

Parents on campus

A research report from the Graduate Student Association of the University of Melbourne

Thank you

Rachna Muddagouni, GSA CEO

Dr Natasha Abrahams, GSA Senior Policy Coordinator

Ally Phillipou, GSA Graduate Representation Officer

GSA Council Members

Emily De Rango (Past Staff Member- GM Representation)

Lubna Meempatta (GSA Families Officer 2019/2020)

Graduate Parents and other stakeholders who participated in the project

National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU)

Report Edited

Elissa Hill

Layout and Design

Vivien Bong GSA Graduate Graphic Design Officer

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Executive summary

The Graduate Student Association (GSA) represents the interests of all graduate students at the University of Melbourne.

As part of GSA's representation and advocacy mandate, this research report aimed to understand and improve the educational experiences of graduate student parents at the University of Melbourne.

The research involved a desktop review of existing policies and support options for student parents at the University. A survey was also conducted with students and staff members with children at the University.

The research highlighted factors that hamper the ability of student parents to participate in the university community and succeed in their studies:

- Overall, the University fails to adequately accommodate the caring responsibilities of students. It does not provide a family-friendly environment in terms of supports, facilities, physical spaces and culture.
- There are no dedicated policies for student parents. More general policies related to leave entitlements and flexibility are often unsuitable for student parents or not adhered to in practice.
- University childcare is largely unaffordable and inflexible, and hence, inaccessible.
- Student parents feel invisible and alienated.

Graduate researchers who are also parents are particularly impacted through the compounding issues of long working hours, low stipends, the absence of leave entitlements if they are a casual or sessional employee, out of hours events and conferences, and discrimination from fellow academics.

Based on the research findings, GSA has recommended actions for the University of Melbourne and Federal Government to improve the educational experiences of student parents. There are also opportunities for GSA itself to support and advocate for graduate student parents.

Recommendations for the University of Melbourne

- Ensure University policies align with student parent needs and are implemented appropriately
- Increase access to University childcare
- Make facilities, supports and physical spaces more 'family-friendly'.

Recommendations for the Federal Government

- Increase leave entitlements for graduate research students who are parents
- Increase government payments to graduate researchers
- Reform the Child Care Subsidy scheme to better support student parents.

Recommendations for GSA

The most impactful action GSA can take to support graduate student parents is to lobby the University and Federal Government and advocate for the changes recommended above.

Other recommended actions:

- Consult with student parents regularly to determine their needs and identify opportunities for change
- Ensure student parents have up to date information about supports and facilities at the University
- Continue existing GSA initiatives for student parents.

Introduction

The Graduate Student Association (GSA) is the independent representative organisation for all graduate coursework and research students at the University of Melbourne. It is led by an elected Council of 15 graduate students. On behalf of over 30 000 constituents, it represents graduate student interests to the University and wider community. It also provides facilities and services, delivers events and activities to connect the graduate student community and promote academic excellence, and supports 149 affiliated graduate student groups.

Purpose and scope of the 'parents on campus' research

The research explored the needs and challenges of graduate students with children at the University of Melbourne. It also examined the existing policies and support options for student parents at the University.

The research aimed to better understand the educational experiences of graduate student parents at the University of Melbourne. The recommendations in this report are intended to improve GSA facilities and services and inform GSA's representation and advocacy to the University of Melbourne and the Federal Government.

Background and context

The following section summarises the available and relevant English language literature on undergraduate and graduate coursework students with children.

Student parent statistics

In Australia, 25 per cent of full-time students and 40 per cent of part-time students between the ages of 25 and 44 have at least one child under fifteen years of age¹. Three per cent of university students are single parents².

While this report focuses chiefly on graduate students, the Universities Australia Student Finances Survey found that 19.4 per cent of low-socioeconomic status undergraduate students provide care for dependent family members and 16.4 per cent financially support a dependent³.

The number of students with children at the University of Melbourne is unknown. However many graduate students are at an age where they are likely having or planning children, particularly graduate researchers. As shown in Figure 1, most graduate researchers are in their late twenties or early thirties. These are the age groups with the highest fertility rates in the general Australian population⁴.

¹ Cherastidtham, I, and Norton, A 2018, University attrition: what helps and what hinders university completion?, Grattan Institute, accessed from <https://grattan.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/University-attrition-background.pdf>

² Edwards, D, and van der Brugge, E 2012, Higher education students in Australia: What the new Census data tell us, Australian Council for Educational Research, accessed from https://research.acer.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1019&context=joining_the_dots

³ Universities Australia 2018, Universities Australia student finance survey, accessed from <https://www.universitiesaustralia.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/180713-2017-UA-Student-Finance-Survey-Report.pdf>

⁴ Australian Institute of Family Studies n.d., Births in Australia source data, accessed from <https://aifs.gov.au/facts-and-figures/births-australia/births-australia-source-data>

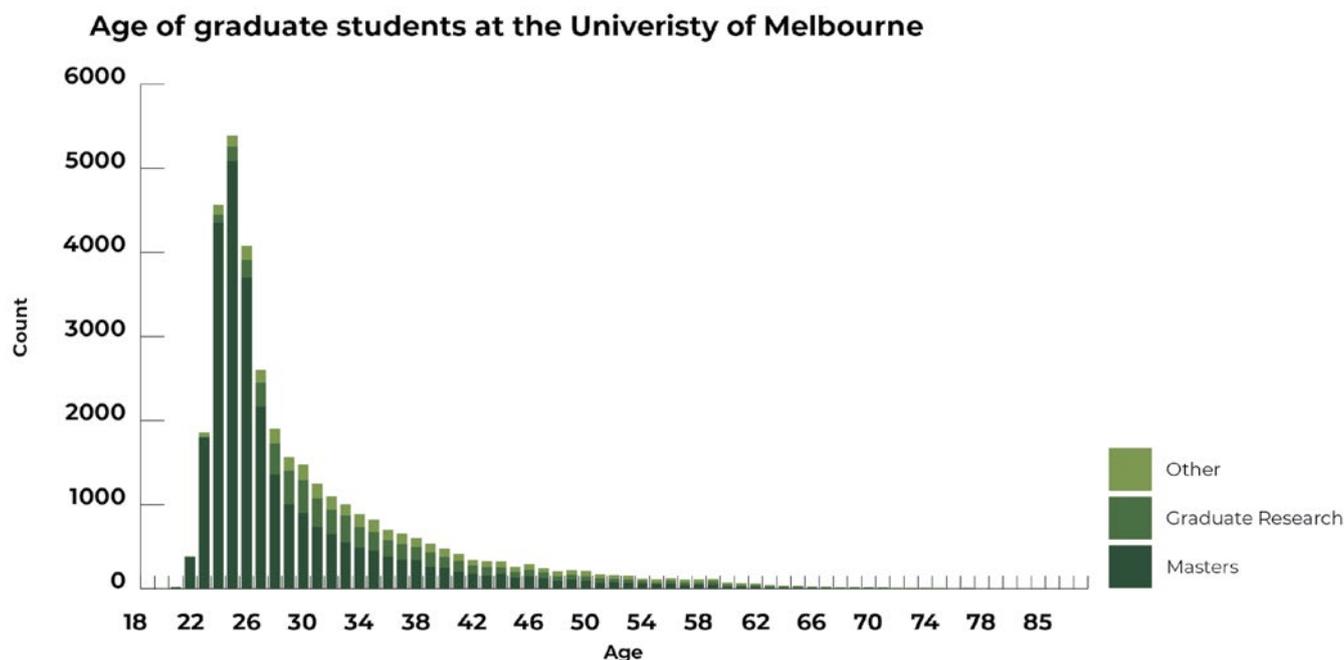


Figure 1.
Age profile of graduate students at the University of Melbourne. Student data provided by the University.

The student parent experience

Existing studies on the experiences of university student parents tend to be on a general student population (which includes both graduate and undergraduate students) or undergraduate students only.

While the needs of graduate coursework student parents and undergraduate student parents are broadly similar, graduate research students with children face unique barriers. For example, difficulty attending and presenting at conferences due to travel requirements.

A common theme in research on student parents is the struggle of combining both aspects of their lives and identities – and feeling inadequate in both.

- A study on student parents in Britain and Denmark found that feeling guilty is a common experience for student mothers, particularly those at British universities⁵.
- Another British study found that student parents described their lives as a 'balancing act', with the labour of study and of parenting never complete⁶.
- A small study of university students in Scotland found that women with children had difficulties managing parenting with their studies, particularly attending classes. They also felt alienated by a university system that did not consider their needs.

⁵ Brooks, R 2012, Student parents and higher education: A cross-national comparison, *Journal of Education Policy*, vol. 27, no. 3, pp. 423 – 439.

⁶ Moreau, MP, and Kerner, C 2012, Supporting student parents in higher education: A policy analysis, accessed from <https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/sites/default/files/files/Moreau%20Student%20Parent%20report%20-%20Full%20report%20October%202012.pdf>

Lack of finances and other support, particularly affordable childcare, are prominent factors in the student parent experience. A study on PhD student mothers at American universities found that universities did not provide adequate support⁷. The most common issue was the insufficiency of PhD living stipends to cover expenses such as health care and on-campus childcare. While graduate research funding schemes differ between countries, under-funding is a common issue. Many participants in the study also converted to part-time enrolment after childbirth, which limited their eligibility for funding opportunities.

Literature on students from low-socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds offers important insights into needs of student parents. This is because many low-SES students have caring responsibilities, which are made more challenging by their lack of resources. Devlin and McKay's study on low-SES students at Australian regional universities found that 72.5 per cent of students felt family responsibilities impacted on their studies⁸. Interestingly, they found family support – including childcare and domestic assistance – was a key contributor to the success of these students. This suggests that paid childcare services are unavailable, inadequate, or unaffordable. In another study, Devlin and colleagues found that low-SES students and university staff thought that institutions should provide free short-term childcare to assist students to succeed⁹.

Some graduate student associations in Australia have surveyed their student parents, in the same vein as the current research.

In 2017 and 2018, the Postgraduate and Research Students' Association at Australian National University (ANU) conducted surveys of students with children¹⁰. They found that student parents at the ANU face unique hardships in finding suitable accommodation and childcare. Their difficulties were compounded by university policies and procedures that were not suitable for those with children. Thirty-six per cent rated support for student parents as poor or very poor and 37 per cent as average. Top priorities for change were more affordable childcare, parking permits for part-time student parents, occasional childcare options and family-friendly accommodation.

The Monash Graduate Association conducted a survey on Higher Degree by Research students in 2017. They found that 30 per cent of those who experienced a delay in their studies cited family responsibilities as a factor. In addition, 20 per cent of those who had considered withdrawing from university identified family responsibilities as a reason for wanting to discontinue¹¹.

⁷ Lynch, KD 2008, Gender roles and the American academe: a case study of graduate student mothers, *Gender and Education*, vol. 20, no. 6, pp. 585 – 605

⁸ Devlin, M, and McKay, J 2017, Facilitating success for students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds at regional universities, accessed from https://www.ncsehe.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/55_Federation_MarciaDevlin_Accessible_PDF.pdf

⁹ Devlin, M, Kift, S, Nelson, K, Smith, L, and McKay, J 2012, Effective teaching and support of students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds: Resources for Australian higher education, accessed from <http://www.lowses.edu.au/assets/ALTC%20LSES%20Final%20Report%202012.pdf>

¹⁰ Corkish, T, and Shaw, A 2018, Postgraduate parents: The challenges of parenting and studying at the ANU, ANU Postgraduate and Research Students' Association, accessed from [https://parsi.anu.edu.au/pageassets/advocacy/report/Parents-Survey-Report\(2\).pdf](https://parsi.anu.edu.au/pageassets/advocacy/report/Parents-Survey-Report(2).pdf)

¹¹ Publication forthcoming.

In 2015, GSA conducted a small survey on students with children (22 respondents)¹². The survey identified that few respondents were satisfied with services and facilities provided by the University and GSA. In response to this survey, GSA created a family-friendly study space.

University as a deterrent to having children

A survey of 8000 PhD students at the University of California found that while most plan or hope to have children, they do not believe they can juggle this with their studies¹³. Over half of the women and over one third of the men surveyed believed that caregiving was incompatible with their PhD. Those who wished to have children one day were concerned about the time required for doctoral study, income level, the stress of managing both child-rearing and doctoral study, and the affordability of childcare, housing and health insurance.

How the 'parents on campus' research report fits with the existing literature

The research is informed by national and international literature on student parents. However it overcomes some of the limitations by focusing primarily on graduate students and surveying both research and coursework students.

It adds important data to the limited body of research on Australian graduate student parents and how universities support them. It also updates and expands on the findings of the small survey of graduate students at the University of Melbourne conducted by GSA in 2015.

The research summarises and identifies gaps in the current policies and support related to student parents at the University of Melbourne. To GSA's knowledge, this is the first time this data has been compiled.

¹² University of Melbourne Graduate Student Association 2015, *Students with Families Report*

¹³ Mason, MA, Goulden, M, and Frasch, K 2009, *Why graduate students reject the fast track: A study of thousands of doctoral students shows that they want balanced lives*, *Academe*, vol. 95, no. 1, pp. 11 – 16

Research methods

Desktop research

GSA staff searched the University of Melbourne's online policies and procedures for those applicable to student parents. Specific support and facilities provided to parents by the University and GSA, including childcare and family spaces, was researched online and compiled.

Survey

Research was conducted through an online survey, with questions focused on student parent demographics and individual experiences. The survey was administered through Qualtrics and distributed through the Graduate Group of Student Parents and National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU). Survey results were analysed through SPSS.

There were 111 valid responses to the survey. Of these, 53 per cent were graduate students only, 19 per cent were both students and staff, and 28 per cent were staff only. Staff data was collected to inform a staff version of this report for the NTEU.

While the survey was directed at graduate students and staff, two undergraduate students completed the survey. They are included in the results.

Policies and support for student parents at the University of Melbourne

Dedicated policies

There is no dedicated policy at the University of Melbourne pertaining to students with parenting responsibilities. The rights and entitlements of students with children are included within more general policies and procedures in the few cases where they are specified.

General policies and procedures

Under the University's Flexible Work Arrangements Procedure, students may seek permission from their lecturers to bring their children¹⁴. Children may not be brought to practical classes. Similarly, staff can seek permission from their supervisor to bring their children to work. The policy prescribes that requests to bring children to the workplace or classroom will be "treated sympathetically" by supervisors and teaching staff.

According to this procedure, staff or potential staff may request work arrangements to accommodate their caring responsibilities. These requests should not be "unreasonably refused". Students, including research students, do not have the option to request alternative work arrangements in this policy.

Employees of the University have parental leave entitlements, both under the law and as set out in the Enterprise Agreement. No paid leave is available for casual or sessional staff.

Graduate researchers receiving stipends are entitled to paid leave to care for a newborn or newly adopted child:

- Up to 60 working days maternity or adoption leave for students who are giving birth or are the main carer of a recently adopted child
- Up to five days parental leave for students whose partner has given birth or is the main carer of their adopted child.

This leave is only available for students who have completed at least one year (or full-time equivalent) of candidature, as specified by the Commonwealth Scholarships Guidelines. Students who have completed less than one year of enrolment may access unpaid leave, with paid leave being granted following confirmation of candidature.

For ongoing parenting needs, graduate researchers are also entitled to up to 60 working days of additional sick leave, which may be used for family caring responsibilities if there are compassionate and compelling circumstances.

Information about paid leave entitlements is difficult to find on the University website. The Grad Research website lists parental and other leave entitlements with details but does not mention that paid parental leave is restricted to certain periods of candidature¹⁵. This page states that candidates can view the Graduate

¹⁴ University of Melbourne 2020. Flexible Work Arrangement Procedure (MPF1155). Accessed from <https://policy.unimelb.edu.au/MPF1155#section-3.4>

¹⁵ University of Melbourne 2020. Taking leave. Accessed from <https://gradresearch.unimelb.edu.au/being-a-candidate/taking-leave>

Research Training Policy for further details. However, this policy does not provide details on leave¹⁶, and links to the Enrolment and Timetabling Policy. It is within this policy that it is first stated that leave entitlements are not usually available in the first half of probationary candidature¹⁷. Paid leave entitlements are also explained in the Scholarship Terms and Conditions available in the Grad Research website. The inadequacy of leave policy arrangement for student parents is thus obscured until one wishes to access leave.

Legislation

The University is required to comply with legislation relating to parents. This includes providing parental leave entitlements for part-time and full-time staff, refraining from workplace discrimination against employees with caring responsibilities and granting maternity leave entitlements to graduate researchers receiving Research Training Program stipends.

The Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) 2015 prescribes that higher education providers must monitor the participation, progress and completion of “identified student subgroups” with the findings used to improve the teaching, learning, and support strategies for these subgroups. Furthermore, the legislation states that the nature and extent of support services are informed by the needs of their cohorts, including wellbeing needs¹⁸. There is no imperative for higher education providers to consider student parents as one of the student subgroups.

Support and facilities provided by the University

Childcare

The University of Melbourne provides two childcare facilities: Swanston Street Children’s Centre and Queensberry Children’s Centre¹⁹; and one Early Learning Centre. The two Children’s Centres take children from three months to six years of age. They provide long day care (7.45am–6.00pm) on weekdays with full-time, full day and half day sessions.

It costs \$126 per child per day for student families and \$145 per child per day for staff or community families. Student rates are subsidised using the Student Services and Amenities Fees (SSAF). The website states there is a rebate system for low income student families and international student families.

The University’s childcare centres do not run their regular program in January, with a holiday program operating in this time. There are 41 places available at Swanston Street and 96 at Queensberry Street. Staff of the University have the option to pay using salary sacrifice to reduce costs. In addition to the University childcare centres, there is also a cooperatively managed childcare – the Melbourne University Family Club. They have 48 places and provide full day care only at \$145 per day.

¹⁶ University of Melbourne 2019. Graduate Research Training Policy (MPF1321). Accessed from <https://policy.unimelb.edu.au/MPF1321>

¹⁷ University of Melbourne 2020. Enrolment and Timetabling Policy (MPF1294). Accessed from <https://policy.unimelb.edu.au/MPF1294>

¹⁸ Higher Education Standards Framework (Thresholds Standards) 2015 (Cth) 2.2: 3. Accessed from <https://www.legislation.gov.au/Details/F2015L01639>

¹⁹ University of Melbourne Early Childhood Education Services 2020. About us. Accessed from <https://services.unimelb.edu.au/childcare/aboutus>

The Early Learning Centre is a long-day education and care program in Abbotsford run by the University. There are 89 places for children aged two to five years with a minimum of two days per week attendance. Costs vary depending on age and attendance.

There is some financial assistance for childcare costs. Domestic and international students with children in childcare, including outside of the University centres, can access the University's Student Rebate scheme. The level of rebate is adjusted to distribute available funding among all eligible applicants. Some scholarship recipients, notably Australia Award recipients, are eligible for childcare subsidies.

At any approved childcare centre, including those associated with the University, Australian citizens may access the Government Child Care Subsidy. The subsidy is provided directly to the childcare provider to effectively lower the cost of childcare, with the parent paying the gap amount. Crucially, parents must pass the activity test to be eligible for the Child Care Subsidy. The subsidy amount scales with the hours parents spend in certain activities, such as paid work, volunteering, looking for work and studying an approved course. The legislation allows only for study up to level eight of the Australian Qualifications Framework. This excludes graduate courses, which are levels nine and ten. Graduate students can only access the subsidy if they complete enough hours in the other listed activities.

Parents' rooms

There are seven multi-purpose rooms on campus that parents can use as private spaces if needed²⁰. The University does not distinguish between rooms used for breastfeeding or pumping and rooms used for other aspects of parenting. Three of the parents' rooms contain changing tables.

Language support

The University offers a free Language Support and Professional Development Program for international students and spouses. The program is designed to assist newcomers with integration including through everyday English lessons. Attendees can bring their children under five.

Melbourne University Sport School Holiday Program

Melbourne University Sport runs a day camp School Holiday Program for children between five and 12 years of age²¹. This is available to all community members, with student pricing available for children of University of Melbourne students. Each day

²⁰ University of Melbourne 2020. Parents Rooms. Accessed from <https://students.unimelb.edu.au/student-support/childcare/parents-rooms>

²¹ Melbourne University Sport 2020. School Holiday Program Challenge is On! Accessed from <https://sport.unimelb.edu.au/programs/sport-camps>

comprises different activities priced between \$65 to \$95 per day. It does not run for the entire school holiday period²².

Support and facilities provided by GSA

GSA provides some community-building and facilities to student parents.

GSA provides two family-friendly study spaces, where students may use the desk or computers while their child is able to play with the toys provided. These spaces are available from 9am until 5pm on weekdays. Additionally, there is a separate nappy changing room.

Representation of the needs of student parents is cultivated at GSA by the inclusion of a dedicated Families Officer on GSA Council.

GSA facilitates a community of student parents by supporting the Graduate Group of Student Parents. The group aims to promote interaction, welfare and cohesion between graduate student parents and their families, and to enhance the personal, academic and professional life of graduate student parents.

GSA runs a Family Fun Day each semester, with students invited to bring their children for activities such as a jumping castle, face painting and crafts. GSA has also developed an information sheet for student parents²³.

²² ANU Parenting Spaces. Accessed from https://www.google.com/maps/d/viewer?mid=1bXOUpqUmFp0zlcRuc_rAavAXP1Q&ll=-35.28001500665826%2C149.11813435&z=16

²³ Graduate Student Association 2018. GSA Resource: Resources for student parents and expectant parents. Accessed from <https://gsa.unimelb.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/20180717-Families-Resources-for-student-parents-and-expectant-parents.pdf>

Survey findings

Demographics

Of the 111 survey respondents, 80 were students (53 per cent were graduate students only, 19 per cent were both students and University staff). The majority of students (61.3 per cent) were graduate researchers, 36.3 per cent were studying graduate coursework degrees and 2.5 per cent were undergraduates.

A range of faculties were represented (Figure 2), as well as a number of campuses (Figure 3). As expected, most respondents were from Parkville campus.

Most students (87.3 per cent) were female, 11.4 per cent were male and 1.3 per cent identified as other²⁴.

Most students (62.5 per cent) were Australian citizens or permanent residents, while the remaining 37.5 per cent were on student visas. The average age of students was 38 years old and the average age of the eldest child was five.

Almost half of the students surveyed (43 per cent) were not currently employed, 31 per cent were employed outside of the University and 26 per cent were employed at the University. Most were employed on a casual or sessional basis (Figure 4). The median household income was \$800–\$1249 per week.

Faculties represented

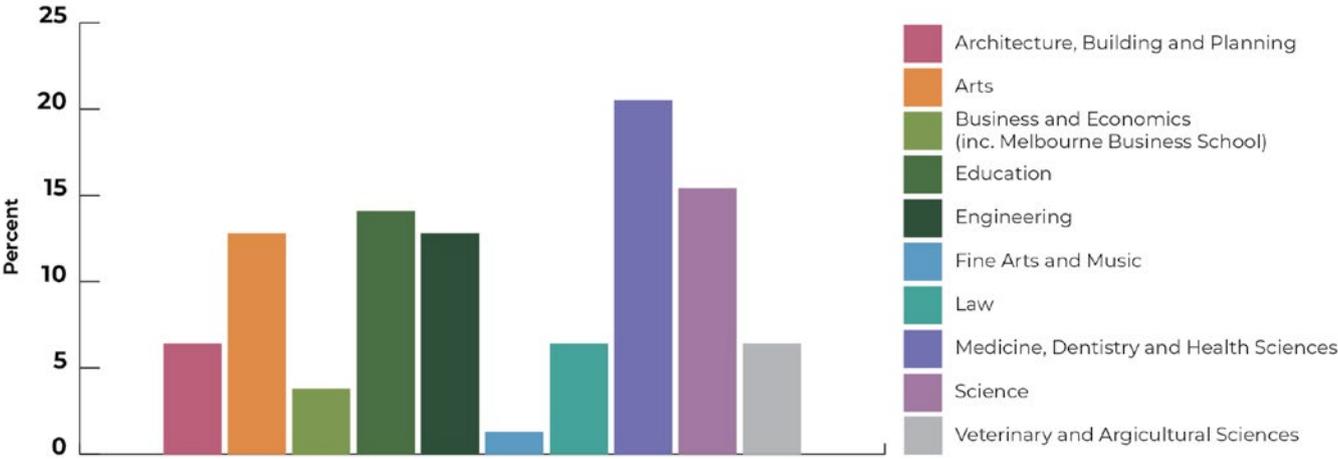


Figure 2.

²⁴ The options presented were Female, Male, Non-binary and Other (please specify) and the respondent chose not to specify.

Campuses represented

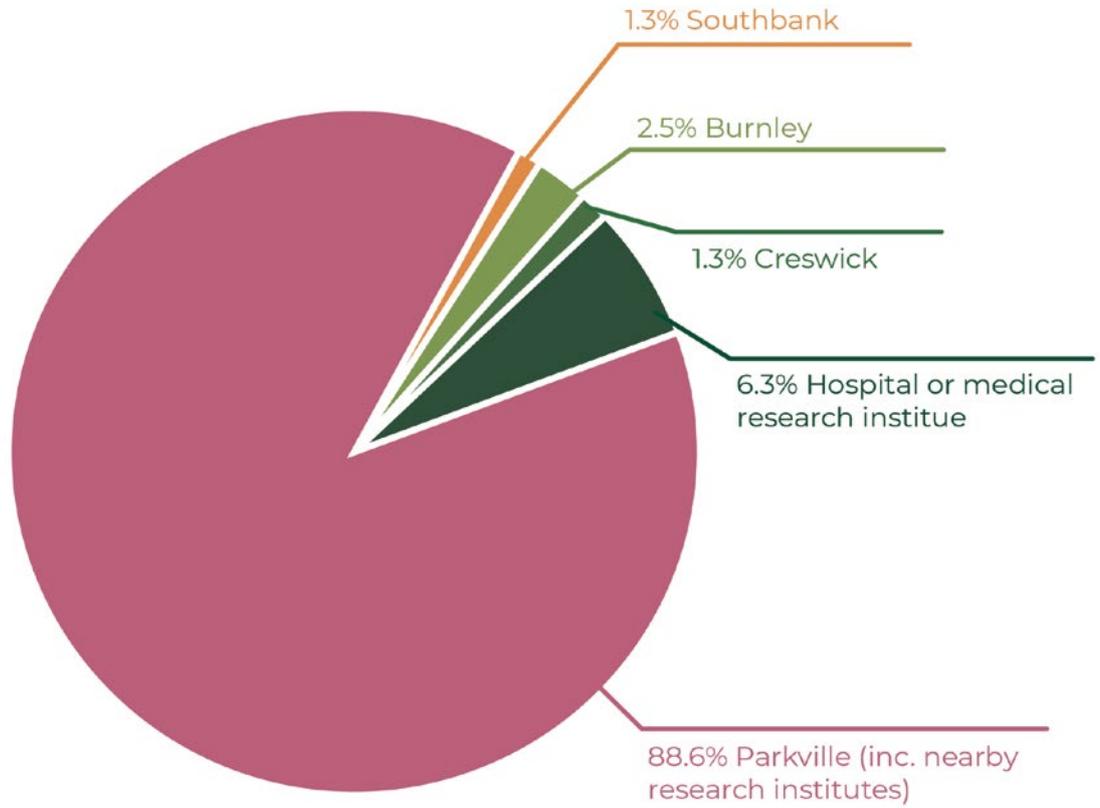


Figure 3.

Types of employment contracts

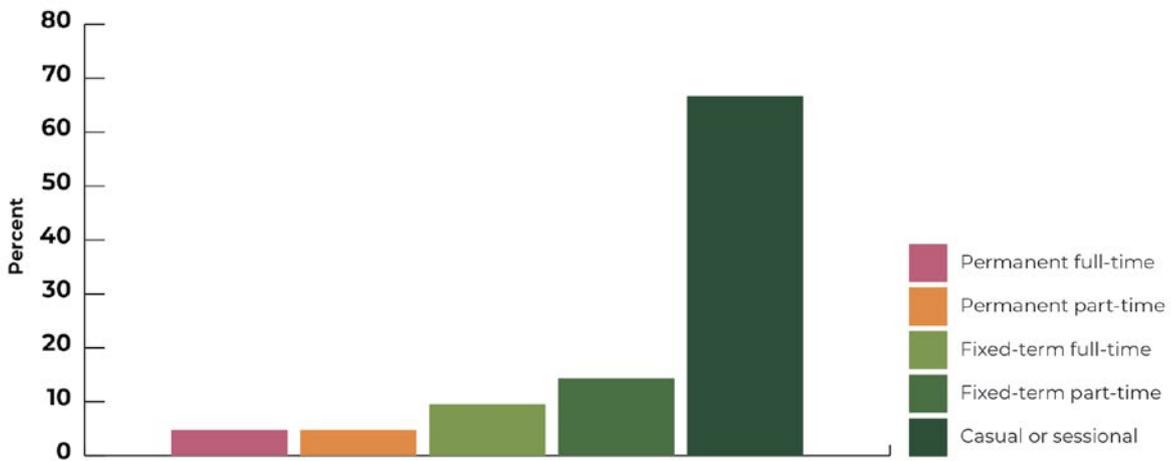


Figure 4.

Caregiving role and childcare arrangements

Eighty-five per cent of students surveyed were primary caregivers to their children. One in thirteen students (7.5 per cent) was caring for a child with special needs.

Over half of the student parents were in paid employment. Two thirds of student parents have at least one child who is pre-school aged. That is, they would require another person or a childcare service to look after their child while they are engaged in study or work.

The median amount spent by student parents on childcare each week was \$277 and the average amount was \$303. Student parents spent an average of \$287 per week on schooling costs (median \$195).

Only 32 per cent of student parents had used the University of Melbourne childcare facilities.

Caregiving responsibilities



55% have one child
35% have two children
9% have three children
1% have five children

Figure 5. Number of children

Caregiving responsibilities

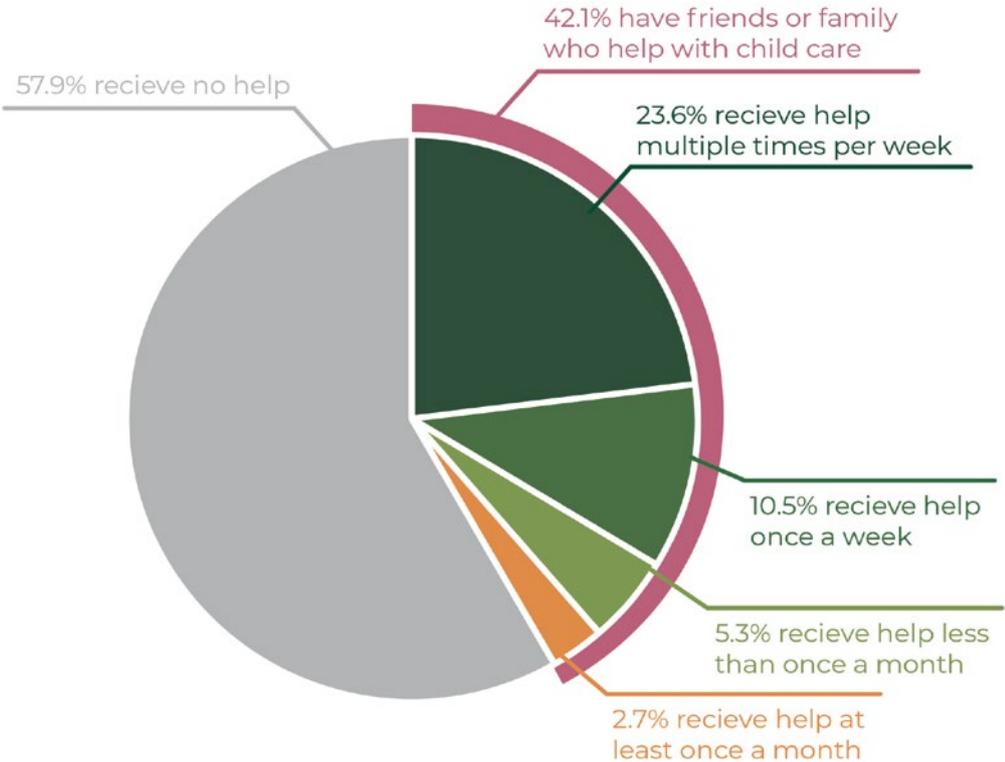


Figure 6. Help received

The University is not a 'family-friendly' environment for students

Student parents were generally negative in their evaluations of University support and services.

Only 17 per cent of student parents felt satisfied with how they engage with the University as a parent. And only 16 per cent felt the University is welcoming towards children. These figures are much lower than those reported by University staff who are parents but not students. For this group, 50 per cent felt satisfied with the University and 45 per cent found the University welcoming.

Most student parents (65 per cent) have brought their child(ren) onto campus. Of those, 40 per cent experienced difficulty navigating campus with a child. Almost three-quarters of student parents who hadn't brought their child(ren) to campus would like to.

²⁵ Live in Melbourne 2017. Preschool. Accessed from <https://liveinmelbourne.vic.gov.au/live/education-and-childcare/pre-school-education>;

²⁶ Early Childhood Education Services 2020. Fees for 2020. Accessed from <https://services.unimelb.edu.au/childcare/ourservices/fees>

Facilities desired

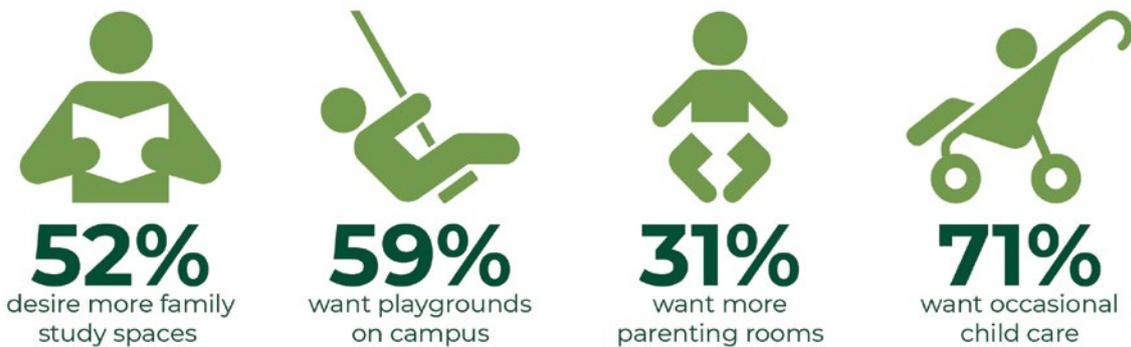


Figure 7. Facilities desired

Student parents encountered the following difficulties when bringing their child to campus:

- Lack of facilities
- Lack of accessibility for prams
- Unfriendly or unwelcoming comments or attitudes from others.

Respondents indicated that the University could be more accessible for children on campus through:

- Playgrounds and family study spaces
- Affordable childcare
- Financial support
- Occasional childcare
- Improved parenting facilities
- More tolerant attitudes from colleagues.

There are barriers to accessing University childcare facilities

Responses on the quality and suitability of on-campus childcare varied. A number of barriers to access were identified.

Cost

Cost is a significant barrier for student parents accessing childcare.

Of those who did not use the University's childcare, one third said this is because it is too expensive. With childcare costs around Melbourne ranging from \$70-\$185²⁵ per day, University childcare is on the more expensive side at \$126 per child per day for student families²⁶.

Stipends for graduate researchers are sufficient for a modest lifestyle if you are a single person but they do not leave room to support dependants. The inadequacy of the graduate researcher stipend to cover childcare costs was mentioned by a number of respondents:

"The childcare services are great but they are ridiculously expensive for international students living on a scholarship budget because we are not eligible for any government subsidy."

"The stipend provided by Melbourne research scholarships is completely used up for childcare, leaving little for actual expenses and research-related costs. This creates significant stress."

"It makes no sense that our scholarship is less than childcare fees."

One international student reported leaving their child behind in their home country as a result of being unable to afford childcare.

Lack of flexibility and limited opening hours

Students pointed to the need for longer hours at University childcare to improve accessibility of services. For example, Queensberry and Swanston Street Children's Centres are only opening open 7.45am–6.00pm Monday to Friday, despite many graduate courses having compulsory evening classes. Having to request childcare months in advance was another challenge, as articulated by a respondent below:

"When childcare has to be requested in October for the following year you have no idea whether it'll work with your personal timetable, which is only available in Feb and then changes mid-year."

The lack of flexibility for childcare, combined with the lack of flexibility for placement requirements, was a barrier to students completing their course requirements. For example, childcare centres not opening early enough to get to a work placement on time. Or having to find childcare for two continuous weeks of full-time placement work.

Lack of occasional childcare

Almost three-quarters of student parents indicated the need for occasional childcare

on campus to assist with their irregular class schedules and changing timetables and workloads. There was also a cost benefit of being able to pay for just a couple of hours rather than enrol a child in a full day of childcare.

University policies and culture do not support student parents

Student parents felt that University policies created bureaucratic challenges to combining parenthood with study. They also reported discrimination in the way policies were implemented.

Insufficient leave entitlements

Half of graduate researchers who are parents have frequently taken time off work and study to care for their children. However only 37 per cent indicated they have sufficient leave available to care for their children when needed.

The survey found that leave entitlements were not always suitable or sufficient for student parents, which can place them in difficult and stressful situations. The following examples were reported through the survey:

- A PhD student found she was ineligible for parental leave only after she was pregnant.
- A PhD student had to take 'leave of absences' throughout the year (where their enrolment was formally suspended) to accommodate parenting responsibilities, like caring for a sick child.
- Students were not able to access ongoing special consideration in the way that other student carers would. For example, if they were caring for someone with special needs.
- The difficulties with accessing leave as a graduate researcher were compounded by the absence of leave entitlements as a casual or sessional University employee.

Lack of flexibility

While there are some work flexibility policies in place at the University, which could be used to the advantage of parents, the survey responses show these policies are not always followed.

One in five respondents disagreed on some level with the statement that their requests for flexibility are supported by lecturers/tutors or supervisor/manager.

This was also reinforced through the comments:

"The University talks the talk when it comes to flexibility but individual teams within the University don't actually walk the walk. In fact, there are teams where working flexibly is effectively discouraged, which is incredibly disappointing."

"I have been told a number of times after requesting flexible work arrangements that the university policy 'doesn't work here/for us'."

This speaks to a need for the University to monitor and evaluate the implementation of family-friendly policies, in addition to putting these policies in place.

Discrimination following parental leave

Survey respondents reported discriminatory or inequitable practices following a return from parental leave. These include:

- Having to perform the duties of a full-time role on a part-time time fraction
- Being forced to return to work full-time
- Having occasional requests to work from home knocked back, despite no operational impact.

Student parents feel alienated and invisible

Survey respondents felt parenting is discouraged through branding, facilities, policies, scheduling and a lack of support services at the University.

Students described the failure of the University to recognise them and their needs. For example, by scheduling mid-term assessments in school holidays, showing a lack of awareness of the challenges facing student parents or running networking events in the evening.

Only 37 per cent of respondents felt a sense of belonging to the University community.

This sense of alienation is reinforced through the lack of visibility of children on campus. Over half of respondents indicated other people in their course or team/department never bring their children to campus. While one third of respondents stated their lecturers/tutors or managers never actively promote a family-friendly environment.

Graduate researchers who are parents face compounded challenges

The graduate researcher experience is understood as more like University staff than student. Like University-employed researchers, they are responsible for contributing to the research output of the University. Many are forming their own research careers and seeking out opportunities such as conferences and publications to improve their profile. However, graduate researchers are not paid a researcher salary and their workplace entitlements are minimal.

This hybrid space presents challenges for graduate researchers, which are compounded for those who also have parenting responsibilities. This includes prejudices against student parents by fellow academics and balancing competing priorities of work, study and parenthood. These are highlighted in the survey comments below:

“Recently a very senior male academic said to me that I could not possibly be serious about my research plans with a small child in tow. Then he said that all I am providing as outcomes are bunch of dreams and abstracts. He also said that no support will be granted to my research ideas and that I should go back to my desk and stick to teaching. A senior female academic recently told me that I wouldn’t be interested in a conference because I have a small child and another told me that I was not suggested for a role because I have family commitments and cannot make it to those meetings. This is crushing to sense of self and sense of dignity.”

“Balancing the demands of university whilst being a father to my one year old, working to pay the rent and trying to maintain a healthy relationship with my wife at home has so far been the most stressful time of my life...I never thought myself capable of a mental breakdown but my time at university so far has made see otherwise.”

Conclusion

This research has illuminated the ways in which student parents are excluded as members of the University of Melbourne community, are not adequately supported in their study and work and, in some cases, overtly discriminated against.

Key findings:

- Overall, the University fails to adequately accommodate the caring responsibilities of students. It does not provide a family-friendly environment in terms of supports, facilities, physical spaces and culture.
- There are no dedicated policies for student parents. More general policies related to leave entitlements and flexibility are often unsuitable for student parents or not adhered to in practice.
- University childcare is largely unaffordable and inflexible, and hence, inaccessible.
- Student parents feel invisible and alienated.

All these factors hamper the ability of student parents to participate in the university community and succeed in their studies.

Graduate researchers who are also parents are particularly impacted through compounding issues of long working hours, low stipends, the absence of leave entitlements if they are a casual or sessional employee, out of hours events and conferences, and discrimination from fellow academics.

With the increasing political and economic imperative for Australians to undertake post-secondary education, the family unfriendliness of universities should be recognised as a matter of national concern. As shown in this report however, there are many opportunities to improve student parents' experiences.

Facilities and support

GSA believes that parenthood itself should not be regarded as the cause of disadvantage for student parents. Rather, the impediment is the University's failure to provide appropriate facilities and support for student parents.

Support is needed to enable those engaged in primary caregiving, paid work and study to manage their responsibilities. According to the Higher Education Standards Panel, student support services, including on-campus childcare facilities, are regarded as important in preventing attrition due to personal or financial hardship²⁷.

The importance of accessible childcare cannot be underestimated. It allows students to attend class and meetings, engage in solitary study and participate in networking events and extracurricular activities. Despite this, existing services and support do not meet student parents' needs. The failure of the University to provide affordable, reliable and accessible childcare is a failure to support student parents.

²⁷ Department of Education and Training & Higher Education Standards Panel 2017. *Improving retention, completion and success in higher education: Higher Education Standards Panel Discussion Paper*, June 2017. Accessed from https://docs.education.gov.au/system/files/doc/other/final_discussion_paper.pdf

Policies

Current leave entitlements fail to address the needs and concerns of student parents. In some cases the policies are unsuitable or insufficient. In other cases, student parents are unable to access the options and flexibility required to succeed in their studies. For example, ongoing special consideration.

Support for student parents cannot rely on the discretion of supervisors and teaching staff. Policy must be adequately implemented to be effective.

Culture

The University must move beyond disregarding student parents and proactively address their alienation with genuine support. It must increase the representation and visibility of student parents.

Understanding parenting positively, rather than as a disadvantage, would greatly improve support for student parents. Inclusivity for all students is crucial in the University community.

The framing of parenting as a disadvantage can be understood through Acker's framework of the "ideal worker"²⁸. The "ideal worker" is always available, working and without familial obligations. This is imposed in academic contexts where researchers are considered uncommitted to their work if they have caring responsibilities, thereby treating parenting as a disadvantage to one's work²⁹. Research suggests the "ideal worker" is deeply engrained in academia's workplace culture, with both men and women experiencing discrimination as a result³⁰.

²⁸ Acker, J 1990 Hierarchies, Jobs, Bodies: A Theory of Gendered Organizations. *Gender and Society*. 4:2, 139-158.

²⁹ See: *Ideal for Whom? A Cultural Analysis of Ideal Worker Norms in Higher Education and Student Affairs Graduate Programs* - Margaret W. Sallee; *Troubling Gender Norms and the Ideal Worker in Academic Life* - Jaime Lester and Margaret W. Sallee

³⁰ See: *The Ideal Worker or the Ideal Father: Organizational Structures and Culture in the Gendered University* - Margaret W. Sallee; *Academic Motherhood: Mid-Career Perspectives and the Ideal Worker Norm* - Kelly Ward, Lisa Wolf-Wendel

Recommendations

Based on the research findings, GSA has recommended actions for the University of Melbourne and Federal Government to improve the educational experiences of student parents. There are also opportunities for GSA itself to support and advocate for graduate student parents.

Recommendations to the University

Ensure University policies align with student parent needs and are implemented appropriately

- Create a family-friendly committee and strategy, similarly to Australian National University initiatives³¹.
- Create a maximum working hours policy for research students.

Increase access to University childcare

- Provide heavily subsidised childcare for University of Melbourne staff and students.
- Provide occasional childcare for University of Melbourne staff, students and visiting scholars.
- Establish grants for research students and honours students to pay for childcare whilst at conferences, in line with engineering academic staff entitlement³².

Make facilities, supports and physical spaces more 'family-friendly'

- Create a priority system for tutorial access for student parents.
- Establish family-friendly meeting rooms on campus.
- Improve the physical accessibility of campuses. For example, ensure access for prams.

Recommendations to Federal Government

Increase leave entitlements for graduate research students who are parents

Amend Commonwealth Scholarships Guidelines (Research) 2017:

- Remove or reduce the one-year waiting period for accessing maternity leave
- Establish paternity leave for primary carers as a standard entitlement
- Create a leave category for caring responsibilities.

³¹ Australian National University 2020. Family Friendly Committee. Accessed from <https://www.anu.edu.au/about/governance/committees/family-friendly-committee>

³² University of Melbourne 2020. Parents. Accessed from <https://diversity.eng.unimelb.edu.au/parents/>

Increase government payments to graduate researchers

- Raise minimum rate of Research Training Program stipend to at least minimum wage to make childcare costs more achievable for research students.
- Include graduate researchers in the Australian Government Parental Leave Pay scheme.

Reform the Child Care Subsidy scheme to better support student parents

- Expand Child Care Subsidy access to postgraduate level courses.
- Create another level of subsidy (100 per cent) for those on low incomes.
- Raise the hourly rate cap and regulate the cost of childcare.

Recommendations to GSA

The most impactful action GSA can take to support graduate student parents is to lobby the University and Federal Government and advocate for the changes recommended in this report.

Other recommended actions:

- Consult with student parents regularly to understand their needs and the opportunities for change. For example, seek guidance from the Graduate Group of Student Parents about running more family-friendly and online events.
- Ensure student parents have up to date information about supports and facilities at the University. For example, update the 2018 GSA guide for student parents³³.
- Continue existing initiatives such as the family-friendly study space, supporting the Graduate Group of Student Parents and running the Family Fun Day each semester.

A note on COVID-19

This research was conducted before COVID-19 hit. This virus has had, and will continue to have, a significant impact on education institutions at large and the way that students conduct their study, research and work. All recommendations in this report should be considered in light of the 'new normal' resulting from COVID-19 – increased work and study from home, homeschooling responsibilities, decreased university funding and restrictions on childcare facilities.

³³ Graduate Student Association 2018. GSA Resource: Resources for student parents and expectant parents. Accessed from <https://gsa.unimelb.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/20180717-Families-Resources-for-student-parents-and-expectant-parents.pdf>