security Committee

Inquiry into Addressing Child Poverty through Parental Employment

Written submission from Universities Scotland ahead of Committee meeting on Thursday 15 June

As the representative body for Scotland's 19 higher education institutions we welcome the opportunity to provide written evidence to the Scottish Parliament's Social Justice and Social Security Committee ahead of its session on Child Poverty and Parental Employment.

- Our evidence focuses on what steps our members take to support students who are parents.
- We also make some points about models of study and highlight the relative lack of funding support available to students who wish to study part-time or later in life. Progress on these fronts would undoubtedly support parents to re-engage with higher education, even if parents are not the specific focus of such policy and funding measures.

Universities are engaging with parents as learners in multiple phases: as prospective students, as current students and then finally supporting student parents for life post-university. It is important to say that students who are parents have full access to support and facilities enjoyed by all students, therefore the examples provided in our evidence are those which are specifically available to, or adapted for, parents.

The examples below are illustrative and drawn from only some of our 19 member institutions. This brief is not an exhaustive reflection of the full variety of support on offer. Institutions not reflected in this brief will also be active in supporting student parents. The Open University in Scotland is a major provider of part-time and flexible study options that support students as parents. The Open University in Scotland is not covered in this brief only because the institution is giving evidence separately to the Committee on behalf of the sector.

It should also be noted that students are not obligated to tell their university their parental status. This makes data on the number of students who are parents difficult to get.

Prospective students

- 18 of Scotland's universities ensure appropriate advice and guidance is provided through the Scottish Wider Access Programme (SWAP), an alternative route for adult learners and mature students to get into university or college. SWAP access programmes run in colleges throughout Scotland and allow learners, if they wish, to progress to university.

- University of the West of Scotland (UWS) has a dedicated Funding and Advice Team which provides financial advice and support to all students. Members of the team are trained benefits advisers and can offer bespoke and tailored advice to student parents, many of whom will be in receipt of benefits most other students can't access. Advice can be offered from the pre-entry stage, including from open days onwards so parents don't have to wait until they are enrolled before they can access this service.
- Applicants to Edinburgh Napier who become pregnant are encouraged to notify the university so support can be put in place, with options for the student to request deferred entry.

Teaching provision

- Many of our members offer a wide range of short and flexible upskilling courses. The vast majority of these courses are online and progress can be undertaken at the learner's discretion.
- Our members try to be as flexible as possible to individual requests that result from caring responsibilities. In addition, in some courses where there are a high number of student parents (such as Social Work programmes at Glasgow Caledonian University) adjustments are made with consideration to both timetabling and the scheduling of assessments with recognition of the school holidays.
- The University of Edinburgh is working with their student parent representatives to shape, design and review the curriculum so it evolves with the needs of students.
- UWS ensure that students receive their timetable within 24 hours (or less) of enrolment to allow students to make their plans and arrangements. Indicative timetables are published as early as possible, for example, for 2023/24 they plan for publication on 31st July. This is to allow at least one month's notice ahead of classes commencing.
- Furthermore, UWS is utilising 'block' approaches to timetabling to support students to attend campus-based teaching on key days for a period of time. This can help support planning for childcare and caring responsibilities.
- Many parents may study on work-based learning programmes. These programmes focus primarily on individuals who are in employment, many of whom have parenting responsibilities in addition to their work and study commitments. Our members, such as Glasgow Caledonian ensure delivery of these courses are designed to provide flexibility for this, with the lecture programme for example delivered on a Saturday to accommodate work patterns: tutorials happen at 12pm and are repeated at 7pm.

Work placements

- At Edinburgh, on relevant programmes, student parents are given earlier opportunities to choose their placements and are given financial support for travel and childcare. At Glasgow Caledonian, the university try where possible to take parental responsibilities into account when placements are allocated, this

includes making provisions for parents to have earlier or later start and finish times to accommodate childcare needs.

- Edinburgh Napier are currently undertaking work supporting placement students from various under-represented groups. The biggest challenge reported by students was juggling childcare, working, placements, as well as feeling they had enough time to spend with their children. This challenge was noted likely to be greater for younger children compared to older children/teenagers. Further challenges included: lack of suitable childcare for shift workers; travelling (expense and distance); the nursing bursary not being supplemented with the cost-of-living payment that Universal Credit recipients received, and the lag time for costs between paying for travel and reimbursement from SAAS. As part of this work, informed by students, Edinburgh Napier's School of Health and Social Care is developing peer support for single parents

Postgraduate students

The University of St Andrews introduced a parental leave policy for Post Graduate Research (PGR) students in 2016, allowing students to take up to 12 months parental leave and giving six months paid leave to internally funded PGR students. The policy has continued to evolve since then, with the addition of two weeks of paternal/supporting partner leave added several years ago, and miscarriage considerations added in summer 2022.

Childcare provision

- All members offer childcare funds to students who are eligible, which is funded by the Student Awards Agency Scotland (SAAS).
- Members such as Dundee and St Andrews own and operate their own nursery. At Dundee they offer discounted places for student parents as well as ensuring placing requests from students are given priority where possible. St Andrews offer a discount to student parents.
- Dundee offer facilities for breastfeeding, expressing and storing breastmilk and Glasgow Caledonian has two mother and baby rooms on campus.
- Glasgow Caledonian's Sir Alex Ferguson Library has a designated family friendly space and is being expanded to reflect the growing number of students with children. Edinburgh's library will soon have a family room to allow student parents to bring their children safely into the library to study and play. The University of the West of Scotland has study space where children are allowed to join their parent.

Further support

- Single parents are prioritised at several universities for hardship funds, should they be required.
- Universities' accommodation services at our members will help students with support, advice and guidance.

- Edinburgh have established Facebook and WhatsApp groups for student parents as well as dedicated space on its website (<https://www.ed.ac.uk/students/health-wellbeing/student-parents>). Edinburgh Napier plans to introduce peer support for parents as a result of student feedback.
- Students at some of our members, such as Edinburgh Napier, Glasgow Caledonian (https://www.gcu.ac.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0026/37655/Student_Pregnancy_and_Maternity_Policy_March_2023.pdf) and the University of the Highlands and Islands, who become parents during their course are supported and policies exist to allow appropriate support to be put in place.
- St Andrews have created commuter lounges for students who commute to the town. Students have two dedicated spaces within university buildings open to students who commute. The commuter lounges provide access to space containing lockers, showers, kitchen facilities, desk, and chill-out space for between classes. Access to the commuter lounges is available from 7am to 11.30pm, and from 7am to 2am during revision and exams. This space allows students not living in halls to meet and create peer and friendship groups.
- In addition, St Andrews provide some University-managed, family-sized accommodation outside our halls of residence. Additional accommodation that will be targeted at post graduate research and junior academic staff who may have families, is under construction.
- The UWS Student Success Team periodically organise events aimed at student parents. In April a free Family Fun Day was held at the Paisley campus in response to requests from both staff and students. The current economic climate combined with successive lockdowns had resulted in fewer opportunities for student families to meet and opportunities to make vital social connections with fellow student parents. Many of UWS's students are the first in their families to go to university, so providing an opportunity for their children and family members to see the space their parents study in as a fun and inviting inclusive way not only helps contextualise where their parents/guardians spend their time, but may help them feel more positively about their own future and education when the time comes.

Post-university transition

- Most universities offer career services to current students as well as graduates. At Glasgow Caledonian and the University of Strathclyde, appointments are provided both during the day and in the evening with parents being able to bring their children with them.
- Dundee's Career Services worked with the Mature Students' Society (many of whom are parents) to gain an understanding of the needs of students as well as offering an opportunity to raise awareness of existing initiatives which can support student parents' career development, such as an Internship Module open to all second year students whose degree pathway allows which combines career management learning with a flexible 30 hour microplacement which students can arrange around their other commitments.

- Robert Gordon University's Women in Business was specifically designed to inspire female audiences and support women with children who are considering starting their own venture, as well as reflecting on the barriers women in business can face. Delivered by RGU's Entrepreneurship and Innovation Group, in partnership with Aberdeenshire Council, the programme has supported 60 mothers across five successful cohorts with two more to come in 2023. Each course consists of a weekly, four-hour workshop delivered over seven-weeks which is entirely online, accessible, and flexible. As well as equipping women for self-employment, the course also develops invaluable, transferable soft skills for all sectors.

Models of study to better support students who are parents

Current models of funding for study in higher education and student support are based primarily around full-time undergraduate students. Clearly this is an important means of study for many people and some parents will choose to study this way. However, if the goal is to encourage more parents into higher education, improvements should be made to support learners to study on a part-time basis.

The Withers Review on skills, [*Fit for the Future: Developing a Post-School Learning System to Fuel Economic Transformation*](#), published in June 2023 acknowledged this issue and made it the subject of one of his recommendations. Recommendation 7 states that: *"The Scottish Government, should ensure that there is provision in the system for those undertaking part-time learning or pursuing certain approved accelerated retraining programmes to receive the same pro-rata level of funding support for living costs as those in full time education."*

Universities Scotland supports this recommendation and more equitable financial support for part-time students. We have previously called on the Scottish Government to review the part-time fee grant (see Supporting Universities Contribution to Transformation and Recovery published by Universities Scotland in 2021 available at <https://www.universities-scotland.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/US-SG-SR-Submission-2021-FINAL-v1.0.pdf>). A revised grant model should ensure that it can support people doing short courses or micro-credentials as well as other learning programmes.