



Single Parents and Higher Education

Barriers to access and recommendations for change

Taking a long-term View

“For single parents there’s the immense pressure to conform to societal expectations, such as being back in work by the time my child turned three. This pushed me to start university when my child was just five months old, in the hopes of securing better career prospects.

What makes these challenges especially frustrating is that you can see how hard people are working to improve their lives by attending university. This isn’t a short-term arrangement—it’s a long-term investment that will reward those efforts in the future. ”

Contents

Executive Summary

Overview of the report
Key findings and recommendations

Section 1

One Parent Families Scotland
Research Outline
Research Methods
Planned Outcomes of research

Section 2

Why Single Parent Families? – A Profile

Section 3

Single Parents Students and Financial Support

Section 4

Previous Research on Single Parents in Higher Education

Section 5

The Survey and Results

Section 6

Focus Groups

Section 7

Case Studies

Section 8

Suggestions from Single Parents on tackling barriers & challenges

Section 9

Recommendations

Appendix

Case Studies

Executive Summary

This report explores the barriers faced by single parents (SP) in accessing higher education (HE) and offers targeted recommendations to improve inclusivity and support. This research by One Parent Families Scotland (OPFS), through consulting single parents, outlines the financial, structural, and emotional challenges encountered by single parents and highlights necessary policy and institutional reforms.

1. Introduction

Higher education (HE) is a vital pathway for single parents (SPs) seeking economic stability and career advancement. However, numerous barriers—financial, institutional, and personal circumstances—limit their ability to enrol, persist, and complete their studies. This report by **One Parent Families Scotland (OPFS)**, funded by the Robertson Trust aims to:

- Identify the **challenges and barriers** that single parents face in HE.
- Assess **existing support systems** at institutional and policy levels.
- Provide **recommendations** for improving access, retention, and success for single parent students.

The study emphasises that increasing HE access for single parents is not only a matter of equity but also a **key driver of economic empowerment** and social mobility.

2. Research Methodology

A **mixed-methods approach** was used to provide a comprehensive analysis of single parents' experiences in HE. The research included:

- **Surveys and interviews:** Conducted with single parents in HE, those who had to withdraw, those who completed their course and single parents interested in HE
- **Policy and funding analysis:** Examined existing financial aid structures, childcare provisions, and institutional policies in Scotland.

The study sought to uncover **both systemic and situational barriers** to HE participation for single parents.

3. Key Findings

3.1 Financial Barriers

One of the most significant barriers for single parents in HE is financial insecurity. The report identifies the following challenges:

- **Single parents have only one income to cover family costs made worse by the cost-of-living crisis:** Single parents face financial strain due to rent, food, utilities, and educational materials.
- **Insufficient financial aid:** Grants and bursaries exist but are often not **widely publicised, insufficient**, or have **stringent eligibility criteria**.
- **Welfare system conflicts:** Many single parents are hesitant to enter HE because they fear losing welfare benefits due to strict income thresholds.
- **Limited employment options:** Balancing HE, work, and childcare is difficult, restricting their ability to earn supplemental income.

3.2 Childcare Challenges

Access to affordable flexible and reliable early years, school age and holiday childcare remains a major obstacle, impacting enrolment and retention rates in HE among single parents.

Key issues include:

- **Lack of flexible childcare options:** Many institutions lack on-campus childcare or fail to provide subsidised childcare programmes.
- **Inconvenient class schedules:** Many HE programs are designed for traditional students, with class timings that conflict with childcare needs.
- **Emergency childcare support:** The absence of backup childcare options means that single parents often miss lectures, exams, or deadlines due to unexpected caregiving responsibilities.

3.3 Institutional Support and Accessibility

HE institutions often lack **tailored support structures** for single parents, leading to:

- **No dedicated student support services:** Most institutions do not offer designated advisors or mentoring/ peer support initiatives for single parents.
- **Rigid academic policies:** Attendance policies, coursework deadlines, and assessment methods do not account for single parents' unpredictable caregiving needs.
- **Mental health and well-being challenges:** Many single parents experience stress, anxiety, and burnout due to juggling academic, financial, and caregiving responsibilities without adequate mental health support.

3.4 Policy and Legislative Gaps

- **Single parents are not officially recognised as a priority group in accessing HE:** Many national and institutional policies fail to explicitly recognise single parents as a distinct group needing targeted support.
- **Inadequate financial support frameworks:** Current funding mechanisms do not account for the **additional financial burden** of raising a child on your own while studying.

- **Lack of standardisation:** Support for single parents varies significantly across institutions, leading to **unequal access to resources** depending on where they study.

4. Recommendations

4.1 Enhancing Financial Support

- **Expand financial support for single parents:** Increase, grants, bursaries and funds for exceptional needs/ crises specifically targeted at single parents.
- **Simplify financial aid applications:** Ensure transparency and accessibility in applying for student finance, reducing bureaucratic barriers.
- **Reform student finance policies:** Adjust funding criteria to better reflect the **true cost of living** for single parents, including housing, utilities, and childcare.
- **Introduce more work-study programmes:** Create employment opportunities within HE institutions that align with single parents' schedules and responsibilities.

4.2 Improving Childcare Accessibility

- **Develop on-campus childcare services:** Encourage HE institutions to establish or expand flexible childcare facilities.
- **Subsidise childcare costs:** Introduce government-funded childcare schemes specifically for single-parent students.
- **Offer flexible scheduling options:** increase availability of evening classes, hybrid learning, and recorded lectures to accommodate single parents' caregiving responsibilities.
- **Implement emergency childcare support:** Establish funding mechanisms or institutional policies that provide backup childcare solutions.

4.3 Strengthening Institutional Support

- **Create dedicated support:** Institutions should ensure student **advisors** have training in single parent issues and facilitate support networks.
- **Enhance academic flexibility:** Implement policies that allow single parents to request coursework extensions, alternative assessment methods, and flexible attendance options.
- **Improve mental health services:** Introduce counselling and peer-support opportunities tailored to single parents' challenges.
- **Faculty awareness training:** Educate university staff on the specific barriers faced by single-parent students to foster a more inclusive academic environment.

4.4 Policy Reforms and Advocacy

- **Recognise single parents as a priority group in HE policy:** Governments should formally include single parents in **student equity and access frameworks**.

- **Reform welfare policies:** Ensure single parents can pursue HE without facing conditionality and sanctions jeopardising access to essential welfare benefits.
- **Mandate data collection and reporting:** Institutions should be required to **track and report** single-parent student outcomes to assess progress and inform future policy decisions.
- **Promote public awareness campaigns:** Increase visibility and outreach efforts to inform single parents of available HE opportunities and support systems.

5. Recommendations by Agency

5.1. Higher Education Institutions (HEIs)

Financial Support

- Develop **institution-specific support packages** for single parent mature students.
- Implement **on-campus work-study programmes** tailored to single parents.

Childcare Support

- Establish or expand **on-campus childcare services** with flexible hours.
- Provide **subsidised childcare partnerships** with external providers.
- Offer **emergency childcare funds** for student-parents facing unexpected caregiving issues.

Academic Flexibility & Support

- Introduce **flexible course schedules** (evening, online, hybrid learning options).
- Create **dedicated student support services** for single parents, including academic advisors and peer mentorship.
- Implement **lenient attendance and coursework extension policies** to accommodate caregiving responsibilities.
- Provide **faculty training** to raise awareness of the challenges faced by single-parent students.

Mental Health & Well-being

- Establish **counselling and mental health support** tailored to the stress and challenges of single-parent students.
- Develop **peer support groups** to build a sense of community and reduce isolation.

5.2. Government & Policy Makers

Financial Reforms

- Increase **government grants, bursaries, and support packages** specifically for single parents.

- Adjust **student finance policies** to account for the full cost of living, including housing, childcare, and utilities.
- Ensure **single parents in HE remain eligible for welfare benefits**, preventing financial disincentives for pursuing education.

Childcare & Family Policies

- Expand **government-subsidised childcare** for student parents.
- Mandate **HE institutions to offer flexible childcare support** as part of student services.

Legislative & Policy Changes

- Recognise **single parents as a priority group** in higher education policies.
- Require **HE institutions to report data** on single-parent student retention and success rates.
- Develop **public awareness campaigns** to inform single parents about available HE opportunities and support.

5.3. Robertson Trust

Awareness & Outreach

- Support **information campaigns** to inform single parents on financial aid, childcare support, and flexible study options.
- Recommend to institutions that their **advisory services** to offer tailored support to single parents with navigating HE applications and funding processes.

Policy Advocacy

- Lobby for **government policy reforms** to increase financial aid and childcare support for single parents.
- Work with **HE institutions to develop inclusive policies** that address the unique needs of single parents.
- Push for **data collection requirements** to monitor and improve outcomes for single-parent students.

Community & Peer Support

- Facilitate a peer mentoring/ support network linking RT existing mature student bursary holders with new mature single parent students.
- Work with single parent organisations to help promote a positive and supportive culture and environment for single parents in education settings, such as raising awareness, challenging stereotypes and celebrating achievements,

Support with extra costs

- Bursary support to buy materials, books, licenses, electronics, software etc.

- A bridging fund to help pay up front for deposits for childcare whilst waiting for UC to reimburse parents.

By implementing these targeted recommendations, each agency can play a crucial role in **removing barriers** and **enhancing access to higher education for single parents**.

6. Conclusion

This report underscores the **urgent need for financial, institutional, and policy reforms** to ensure that single parents have equitable access to Higher Education. The research highlights:

- **The compounded financial, childcare, and institutional challenges** that hinder single parents' educational success.
- **The gaps in existing support structures and policies**, which fail to adequately address the needs of single-parent students.
- **The actionable recommendations that can drive change**, including enhanced financial aid, improved childcare provisions, flexible learning options, and targeted policy reforms.

By implementing these recommendations, **HE institutions, policymakers, and advocacy groups** can create a **more inclusive and supportive education system** that empowers single parents, enabling them to complete their studies and improve their long-term socioeconomic outcomes.

Section 1 Background

The Robertson Trust (TRT) '**Bursary and Non-Financial Support for Mature Students**' scholarship programme¹ has supported over two thousand young people in Scotland since launching in 1992. TRT is committed to embedding cycles of continuous learning across their work, so to this end they want to ensure that the scholarship programme is maximising its impact in preventing and reducing poverty and trauma in Scotland.

They have undertaken extensive stakeholder engagement and discovery work to broaden their bursary offerings across the wider post-sixteen education system and to create new partnerships for non-financial support in line with Robertson Trust's strategic priorities for developing the scholarship.

The trust wanted to learn which groups are most at risk of future poverty out with their current scholarship eligibility criteria. As a result, they were interested in exploring what a financial and non-financial support package may look like for mature learners and adult returners. Single parents are therefore a key group, as most are mothers in their mid-thirties and 'lone parent' families have been identified by Scottish Government as a priority family group who experience multiple disadvantages or adversities. OPFS argues in a recent paper that supporting single parents to gain further and higher education qualifications enables them access to jobs with higher earnings and improved sustainability so, contributing to increasing family income.²

In widening their scholarship offer Robertson Trust are keen to understand both the financial and non-financial support mature students may require. As part of this process, OPFS was funded by Robertson Trust to consult single parent students/ potential students across Scotland about their experiences and views on accessing and sustaining participation in higher education (HE).

One Parent Families Scotland

Established in 1944, OPFS has a model of involving single parents, experts by experience, in our work. We have unrivalled knowledge of the issues facing single parent families and are acutely aware of their needs in an ever-changing environment. In 2024/25, OPFS supported 6603 parents, children, and young people.

OPFS involves single parents, experts by experience, to co-produce OPFS services & policy priorities. We focus on family wellbeing; empower single parents with the right advice (materially, socially, and emotionally); support parents into training, employment, and education; and contribute to reducing child poverty.

Most single parents are mothers in their mid-thirties. We take an intersectional approach, so we work with many racially minoritised single parents, disabled and young single parents who face multiple barriers affecting access to services and opportunities.

OPFS is committed to transforming the narrative surrounding single parent families from one of dependency to one of resilience and agency. We aim to achieve this by focusing on

¹ <https://www.therobertsontrust.org.uk/news-and-blogs/building-a-scholarship-for-the-future/>

² <https://www.gov.scot/publications/annex-6-evidence-review-works/pages/7/>

upstream interventions and co-production, empowering single-parent families to be active participants in shaping policies and services that directly impact their lives.

Our unique position to deliver informed research comes from our deep understanding of the challenges faced by single-parent families, as documented in our ongoing 'Impact Reports' and research reports available on our website.³ We have also initiated engagement most recently with parents on specific issues including climate change, employability, poverty, and child maintenance service issues.

Research Outline

To support the Robertson Trust in their quest to understand both the financial and non-financial support mature students require, we consulted single parent students/potential students on the following key areas:

1. What is the financial offer needed for single parent mature students to access and sustain Higher Education?

- What are the direct financial barriers?
- What are the wider financial barriers e.g. childcare, tuition fees, living costs.
- Are there any other negative ramifications to undertaking Higher Education? i.e. lack of time, lack of transport, etc.

2. What is the non-financial offer needed for single parent mature students to access and sustain Higher Education?

- What wrap around support might be needed? Examples might include - mentoring, buddying, signposting, training sessions, access to careers, mental health support, financial management training, benefits advice.

To fully understand the barriers facing single parents in accessing, staying in and successfully graduating from higher education OPFS consulted single parents in the following four categories:

- **Presently in higher education:** To gain insights into the real-time barriers single parent students face, such as financial limitations due to interactions with the UK benefits system. Single parents who are in the system; what would they like to see? Develop actionable suggestions to improve their experience and retention in higher education.
- **Prospective students:** Identify barriers preventing potential single parent students from accessing or entering HE, including financial constraints, lack of information, confidence issues, childcare, and family responsibilities.
- **Former Students (Completers):** Those who have gone through HE - what could have been better?
- **Former Students (Non- Completers)** Gather insights from graduates and those who did not complete their studies to understand what improvements could be made.

³ <https://opfs.org.uk/policy-and-campaigns/policy-research/impact-reports/>

From this we will provide recommendations to improve the transition to HE. We will also suggest strategies for HE institutions to support single parent students in accessing and sustaining their education.

Research Methods

Survey

The research began with an online survey followed by focus groups which combines the strengths of both quantitative and qualitative research methods.

The survey reached a large and diverse number of single parents providing a broad overview of opinions, experience and policy suggestions. From this group of respondents, we recruited participants for the focus groups. This approach enabled us to gather initial data that highlighted key issues and areas of interest and helped identify specific topics and concerns that needed deeper exploration as part of further planned focused groups.

We aimed to target one hundred survey response, a minimum of forty responses from OPFS participants who are current, prospective or former higher education students in Scotland, with the aim of combining with a further sixty participant responses, from TRT stakeholder contacts. In fact, the survey reached 280 people. A larger, more diverse pool of participants enabled the selection of focus groups that better reflect the target audience.

Focus groups

We adopted a place-based approach by carrying out six focus groups (8-10 participants per group) covering potential, current and former students where possible, allowing parents from our Dundee, Glasgow and North Lanarkshire local services to be engaged within their location.

We offered a mixture of in-person and online sessions for parents who had contacted our advice services with queries related to HE and parents from other areas of Scotland who met the criteria for this engagement. Our approach was flexible dependent on what worked best for the parents involved.

Case Studies

We have included case studies of single parent students whom OPPFS has supported as they are incredibly valuable in a report about access to higher education for several reasons. They provide concrete examples of how single parent tailored interventions have impacted on single parents' experiences. A case study can highlight both successful strategies and the challenges faced in improving access to higher education.

Planned Outcomes of research

The planned outcomes for the research include to:

1. Gain insight into real-time barriers for SP's presently in HE and actionable suggestions to improve the single parent student experience and retention.
2. Gain insight from HE graduates or those who did not complete their studies on what could have been improved.

3. Identify barriers preventing potential single parent students from entering HE and suggestions for wraparound support that would ease their transition to HE.
4. Recommendations for HE institutions; Scottish Government; DWP and advice agencies on how they can support single parent students access and sustain higher education
5. What a financial and non-financial support package provided by RT may look like for mature single parent learners and adult returners.

This comprehensive and integrated approach will allow for targeted interventions at each stage of the educational pipeline, resulting in a better understanding of how to support single parent students in achieving academic success.

Report and Recommendations

After conducting the surveys and focus groups we analysed the findings from these sources. This analysis involved identifying key themes, patterns, and trends in the responses provided by single parents.

We then synthesised these findings into a report that presents detailed insights and recommendations. The report provides a clear overview of the challenges faced by single parents in higher education, the financial offer needed for single parent mature students to access and sustain Higher Education, the non-financial support needs, and potential areas for improvement.

The report offers actionable recommendations to Robertson Trust, Scottish Government, education institutions, DWP and support organisations to enhance the experience and outcomes for single parents pursuing higher education in Scotland.

Section 2: Why Single Parent Families? – A Profile

There are 144,000 single parent families in Scotland, one in four of all families with dependent children. A briefing from Public Health Scotland ⁴shows:

- Single parent families make up 25% of all families, and 92% are headed by women. Around 80% of single parents are aged between 25 and 50 years old and less than 1% are under 20 years.
- Most (65%) single parents with dependent children in Scotland are in paid employment.
- Four in ten (90,000) children in poverty in Scotland live in a single parent family and 38% of children in single parent families live in poverty.
- Two thirds of children in poverty in single parent families (66%) live in families where no one is in paid employment. A quarter (23%) live in families where the parent works part-time.
- Families often belong to more than one of the priority groups in the Scottish Government's Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan. For example, 40% of children in

⁴ https://publichealthscotland.scot/media/3100/child-poverty-in-scotland_priority-groups_lone-parent-families_briefing.pdf

single parent families also have a disabled person at home, and 47% of children in a family with a mother aged under twenty-five are also in a single parent household.

Viewing single parents through an intersectional lens highlights multiple factors of disadvantage facing women who are single parents. Not all single mothers share the same level of disadvantage: single mothers from Black, Asian, and minority ethnic communities, for example, experience the discrimination and inequality that confronts them as women, but in addition they must deal with those that come with being women of colour.

The key issues affecting single parents

In Scotland, 92% of single parents are women, and gender inequality is a significant cause of the barriers facing many single parents. By having to combine the role of sole carer and provider for their children and being unable to pool resources with another adult, single parents and their children are more likely to be in poverty than any other type of household. Nearly 7 in 10 (68.5%) lone parents are employed with over half of these employed full-time (51.8%) and under half employed part-time (48.2%).⁵ There is a limited number of job opportunities that fit around caring responsibilities which would provide a viable route out of poverty.

Single parents have been disproportionately impacted by cuts to the UK social security system, from the benefit cap to the two-child limit, to the young parent penalty which abolished previous policy of paying parents under 25 years the adult rate of benefits.

Stricter work requirements recently introduced by the UK Government now require single parents in receipt of Universal Credit to work up to 30 hours once their child turns three. This is despite single parents facing multiple barriers when looking for work or to increase their hours, the biggest of which is access to affordable and flexible childcare. Children in single parent families are more likely to be living in poverty at 38% compared to 24% of all children.⁶ This higher rate of poverty is the result of a combination of factors, including:

- **Gender inequality.** Ninety two percent of single parents are women, and the barriers and inequalities faced by single parent families are inextricably linked to gender equality.⁷
- **Labour market inequality.** Single parents in work are consistently the family type most likely to face in-work poverty and are more likely to be working in a low-wage sector and on lower hours. 48.2% of single parents in paid work are in part-time work. Part-time opportunities tend to be within lower-paid jobs and sectors which are female dominated and often undervalued. There is limited availability of job opportunities that would allow single parents to meet their caring responsibilities and exit poverty. Just 65.5% of single parents are in paid work, compared to 78.3% of mothers in a couple and 93.8% of fathers in a couple.
- **Lack of affordable childcare.** For single parents, access to affordable, flexible, quality childcare is vital as means of enabling them to enter paid work and potentially lift their families out of poverty. Coram's Childcare Survey 2023 found that the cost of

⁵ [Families and the labour market, UK - Office for National Statistics](#)

⁶ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/tackling-child-poverty-priority-families-overview>

⁷ [Poverty - Tackling child poverty: second year progress report - annex C - gov.scot \(www.gov.scot\)](#)

childcare is rising and there is a major gap in provision, which, in Scotland, was particularly stark for under twos, disabled children, and school-age childcare. In 2022, research by OPFS found that 21.2% of participants were not able to afford childcare at all, and a Scottish Government survey found single parents were twice as likely as dual earner households to report significant difficulties paying for childcare.

- **Social security.** Research by the Institute for Fiscal Studies found that cuts to social security from 2010-20 left single parents among the most exposed to rising inflation. Women are twice as dependent on social security due to structural inequalities, and analysis from the House of Commons library shows that from 2010 to 2020, 86% of net savings raised through cuts to social security and tax credits would come from women's incomes.
- **Housing.** From our local work we know single parents have fewer housing options than other households. They are more likely to live in poor-quality housing, such as temporary accommodation, overcrowded flats, or damp and mouldy properties. Single mothers and their children are also disproportionately affected by rising homelessness.
- **Child Maintenance.** Single parents face the ineffective enforcement of child maintenance payments on the part of the Child Maintenance Service and experience non-payment / delays in maintenance payments being used as a financial coercive technique. When children do not receive financial support from their other parent, or can't rely on receiving it regularly, this creates a huge strain for low-income single parents.
- **Multiple inequalities.** Many single parent families are also impacted by multiple inequalities which increase their risk of poverty. Single parents are more likely than couple parents to be from black (9%) and mixed ethnic groups (3%), and are more than twice as likely to be disabled (33%) and are more likely to have a disabled child (35%)
- **Paid and unpaid care.** Many single parents work in the care sector. The undervaluation of social care workers reflects the under-valuation of all care in Scotland, whether paid or unpaid, with too many single parents in low paid caring roles living in poverty. A high proportion of single parents care for a disabled child - for too long, people who care for others, whether paid or unpaid, have been undervalued and under-rewarded. As a result, caring can result in significant personal and economic costs for individuals and their families, with carers more likely to live in poverty.
- **Being the sole provider and carer.** All of these are areas which impact disproportionately on single parent families because they start from a position of living in a one-income household and balancing sole childcare responsibilities with paid work. They have many of the same costs as a two-parent family to be paid for from one income.

Section 3: Single Parents Students and Financial Support

Single parent students in higher education in Scotland have access to various forms of financial support⁸⁹:

1. **Bursaries and Loans:** Eligible students can receive a combination of bursaries and loans. For example, students with a household income of less than £21,000 can receive a minimum income of £8,100.
2. **Lone Parent Grant:** This grant provides additional financial support specifically for single parents. The grant provides up to £1,305 per year. The grant is income-assessed, but benefits are not considered in the calculation.¹⁰
3. **Discretionary Funds:** These funds are available to help with unexpected financial difficulties, such as housing or travel costs.
4. **Free Tuition:** Scottish domiciled students studying in Scotland do not have to pay tuition fees.
5. **Part-Time Fee Grant:** For part-time students, this grant can cover up to £1,805 of tuition fees.
6. **Disabled Students Allowance (DSA):** Additional support for students with disabilities.
7. **Benefits and Earnings:** Single parents may also be eligible for certain benefits and can combine these with earnings from paid work.

Help with childcare costs

Lone Parents' Childcare Grant (LPCG) is specifically designed to help with childcare costs for single parent students in higher education in Scotland.¹¹ It provides up to £1,215 annually to help cover costs for:

- Registered childminders
- After-school clubs
- Day care providers
- Pre-school education

It is in addition to the Lone Parents' Grant (£1,305) which is administered by the Student Awards Agency Scotland (SAAS). Funds are limited and may close early – apply as soon as possible.

- **Eligibility:** You must be a single parent with at least one dependent child and have applied for the Lone Parents' Grant through SAAS.
- **Application:** Complete the LPCG application form (Available via your university's Scholarships or Student Funding office). Ask your childcare provider to complete Sections C–F of the form. Submit the completed form along with associated documentation

⁸ [Benefits for lone parent students | CPAG](#)

⁹ <https://opfs.org.uk/support-and-advice/support-if-youre-a-student/financial-help-in-higher-education/>

¹⁰ <https://www.saas.gov.uk/guides/support-for-student-carers/lone-parents-grant>

¹¹ [Living Costs Grants - SAAS](#)

Other childcare support options available

There are additional childcare support options available for single parent students in higher education in Scotland¹²:

- **Childcare Fund:** Many universities have a Childcare Fund to help students with the cost of registered childcare. Students can apply directly through the institution.
- **Free Early Learning and Childcare:** The Scottish Government provides up to 1,140 hours of free early learning and childcare per year for eligible children aged 2 to 5
- **Universal Credit:** If you are eligible for Universal Credit, you can claim up to 85% of your childcare costs but only to cover your hours of work.

Section 4: Previous Research on Single Parents in Higher Education

There are very few comprehensive reports that have researched single parent students in higher education in the UK. Here are two notable examples:

1. Lone Parent Students' Motivations for and Hopes of Higher Education Engagement¹³:

This chapter in the book *'Widening Participation in Higher Education'* explores the motivations and aspirations of single mothers studying at UK Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). It provides a detailed analysis of their experiences and challenges. Key findings include:

- **Motivations and Aspirations:** Single parents, particularly single mothers, pursue higher education to improve their long-term prospects and those of their children. Their motivations include financial stability, freedom from welfare dependency, and intrinsic goals like developing self-esteem and providing a positive role model.
- **Challenges:** Single parents face significant challenges related to time management, finances, and childcare. These issues often impact their ability to engage fully with their studies.
- **Support Needs:** The report highlights the need for tailored support services, including accessible childcare, parent-friendly activities, and improved campus facilities such as baby-changing rooms.

¹² <https://www.studentinformation.gov.scot/students/further-education/childcare-funding>

¹³ [Lone Parent Students' Motivations for and Hopes of Higher Education Engagement | SpringerLink](#)

2. 'It has been an uphill battle from the get-go: The experiences of single parents studying at university in the UK during the COVID-19 pandemic'¹⁴

This article in the Journal of Further and Higher Education examines the unique challenges faced by single parents during the pandemic, including financial pressures, isolation, and the need for tailored support services. Key findings include:

- **Impact of COVID-19:** The pandemic exacerbated the challenges faced by single-parent students, including increased personal demands and limited support. Many struggled with balancing their studies, work, and childcare responsibilities.
- **Isolation and Mental Health:** Single parents experienced isolation and loneliness, which negatively affected their mental health and academic performance.
- **Recommendations for Change:** The report suggests universities should collect data on student parents to provide tailored support, work with Student Unions to ensure parent-friendly activities, and make concrete changes to campus spaces, such as introducing accessible, flexible, discounted childcare, parent and baby rooms, and baby-changing facilities

These findings underscore the importance of addressing the specific needs of single parents in higher education to ensure they have equal opportunities to succeed

Section 5 -The Survey and Results

Survey Monkey was the tool used for the on-line survey of single parents as it offers several benefits. It is user-friendly, making it easy to create and distribute surveys without needing advanced technical skills. It was possible to tailor the survey to address specific concerns and needs of single parents, using various question types like multiple-choice and comment boxes. The online model allowed single parents to respond at their convenience, which is crucial given their often busy schedules.

The survey was kept simple, using clear and concise language. We used multiple channels to reach single parents, such as email, social media, and community groups. Ensure the survey is mobile-friendly for easy access. This results section provides a structured and clear presentation of the findings to enable an understanding of the outcomes of the research. This section focuses strictly on presenting the data, leaving analysis and interpretation for the discussion section.

Demographics

We promoted the survey via OPFS social media channels (Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn and Bluesky) in addition to our newsletters to parents and practitioners and reached out to various universities, and charities. 280 parents responded to the survey.

- **Age:** respondents age was made up of the following: aged 35-44 years (38.93%), followed by 25-34 years (31.43%), 45-54 years (21.79%), 55+ (3.57%), less than 1% were aged under 18 years (0.36%) and 5 preferred not to answer (1.79%).

¹⁴ ['It has been an uphill battle from the get go': The experiences of single parents studying at univer](#)

- **Family Type:** Two-thirds of survey respondents were single parents, including kinship single parents, one-tenth were a single parent when they were in higher education. With almost a tenth (9.75%) saying they are a single parent with equal share. The rest were disqualified from the survey as they were not a single parent.
- **Ethnicity:** 87% of respondents were white with the rest being from multiple ethnic groups.
- **Gender:** Most respondents were female (95.29%) which is representative of the 92% of single parent households in Scotland that headed by a female. Less than 3% were male (2.75%), less than 1% are non-binary, prefer not to answer or other (0.39%, 0.78%, and 0.78%).
- **Children:** Most respondents had one child (39.22%), closely followed by those with two children (38.04%), 15.69% with three children, 5.88% with four children, and only a small number with five or more children (0.39%), and additional 0.78% preferred not to answer. Over a half (53.33%) have children aged 5-10 years, almost a half (48.63%) have children aged 16-19, almost one-fifth have children aged 4 or under, and aged 16-19 (22.75%, and 21.96%), and over one-tenth (12.16%) have children aged 20+.
- **Disability:** Over a half (53.45%) did not have a disability or a child(ren) with a disability or long-term health condition. Almost a third (31.03%) have a disability or long-term health condition themselves, and over one-fifth (21.98%) have a child(ren) with a disability or long-term health condition. 3.88% chose not to answer this question.
- **Care Experienced:** Over one-fifth said they were 'care experienced' (21%) and over a tenth (15%) were estranged from their parents.
- **Experience of higher education:** The majority (40.77%) were current students, over one-quarter (26.61%) were graduates, almost one in ten (9.87%) were former students that did not successfully complete and over one in ten (11.59%) were considering studying in higher education. There were some further respondents that were disqualified from taking the survey further as they were studying at further education colleges, or not a student (8.15%, and 3% respectively).

Survey Analysis

As well as the quantitative responses we analysed the open-ended survey responses to provide deep insights into the thoughts and experiences of single parents. We did this by creating themes, grouping similar responses together under each heading. We assigned each response to one or more themes. This helped in quantifying how many responses fell under each theme. We highlighted standout quotes that clearly illustrate each theme. These quotes are very powerful in conveying single parents' experiences and perspectives.

We then combined the qualitative insights with the quantitative data to create a comprehensive understanding of the issues. This synthesis can help in making informed decisions and taking actionable steps.

The survey findings indicate that single parents face significant challenges in accessing and succeeding in higher education, primarily due to financial issues, childcare challenges, institutional inflexibilities and the need for specific support for their children's mental health

and learning disabilities. Respondents highlighted the importance of having reliable support for their children, particularly for those with conditions like dyslexia and autism. There is a call for additional resources such as helplines, flexible assignment deadlines, and regular communication with educators.

The next section covers challenges, grouped by student category and then suggestions from respondents as to how things could be made better for mature single parent students.

Challenges

The survey responses reflect several recurring themes related to challenges faced by single parents balancing studying with family responsibilities. Key issues identified from the data:

Current students ---

The survey responses reflect several recurring themes related to challenges faced by single parents balancing studying with family responsibilities. Key issues identified from the data: The following eight barriers are listed in order of significance.

Quantitative Feedback on the Key Barriers

- 1. *Managing studies alongside family responsibilities and childcare***
97% of current single parent students found managing studies alongside family responsibilities 'extremely challenging' (36%) or 'challenging' (61%). None found it easy or very easy.
- 2. *Finances including benefits & student loans***
87% found family finances (student loans & benefits) extremely challenging (61%) or challenging (26%)
- 3. *Mental ill-health (including stress & anxiety)***
67% felt their mental ill-health extremely challenging (48%) or challenging (19 %) in sustaining their course.
- 4. *Access to higher education (travel time /cost & time of classes etc)***
60% found access, in terms of travel time/costs and the 'systems', to higher education extremely challenging (35%) or challenging (25%)
- 5. *Confidence (feeling prepared for the challenges of higher education)***
53% felt their lack of confidence was extremely challenging (19%) or challenging (34%)
- 6. *Accessing support & information (course info, flexibilities, childcare support info etc)***
49% felt accessing the right information, advice or support specific to single parents was extremely challenging (20%) or challenging (29 %)

7. Conditions that make learning more challenging such as dyslexia, autism, or ADHD

33% felt their condition meant learning was extremely challenging (13%) or challenging (20%)

8. Disability & Physical Health

29% felt their disability or poor health was extremely challenging (8%) or challenging (21%)

Summary of the key points from the survey data regarding challenges facing current students:

1. Balancing study with family responsibilities and childcare:

- Difficulty finding time to study due to childcare, school drop-offs, and school holidays.
- Struggling to prioritise study amidst family commitments, particularly when trying to juggle working and studying simultaneously.

2. Financial struggles and employment concerns:

- The challenge of managing finances, with specific reference to insufficient support for the costs of transport, childcare, a decent laptop and ongoing internet costs.
- Financial stress related to the expectation of finding full-time work during the summer months, even when childcare and study commitments conflict.

3. Rigid and inconsistent timetables:

- The lack of flexibility in timetables, which complicates planning childcare and part-time employment opportunities.
- Issues with not receiving timetables in advance, making it difficult to plan necessary arrangements (e.g. booking childcare).

4. Placement and course requirements:

- Struggles with the requirement for full-time placements, especially when options are limited or difficult to access.
- Challenges in meeting attendance and punctuality requirements as well as assignment deadlines (e.g., being marked late due to childcare obligations).

5. Lack of support systems:

- Insufficient institutional support for the specific needs of parents or caregivers, particularly in terms of flexible study options or accommodations.
- Limited guidance on how to balance study and personal responsibilities effectively.

“As a single parent nursing student in second year, SAAS only provide £200 per month towards childcare fees. My childcare is full time so it’s £990 per month - it’s unmanageable along with my private rent housing of £1020 per month. I can barely pick up nurse bank shifts as I do 40+ hours per week on placement and childcare is an issue at weekends as I have no support. There is no other help available for my situation it’s completely unfair.”

"I did think I'd have had better support to get through course work, projects, and essays a bit more than I have. I feel embarrassed about handing in extension forms to ask for longer time if my daughter becomes hospitalised due to her epilepsy. I have not heard of any charities that support. I have applied and receive a bursary that is roughly £900 a month, but this has affected my UC benefit, and I struggle to support my children fully with this little coming in. I do feel grateful that I receive financial support from the college to my daughter's nursery fees, while being in the college classes two days a week 9-5. I am expected to be on placement the other three days. This has become an issue as I am the only one who picks up and drops off my children as they are in three different places due to schooling and nursery settings, so there is no flexibility within this."

"As a single parent, one of the biggest challenges I faced was the lack of alignment between childcare arrangements and university class schedules. Nurseries often don't operate at times that accommodate early lectures, late seminars, or the flexibility needed to stay behind after class. This meant I frequently had to leave classes early or rush into university with a crying baby, unable to take the time to settle him before class. Securing a nursery place often requires booking a year in advance, which is impossible when life circumstances change suddenly. Moreover, funding is only available for registered childcare services, leaving no flexibility to explore other options. "

"Since my child is under 2, she isn't entitled to any free or discounted childcare as I'm a full-time, unemployed university student. Only those who are employed are entitled to up to 85% paid childcare services, which I find extremely discriminatory and unfair, considering I'm working towards a career myself.... Many people I know who are in employment and earn roughly the same amount as my student income get their rent and majority of their childcare costs paid for them through universal credit, but I can't access any of this solely because I'm a student.

"Having to be on UC and having to take SAAS. SAAS being taken out my UC and still paying it back again. So, feel like I am paying it twice. If I did not apply for it I would still have it taken out my UC. Not fair."

"It's more the financial side of things. Universal credit has been stopped because my SAAS payments wipe them out, also having to still work as I could not just live on my SAAS payments every month. Having to buy materials, books, licenses, electronics, software etc. printing is expensive. I don't get any financial help from my children's father either!"

"At my university important exams and assignments were set on dates /or changed to dates within school holidays. Parents who had no holiday childcare cover and who therefore couldn't attend these exams or meet deadlines were marked as a fail and we had to do a resit! "

"In person classes being at 9 when school doesn't open until 9!!"

"The BIGGEST issue I face currently as a student is when I'm no longer registered as a student between the months of May-September I am expected by UC to find full time employment, despite having no childcare- and it would actually negatively impact my CV to only be in employment for 1 month (time the interview/training etc is complete) as once you're a student

you no longer need to work so was actively told just to leave the job when I become a student again. On that, they also expected me to realistically have no break with my kids, so studying for 8 months, and working full time for 4 months?"

Past students, non-completers

Quantitative Feedback on the Key Barriers

We asked those single parents who had been in HE but hadn't completed their qualification what they felt were the key barriers in their experience to sustaining participation in higher education. The following eight barriers are listed in order of significance.

- 1. *Managing studies alongside family responsibilities and childcare***
91% of non-completers found managing studies alongside family responsibilities 'very challenging' (86%) or 'challenging' (5%). None found it easy or very easy.
- 2. *Finances including benefits & student loans***
87% found family finances (student loans & benefits) extremely challenging (60%) or challenging (27%)
- 3. *Access to higher education (travel time /cost & time of classes etc)***
72% found access, in terms of travel time/costs and the 'systems', to higher education extremely challenging (36%) or challenging (36%)
- 4. *Mental ill-health (including stress & anxiety)***
63% felt their mental ill-health had been extremely challenging (36%) or challenging (27%) in sustaining their course.
- 5. *Accessing support & information (course info, flexibilities, childcare support info etc)***
59% felt accessing the right information, advice or support specific to single parents was extremely challenging (41%) or challenging (18%)
- 6. *Confidence (feeling prepared for the challenges of higher education)***
50% felt their lack of confidence was extremely challenging (32%) or challenging (18%)
- 7. *Disability & Physical Health***
46% felt their disability or poor health was extremely challenging (32%) or challenging (14%)
- 8. *Conditions that make learning more challenging such as dyslexia, autism, or ADHD***
32% felt their condition meant learning was extremely challenging (14%) or challenging (18%)

Summary of the key points from the survey data regarding challenges faced by former students who didn't complete their degree:

1. Balancing work and education:

- Many respondents were working while studying, which impacted their ability to achieve their desired educational outcomes.
- Some completed courses but not to the level they aspired to.

2. Insufficient disability support:

- Limitations in disability support funding, as dictated by government policies, hindered some students from studying part-time, which could have better accommodated their needs.

3. Childcare challenges:

- A significant barrier for parents, particularly single parents, was the difficulty in securing reliable childcare, especially for children with disabilities.
- The lack of accessible childcare options contributed to failures in completing courses, such as nursing degrees.

4. Inadequate support from educational institutions:

- Some respondents felt that there was a lack of support from tutors and faculty, particularly during times of personal crisis, such as dealing with violence or health issues.

5. Difficulties with placement organisation:

- For nursing students, placement locations were often far from home, complicating travel and childcare arrangements. The limited availability of night shifts exacerbated these challenges.

6. Need for broader childcare funding:

- Former students emphasised the need for childcare funding that is not restricted to large colleges,
- They advocated for more comprehensive support for those in higher education.

Overall, the survey highlights substantial obstacles such as inadequate support systems, financial constraints, and the challenges of balancing childcare with educational commitments that former students faced during their studies.

"Lack of care for older children with ASN in my area. Unreliable bus service as buses often do not turn up so made me late which costed me more in care costs. Bus journey takes 1.5 hrs into the city + 20 minutes' walk across city each way. Car drivers take 20 mins each way to drive same journey to college in city and home.

"School holidays were 2 weeks for children and 1 week for studentsso childcare problems."

"I felt like a fish out of water all the time. At Uni it was an environment where there was no support for anyone who was not used to how all the online stuff worked whereas other younger

students did so- things like handing essays in, referencing them was a constant struggle. I had no PC or up to date phone help with that practical side would have helped "

"Unable to commit to practical placements as part of course as in evenings and the already limited amount of care available for daughter stops at 6pm. "

"Lack of funds to purchase laptop to work on. College laptops can be loaned however in demand by other students."

"I found childcare very challenging as my child struggles to adapt to random people and I struggle to trust people. I was doing nursing and because I don't have any support, I got chucked off the course... the man that did it actually made me cry. The hours were 12-hour nightshifts, and the workload was exhausting. It was made impossible for me, and I was discriminated for it and made to feel useless by a man. I think more help and support for single mothers wanting to better themselves is crucial. I haven't done anything since then and my anxiety and depression has gotten extremely worse and that was 3 years ago. It's not just in the moment these things effect single mothers for years and makes us feel trapped."

"I had an unconditional offer at 3 universities to study mental health nursing. I started one but to pay for childcare for my 2 children, the cost was over £1000 a month. SAAS would only cover £200, so I could not begin the course. "

"I couldn't afford the childcare. Nursing bursaries don't help much, and I had childcare to pay through holidays and placement. It's not only restricted me from finishing my course it's left me in debt. "

"Timetables are released late on which causes issues with arranging childcare, public travel is difficult, feeling prepared then realising you're overwhelmed with everything is difficult. All this adds to stress, anxiety, depression."

"Lack of clear information about what financial support there's available to single parent students. Often places like CAB or universities just tell you about general student finance not understanding that there can be variations if you are also a single parent."

"Paying up front for deposits for childcare whilst waiting for UC to reimburse me the following month has put me into debt. Home is cold in winter due to cost of energy on pre-payment meter. Univ suggest I studied in the college library or local library. Childcare costs would be more if I went out to use these facilities! "

Graduates

We asked those single parents who had been in HE and who graduated what they felt were the key barriers in their experience to sustaining participation in higher education. The following eight barriers are listed in order of significance.

Quantitative Feedback on the Key Barriers

1. Managing studies alongside family responsibilities and childcare

80% of graduates found managing studies alongside family responsibilities 'very challenging' (49%) or 'challenging' (31%). None found it easy or very easy.

2. Finances including benefits & student loans

75% found family finances (student loans & benefits) extremely challenging (51%) or challenging (24%)

3. Mental ill-health (including stress & anxiety)

70% felt their mental ill-health had been extremely challenging (26%) or challenging (44%) in sustaining their course.

4. Access to higher education (travel time /cost & time of classes etc)

60% found access, in terms of travel time/costs and the 'systems', to higher education extremely challenging (20%) or challenging (40%)

5. Confidence (feeling prepared for the challenges of higher education)

60% felt their lack of confidence was extremely challenging (16%) or challenging (44%)

6. Accessing support & information (course info, flexibilities, childcare support info etc)

51% felt accessing the right information, advice or support specific to single parents was extremely challenging (31%) or challenging (20 %)

7. Conditions that make learning more challenging such as dyslexia, autism, or ADHD

26% felt their condition meant learning was extremely challenging (13%) or challenging (13%)

8. Disability & Physical Health

25% felt their disability or poor health was extremely challenging (7%) or challenging (18%)

Summary of the key points from the survey data regarding challenges faced by former students who successfully graduated.

1. Managing studies alongside family responsibilities and childcare:

- Most graduates (80%) found managing studies alongside family responsibilities 'very challenging' or 'challenging'.
- None found it easy or very easy.

2. Finances including benefits & student loans:

- A high percentage (75%) found family finances (student loans & benefits) extremely challenging or challenging

3. 3 Mental ill-health (including stress & anxiety)

- Poor mental ill-health had been extremely challenging in sustaining their course.

4. Access to higher education (travel time /cost & time of classes etc)

- Over half of graduates had found access, in terms of travel time/costs and the HE 'systems' had created barriers

5. Confidence:

- Although they had graduated 60% felt their lack of confidence had affected them.

6. Accessing course info, flexibilities, childcare support info etc:

- Accessing the right information, advice or support specific to single parents was a key issue.

"It would have been better if I had done an apprenticeship, at least I would have gone through hell, but coming out with a foot already inside the job market. All I have so far is debt, very little confidence to compete with master and PhD graduates applying for the same jobs. I am working in the same kind of jobs I had before having done all this, since I need to pay the bills, i have no time to wait for the right job. so, my situation changed nothing, except for the huge amount of debt from student loan i have now."

"University had no special provision for people like me, no special provision for mature students in general, very bad provisions for neurodiversity, it was just truly a hellish"

"I think there is not enough information for single parents who are considering further education on how their benefits might change and what is available in the education sector to support them."

"It's hard to know where to start, how to access funds you are entitled to and childcare being a nightmare."

"No support at all for single parents. Zero family support, working full time and all by myself. Not having days off it was extremely difficulty."

"As a single parent in higher education, I faced many of these issues myself. Timetable changes often left me without childcare because most providers require fixed hours. On multiple occasions, I was eligible for funding but delays in payment caused me to lose my child's place at the childcare centre. By the time the money arrived, that spot had been filled. This experience made me acutely aware of how damaging these delays are for parents!"

"Only support, and I had to beg for it every single exam or essay, was the extensions. But I had to write almost a journal every single time, it made me feel awful. They should assess our situation from the beginning and apply to every deadline throughout the course. Why make us state the same every single time, being that our situation will not change? It was very, very distressing and humiliating to write every time to ask for extension. It was one of the greatest contributors to my declining mental health."

“Being able to have time to meet the needs of my children without penalty Once my autistic child had absconded from primary school and I was told if I left the class I would be forced to leave my course. It was the most stressful experience. Treated like trash.”

“It sometimes feels like a secret that in higher education you can get help with childcare and discretionary funding to support lone parents. Each year of my higher education when it was time to reapply for discretionary funding, I was always uncertain if I could continue my studies. I had to continue to share my finances and life with student support and submit a plea to help me continue in my studies. It was very challenging on my mental health and my confidence at that time. Looking back, I am forever grateful for the funding I was able to obtain to complete my studies however it wasn't without its barriers and complications.”

“Financial implications eg universal credits deducting £ for £ what you get in loans. Also, UC won't work out your entitlement before starting a course, makes it difficult to work out whether you will manage it or not financially. Childcare was always a massive issue.”

Prospective students

We asked prospective students what they expected the key barriers would be to accessing and completing higher education as a single parent student. The following eight potential challenges are listed in order of significance.

Quantitative Feedback on the Key Barriers

- 1. Managing studies alongside family responsibilities and childcare**
92% of prospective students expected managing studies alongside family responsibilities to be 'extremely challenging' (40%) or 'challenging' (52%). None felt it wouldn't be a challenge.
- 2. Finances including benefits & student loans**
88% expected family finances (student loans & benefits) to be extremely challenging (56%) or challenging (32%)
- 3. Mental ill-health (including stress & anxiety)**
64% felt the impact on their mental health would be extremely challenging (36%) or challenging (28%) in sustaining studying in HE.
- 4. Access to higher education (travel time /cost & time of classes etc)**
64 % thought access, in terms of travel time/costs and the 'systems', in higher education would be extremely challenging (20%) or challenging (44%)
- 5. Confidence (feeling prepared for the challenges of higher education)**
56% felt their lack of confidence was extremely challenging (20%) or challenging (36%)

6. **Accessing support & information (course info, flexibilities, childcare support info etc)**
52% felt accessing the right information, advice or support specific to single parents would be extremely challenging (20%) or challenging (32 %)
7. **Disability & Physical Health**
28% felt their disability or poor health would make HE extremely challenging (8%) or challenging (20%)
8. **Conditions that make learning more challenging such as dyslexia, autism, or ADHD**
20% felt their condition might mean learning would be extremely challenging (0%) or challenging (20%)

Summary of the key points from the survey data regarding challenges prospective students think they will face:

1. **Lack of support:**
 - Many respondents interested in higher education are single parents without family or friend support, which adds to their challenges in pursuing education.
2. **Time management and deadlines:**
 - Concerns about meeting deadlines and managing time effectively are significant challenges for prospective students.
3. **Family and Caregiving responsibilities:**
 - Some prospective students were worried about balancing coursework with caregiving duties, such as caring for elderly parents or children, which complicates their ability to study.
4. **Financial barriers:**
 - Many respondents expressed concerns about potential financial difficulties, including the inability to reduce work hours to find time for study due to financial constraints.
 - High costs of education and living, alongside changes in benefits (like Universal Credit), create additional financial stress.
5. **Limited course availability:**
 - Prospective students felt there are limited options for part-time or online courses, making it difficult for students to find courses that fit their needs.
6. **Impact of benefits on education:**
 - Some respondents reported they had heard that pursuing education can lead to the loss of benefits, making it financially unsustainable to study.
7. **Concerns about future employment:**

- There is anxiety about the ability to secure better job opportunities through education while managing existing responsibilities and financial challenges.

8. **Single Parent Specific Information:**

- Some respondents express a desire for more clarity on university access and associated costs, indicating that understanding financial implications is crucial for their decision-making.

9. **Worries about capability:**

- There are concerns about whether individuals can cope with the demands of studying alongside personal and financial challenges.

Overall, the survey highlights significant obstacles such as lack of support, financial difficulties, caregiving responsibilities, and limited flexible HE educational options that prospective students face when considering further education.

“Not everyone has family around them or the spare cash for childcare, however, how are we supposed to better ourselves, progress in our career etc to benefit our children if it’s not made possible.”

“I’m concerned about losing Universal Credit and not knowing how much bursary/grant available or if need to take on more student debt as already have loans outstanding. It’s a step into the unknown”

“Seems so difficult to find out how this all works so you have to go in blind and I can’t commit to that.”

“I worry about the speed of the university in awarding the childcare fund. I have heard you apply; the finance team consider your application in a meeting before your application is approved. In the meantime, you have the responsibility of covering childcare costs.”

“I’m on benefits due to disability and have heard I might potentially lose benefits if I have a student loan. if your disability is physical, it’s fine to go into education without it being seen to impact your condition, if your disability is mental health based, you’re somehow seen to be ‘improving’ by attending education. ”

“As far as the Job Centre is concerned during the summer holiday single parents are not students and we must look for work or work more and we must visit the Job Centre every week... this is a very big problem, how to find a job for 6 weeks only? And what we can do with our children, not every school has holiday childcare ...”

“I’ve tried to get the advice I need to make a really life changing decision, but nobody has the time in these services to support people who need a bit more help to overcome barriers, therefore the barriers get progressively bigger”

Key Themes across all Parent Student Categories

The difficulty of managing studying alongside family responsibilities was the dominant theme. The chart below shows that for past students that did not complete, 100 % had found it very difficult or difficult to manage their studies in conjunction with family responsibilities.

For single parent graduate students 87% had found it very difficult or difficult to manage their studies in conjunction with family responsibilities. The table also highlights that almost three-quarters (72.73%) of single parents' students that did not complete higher education reported to find the balance of studying with family responsibilities 'really difficult', in contrast to a third of graduates (37.74%). Nearly all current students (96.93%) and prospective students (92%) reported they found this balance is or would be difficult or very difficult.

These results suggest a need for more flexible, supportive systems to help students with caregiving responsibilities and other external challenges.

Key themes identified by all students:

Childcare support:

All groups highlighted the importance of childcare support, with multiple references to the need for funded or subsidised childcare options.

Current students: Pay childcare similar to what employed parents receive.

Prospective students: Clear information about available childcare options.

Former students (not completed): Funded childcare is critical for continuing education.

Graduates: Access to childcare and support in planning study time to balance being a parent and a student.

Financial support

Financial concerns were a key theme across all groups, with particular emphasis on:

Current students: Paid childcare support.

Prospective students: Information about bursaries, financial calculations, and available support.

Former students (not completed): Stress around student loans and the need for financial guidance, as well as concerns about rent and Universal Credit impacts.

Graduates: Budgeting advice, clear guidance on benefits entitlement, and additional financial support (e.g., charities, crisis support).

Flexibility in education

Flexibility in timetables and study options was emphasised by multiple groups, with a focus on accommodating the needs of single parents.

Current students: Support for flexibility in coursework or class timings.

Prospective students: Mention of course flexibility and how schedules would work with parental duties.

Former students (not completed): Distance learning options were seen as crucial for accommodating children's needs.

Graduates: Support in planning study time and understanding how to balance academic and parenting responsibilities.

Clarity of information

Many respondents highlighted the need for clear, accessible information about the support available to single parents.

Prospective students: Simpler access to support information and clear guidance on financial matters.

Former students (not completed): Desire for better guidance on available financial support and entitlements.

Graduates: More information on benefits entitlement and study support.

Similarities between all students:

Childcare needs: Every group mentioned the importance of childcare, with several responses reflecting a need for funded childcare or better childcare options to help single parents balance education and parenting.

Financial support: All groups expressed a desire for better financial support, whether through bursaries, student loans, or assistance with rent and benefits. Financial stress appears to be a common challenge.

Access to information: All groups sought clearer, more accessible information about available support services and entitlements (e.g., childcare options, financial help, benefits).

Differences between different categories of students:

Current students: Emphasised the importance of paid childcare similar to employed parents and flexibility in their studies. There was less focus on the need for information about finances since they may have already navigated that process.

Prospective students: Strong focus on understanding how finances will be calculated, available bursaries, and childcare options. They seem to be most in need of simplified information to make the prospect of attending higher education more manageable.

Former students (Not completed): A heavy focus on the stress caused by student loans and the lack of clear guidance on how financial support impacts other benefits like Universal Credit. This group also expressed frustration with the lack of practical support in terms of childcare and understanding financial entitlements.

Graduates: Focused more on long-term support, such as budgeting, time management, and stress management strategies. There was also a desire for more guidance on benefits entitlement while studying and how to access crisis support (e.g., foodbanks). Graduates seemed to benefit from structural support in balancing study and parenting.

Summary

Overall, the suggestions across the different categories reflect a common concern about financial and childcare support, with each group emphasising the importance of clear information and flexibility.

However, prospective students are looking for information to help them decide whether to pursue education, current students are focused on maintaining their studies with adequate support, former students (not completed) are looking for more practical and financial assistance to make education sustainable, and graduates are interested in more holistic support strategies, such as stress management and ongoing financial guidance.

Several responses emphasised the idea that not all single parents face the same circumstances (e.g., different social support networks). This suggests a need for more personalised or individualised support services.

Section 6: Focus Groups

The above analysis of the survey data aims to identify trends and patterns, but we also gathered much qualitative information from the open questions in the survey. The qualitative data from our focus groups aims to understand the more depth the reasons behind these trends.

We held four focus groups with single parents – two in-person sessions held in Dundee and Edinburgh, one held online during the day, and one held online in the evening. Twelve parents attended with all being mothers and the majority in their mid-thirties. Eight parents were white British, three were other white and one was black African. In each discussion there was a mix of parents who were presently in HE, left HE and were thinking about higher education.

Participants in the focus groups were parents to school- age children ranging from 5 to 12 years old. One member of the group has a child who is a non-attender while the others are in full time education.

The focus group discussions were very loosely structured to facilitate a free-flowing discussion. The issues covered were not so wide ranging as the survey, which had predefined questions, but reflected very similar priorities and suggested solutions.

Key Points from the Focus Groups

Issue 1. Lack of childcare around school pickups and drop offs

Parents felt it was assumed that once your children were in school that childcare is not an issue anymore. However, this isn't the case and it much harder to work around school times than it is to get a full day space with a childminder.

"There are never any spaces at our breakfast or after school club as soon as the P7s leave their spaces are given to the new P1s so my son who is in P4 will never get a space"

Suggested Solution

Having a timetable which is centred around school times would allow time for parents to make drop off / pick up and travel to / from their setting at either end of the day, reducing the need for out of school childcare. "

Issue 2. Lack of age-appropriate childcare

The parents shared that they all felt that current after- school childcare services are aimed at younger children. One parent commented that she felt activities were always craft based which is not of interest to her son but opportunity to use sports facilities would make it more appealing. Another parent shared that their daughter suffers with sever anxiety and would not cope being left with a childminder however having something on site where she is able to be in the same building as her would make this far more of an option she would explore.

"I find that my kids don't enjoy childcare because it's not aimed at their age group, they find it boring and don't want to go which adds to the stress."

Suggested Solution

"If the university could offer some activities or club for pre-teen, teenagers like sport sessions or gym sessions on site that students could use for experience in teaching it would benefit everyone"

Issue 3. Placement expectations

It was clear during the conversation that all parents in the focus groups have experienced difficulties with childcare while studying which involves placements. There is a lack of a personal approach taken when allocating placements with a student's caring responsibility not considered. It was suggested that additional funding for childcare during placements would be helpful and that paying family and friend should be considered in this.

They felt the childcare available was not catering to their children's age group. They would like to see changes to look at ways to enhance the offering to an older age group using one site facilities at/near the university such as gyms, sports pitches and computer suites.

"I knew I would be expected to do placements as part of the course but finding childcare for a 12-hour shift is very difficult. I'm asking friends and family to do morning drop- offs and afternoon pick-ups, do tea, homework and get them settled for the night, it's a lot to expect for an extended period of time"

Suggested Solutions

"Share timetables for course & placement in advance - to plan childcare. - at least 3 months in advance"

"Childcare options that come as a package deal with placements"

"For courses that include placements then the bursary should cover at least the national minimum wage for the hours worked."

Issue 4. Financial support

From the participants attending there were many different financial situations, one of the most noted was the stark difference between those parents studying nursing and those who are studying different courses. It was discussed in detail the lack of information about the effects on a parent's universal credit when receiving a student bursary which is the financial support option for nursing students.

"I am studying nursing, and the financial implications were not made clear to me before I started, I am not entitled to a loan or UC having this information made clear would have allowed me to better prepare for this"

Suggested Solution

"A partnership with Job Centre Plus so that there are specialist work coaches in the job centre for HE students who can work closely with specialist student advisors within the universities to avoid misinformation and better management of expectations before starting their course."

"The university could implement a buddy system where new single parent students could meet with 3rd or 4th year single parent students to share the reality of what financial support is available in terms of grants. "

"Better collaboration of student's services with DWP specialists and combined sessions with them both would be helpful. "

Issue 6. Lack of help with childcare costs

All participants struggled / had struggled to pay for childcare. This meant less money for food, heating and paying the rent resulting in some parents getting into debt.

"The money you get does not come close to the cost of childcare particularly when it's out with 9-5 hours. "

"Help needs to be increased in line with current childcare costs, not necessarily students getting the money directly but the childcare settings having an incentive to be more flexible for student parents"

Suggested Solutions

I like the idea of funded spaces for student families in an equivalent way the 2-year-old spaces are allocated in nurseries but for children of all ages.

Issue 6. Lack of information around grants, application processes and timelines

The parents shared that there were many grants available at various times of year, but it was difficult to get information in one place of how and when to apply and one parent share that there have been times when she has missed the window to apply for grants

"a lot of what you hear is word of mouth it not all in once places so everyone can get access to the information"

Suggested Solutions

"A mandatory appointment where you have a one to one with an adviser who can go through which grants you can apply for and how to go about it - in this group I have met someone else who goes to the same uni as me and knew about grants that I didn't"

Issue 7. Flexible study

The groups all agreed that having more control over their studies would make managing studying a lot easier.

"Having a university timetable that conflicts with the school timetable makes studying a stressful experience."

Suggested Solutions

"Spread classes during the week, so instead of 3 full days I would have 5 days 10am till 2.30, for example, because afternoon classes usually make more problems for me because I have limited after school care"

Issue 8. University holiday timetables don't match school holidays

School holidays don't match uni breaks. Specifically in service days were highlighted as a consistent issue where the cycle of a lack of appropriate childcare and financial support for ad hoc childcare is causing parents to miss classes

The differences between university and school holidays are significant. University holidays tend to be longer and less frequent, so they don't fit with school breaks. This can create challenges for parent students who need to align their schedules with their children's school holidays."

Suggested Solutions

"Holiday times and in service days that match the schools I had the situation this year when children had 2 weeks of holidays when I had only 1, I was unable to attend as I had no childcare"

"Remote classes are also a good option, or flexibility to attend the same class on different day with another group doing the same course if possible"

"Addressing these issues often requires universities to consider more flexible scheduling options and support mechanisms for parent students."

Issue 9. Stigma & Judgemental Attitudes

Single parents in the focus groups described how they had experienced stigma and judgemental attitudes due to their family type. They described feeling isolated, stigmatised and frustrated with negative stereotypes.

"As a single parent there is a stigma that you don't want to do anything but that isn't the case, I know many single parents who want to study and get a good job, but our circumstances aren't taken into consideration."

"The stigmatisation of single mothers spreads harmful stereotypes and unjust prejudices that affects our ability to overcome the challenges we face. It just feeds the narrative that you can't manage when you are late to class or missing classes due to childcare"

Suggested Solutions

"Government & universities should be encouraging empathy and understanding toward single mothers. We are the ones who have been there for our children and who want to better ourselves to give our kids a better future!"

"Why can't the universities appreciate diversity in family structures, so we have a more understanding and supportive environment to do our studies."

"We need policies and initiatives that support single mothers, including affordable childcare, decent employment opportunities, and social support systems, so we can navigate the challenges of being a single mum"

Issue 10: Mental health & wellbeing

The parents discussed in detail their experiences and it became clear that there is a lack of consistency in mental health support and provision across the universities attended. Some had a very good experience when they needed support whereas others felt there was a lack of support.

"It wasn't until I had a break down and displayed a certain type of emotion that I was made aware of the supports a could access, this made me feel weak had there been more availability and options I wouldn't have reached breaking point"

"Discretionary fund - £500 - spoke to personal academic tutor advised me to speak to the financial support at the uni. not nice sharing bank statements with someone, but it was worth it. It would be good if funds were more known about - instead of waiting till I was at breaking point that I was told about it."

Suggested solutions

"There could be more options to have off- site appointments to avoid awkwardness, services that can be accessed in the evening online."

"More information on specialised charities such as One Parent Families Scotland and Fife Gingerbread."

"Having more open and compassionate conversations about childcare "

"Being able to have a conversation about my payment would have reduced my anxiety massively when I tried approaching this i felt like my childcare issues were brushed off and didn't matter but it was causing me a huge stress".

"Make wellbeing teams more accessible - workshops like stress management - guided mediation - laughter workshop - that fits in with normal timetables. peer support."

Issue 11. Food & Stigma

Parents discussed food provisions / help with food on the university site and agreed that this would be a useful service however there was inconsistencies with not all university's offering this help.

"Student loans are not enough to live on anymore. Once I've paid the rent, I had hardly any money to cover our living costs, including food, and this severely impacted my social life and mental health."

"It's especially hard when on a placement, being for 12 hours I struggled faced by single to buy up to 3 meals during these shifts. Particularly on nursing placements. "

Suggested solutions

"On-site food pantries would be useful. Less stigma when available to everyone."

"It could be a case of running free breakfast or lunch events for students or even giving out free hot drinks and snacks around campus."

I feel embarrassed and uncomfortable about going to food banks so, any free-food initiatives that university can provide would be really helpful "

"It's important that single parent students have a clear idea of what support is available to them, along with the steps they need to take to access that support. "

"Lunch vouchers - that can be used in Uni and placement canteens."

Summary of focus groups

The key issues raised were that of insufficient childcare funding and spaces to accommodate the need coupled with a rigid system of timetabling and placement expectations. Single parents would benefit from more flexibility with their scheduling, timetables and holidays that mirror that of the school calendar to eliminate the need for childcare during the standard weekly classes. Having a more family friendly approach to placements where childcare is considered at the very start with the potential of placements offering a package including childcare.

Section 7: Case Studies

Single parent families are a diverse and significant group in Scotland, making up nearly a quarter of all families. We have included case studies in an appendix of this report. (See Appendix 1) These shed a light on the experiences of, and challenges facing, single parents who want to access higher education and why specialist single parent advice is so important.

The case studies highlight the important issues of parent's time poverty, which so often goes unrecognised. Some of the challenges and barriers that single mothers face in accessing and completing their education are highlighted such as institutional barriers, financial hardship, lack of childcare support, social isolation, stigma, and discrimination.

The parents' stories also articulate how amazing single parents as they rise to the challenge of completing higher education against all the odds.

Section 8: Suggestions from single parents on tackling barriers & challenges

Single parents who have experience of higher education say they face distinct challenges that need targeted support. If higher education institutions are to be made more accessible parents say that **integrating their voices into policy development both by Scottish Government and the universities is vital. Higher education needs to be 'single parent proofed'**

By addressing issues like childcare, financial assistance, academic support and flexibility, and emotional wellbeing, the government and universities could enable single parent (mainly mothers) students have a fair chance to succeed.

The following suggestions from parents outline practical measures that could significantly reduce barriers for parents in higher education.

1. Childcare Support

Parents say childcare is one of the biggest hurdles for single parents in university.

- Short-notice timetable changes often leave parents scrambling for childcare, especially when most childcare providers require fixed schedules. On-campus childcare services with flexible hours and priority spots for student parents would reduce this pressure.
- Universities could partner with local providers to offer back-up childcare services, similar to emergency daycare options for NHS workers. This would ensure that parents have access to care even when schedules shift.
- Funding for unregistered childcare (i.e. paying babysitters who attend university) would be incredibly beneficial.
- Funding for nursery extended hours would be helpful for starting an academic course.
- Another key improvement would be the introduction of bridging funds to cover childcare costs while grant payments are being processed. Too often, delays in funding mean parents lose their childcare place, only to receive the money after the spot has been filled

by someone else. Support like this could be accessed through student services or welfare teams, with details clearly communicated during pre-enrolment inductions.

2. Financial Support for Single Parents,

Financial barriers are a constant source of stress for single parent students. Current funding models often exclude those with part-time jobs, even if those jobs fail to cover basic living costs.

- A better approach would be to offer needs-based financial support that doesn't penalise parents for working.
- Parent-specific hardship funds could provide emergency support for unexpected costs like childcare or housing.
- Universities could also introduce faster payment systems to prevent students from waiting weeks for financial aid. This delay is especially damaging for parents who need funds to secure childcare places. A more effective system would ensure payments are processed before the start of term or allow parents to request an advance payment.
- Better financial information for single parent students. At open days for university selections there should be a dedicated leaflet or section to explain- and the option to have a face-to-face meeting with someone who is educated on SAAS/Bursaries and benefits. Information on support options should be included in student welcome packs and shared through regular email reminders from student welfare services.
- Support with extra costs for example help to buy a laptop & mobile. Support with connectivity costs

3. University Systems - Parental Adjustments in Academic Work

The challenges single parent students face highlights the need for greater support systems, In the survey parents pointed out that universities already offer adjustments for students with ADHD or dyslexia, but the same logic could be applied to student parents. This approach would acknowledge that parenting, like other life circumstances, requires flexible support to ensure equal access to education.

- Parental adjustments would recognise that parenting involves similar cognitive and logistical pressures, such as managing unpredictable schedules and working with reduced mental bandwidth due to sleep deprivation.
- Scheduling should be done with parent students in mind.
- Adjustments could include flexible deadlines/extensions, rescheduling of assessments, or "emergency absence" allowances for when a child is ill or childcare falls through. Much like disability support, these adjustments should be formalised through student support plans submitted at the start of term. Parents would then have access to a clear, consistent process for requesting deadline extensions or adjustments without being forced to explain their situation every time.
- If more lectures could be live streamed and recorded it would make life easier for students with children who have no outside help as if they are sick or refusing school with disability you are unable to attend in person and then get emails about attendance. Being able to do it online would free stress and time and also allow more time for studying as not travelling.

- University Libraries having a family study area that allows young children in the building.
- Difficulties with placement planning - for nursing students who are parents, placement locations should be near their home, reducing travel and childcare challenges.

Addressing these gaps could make higher education a more accessible and inclusive experience for single parents.

4. Wellbeing & Support

Parents told us balancing parenthood and higher education is emotionally draining. Single parent students often carry parental guilt over the sacrifices their children have to make. Children may miss holidays, clubs, or hobbies due to financial strain, and they spend less time with their parent because of university commitments.

- Mental health support tailored to student-parents would help parents manage this guilt and maintain perspective. This support could take the form of mentoring or peer support groups, where parents share advice and encouragement, or one-to-one counselling to process the emotional toll of juggling multiple roles.
- Universities could provide information on mental health support during enrolment and send wellbeing check-in emails partway through the term.
- To be effective, support for single parents should be available before, during, and after enrolment. Before enrolment, universities should offer a "Parent Support Guide" as part of their welcome materials, detailing the financial, academic, and childcare support available.
- During the academic year, universities/ student support should check in with parents to ensure support remains accessible.
- If new childcare issues arise mid-year, parents should have access to emergency support funds and academic adjustments. This support should be delivered through a combination of student support services and hardship fund providers.
- Ensure awareness of food banks and provide flexibility to overcome the difficulty of picking up food due to scheduling conflicts with university timetables.

5. Advice and Information

Many single parents we consulted were unsure of where to go for the correct information and advice especially about finance.

- Single parent organisations need more resources to offer single parent specialist advice on accessing higher education.
- Ensure advice workers in various agencies are trained and knowledgeable about the very specific advice needs of single parents wanting to take up / who are in higher education.
- There needs to be more awareness of third-sector charities for providing support, which can be crucial for a single parent students career and family well-being.

Section 9: Recommendations

The recommendations aim to cover what financial offer is needed for single parent mature students to access and sustain higher education. This is in response to the direct and wider financial barriers single parents face as highlighted in the consultation results. These

barriers include low income (student loans/ bursaries, benefits) cost of living (food, travel, energy) childcare costs, it equipment / on-line access costs etc.

We will also cover what non-financial offer /wrap around support is needed for single parent mature students to access and sustain higher education. This is in response to non-financial barriers identified in the consultation results: poor access to early years, school-age and holiday childcare; inflexible course timetabling and assignment deadlines; stress and anxiety causing poor mental health and the lack of single parent specific information & advice. These recommendations aim to address real time barriers for current single parent students; enhance access and engagement for potential single parent students and improve support systems and completion rates for single parent students

Universities

The barriers single parents face in higher education stem from systems that overlook parental responsibilities as legitimate needs. Universities already support students with disabilities and mental health conditions; the same principles should apply to parenting. Universities can make education more inclusive and equitable for student-parents.

1. Collect data on student single parents and use this data to enable tailored support via student support services.
2. Work with Student Unions to ensure single parent-friendly freshers' activities and ongoing social/support groups for student parents. At open days for university selections there should be a dedicated leaflet for parents.
3. Make concrete changes to campus space, including the introduction of accessible, flexible, discounted childcare on campus and spaces where children are welcome.
4. Introduce academic adjustments supportive to parents such as class times and coursework deadlines and introduce more on-line and recorded lessons. Release timetables well in advance so that parents can arrange childcare and travel in good time.
5. Support university libraries to have a family study area that allows young children in the building.
6. Reduce difficulties with placement planning - for nursing students who are parents, placement locations should be near their home, reducing travel and childcare challenges.
7. Increase the speed of the university in awarding support through the childcare fund.
8. Improve the availability of mental health support and peer mentoring opportunities - linking new single parent students with single parent students further on the path to completing their qualification.
9. Budgeting advice, clear guidance on benefits entitlement, and additional financial support (e.g., charities, crisis support).
10. On-site food pantries would be useful to support mature students who are parents.

DWP

1. Review the expectation by JCP that single parents receiving UC need to find full-time employment for 6/8 weeks during the summer holiday break despite schools being off and having no childcare.

2. Job Centre Plus should train work coaches to ensure they can support single parent HE students and who can work closely with student advisors within the universities to avoid misinformation and better management of expectations before starting their course.

Scotgov

- Publish clear information about what financial support there's available to single parent students and how this interacts with paid work and the benefits system.
- Review the adequacy of the tailored financial support for single parents entering higher education.
- The Scottish Government's 'Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan 2026-2031' should include an additional key strategic theme: 'Supporting parents of children in the priority families to gain further and higher education qualifications which enable access to jobs with higher earnings and improved sustainability.'¹⁵
- Integrating the voices of single parent students into policy development so that higher education is 'single parent proofed'

Advice Agencies

- Ensure generic advice workers are trained and knowledgeable about the very specific advice needs of single parents wanting to take up / who are in higher education - on the associated costs as well as sources of income.
- Increase resourcing of single parent organisations to give information and advice to single parents on education opportunities, entry requirements, funding sources, career pathways, and support services.

Robertson Trust

1. Bursary support to buy materials, books, licenses, electronics, software etc.
2. A bridging fund to help pay up front for deposits for childcare whilst waiting for UC to reimburse parents.
3. Work with single parent organisations to help promote a positive and supportive culture and environment for single parents in education settings, such as raising awareness, challenging stereotypes, celebrating achievements, and fostering peer support networks.
4. Facilitate a peer mentoring/ support network linking RT existing mature student parent bursary holders with new mature single parent students.

This research aims to inform and inspire policy makers, education providers, researchers, practitioners, campaigners, and single parents themselves to take action and make positive changes happen. The recommendations aim to create a more equitable and inclusive education system so that single parents can fulfil their amazing potential and aspirations through learning and education, which will benefit not only themselves but also their children and communities. We hope this report will make an important contribution to making this happen.

¹⁵ [Why access to further & higher education is important for single parents - One Parent Families Scotland](#)

Project Team

Marissa Costello, **Single Parent Participation Officer**
Colleen Gowans, **Employability Support Worker (Dundee)**
Sarah Stewart, **Head of Service Support for Families**
Marion Davis, **Director Policy, Communication & Strategy**

One Parent Families Scotland

2 York Place, Edinburgh EH1 3EP
Tel: 0131 556 3899 marion.davis@opfs.org.uk
Lone Parent Helpline: 0808 801 0323

Appendix 1 Case studies

Case Study1. Jessie – Resilience and Determination

Jessie, a single mother of two children aged 8 and 6, sought support from OPFS after her marriage ended, aiming to pursue a career in nursing. She faced numerous challenges but worked hard to overcome them.

Barriers Faced:

Financially, Jessie struggled as bursaries disqualified her from accessing Universal Credit and other benefits. To fill gaps in her income, she relied on short-term hardship grants identified with OPFS's help, but she also had to secure a sessional job during her studies. Summer employment became necessary to cover living costs when bursary payments stopped.

Childcare was difficult due to the shift patterns required by her course. Jessie relied on unpaid help from family and friends, as traditional out-of-school care options were unsuitable. Balancing studies, placements, work, and limited time with her children took a toll on her emotionally. Special occasions like Christmas and birthdays added to her stress, as she struggled to manage bills and provide for her children.

Support Provided

OPFS helped Jessie understand her financial options, identify hardship grants from charities, and plan her summer employment. The advisor guided her in balancing practical challenges such as childcare and academic commitments, providing steady support to keep her on track during her studies.

Outcome

Jesse is now in her final placement and, in a few months, will be in a qualified nursing position. Throughout her journey, she has demonstrated unwavering determination, working hard to juggle her studies, work, and parenting responsibilities while staying focused on her goals for herself and her children. Her achievements highlight the transformative power of sustained support and the resilience of single parents pursuing higher education.

Barriers for Single Parents in Higher Education

Barriers:

Financial Challenges

- Reliance on short-term hardship grants
- Ineligibility for benefits like Universal Credit due to bursaries
- Requirement to secure summer employment to cover living expenses when bursary payments stop.

Childcare Constraints:

- Limited availability of childcare for those on placement particular shift based courses
- Dependence on unpaid care for family and friends

Emotional and practical strain

- Balancing study, placement and parenting responsibilities
- Parent guilt and stress due to limited time with the children and financial strain, especially during special occasions

Case Study 2: Paula's Journey to Confidence and Wellbeing

Background: Paula, a single parent to an 8-year-old child, was referred to our service seeking support. She faced several challenges related to mental health, including severe anxiety and a lack of confidence. As a student, Paula felt isolated outside her studies and struggled with low self-esteem, particularly regarding her parenting abilities, which were impacted by her past trauma. Her primary goals were to improve her confidence, participate comfortably in group settings, and receive support to achieve these.

Barriers Faced:

Financial Difficulties: At OPFS, we ensure single parents accessing our service receive a financial health check to maximise their entitlements. Through this process, we discovered that Paula was not receiving Universal Credit and was not aware of the Scottish Child Payment, these were benefits she was eligible to as a single parent responsible for a child.

Misguided advice had led her to believe she couldn't claim these benefits due to her student loan, despite meeting the necessary criteria.

Additionally, when Paula sought financial hardship support from her university, they failed to provide her with accurate information about her entitlements. With our guidance, Paula successfully claimed these benefits, significantly improving her family's financial situation.

"I don't know how I have been managing. This has made a huge difference. I feel like I can breathe better."

Mental Wellbeing: Paula joined our six-week health and wellbeing group, where she actively engaged with others in a supportive environment. By the end of the program, she reported a substantial improvement in her mental health, with reduced anxiety and enhanced confidence. These positive changes extended to her parenting abilities and her engagement with university studies, fostering a sense of empowerment and self-assurance.

Outcome:

Through financial support and mental health initiatives, Paula experienced a transformative journey. Her increased financial stability and improved wellbeing not only elevated her

confidence as a parent but also enabled her to participate more fully in her academic pursuits. This case highlights the importance of accessible, accurate financial information for Singel parent student and holistic support in creating lasting positive change.