

# Combining Education and Family Life

Ivana La Valle, Ini Grewal and Alice Mowlam  
National Centre for Social Research

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*National Centre for Social Research*

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## 2 INTRODUCTION

In an increasingly competitive and fast changing economy it has become necessary for many parents to undertake learning and training. While learning can, and often is, very rewarding, it can nevertheless add to the pressures many parents already face in juggling caring responsibilities, often combined with paid employment. There is a growing body of research on the difficulties faced by parents who are in paid employment or wish to return to work, and the role that childcare provision plays in influencing parents' employment decisions and patterns. However, very little is known about the experiences and problems faced by parents who return to education and their needs for childcare support, as well as other forms of help. It was to fill this gap that the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) commissioned the *National Centre for Social Research* (NatCen) to undertake a qualitative study to provide an in-depth understanding of the factors which influence parents' decision to return to education, their experiences of reconciling studying with paid and unpaid work, and what factors facilitate and hinder parents who wish to study.

### 2.1 Background

In recent years the globalisation of the economy, changes in the labour market and organisational structures have pushed lifelong learning high on the political agenda. Lifelong learning is seen as essential to create a more flexible and knowledge based economy. Training and learning have also become an important part of welfare to work programmes, including those, such as the New Deal for Lone Parents, specifically targeted at unemployed parents. While economic factors have largely shaped the debate about lifelong learning, wider social and cultural influences have also played a part. There is a growing emphasis on the role of learning in helping in the regeneration of local communities, encouraging active citizenship, as well as combating social exclusion. There is also a growing interest in family learning, and in particular, whether having children might encourage parents to engage in learning (currently being explored by the DfES 2002 National Adult Learning Survey), and also the extent to which participation in learning might place parents in a better position to support their children's learning.

#### 2.1.1 Student parents

While some of the specific issues faced by parents who study or want to return to education have been explored to some extent in investigations of adult learning, and also in research on participation in Higher and Further Education (e.g. Callender, 1999; Davies et al., 2002; La Valle and Blake, 2001), there has been little research so far focusing specifically on student parents. The Repeat Study of Parents' Demand for Childcare has perhaps been the first large scale survey which has addressed key issues faced by student parents, with a particular focus on their childcare needs (Woodland et al., 2002). The survey found that a fifth of families with children under

15 included a parent who was studying<sup>1</sup>, with the majority of these being mothers. Further Education (FE) and part-time studying were more common among parents, although just under a quarter were studying in Higher Education (HE) and one in ten were enrolled on full-time courses. The majority of full-time and part-time student parents attended classes during the day. The survey has also shown that a majority of parents combined studying with paid employment, while, predictably, this was more common among those studying part-time, a third of parents on full-time courses were also working.

### **2.1.2 Studying and childcare**

Given the above results on the prevalence of daytime course attendance and the fact that many parents combine studying with paid employment, it was not surprising to find that student parents were more likely than other families to use (non-parental) childcare, both formal and informal. Student parents were also more likely than others to report unmet demand for childcare; a finding reflected in some of the difficulties reported by this group: a majority had to study while looking after the children, and a substantial minority had missed classes because of problems with childcare. While around a third of both FE and HE student parents said their educational institution provided childcare facilities, very few parents in the survey used these facilities.

The above results confirm the findings from other studies, which have shown that access (or lack of access) to childcare can be an important influence on participation in adult learning. For example, the National Adult Learning Survey found that family and childcare responsibilities represented an obstacle to learning for many parents, and mothers in particular. In addition, for many lone parents the costs of studying, transport difficulties and fear of losing benefits represented further obstacles. Among this group, funding for courses, help with childcare and advice about learning were found to be important incentives to participation in learning (La Valle and Blake, 2001).

In a recent study of mature HE students and 'potential' students (i.e. people who had applied or considered applying for an HE course), the latter also mentioned similar difficulties, with a substantial minority of women reporting lack of childcare as a factor which might discourage them from entering HE. Information on and help with childcare, flexibility of tuition hours to fit around family commitments, financial advice and help were identified as some of the key influences on participation in HE (Davies et al., 2001).

A recent study of student parents in FE has also identified similar difficulties relating to childcare. Many parents (and particularly lone parents) included in this research missed classes because of lack of childcare. Participants to this study also reported that, when childcare help was available (e.g. a place in the college nursery or funding), this tended to cover mainly the times they attended classes, and help with childcare for private studies and work placements was less well covered. The inflexibility of childcare provision (e.g. having to book for a certain number of days

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<sup>1</sup> For the purpose of this study a student was defined as someone who was enrolled on a course leading to a qualification or a credit towards a qualification.

to keep a place, inadequate opening times) was also another obstacle identified by this investigation (Dewson and Dench, 2002, forthcoming).

### **2.1.3 Paying for learning**

Some of the results mentioned above indicate that, together with childcare, financial support is another key influence on some parents' decisions about learning. The extent to which financial support can affect participation among different groups has been extensively explored in several studies of FE and HE student finances. Some of these studies have shown that students with children, and particularly lone parents, are the most financially vulnerable groups, as they are more likely to be in debt, have higher debts and have no savings (Callender, 1999; Callender and Kemp, 2000). This is due to the higher costs faced by parents (e.g. childcare and other costs associated with raising children) and student parents in particular. For example, the Repeat Study of Parents' Demand for Childcare found that student parents incurred higher childcare costs than other families, probably reflecting the higher use of childcare among the former. The survey also shows that a majority of student lone parents reported difficulties in meeting childcare costs (Woodland et al., 2002).

Students with children do have access to government funding specifically targeted at parents (e.g. Learner Support Fund, Childcare Grant), and more generally funding for mature students and those who face financial difficulties (e.g. Access Funds, Mature Student Bursaries, Hardship Funds). Parents on benefits can also get some financial help through the various New Deal programmes (Jones, 2002). However, as research has shown, there are several difficulties associated with these funding sources.

- A number of recent studies have highlighted the difficulties faced by both HE and FE students in finding their way through the 'funding maze' (Herbert and Callender, 1997; Jones, 2002; National Audit Commission, 2002). The study of FE student parents mentioned above specifically pointed to the lack of information about different funding schemes and the difficulties faced by parents in identifying and applying for funding for childcare (Dewson and Dench, 2002, forthcoming).
- The discretionary nature of some of the schemes and the resulting variations in the allocation of funding can also represent an obstacle for some parents. If schemes are discretionary, eligibility criteria and amounts allocated can vary from institution to institution, thus adding to the financial uncertainty in which parents have to take decisions about studying. Also, as the study of FE student parents found, some parents believed that childcare funding was allocated on a 'first-come, first-served' basis, thus penalising those who applied late, usually because they did not know about the availability of this funding when they enrolled on the course (Dewson and Dench, 2002, forthcoming; Jones, 2002).
- The inadequacy of the funding available for studying both in HE and FE is an issue which has been covered extensively, with concern being raised about the possible impact this could have on the participation and retention of groups which have traditionally been less likely to participate in education (and in HE in particular). For example, there is evidence that changes in HE funding (i.e. the



introduction of fees and replacement of grants with loans) have discouraged mature students from entering HE (Davies et al., 2001). Research has also found that the greater financial difficulties faced by student parents (and lone parents in particular) could negatively impinge on their academic performance and might eventually affect their ability to complete their course (Callender and Kemp, 2000). The study of FE student parents mentioned above also highlighted the financial difficulties, closely linked to childcare costs, faced by parents studying in FE (Dewson and Dench, 2002, forthcoming).

## 2.2 Aims of the study

The issues discussed above raise some important questions about the barriers faced by parents who wish to study, and the kind of incentives and support that might help parents to undertake learning or training. It was to gain a better and more in-depth understanding of these issues that a qualitative study was commissioned. More specifically the investigation aimed to explore the areas outlined below.

- *Influences on decision to study and routes into FE and HE:* as well as key factors which are known to influence participation in adult learning, the research has explored in considerable depth the extent to which the availability of childcare might enable or even encourage parents to study. The research has also looked at how the division of childcare responsibilities in two-parent families might influence learning decisions, and also whether a return to education might be linked to children's life cycle stage.
- *The role of childcare in shaping decisions about what, where and when to study:* we have investigated if and how decisions about courses, academic achievement and future progression are linked to the availability of formal and informal childcare, the flexibility and quality of provision, how and where childcare is provided, childcare costs and funding.
- *Combining work (or seeking work) and studying:* the research has specifically looked at the issues faced by parents who wish to combine work with studying, and the difficulties reported by student parents who have been out of the labour market for some time (e.g. lack of confidence, financial constraints, lack of information, advice and guidance on learning options).
- *Experiences and impacts of studying in FE and HE:* the study has looked at the (combination) of factors that might facilitate or hinder learning among parents, and also the impacts of learning on student parents and their families.
- *Knowledge of and views on support available for student parents:* these were explored with a particular focus on childcare support and funding, the provision of information, advice and guidance on learning options, the accessibility of educational institutions and HE and FE courses.

## 2.3 Methodology

The research included 50 in-depth interviews with student parents selected from the Repeat Study of Parents' Demand for Childcare, the latter is a survey of over 5,400 families with children aged 0-14, which was carried in England in spring/summer 2001 (Woodland et al., 2002).

### 2.3.1 Sample

It was considered important for the research to gather information about the experiences and views of parents studying in different education sectors, so the sample was split between parents who had undertaken a course in a higher education institution (HEI) and those who had studied in other education settings. Throughout the report, the latter are referred to as FE students, although as well as parents who were studying in FE colleges, the group also includes parents who were undertaking adult and community learning, work-based training, learning that was part of welfare to work programmes which, in some cases, was provided by private trainers. The final sample included 24 parents who we talked to in detail about their HE course, of which 10 had previously studied in FE. Of the 26 parents we talked to in detail about their FE course, only one had also studied in HE. The overall sample profile is presented in the table below. Of the 50 interviews, two were with white fathers, three involved Black Caribbean mothers, two involved Bangladeshi mothers, one was with a Chinese mother and the remaining 42 were with white mothers.

	Higher Education		Further Education
	Part-time	Full-time	Part-time
<b>Lone Parent</b>	6	5	12
<b>Couple</b>	6	7	14
<b>Total</b>	12	12	26

The sample was also purposively selected to reflect the key characteristics of the research population, as shown below.

- Mode of study, type of course and qualifications:** the HE group was equally split between full-time and part-time students. The FE group included only part-time students<sup>2</sup>, with weekly tuition/contact hours ranging from two to 24. The sample also included parents who had studied in different ways (from more traditional face-to-face teaching to distance learning), and at different times (e.g. evening and daytime, weekdays and weekends, residential schools). Respondents were studying for a wide range of qualifications, from basic vocational NVQ level 1 courses to degree and post-graduate programmes. On the whole the subjects studied were vocational. Some were directly related to parents' current jobs (e.g. continuous professional development) or were done to train for a specific profession (e.g. childcare, accountancy, nursing). Other courses were seen as helping to enhance one's employability and position in the

<sup>2</sup> The sample was designed to include only part-time FE students, as the Department specifically required information on this group and not on full-time FE students.

labour market, but were not done with a specific job or career in mind; IT courses were a typical example of the kind of learning that would fall into this category.

- ***Employment status and educational background:*** over half of respondents were in full or part-time paid employment while studying, with a range of occupations represented in the sample, from semi-skilled manual workers to associate professionals (e.g. teaching, nursing). Since the research focused on low-middle income families (see below), parents in higher level professions were not included in the sample. Parents varied also in terms of educational background, the sample included parents who had left school early (e.g. aged 15-16) with no or low qualifications levels, as well as those who had achieved an NVQ level 3 equivalent. Again probably largely due to the fact that we focused on low-middle income families, the sample did not, by and large, include parents who had left full-time education with degree or higher qualifications.
- ***Household income:*** government childcare and adult learning policies place a considerable emphasis on targeting low income groups. While these groups are more likely to benefit from the expansion of both childcare and adult learning, they are most likely to face obstacles in accessing these. It was therefore considered important for the study to focus on these groups; around half of parents in the sample were in the £15-20,000 household income bracket, while the rest were split between those with a household income below £15,000, and those in the £20-30,000 income group.
- ***Family structure, number and age of children:*** given some of the research results mentioned above, it was important for the sample to include a sufficient number of lone parents, as well as partnered parents (the respective figures being 23 and 27). Also given that childcare needs are strongly influenced by a child's age, the sample included families with pre-school, as well school children, the main emphasis was on younger school children (i.e. under 11), although some parents with young teenagers were also included.
- ***Patterns of use of formal and informal childcare:*** the sample included parents with a variety of childcare arrangements, which ranged from those who did not regularly use (non-parental) childcare, to those who regularly used (a combination of) formal and informal provision. A small number of respondents (six in total) had received childcare support either in the form of funding or access to childcare facilities provided by the educational institution.
- ***Geographical location:*** respondents were selected from a range of urban/city and rural areas, and also from more and less affluent locations.

### **2.3.2 Fieldwork and analysis**

Interviews were carried out mainly with mothers, as the overwhelming majority of respondents to the Repeat Study of the Parents' Demand for Childcare were mothers. Interviews were conducted between January and March 2002 and lasted around one and half hours. A payment of £15 was given to respondents.

Interviews were exploratory and interactive in form, based on a topic guide (included in Appendix A), which listed the key themes and sub-topics we wished to explore, and the specific issues for coverage within each. Although the topic guide helped to ensure systematic coverage of key areas across interviews, it was used flexibly, to allow issues of relevance for individual respondents to be covered through detailed follow up questioning. In this way parents were able to discuss the issues in their own words and with their own emphasis.

Interviews were tape-recorded, transcribed verbatim and analysed using 'Framework', a content analysis technique developed by NatCen. Framework involves ordering and summarising verbatim data from each transcript on to a series of thematic charts. We first identified emerging issues which informed the development of a thematic framework. The thematic matrix comprised seven subject charts, each focusing on a key theme (e.g. childcare arrangements). The columns in each chart represent sub-topics relevant to the subject covered by the chart (e.g. regular childcare arrangements, ad hoc arrangements, childcare costs, etc.) and the rows individual respondents. Data from each interview transcript were summarised under the appropriate subject heading of the thematic matrix. The final stage involved classificatory and interpretative analysis of the charted material in order to identify patterns and explanations. Organising the data in this way enabled the views, circumstances and experiences of all respondents to be compared and contrasted (both within and across groups), within a common analytical framework which is both grounded in and driven by their own accounts.

Where names are used in quotations, these have been changed to preserve confidentiality. Quotes have been attributed by giving the respondent's type of course (i.e. FE or HE, part-time or full-time), whether they are lone or partnered parents, the children's age group (i.e. pre-school or school age), and if they were in paid employment while studying.

## **2.4 Report outline**

Chapter 2 explores the different circumstances through which parents returned to education and presents a typology of different types of learners. Chapter 3 looks at the factors, including different types of childcare, which influence parents' decision of what and where to study. Chapter 4 explores the experiences of student parents, what helped them to combine family responsibilities with studying, and what made it more difficult for them to do so. The role of childcare provision (or lack of it) and of the facilities and support provided by FE and HE institutions are also discussed in this chapter. Chapter 5 focuses on the range of impacts that studying had on parents and their families. Chapter 6 summarises the main barriers faced by student parents' and the kinds of support that might help them to overcome these barriers.

### 3 INFLUENCES ON THE DECISION TO STUDY

This chapter looks at the different circumstances through which parents return to education. First, background influences are considered, such as experiences at school, parental and societal expectations, as well as unexpected life events. These all played their part in forming a backdrop against which later educational experiences hang. Second, contemporary factors are explored, which relate directly to parents' family and employment circumstances.

A typology of learners is then presented which classifies respondents according to the main motivators for studying, the typology includes three broad categories: 'exploratory', 'vocational' and 'lifelong' learners. The defining features of these different learner types, including the type of courses they were doing, are explored in detail.

#### 3.1 Educational and family background

A predominant influence on parents' decision to return to study was the need to pick up education where they had left it, often with poor results, many years earlier, as the quote below illustrates.

*I mucked around a bit at school and didn't take it too serious. So it's like I came out of school with hardly no exams except for them ones. So I just decided afterwards ... to go and get an education (laughs). (FE PT, lone parent, pre- and school age children, not in employment while studying)*

This finding probably largely reflects the composition of our sample, as discussed in Chapter 1, our focus on low-middle income families means that many of the parents interviewed had achieved no or low level vocational qualifications when they first left full-time education. There was a strong sense among these respondents that they needed to make up for what they had failed to achieve when they were younger, either because of their negative attitudes towards education at the time or learning difficulties which went undiagnosed at school, as well as a combination of social, economic and cultural factors.

The impact of societal expectations could be seen as pertinent for the parents interviewed, who grew up at a time when many young people left school early and HE was seen mainly as an option for a privileged minority. At the time of leaving school, academic courses and higher level qualifications were not usually considered as feasible options by the parents interviewed, who came from a working class background. One parent, who had left school at 16 and was now studying to be a teacher explained:

*We had a careers department at school then, and they expected you to go into an office or to have children....There was no encouragement or no mention of further education. You could stay on to the sixth form and take some more exams but... there was never the kind of information. I suppose, lack of information of knowing that you can go on to do this, you can go on to do that. (HE PT, couple, school age children, in employment while studying)*

Following on from societal expectations, the attitude of the respondents' families could also be a marked factor in the decisions made at that time of leaving school. Among parents from a working class background, it was common to have no history of further education in the family, and no expectations nor information about this option. Financial pressures and the need to contribute to the family's income were also other important factors that prevented these parents from progressing with their studies.

*No one in my family had studied further education, they'd all gone out to work so it was just the accepted thing in those days that we went out to work and that's what my parents had done, so I did the same thing. (HE FT, couple, school age children, not in employment while studying)*

There were also some who had been unable to carry on studying when teenagers, as they had started a family early. In some cases this was unplanned, while in others it was due to the customs and traditions of communities, where late teens was considered the appropriate age for getting married. As a 24 year old woman, who got married during her A levels, and had a learning break of six years before going in to nurse training said:

*...with Asian families I think it's expected to have a family [at an early age] and... I did what I was expected to do and then I thought now yeah it's my time [to go back to study]. (HE FT, couple, pre- and school age children, not in employment while studying)*

As well as unplanned pregnancies, other unexpected events such as illness in the family or the death of a parent interrupted the expected path, with the result that any plans for continuing with education were put on hold. Some of these respondents had been brought up with a strong family expectation of continuing in higher education, which proved a strong motivator for going back into study later on.

*I wanted to go university. My mum sort of instilled it in all of us to go to university. (HE FT, couple, school age child, in employment while studying)*

These tended to be younger respondents, and parental expectations could reflect changing attitudes to continuing education.

### **3.2 Family circumstances**

As well as educational background, there was a range of contemporary factors which opened up the possibility of education, where it may previously have been a closed door.

### 3.2.1 Childcare

An extremely strong precursor to people contemplating going back into education was the level of family support available – either from a partner or relatives. When childcare did not emerge as a key consideration for parents at the preliminary stages of the decision making process, this was because they took it for granted that relatives, friends or their partners were willing and available to help.

*I've got all my family ... there wasn't that much that I needed to plan for and worry about whereas if I'd had to think about baby-sitters or day care and playgroups or what have you. Then I would've been more worried.* (HE FT, couple, school age children, not in employment while studying)

Childcare was a considerable potential barrier, that, for people who could rely on the support of their family, had already been overcome. Knowing that there was family support available to help meant that people were able to consider going back into education. Some were explicit about this having been a turning point and had been discussed – often with their own parents – and support agreed.

*I'd sort of talked over the hours of the course with my mum first and she'd said oh that's fine I can do it.* (HE FT, couple, school age children, in employment while studying)

*Obviously the situation may change but my mum is retired, she took early retirement a year or two back so it fits in nicely and she enjoys it... and one of the reasons for her taking early retirement was that she wanted to be a full-time grandma, so her whole idea was that she wanted to do the school runs and have time with the children because they're not little for long.* (FE PT, lone parent, school age children, in employment while studying)

For respondents in two-parent families, the partner (normally the man) would often step in to look after the children when the mother was at a course or studying.

*If Bill couldn't have had the kids, then I wouldn't have done the course* (FE PT, couple, pre- and school age children, not in employment while studying)

Parents who were already using formal childcare before returning to education, made use or extended their existing childcare arrangements in order to study. Examples of parents who set up new formal childcare arrangements in order to go back to study were less common, although, when formal provision (e.g. a college based crèche) or childcare funding were available, these could represent strong incentives to study and opened up opportunities parents had not thought were available to them. As will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 3, there was a widespread lack of knowledge across the sample of the availability of funding for childcare, other than through Working Families Tax Credit. Similarly, knowledge of childcare facilities based in educational institutions was also limited, partly because even when available these were believed to be appropriate only for a narrow age group (e.g. 2-4 year olds). Because of this lack of knowledge about childcare support options, there was a fairly widespread assumption that, the childcare needed in order to study would be a considerable extra expense, unless the course fitted with school hours, existing arrangements or parents could rely on help from the family.

Again it should be remembered that the sample was focused on low-middle income families and for these the additional childcare costs would therefore be a large outgoing.

### **3.2.2 Age of children**

The age of children also affected decisions about learning. Given what has been said above about the difficulty for many of affording formal childcare, children starting school opened up a whole realm of possibilities for parents. There were those who explicitly stated that they had waited until their children were at school before going back to study themselves, as explained by one mother:

*As soon as he started school, I thought, right, this is my chance [to return to education] (HE FT, lone parent, school age children, not in employment while studying)*

Others found that once the children were at school they had time available and at that point considered how to use it and decided on going back to study.

Amongst some of the lone parents the desire to have something fulfilling to occupy their time as the children grow up and become more independent, also emerged as a factor.

*I thought: 'Well, I know he's here now, takes up all my time, but years down the line, 16/17, he's gonna be out with his friends, and this, that and t'other – I need something for me – I need something I'm interested in and can build on, I need a working qualification'. (HE FT, lone parent, school aged children, in employment while studying)*

## **3.3 Employment influences**

As explained in Chapter 1, vocational learning was predominant among the parents interviewed. Therefore, it was not surprising to find that employment (potential or actual) was a significant factor on the road back into learning and on future learning plans. The interaction between employment and learning is explored in the typology presented in the next section, and is also discussed further in Chapter 5, when looking at the impacts of studying.

Briefly there were parents who went back into learning with no fixed employment goals, rather they were '*dipping their toes back into education*', although they could see how the course might represent the first step towards an eventual re-entry into paid employment. There were other parents, who were planning to return to work and who had undertaken the course(s) to update their skills and enhance their employability. At the far end of the spectrum, there were parents who had taken a course specifically in order to get a certain job or a promotion, or to change career.

## **3.4 Learners typology**

A number of types of learners were identified according the main motivators for studying, the typology includes three broad categories: 'exploratory', 'vocational' and



'lifelong' learners. The defining features of these different learner types are explored in the rest of the section.

### **3.4.1 Exploratory learners**

'Exploratory' learners were essentially new learners, that is parents who had recently returned to study, and had first left full-time education early, with no or low qualifications. This group comprised parents who had been out of the labour market for some time or who were in low skilled jobs, and therefore included those from low income families, including lone parents.

All 'exploratory' learners were studying in FE and therefore attended part-time courses, which were also low cost or free of charge. As discussed below, the return to learning among some in this group was facilitated or even arranged by the employer. For other 'exploratory' learners the course was not linked to any specific career goals, the learning undertaken by these parents tended to consist of short, skill 'enhancing' courses (e.g. IT, basic skills). However, it is of key importance that exploratory learners did view their learning as having the potential for improving their long term job prospects. Also significant is that this first tentative step back into education might prove to be the catalyst for doing further courses: a confidence building exercise, which could set them on a path more focused on employment related learning and outcomes. Therefore, although these learning paths can be seen as exploratory in nature, the evidence suggests that they may form an important first rung to stepping back on to the education and skills ladder. Since these were 'new' learners, information and guidance about learning could play a vital role in influencing the decision to study and also in giving parents the confidence to return to education after a very long break. Incentives such as free or low cost courses, provision of childcare or courses that fitted with existing arrangements were also crucially important for this group.

While all parents in this group were 'new' learners and still assessing whether learning was 'for them', the circumstances and motivations that led to a return to education varied between different parents. Some literally stumbled across information about the course and as a result of that decided to return to study. They may have been approached either by their children's school or nursery, which provided courses for parents that fitted with the school's or nursery's hours. Courses might have also been offered to parents as part of welfare to work programmes or specific initiatives (e.g. Sure Start). Again in these cases, as courses were specifically targeted at parents, childcare facilities were offered as part of the course, or courses were sufficiently flexible to fit in with existing childcare arrangements. The indications are that this group of parents would probably have not returned to study without having been approached and offered, not only the opportunity to learn, but also support with childcare, or a course that fitted with existing arrangements.

For other parents, the initial encouragement (or in some cases the requirement) to undertake a course came from the employer. For some in this group training was necessary in order to comply with professional requirements or health and safety legislation. Others were employed in organisations where some basic training was encouraged even among low skilled staff; this was typical, for example, in sectors

such as education, health and social care. An incentive to learn could also come from experiences of voluntary work, as well as paid employment. Courses undertaken by this group tended to be done during working hours, and therefore did not require any extra childcare. Again, within this group the combination of being given information about learning options, funding for learning (from the employer) and courses which did not require extra childcare, was what opened the door to a return to study.

A final group included parents who did not require any initial encouragement to consider going back to education and had been thinking about this for some time. However, they were anxious about going back to study because they lacked confidence and were concerned about their ability to cope with the course, they were therefore still 'exploring' whether studying was 'for them'. Unlike other exploratory learners, these parents actively sought information about learning options, which may have been obtained in a number of different ways: an advert in a local paper or a leaflet through the door, they may have been told about the course by a friend, or they may have sought out the information. There tended to be a catalyst which actually gave these parents the final push to start the course, whether it was that a friend was going to do the course as well, or that children were settled well into school.

### **3.4.2 Vocational learners**

'Vocational' learners were parents who had been engaged in learning for some time and had some specific career or employment goals in mind, for this group learning was seen as a means to an end (e.g. promotion, better career prospects). Parents in this group were undertaking a very wide range of full-time and part-time courses, both in FE and HE, with some having studied in both sectors.

These were generally parents who were highly motivated and for whom learning represented an important part of their (current or future) career. They were therefore prepared to 'invest' time and resources in learning. As discussed later, some faced considerable financial and time constraints, but while these might limit their course options, they did not prevent them from engaging in some form of learning. This attitude was reflected in their decisions regarding childcare arrangements, while finding suitable childcare might present some problems for this group, they were sufficiently determined to find ways to overcome these difficulties, even if this meant changes in their learning plans or study programme.

Noticeable amongst this group was the fact that they had an intrinsic knowledge of how to access the relevant information about different learning options. Access to this information was taken for granted and, while important in choosing the right course, it was not seen as having influenced their decision to study. This is in contrast to the 'exploratory' learners, for whom seeing an advert in the paper or being approached by an employer was a watershed moment which they remembered clearly as having been the trigger to getting back into learning.

'Vocational' learners were a very heterogeneous group in terms of socio-economic profile, while it comprised parents in associate professional jobs (e.g. nurses, teachers, social workers), it also included those in low skilled occupations, as well as

parents who had been out of the labour market for some time and were now planning a return to work. The feature that was common to all parents in this category was the belief that learning was necessary in order to improve their employment position and career prospects, but they did have different starting points in terms of educational and employment background, and their expectations regarding the course outcomes varied considerably.

As mentioned above 'vocational' learners included parents who were planning to return to work or who wanted a career change. These tended to be parents who on leaving school were faced with limited choices due to family influence or societal expectations as described above, and who reached a point where they were in the right circumstances to be able to do something about it. One example of this was a woman living with her partner and three school age children who was very dissatisfied with her hairdressing job, and was looking for a career change, a job she would enjoy: something with more 'depth'. She went on to do a fast track health and social studies FE course and at the time of the interview was in her final year of a three year full-time nursing diploma. Others decided to take a course either to improve their promotion prospects and/or earning potential in their current job. For example, a mother who ran a shop with her husband studied accounting in order to be able to do the bookkeeping for her shop and reduce the accountant bills.

'Vocational' learners also included parents who had always intended or been expected to go to university, but an unexpected event meant that they were unable to pursue a university degree at the 'normal' time, or they dropped out of university the first time to return to it later on with clearer objectives and expectations. In other words they had literally put their study 'on hold'. A highly motivated group, and seemingly from more professional class backgrounds, they moved in circles where having a degree was the norm.

Finally 'vocational' learners included parents for whom continuous professional development was an intrinsic part of their job, necessary for career progression; also regular up-dating was in some cases necessary to remain in that line of work. Parents in this group tended to be found in jobs such as teaching, social work and health. For example, a social worker who needed to undertake the social work diploma course to continue in her job, having been employed at a time when a degree in an unrelated subject was sufficient to get the job; or a community nurse first taking the district nursing diploma before going on to upgrade the credits to get a community health degree specialising in district nursing.

### **3.4.3 Lifelong learners**

For parents in this category learning was an integral part of their life style and crucial to their personal development, learning for these parents was perceived as an end in itself, rather than mainly as a means to an end. The courses undertaken by this group were again very diverse, they were both in HE and FE, but they tended to be part-time.

Although the courses undertaken by 'lifelong' learners were skill enhancing and might be seen as having a possible impact on employability and employment opportunities, the potential employment benefits were not the only or even main

driver that motivated these parents to study. For some, particularly those who felt isolated by being at home and looking after the children, there was evidence of a social incentive: doing a course offered a chance to get out, meet new people and develop social networks. There were also some parents who were studying in order to give them something to do, *'to keep their brains ticking over'*, while looking after their children. Within this category there were some parents who may have started as *'exploratory'* learners, and seemed to have become *'hooked'* on learning.

This group was again very diverse and included mothers, and particularly lone mothers, who had been out of the labour market for sometime and for whom learning was seen as a way of having a life outside the home. It included parents in low skilled and unchallenging jobs, who got from learning the stimulation and development opportunities they were unable to get from their jobs. In this group there were also respondents who never really left education, these were parents who had achieved relatively high qualifications on leaving full-time education, and had been engaged in some form of adult learning since then.

While for these parents learning was an important aspect of their life, because they did not have to meet specific learning and employment goals (e.g. a certain qualification in order to get a promotion) and learning was generally seen as a *'pleasure'*, they tended to choose courses which did not require big *'sacrifices'* (in terms of time, but particularly money) for them or their families. So, for example, as mentioned earlier, courses tended to be part-time and to fit with existing childcare arrangements or with the availability of informal care. Because of this approach to learning choices, barriers to participation in some courses (e.g. cost of course, lack of childcare) did not feature very highly, but there was some evidence that financial and childcare support might enable some of these parents to choose courses which more closely reflect their aspirations. Having already undertaken prior learning, these parents were very familiar with the various sources on information about courses, and again while access to this information was important to find courses that met their aspirations, it played no part in their decision to study.

### **3.5 Conclusion**

The research found that, predictably, early educational experiences can be a strong precursor for learning patterns later on in life, and represent the foundation stones of subsequent adult learning routes. Among contemporary influences, as many other studies of adult learning have found, employment and employability were clearly strong motivators. However, for parents, the availability of informal or formal childcare was also an important influence, particularly for lone parents and those who were on full-time courses. The interaction of childcare with other influences on decisions about learning can be clearly seen from the learners typology summarised in the table below.

**LEARNERS TYPOLOGY**

<b>Level of engagement in learning &amp; motivation</b>	<b>Type of courses</b>	<b>Socio-economic profile</b>	<b>Knowledge about learning and attitudes</b>	<b>Facilitators/incentives</b>
<b>'EXPLORATORY' LEARNERS</b>				
'New' learners, some interest in learning and its possible employment benefits, but still assessing if learning is 'for them'	Part-time FE courses, mainly short skills enhancing	Low/no qualifications  Not in employment or in low skilled jobs, therefore from low income families including lone parents	Little/no knowledge about learning options.  Not prepared/ able to invest a great deal of financial resources in learning	Employers and special initiatives targeted at parents can play an important role in encouraging learning  Key incentives to learning: -information & guidance, -cheap/free courses, -provision of childcare, -flexible courses that fit with existing childcare
<b>'VOCATIONAL' LEARNERS</b>				
High level of involvement in learning strongly driven by employment goals	FE and HE, part- and full-time, very wide ranging subjects	Very diverse in terms of qualification levels, employment and financial circumstances.  Includes parents who through learning want to improve their career prospects, change career or return to work	Good knowledge of sources of learning information  Prepared to invest considerable resources in view of expected employment benefits, but financial circumstances and inadequate childcare can limit course options	Employers play a key role in facilitating and supporting learning  Extent to which learning options can meet expectations influenced by: -cost of courses, -funding for courses, -provision of childcare, -flexible courses that fit with existing childcare
<b>'LIFELONG' LEARNERS</b>				
High level of involvement in learning strongly driven by personal development motives	FE and HE, part-time, very wide ranging subjects	Very diverse in terms of qualification levels, employment and financial circumstances.  Includes parents in low skilled jobs and not in employment who seek development opportunities through	Good knowledge of sources of learning information  Prepared to invest some time and resources, but since learning seen mainly as 'pleasure' should not be a strain for self or family	Very highly motivated so no other agents emerged as key facilitators  Extent to which learning options can meet expectations partly influenced by: -cost of courses, -funding for courses, -provision of childcare, -flexible courses that fit with existing childcare

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## 4 CHOICES AND DECISIONS

Once parents had decided to return to study, they were then faced with making choices about what and where to study. This chapter looks at the main factors that influenced these choices. We begin by exploring the role that childcare played in the selection of the course and to what extent existing childcare arrangements were used or supplemented to enable study. Next we assess the influence that employment, be it prospects within one's current job or potential career opportunities, had on choice of course and institution. We also examine the impact that the availability of funding had on options considered. We then look at the effect that opportunity or convenience had on weighing up options.

### 4.1 Childcare

As noted earlier childcare arrangements and children's life cycle stage were identified as a trigger for parents deciding to return to study, the centrality of these continued in further decisions parents made about courses and institutions.

The approach to arranging childcare adopted by 'exploratory' learners (all studying part-time and in FE) and by 'lifelong' learners (who were found in both FE and HE and tended to study part-time) could be described as 'fitting in', while for 'vocational' learners (including HE and FE students studying part-time and full-time) could be described as 'setting up'. In other words, FE students were more likely to '*shop around*' for a course that 'fitted in' with their existing childcare arrangements, for example, choosing one that ran during school-term time only. More common among HE students and some FE students, on the other hand, was the 'setting up' of childcare arrangements that would enable them to undertake a certain course. This seemed to be linked to the fact that 'exploratory' and 'lifelong' learners did not always have specific learning goals and therefore other factors (such as childcare) would be predominant in deciding where and what to study. On the other hand, 'vocational' learners, were pursuing particular learning goals and had fewer options of which institution to attend, a consequence of having to go to a particular institution meant that they may have to 'set up' childcare arrangements to suit.

#### 4.1.1 Choice of course

It was common among both FE and HE students to select courses that fitted, as far as possible, with existing childcare arrangements. Therefore, for those with children at school, the extent to which the format of a course fitted in with school times was a critical consideration. For example, parents had sought out courses with classes that began late enough to allow them to continue to drop their children off at school, or ones which had taught sessions in school term-time only.

To this end parents reported that they had enquired about the flexibility of the course timetable and selected one that, for example, allowed students to take time off during school holidays.

*...I just wouldn't have done it. I'd have to quit the course if I couldn't have the six weeks holidays off. (FE PT, couple, school age children, in employment while studying)*

The need for flexibility was based on the expectation that, in addition to foreseeable periods such as school holidays, there would be unpredictable occasions, such as children's illness, when they would be unable to attend classes. Therefore, courses that allowed students to work at their own pace and with flexible assessment arrangements were preferred.

*.... I don't feel guilty if one week... I didn't do anything...and that is the beauty of it. Whereas if I was on a course that there was specified time limits the pressure would be on me a lot more..... (HE PT, lone parent, school age children, in employment while studying)*

In these circumstances distant learning was favoured by some parents, as it offered flexible learning within existing childcare arrangements. Even if it required additional childcare cover, for example for occasional weekend sessions, the demand was considered to be manageable and one that could be met. Such a case involved a lone parent who felt asking her parents to look after her two daughters for four weekends over a year was reasonable, whereas requiring them to make a daily commitment for a whole year was not.

The cost of childcare was another issue that influenced choices. There were cases of parents opting to do a part-time rather than a full-time course based purely on the need to limit childcare costs, as this parent explained:

*I wanted to do a proper full-time City and Guilds one...but obviously because of the children and childcare I just couldn't do a full-time course. If I'd have had ideal childcare then I would definitely have done a lot more. (FE PT, lone parent, pre- and school age children, not in employment while studying)*

The possible financial hardship made some question the benefits of a particular course and, as the quote below illustrates, formed a critical part of the decision.

*...the... University do a course, very similar, but ... there are set days that you have to do in each week. Well I knew straight away that I couldn't do that. The only way I could do that is that - ... I know it sounds silly but it does boil down to money at the end of the day, because if I'm doing that kind of course it's then the extra childcare that I've got to sort out. And that's where it starts getting expensive and you start thinking, you know, is that gonna be worth it in the long run. (HE PT, lone parent, school age children, in employment while studying)*

The repercussions of selecting a course that is compatible with childcare needs can extend beyond the course. In other words when selecting a course parents



considered childcare needs for the duration of the course, but also in terms of the subsequent employment that the qualifications might offer. For example, a respondent explained that she had decided to do a course that would lead to a job with childcare-friendly working hours. Therefore, she chose to pursue a teaching qualification, rather than one that prepared her for an office-based career due to:

*... needing something I suppose to fit in with the children when I'd started work particularly with holiday arrangements. To go back to an office would have been a bit difficult with the hours and holidays and half terms and things. (FE PT, couple, school age children, not in employment while studying)*

Given the significance of childcare in making decisions about study, it was little surprise that courses that had been designed specifically to accommodate students with children were seen as a particularly attractive option. These tended, though not exclusively, to be found in FE and included a variety of approaches. One was to run courses at the parents' school or nursery. Examples of this approach included a mother who took a ten-week computer course run by a college at her son's secondary school and another who did a similar course at her child's nursery. Another approach was to supply (sometimes free) on-site childcare facilities as part of the course. An example involved a course for lone mothers that provided transport to the place of study, a crèche next door to the classroom, kitchen facilities that mothers could use to prepare feeds, and flexible teaching so that mothers could take breaks to feed and change their children:

*The crèche is next door to the room that we work in so they just come and give you a shout and you have to go and change a nappy and then go back into class. (FE PT, lone parent, pre- and school age children, not in employment while studying)*

The respondent undertaking this course especially welcomed this opportunity as she had been struggling to arrange childcare, because of the cost and because her child suffered from deficit hyperactive disorder, which she discovered made childminders and nurseries reluctant to offer a place. Such child-supportive schemes were usually part of specific initiatives such as Home Start and Reach Out.

Other examples of 'family-friendly' course formats, which proved particularly attractive to parents, were those where parents had been consulted about their needs and preferences, and tuition times and assessments were designed, as far as possible, to meet their needs. Examples of these included offering a lighter workload during school half-terms by making them coincide with reading weeks and having later starting times for classes enabling parents to continue with their school runs.

#### **4.1.2 Choice of institution**

In terms of selecting where to study, the importance attached to having childcare facilities available at a college was not straightforward. For some parents this was a significant factor. For example, a lone parent noted that she chose an HE institution that had childcare facilities over one that did not. Her explanation was that if the childcare was not onsite, it would entail an extra travel cost. However, for a number of reasons, this applied to a limited number of parents. Firstly, age restrictions, as college crèches were thought to be available for children in a specific age group (i.e.

2-4 year olds) and this meant that often parents found their children were not eligible; a pertinent point especially given the finding noted earlier that parents seemed to wait until their children were at school before returning to study. Secondly, the limited hours crèches operated, which were usually roughly standard 9-5 hours, made them inadequate for those doing twilight or evening courses, or undertaking early/late shifts as part of their course placement, for example, in nursing. 'Standard' opening times also did not suit private study times which were often – as discussed further in Chapter 4 - in the evenings and at weekends.

Therefore while for parents with older pre-school children doing courses at 'standard' times, the availability of a crèche place could be a crucial influence on the choice of institution, the unsuitability of these facilities for parents in different circumstances meant that their availability played no part in the selection of institution.

Another factor that influenced the choice of institution was, as one respondent put it: '*location, location, location*'. It was important that the college was local for three reasons. One, that in case of an emergency parents would be able to reach their child with reasonable speed; two, that the length of their journey did not mean that they returned home too late in the evening to spend time with the children; and three to be able to manage their childcare arrangements, such as collection from an after-school club. To this end there were cases where respondents reported, for example, restricting the geographical spread of their search -

*...it would have had to have been at [name of city where she lives] I think because travelling and the children it wouldn't have fitted in (HE FT, couple, school age children, not in employment while studying)*

- at the expense of quality of the course:

*...for art.... [name of college preferred] is an art college now, they specialise in it, whereas [name of college actually chosen] really isn't. So it's just the nearest but I couldn't really go to any other one. I could get home quick and I could get there quick so... (HE FT, couple, school age children, in employment while studying)*

## **4.2 Employment**

As we saw in Chapter 2, employment related factors could play an important role in the decision to return to study, and these could also influence the choice of course. Predictably, the extent to which a particular course might enhance career prospects and the attitude of one's current employer to training were particularly important in shaping decisions about courses among 'vocational' learners.

### **4.2.1 Career enhancement**

Although overall employment did play a key role in decision to study, exactly how much choice one was actually able to exercise in relation to what and where to study varied. On the one end of the spectrum were those for whom there was no real

choice, as ongoing training was part of their current job, and this would typically require them to undertake specific courses. Examples included a chemist who was legally obliged to complete dispensing technicians qualifications and a residential worker who was required by her employer to obtain an 'Independent Living with Mental Health Needs' qualification. For some the place of study was also determined by the employer. Such a case involved a respondent undertaking a diploma at a particular local university as she was seconded there by her employer.

Next there were those who chose to undertake a specific course in order to gain promotion in their current post or to facilitate a career change. In other words they did not *have* to study at all let alone any particular course, but were choosing to do so and had systematically selected a course. This group included, for example, an administrator who wanted to manage the business accounts and therefore decided to do a book-keeping course; a nurse who wished to teach midwifery and therefore had to obtain appropriate qualifications; and, an NNEB qualified nursery nurse who no longer wished to look after other people's children and was following a City and Guilds DTP/Web page design course.

At the other end of the spectrum were those who were entering the job market for the first time or re-entering after a career break. This group could be further split into two camps. One included those who chose a specific course based on its anticipated value in the job market. The quote below is from one such parent who was studying for a Registered Nursing Diploma.

*Well getting the job was the important thing – we're virtually gonna be guaranteed jobs, I mean we've got third-years now who've been approached by various departments, and poached, we're poached before we even finish...(HE FT, lone parent, school age child, occasionally worked while studying)*

The other camp comprised those who selected courses not with a specific career in mind, but simply to enhance their employment opportunities. Sentiments such as '*in any job you need English and Maths*' and '*you have to be sort of computer literate for jobs now*' were common among this group.

#### **4.2.2 Attitude of employer**

For those currently in paid employment the attitude of their employer towards training and career development affected their choices of course. For parents with a 'study-friendly' employer there was a greater scope for negotiating workloads and working hours to enable them to choose their preferred course, rather than one simply based on the fact that it fitted in with their work. Although it is important to point out at this stage that courses were often selected precisely for this reason, for example, parents who worked part-time tended to choose courses that ran during their non-working hours. The extent to which individuals could be flexible with their job, and therefore with their study options, was largely dependent on their type of work, and more specifically the level of job flexibility and autonomy. For example, a mother who worked as cashier at a supermarket reported that any course she chose to do had to fit in with her fixed working hours, whereas a district nurse explained

that she could arrange her appointments to enable her to undertake the course she wanted.

### 4.3 Financial issues

As discussed in the previous chapter, access to free or low cost courses influenced the decision to return to education, particularly among 'exploratory' learners. Financial issues (i.e. both the costs associated with the course and the availability of funding to do it) could also influence the choice of course. There were cases within FE and HE where individuals stated that:

*...without the financial help I wouldn't have taken any of the courses. (FE PT, lone parent, school age children, not in employment while studying)*

*I don't think I would have done it if I hadn't had that funding to be honest. I think it would have gone over the limit of what we could have spared for something which is like...not related to the household....(HE PT, couple, school age children, in employment while studying)*

In these circumstances a course was selected because, for example, it had government funding attached or fees were paid by their employer. 'Exploratory' learners (all studying in FE) reported an added incentive for doing a 'free' course. It provided an opportunity to 'get a taster' based upon which they could make an informed choice about whether to pursue further studies and invest financially. The extent to which financial considerations swayed choices is illustrated by a respondent who expressed a desire to do an Art and Textile course, but decided against it because in order to pay for the course materials, she would have needed to take out a student loan, instead she opted to do an art-related course because of its lower level of financial commitment. Another example that shows cost influencing decisions involved a parent who opted for nursing instead of a teaching course, partly because the latter was much longer, but also because the nursing course provided free transport to college. There were also several examples of parents who did not do the course of their choice, but opted for shorter courses in the same subject area, leading to lower level or less widely recognised qualifications, mainly because they were cheaper.

### 4.4 Opportunity and convenience

In contrast to the young and 'traditional' student population, student parents are very unlikely to move in order to study, as one mother put it:

*I couldn't go seeking places anywhere else 'cos of the family ties here, and the little one was starting school. (HE FT, lone parent, school age children, in employment while studying)*

As a result choices can become determined by convenience, in other words the process of deciding what and where to study may be a question of simply choosing from what is available locally, rather than going out to find a specific course. This was a common route to selection, but the locality from which courses were selected

seemed particularly limited among the 'exploratory' learners (all studying in FE). The convenience factor also helped with the childcare issues discussed above.

For the FE students convenience appeared to have a further impact. There was evidence of parents completing a course and deciding to start another one at the same college, because of the opportunity presenting itself and also the convenience of continuing at an institution that they had become familiar with. This pattern also shaped the decisions of some lifelong learners and assisted 'exploratory' learners.

The role of distance learning is particularly significant within this context. Firstly, it could influence the decision of when to return to study and where to do the course, for example, if childcare cover was simply not an option. This was the situation that one respondent found herself in when she decided to return to study. She had two children, one pre-school age the other school age, her own family lived abroad, her husband's relatives were all working and out of school childcare was non-existent in her area. She opted to do an Open University course because it was home based, even though she had to fund it herself, whereas she could have received a full grant to do a full-time degree in another university. Secondly, distant learning widened the choice of courses open to student parents by making courses that were inaccessible due to location or hours that did not fit with childcare.

#### 4.5 Other influences on choices

A number of other factors were also identified as having influenced choices. Most of these could be described as factors that any student, and not necessarily only those with children, consider when selecting courses and institutions. They included the institution's adequacy of facilities such as libraries and IT resources; its academic reputation; and the level of its tutor-student support network. Such concerns were usually raised by 'vocational' learners.

However, a point worth making which may have more significance for student parents was one about the age profile of the course population. Parents preferred a course with students who were similar in age and therefore possibly in life stage. They valued the prospect of studying with others who shared experiences of juggling family and study. There was evidence to suggest that this was often the case for 'exploratory' learners (all found in FE), though the sentiment was not absent for other learner types as the following quote from a 'vocational' learner implies.

*... the other course you had to join a set of nurses at the end of their 18 months, like 19/20-year-olds that are just starting training, whereas the other course was more my sort of age...so we could like have old conversations...and have the same sort of worries and concerns as families and stuff, whereas I think the other course was ... they'd have a different sort of outlook on nursing..(HE PT, couple, school age children, in employment while studying)*

## 4.6 Conclusion

The factors that shaped parents' decisions about what and where to study were closely linked to their more 'general' motivations for learning, which were in turn associated with the different learner types identified in Chapter 2. Childcare was an issue that, to a greater or lesser extent, affected all parents, but how they dealt with it depended largely on the extent to which learning was an important part of their life, as well as their employment and financial circumstances.

For 'exploratory' learners (all studying part-time in FE) a key determining factor in choosing a course or an institution was the extent to which it could fit in with their existing childcare arrangements, or whether childcare facilities were provided by the college. This was partly due to the fact that 'exploratory' learners were still probably assessing whether studying was 'for them', and also the costs and benefits of learning, so at this stage they might not have been prepared to make a large investment in it, in terms of money, their time and those of others who would need to help with childcare. For the same reasons these parents had chosen courses that were either free or very low cost. However, it must also be remembered that parents in this group were either not working or in low paid jobs, and might have not been in a position to make choices that had considerable cost implications, either because of the need to pay for childcare, fees and other costs associated with doing a course.

For 'vocational' learners (found both in FE and HE) being able to do a specific course or studying in a particular institution was important, as their choices were guided by learning goals, often linked to career aspirations. Even for these learners, course and institutional choices might be limited by childcare. However, they seemed more likely and willing to set up new (formal and informal) arrangements in order to do the course they wanted to do, rather than choosing a course or institution primarily because they fitted with existing arrangements or did not involve (additional) childcare costs. While attitudes to learning were important in shaping these decisions, again employment and financial circumstances played a part. As noted earlier, 'vocational' learners were not only more likely than 'exploratory' learners to be in employment, but they were also more likely to be in the kind of jobs where training was facilitated by the employer. However, financial considerations were important for this group as well, fees and other course related costs, childcare costs and the availability of funding could all play a part in deciding which course to do and where to do it.

Like 'vocational' learners, 'lifelong' learners were strongly committed to learning but their aspirations were broader and not usually focussed on specific learning goals. They, therefore, tended to be rather 'flexible' in their choices of courses and institutions and tended to opt for options that minimised the need, for example, for additional childcare or costs associated with the course.

## 5 EXPERIENCE OF BEING A STUDENT PARENT

This chapter reports on the experience of combining being a parent with studying and other activities such as work. It presents examples of childcare arrangements that enabled the respondents to fulfil their obligations successfully and others that were less effective. Further it illustrates how different childcare arrangements, both those that worked well and those that worked less well, affected the respondents' participation in their course and work.

Here we also explore the impact of funding (or lack of it) on parents' learning experiences and performance. For example, we look at how the availability and accessibility of funding might have enabled parents to successfully complete a course and progress to other studies, or conversely how lack of funding, insufficient funding or lack of information about funding options might have negatively impinged on parents' academic performance and future learning plans.

### 5.1 Types of childcare arrangements

A variety of childcare arrangements were used to enable parents to study. As noted in Chapter 3 some parents set up childcare arrangements specifically to enable them to study, whilst others fitted their study in with existing childcare arrangements, or by extending them a little. There was evidence that the former often involved accessing formal childcare, such as an after school club or a childminder, while the latter received help from family and friends. Accordingly, arrangements ranged from making use of the time that children were in school to organising a complex package of childcare.

As noted above a common practice, especially among 'exploratory' and 'lifelong' learners (both tended to be on part-time courses, in FE for the former and FE or HE for the latter), was to select a course that fitted school hours. This way no or very little additional childcare was necessary. Where the course contact hours did not fit school hours there were cases of parents negotiating with institutions and, for those who were in employment, with their employers to make this possible. Examples included a full-time B Ed student who had made an agreement with her college to be allowed to leave early to collect her daughter from school, and a full-time HE student who worked as a nurse and was able to arrange her shifts to suit her course and her child's school hours. Obviously, the option of negotiating hours with the employer was dependent on the type of job one had.

Often in addition to regular childcare that covered, for example, tuition hours, parents made ad hoc arrangements for occasions such as when their child had to miss school due to illness, or when they required extra childcare in order to meet course deadlines.

Another factor that complicated childcare arrangements was the age range of the children. For families with children of pre- and school age children two different childcare arrangements were necessary. An example of this was a part-time FE student whose three year old attended the college crèche whilst she was at lectures, with the class finishing in time for her to collect her five year old from school. Another point worth making is that over the life span of a course the childcare arrangements may have to change because children will grow older. One such case involved a respondent studying a six-year part-time degree. At the outset her son attended the nursery attached to her college one morning a week, then moving onto full-time school plus an after-school club for when she had late afternoon sessions.

As mentioned above nursing and teaching courses were popular among 'vocational' learners. As well as taught sessions at college, these entailed a period of work placement in hospital or school respectively. A consequence of this was that often the childcare arrangements made for the time in college were not appropriate for the period of work placement. A full-time HE student and a part-time FE student both pursuing a teaching qualification described such an experience. Their college hours matched those of school and therefore they were able to continue to drop off and collect their children from school. However, once they started their work placement, which required them to be at the school they were teaching before school began, and accordingly before their children's school opened, they had to make additional childcare arrangements to enable them to meet their new schedule.

Even if courses did not involve placements, there may be variations in the timetable from semester to semester that require childcare arrangements to be altered. For example, an increased workload near the end of a course may mean that students need to spend more time in private study at home, or a concentration of revision sessions for exams may require them to be at the college more often, each of these changes may need different childcare arrangements.

Next we shall look in more detail at the types of childcare arrangements that parents made to enable them to study. Overall the childcare arrangements can be grouped into two categories: informal and formal. Although there were cases of parents using a combination of formal and informal childcare sources to enable them to study. Such arrangements suited those whose taught sessions ran into late afternoon or evening which meant that they needed cover at a time that formal childcare usually did not cater for. An example involved a childminder doing the school run and dropping off the children at their grandparent's home, from where the respondent collected them much later in the evening.

### **5.1.1 Informal childcare**

In addition to non-parental informal childcare which is usually provided by family and friends we shall also be discussing the contribution of partners (and ex-partners) in this section. Informal childcare arrangements were common among all learner types (in FE and HE). Family and friends helped with 'school runs' or acted as full-time childminders. Usually, there was no financial payment, and sometimes the arrangement was a reciprocal one. Informal childcare, especially that provided by grandparents was seen '*as the next best thing*' to looking after the children yourself,



and offered parents the confidence to participate fully in their study without worrying about their children.

### **Family and friends as regular childcare providers**

Certain circumstances, including the respondent's partner working from home or working flexible hours because, for example, they were self-employed, meant that it was the partner (current or ex) who took responsibility to drop off and collect children from school. There was also evidence of 'shift-parenting' arrangements, for example, a parent described how her partner who worked nights looked after the children two mornings a week to enable her to attend a part-time FE course. Partners were also the childcare providers for those who opted to follow an evening, and therefore usually an FE, course.

Childcare was frequently provided by grandparents. For similar reasons that some waited until their children were in full-time education to return to study, house moves which resulted in being closer to grandparents, was also seen as an opportunity to free up time for themselves to – in these cases – study. Grandparents did the school run and often looked after the children after school enabling the respondents to attend classes that ran into the evening. Sometimes, as the quote below demonstrates, managing childcare turned into a 'family affair'.

*I think everyone took it in turns, Neil's mum, Neil's sister and Neil all took it in turns to look after her... (HE FT, couple, pre-school age child, in employment while studying)*

For those who used friends to provide childcare cover whilst they were at college, there appeared to be an element of reciprocity in the arrangement. In other words it was a case of 'I'll drop them, you pick them up'. This arrangement may be with friends that they had made through coffee mornings or play groups, or with the parents of someone who was in the same class as their child at school. On the whole such arrangements tended to involve older children, usually over 10, may be as one respondent noted she considered her 11 year old to be 'too old to go to the childminder with lots of little children'.

### **Family and friends as ad hoc childcare providers**

In addition to the regular childcare discussed thus far, parents found that on occasions it was necessary to organise additional or alternative childcare on an ad hoc basis. There was evidence that informal, rather than formal, childcare was usually used to provide the ad hoc cover. The main explanations offered for the preference was the flexibility, accessibility and affordability of informal childcare.

One such occasion was during school holidays. Often parents found that after school clubs were closed or that the cost of increasing a childminder's hours to cover the time children would have been at school was too expensive. This meant that they needed to find an alternative source of childcare. In these circumstances family and friends appeared to offer a replacement, sometimes at a personal 'cost', as the following quote suggests.

*...I was a bit concerned about... it running over into Peter's holiday time and what I would do about that ... me mam's been an absolute star because what she did was for all our holidays she literally booked her holidays in around Peter's half terms. (HE FT, lone parent, school age child, not in employment while studying)*

Another time when parents often needed to make ad hoc arrangements was for less predictable occasions, such as when their child was ill and off school or during critical points in their course, for example, when they needed extra time to study in order to meet assignment deadlines. In these situations parents felt that some of the conditions of use that formal childcare imposed, such as having to book an entire week in advance with a nursery or childminder when they required only a day or a number of hours, made the resource unhelpful. Again the flexibility that family and friends offered, for example, grandparents taking the children away for a weekend without demanding too much advance warning or close friends and family providing childcare even when the children were ill (which childminders and after school clubs did not) made them a much valued alternative.

Although the appreciation that parents expressed for the regular and ad hoc childcare provided by family and friends cannot be overstated, there was a sense of guilt attached to this arrangement. This was due to the fact that they did not pay, usually at the family and friends insistence, for the childcare. Instead parents offered other tokens of gratitude, such as buying them flowers or taking them out for a meal. Nevertheless the sense of '*not taking advantage*' or '*making unrealistic demands*', as one respondent noted, who felt unable to ask a friend to look after four children was very real.

### **5.1.2 Formal childcare**

The main sources of formal childcare identified by the respondents included childminders, nurseries, after school clubs and crèches at the parents' place of study. Childminders were used to look after pre-school age children, and for school age children to do the school runs and to look after them for a few hours after school. Those who had taught lessons running beyond school time made use of after school clubs and schools providing an escort to the club were particularly welcome, as opposed to having to organise another layer of childcare – e.g. a childminder to carry out that task. Although this was a little accessed resource, those who used a crèche attached to their place of study were full of praise for the peace of mind and convenience that the proximity afforded.

Generally, there appeared to be little use of formal childcare especially among the 'exploratory' and 'lifelong' learners (the former were all in FE on part-time courses and the latter on part-time courses in FE or HE). This was partly linked to the point made earlier that they often selected a course that fitted school hours and consequently required no additional childcare – formal or informal – to enable them to study. But all learner types also did not use formal childcare for the reasons outlined above, i.e. the benefits of familiarity with family, the age restrictions and limited opening hours of formal childcare sources. There was a further reason for the low usage of formal childcare and that was its cost which we shall discuss next.

### **Cost of formal childcare**

The cost of childcare was a real issue as it could consume a significant quantity of the family income. The concern was heightened where the partner was the sole income earner during the life time of the course or if a full-time course was to be undertaken, as it was likely to require a considerable amount of childcare cover.

There was little evidence of respondents receiving funding to specifically cover childcare. There were a number of reasons for this situation. First there were those whose applications had proven unsuccessful because their salary was above the eligibility level. But more commonly respondents did not receive funding because they did not apply for it. There were three main explanations for not applying. The first was the lack of awareness of the existence of this resource:

*I didn't look into it but I'm pretty certain it's not there to be honest, I've never heard of anybody....* (HE PT, couple, school age child, in employment while working)

The second was that while they knew of the funding available, they did not apply because they presumed that they would not be eligible:

*... I think because my husband was working full-time. I don't think there was anything that we would claim...* (HE FT, couple, school age children, not in employment while studying)

And the third was the knowledge that their preference to use family or friends to look after their children rather than registered childcare disqualified their application:

*You can claim back up to 70 per cent of your costs. But to be honest I feel much happier with the children being at my parents'. I think that they're happier, they treat it as a second home...* (FE PT, lone parent, school age children, in employment while studying)

Comments from the experiences of those who had sought funding suggested that the process was a difficult one. Finding out about the existence of the resource was the first hurdle identified. The quote below is from a full-time HE student who described how a tutor who realised she was struggling to cope with her studies because of childcare suggested that she seek financial help from the Access Fund.

*...found out accidentally because ... they don't really advertise...They just have one small leaflet where in the principal office ....you've really got to go and look for it which I think was terrible.... It was obviously done because they don't want many people to go to them and ask for money, I'm sure of that.* (HE FT, lone parent, school-age children, not in employment while studying)

The second hurdle faced by this student was the length that she felt she had to go to (e.g. having to submit a letter from her GP proving that she was on anti-depressants) to qualify for the maximum allocation, which she believed she needed in order to

complete the final year of the course. Her main complaint, however, was the need for her to be proactive in finding out about financial support when she believed this to be the responsibility of the college.

An overriding impression from those who had sought funding for their course was that the impetus rested with them. One respondent put her successful application down to her taking the initiative and adopting a pro-active approach. She describes her experience below.

*... and it was in fact when I enquired about a student loan that they ..... told me to go back to the college... and make my case ... They [the college] actually managed to borrow...fee waiver off a different course and re-assign it to my course for me...I'd built a good case for having a fee...They felt that I wasn't just going to give up on it halfway...And obviously getting the Working Families Tax Credit they realised that I hadn't got a lot of spare money and they were prepared to do it for me. (FE PT and HE PT distant learning, lone parent, school age children, not in employment while studying)*

The process of applying for childcare support was felt to be onerous and a failed application was likely to deter a further attempt the following year. There was a sense that the eligibility criteria seemed to regularly change which further complicated the process. As a parent explained: one 'has enough pressures in life to keep up with' without negotiating the funding routes. In a similar vein those who only wished to access formal childcare resources during school holidays felt that there was too much paperwork involved in applying for, for example, Working Family Tax Credit for childminding fees for only a short period.

The concerns regarding cost did not end with a successful application. One respondent recounted how she had received funding for a three-year course which she was unable to complete within that timeframe. Instead she had required an additional year and the consequent costs incurred made her question whether she would have elected to undertake that course had she envisaged this situation.

## **5.2 Impact of childcare on participation in course**

Childcare played a key role in determining how fully a student parent could participate in their course. Its influence appeared to increase with the presence of other conditions such as if the course was full-time, the respondent was a lone parent or was in employment alongside studying. Impinging on all these factors was the issue of the cost of childcare. How much time a parent had to devote to study was dependent on how much childcare they needed, which in turn, if there was a financial cost, depended on how much they could afford to pay. A student who was being paid whilst she was on a work placement described the importance of being able to afford adequate childcare to enable her to participate in the course fully.

*I would say that a big factor was the fact that I was having a full salary...And it was enough money to pay for childcare.....Had I been in a low paid job that would have been a different story completely. (HE FT, school age child, couple, employed while studying)*

Childcare appeared to have an impact on the ways in which student parents did, or did not, participate in their course in several ways. These included the ability to meet the required level of attendance, the capacity to keep up with course work, the ability to fulfil work placement requirements, the opportunity to enjoy the social aspects of being a student, and the attitude of institutions to student parents.

### **5.2.1 Attendance/absenteeism**

Where taught sessions started before school, there was a general, but unhappy, acceptance by parents that they would not be able to meet the required number of hours of attendance. These were likely to be 'vocational' learners in FE or HE as the other two learner types were less likely to opt for a course that made it difficult to meet their existing childcare arrangements. Their school run duties meant that they regularly missed the start and/or the end of lectures. A student on a nursing work placement described how she did not feel part of the team because she was never able to be at the hospital for the 7am start. Another blamed her low grades on the fact that she was unable to attend the optional classes, which started after 3pm. As an Art and Textile student she did not have the option of 'catching up' at home or fellow students bringing her the notes from the sessions that she had missed – a popular and usually successful alternative – because of the nature of her course, which required her to do her work in an art studio at the college.

Children being off school, either due to illness or holidays, was another situation that led some to miss classes. This practice was widespread among all learner types in FE and HE, however, its consequences seemed to be greater for the full-time 'vocational' learners (in HE). An explanation for this can be found in the nature of the courses undertaken, namely that less demanding, in terms of workload, courses tended to be selected by 'exploratory' (on part-time courses in FE) and some 'lifelong' learners (on part-time courses in FE or HE), rather than by full-time HE students, which in turn meant 'less catching up' followed any absences. This was less of an issue where the course, whether FE or HE, was being studied through distant learning. Its flexible learning format allowed work to be organised around such eventualities. For these reasons a popular piece of advice offered by parents was to never rely on one source of childcare, but to always have 'back ups'. Those who had made such arrangements reported fewer difficulties with their attendance levels.

### **5.2.2 Private study/course work**

The impact of childcare did not stop at contact hours, but also influenced the opportunity to do private study and therefore keep up with course work. Some found studying at home impossible – *'not with my lot...just a nightmare'*, consequently they struggled with assignments and had to ask for extensions, which made them feel as though they *'had failed'*. A popular strategy adopted by all learners for managing private study was to work when the children had gone to bed. The following quote describes a common experience.

*It was a lot of time, was like putting him in bed and then sitting and doing it in the night. So sometime I have to manage with five hours of sleep, four hours of sleep. (HE FT, school age child, couple, in employment while studying)*

And there were points in the course, particularly for 'vocational' HE learners, usually at the end, when the workload was at its heaviest either with assignment deadlines or revision for exams when 'working through the night' became more frequent.

On the whole 'working when the children were in bed' seemed to be a tactic better suited to those with younger children who were likely to retire early in the evening. For those with older children, usually over 10, bedtime was later which freed up less of the evening for study. Further, for those with children of secondary school age there was a sense that their own assessed course work was less important than their children's, and often the evenings were spent helping them with their homework. However, some described an opposing experience, whereby older children demanded less attention because they were better able to entertain themselves and needed less '*bodily contact*'.

The practice of working 'through the night' meant that it was necessary to have a computer at home as there seemed to be an expectation by institutions that assignments would be in typed format. Those who had a computer at home described how they had to '*fight over it*' with their children, and often not '*getting their turn*' until after the children had gone to bed. For those without access to a computer, studying at home was a limited option. Having to go to the college computer centre meant more time away from their children and consequently more childcare arrangements, and also they were restricted by the opening hours as to when they could study. In other words, when the children were in bed and they had some free time, the college computer centre was likely to be closed. The lengths that some had to go to in order to meet the typed assignments requirement was illustrated by one respondent who had to take her children with her to her brother's house and use his computer. She explained how she saved up and eventually bought a computer, which she described as a '*godsend*', because she could now work from home and renew her library books over the Internet.

However, not everybody struggled with coursework. Naturally, those who reported receiving little homework, and these were usually FE students, fell into this category. And those who were on a part-time course and not in employment or in part-time employment were able to make use of the time that their children were in school (on the days when they were not working). Interestingly, some believed that those with children were better organised than younger people without family commitments and therefore were more able to meet coursework deadlines.

### **5.2.3 Placements**

As noted above nursing and teaching courses were popular. Both contained a period of work placement. Also, as described above often parents selected the place of study because it was local and childcare was arranged accordingly. However, some found that they had to alter the childcare arrangements made for the taught part of the course to accommodate the work placements because it involved a change of location

or timetable. There was evidence of parents attempting to negotiate placement location so that they would not have to make this change. Sometimes the outcome of this was negative in that they could not opt for the best option because it did not suit their current childcare arrangements, but other times such a request to the college was more fruitful. One example involved a full-time student pursuing a teaching qualification who asked for a local placement in order to continue to collect her son, and was placed at a school near her home which in fact meant that she was able to leave home later than she used to for the taught sessions at college.

#### **5.2.4 Student social life**

An opportunity to meet new people had motivated some parents to return to study. Those drawn by the social aspect of learning were not restricted to one type of learner group, but included those who were likely to be socially isolated, for example, lone parents or those living far from family and friends.

More generally, however, whilst parents did not expect to be able to participate in the student social life to the extent enjoyed by the average student (young-single-without children), there was a degree of regret at not having the opportunity to engage at some level. This is not surprising given the difficulties described above in attending the compulsory elements of the course. The desire to have the opportunity to engage with fellow students on a level outside study was not only for social reasons, but for more practical ends too, as a part-time Open University course student explained. She recalled that she had been excused from the residential summer school during her first year because she had young children. On reflection she felt that she missed out on the socialising and the friendships that were forged which she might now have been able to call upon for support.

#### **5.2.5 Attitude of institution to student parents**

On the whole parents' experiences of combining childcare responsibilities with studying varied little between HE and FE students. Both missed classes due to lack of childcare cover, struggled to find time to complete coursework, found their choices of work placement restricted by childcare arrangements, and missed out on student social life. However, there does seem to be a difference between HE and FE when it comes to the attitude of institutions to the needs of student parents and the consequences of this on their ability to participate fully in their course.

On the whole institutions were not felt to be very 'family friendly' but there was a widespread perception that FE colleges were more likely than HE to have a more supportive learning environment for student parents. Some FE courses were described as being '*aimed specifically at women like me*', e.g. for working mothers or mothers returning to work. Below are two examples cited by parents of good practice in FE colleges.

- One was a teacher training course where the parents had been consulted about the course format. Their input into designing the course included determining the timing of assignment allocations (they chose to receive the more difficult ones when they were likely to have less childcare responsibilities, for example, during

school term-time), and the timing of classes (they chose to start at 9.30 so that they could continue to drop their children off at school).

- Another was an IT course run by Home Start for young lone mothers. The course organisers provided transport to collect the mothers from home, an onsite crèche, and kitchen facilities to prepare feeds for their babies.

Even where FE courses were not designer-made for student parents, there was a general sense that tutors were more aware of their childcare needs, and geared up to deal with situations such as having to take time off to look after sick children or during school holidays. Often this was due to the fact that the FE courses that parents undertook usually contained others with similar family commitments. Whereas HE seemed to be more designed for the young commitment-free student population, although there were some examples of good practice here as well, such as sending out timetables in advance so that parents could make childcare arrangements. But generally, the parents' needs discussed above were not looked upon sympathetically as the quote below illustrates.

*...I dropped them off at nine...so sometimes I was half an hour late. They were not very happy about it but I did tell them... there's not much I can do...I obviously lost marks because of that...I mean it was up to them...to take those marks off or be sympathetic about it...they were not very helpful...(HE FT, lone parent, school age children, not in employment while studying)*

Consequently, there was a feeling that a 'here comes another one....children's problems' attitude towards student parents was prevalent in some institutions. To avoid this, some reported using the student profile to decide which course or college to attend, preferring to do a course that involved mature students who would be more likely to relate and sympathise with family needs and possibly increase the awareness of tutors too.

### 5.3 Conclusion

'Juggling' was a popular way of describing the experience of combining childcare with study. And the juggling became more frantic as additional pressures were placed on parents, such as undertaking a full-time course, being a lone parent or being in employment alongside studying. Overall, these three factors seemed to have a greater influence on the type of childcare arrangements made and the impact that childcare responsibilities had on the extent to which parents could participate in their course, rather than whether the course being studied was in FE or HE, although there were particular experiences that did appear to be peculiar to one or the other. In other words the amount of childcare required, when it was required and the size of the resources one was able to access, shaped the experience of being a student parent.

Generally the amount of childcare required for a full-time course was greater than for a part-time course, and when formal childcare was being used, the cost was accordingly higher too. This may be one reason for the limited use made of formal childcare, although the lack of awareness of the funding available and the



complicated application process also appeared to have played a part. There was also evidence of parents opting for part-time courses because they entailed a lower level, and therefore cost, of childcare.

Formal childcare was of little use to those who were doing courses that did not match the childcare providers' standard opening times, for example, for those doing evening courses which were usually found in FE, or for those who were working atypical hours on a placement, for example, in a hospital which tended to be a requirement of HE courses. In these instances they were likely to seek informal childcare because of the greater flexibility that it afforded.

In some cases respondents with partners had selected an evening course on the basis that their partner would be at home to look after the children. Such a 'shift parenting' option was obviously not open to lone parents. However, organising childcare arrangements seemed to be as much a prerequisite to entering study for respondents with a partner as for a lone parent. This is because the mother continues to be the main care provider and her absence requires a replacement.

It follows then that the adequacy of the childcare arrangements determined the extent to which parents could successfully participate in their course. Where childcare was insufficient the negative consequences of missing classes, struggling to meet coursework deadlines, restricting choices of placement and lacking opportunities to socialise with fellow students were experienced by both FE and HE students.

Parents learning experiences were also shaped by the attitude of institutions towards students with family commitments. Generally, institutions were not seen as being very 'family friendly', but instead were felt to continue to cater for a 'commitment-free' student population. However, there were cases within FE and HE of attempts to create a more 'family friendly learning environment', for example courses specifically designed for parent students with later starting times in the morning, or a flexible assignment timetable. Such initiatives recognised the needs of student parents and consequently enabled them, not only take part in the course, but also to enjoy it and do well.

## 6 IMPACTS OF STUDYING

Despite the sacrifices and problems faced by some parents in trying to reconcile family responsibilities with studying, the predominant view was that learning was a very rewarding and worthwhile experience, which positively affected many different aspects of parents' life. Encouragement to progress further with their studies was one of the most common outcomes; personal development also featured very highly, as did a wide range of employment related benefits. While, as discussed earlier, family life might have been (temporarily) disrupted by parents' courses, parental learning can also bring benefits to the whole family. Last, but not least, for some parents who were isolated, attending courses could represent an important opportunity to meet new friends and establish social networks.

Predictably the outcomes of learning were closely linked to the factors that motivated parents to study and to learning routes (discussed in Chapter 2), as well as the influences that shaped their decisions about which course to do (covered in Chapter 3).

### 6.1 Future learning

Progression to further learning seemed to be the next 'natural' step for many of the parents interviewed. This was clearly linked to the fact that parents had found learning a very rewarding and enjoyable experience, but future learning plans were also shaped by more specific reasons.

Respondents seemed to view the course(s) discussed in the interviews as part of a 'learning path'. As discussed earlier, parents were at various stages of their learning path, at one end of the spectrum there were some who had recently returned to education after a very long 'learning break'. These were, by and large, 'exploratory' learners and were therefore all found in FE and studying part-time. While these parents had enjoyed their learning experience, they were still assessing whether studying was 'for them', and also weighing up the costs and benefits of progressing to possibly more demanding courses.

At the other extreme, there were parents who had never really left education, as a combination of personal choice and employment circumstances meant that their involvement in learning did not end when they left school. These included both 'vocational' and 'lifelong' learners and did not seem to be more likely to be found in a particular sector, indeed they were likely to have studied in a variety of settings. This did not, however, apply to all 'vocational' or 'lifelong' learners, with some having returned to learning after a break of several years, but having now been involved in learning for a considerable period of time. It seems very likely that these parents will carry on studying in future, in both HE and FE.

Parents' medium and long term learning goals also varied considerably, some 'vocational' learners were planning further courses which would enable them to develop specific skills, or enter a particular occupation. Having completed the

course(s) required to enter a particular profession, other 'vocational' learners found that the new career will require them to regularly up-date their skills and knowledge, or even specialise in a particular area. Different learning goals did not appear to be linked to the sector where parents studied, although predictably those who had studied in FE and were aiming for high level or professional qualifications were likely to plan a move into HE.

Finally, a predominant influence on future learning intentions was what had motivated many parents to return to study in the first place; as discussed in Chapter 2, some were strongly driven by the need to pick up education where they had left it, often with poor results, many years earlier.

## 6.2 Personal development

To a greater or lesser extent all courses (even short ones) were seen as having contributed to parents' personal development; this is of course a very broad impact, which was expressed in a variety of ways by parents with different experiences. Some parents talked about having been able to prove to themselves and to others that they could successfully complete an academic course and achieve qualifications. For others it was about establishing a life outside the family and being more than '*just a mum and a wife*'. The development of 'life' and basic skills were also outcomes mentioned by some parents. Apart from the latter which were outcomes that featured predominantly among FE students, all the other personal development outcomes did not seem to be linked to studying in a particular sector, nor to the learning types identified in Chapter 2.

### 6.2.1 'Proving yourself'

Having been able to prove to themselves and to others that they were able to successfully complete an academic course and get a 'piece of paper' was a predominant impact of studying among parents who had left school with low or no qualifications. Having being able to do this gave parents a tremendous sense of fulfilment, as explained below by a parent who had not done very well at school and in her mid 30s went back to study and took GCSEs in Maths and English:

*I don't seem so thick anymore...because I've got GCSE grade A ...and a grade B. So I felt better in myself – the better grade I got, the better I felt ... I felt I had more confidence... 'cos I know I didn't do very well at school, I was shy at school...it was a big achievement for me I think. (FE PT, couple, school age children, employed while studying)*

The sense of achievement was also very strong among parents who, as teenagers, felt they had been denied the opportunity to study, as the following quote, from a mother who was on a teacher training course, illustrates:

*I didn't have to be a mum or work in an office thank you very much [as suggested by the career adviser when she left school]. And even though I come from a working class family and a working class area I can get a degree and I can be a teacher and so can my children now, because my children have completely different experiences to what I had... (HE PT, couple, school age children, employed while studying)*

### 6.2.2 'Not just a mum and a wife'

For mothers who had left paid employment to look after the family a return to study was seen as having provided an important opportunity to be more than '*just a mum and a wife*'. For some this might be about having some time and space for themselves, but for others studying had meant more than that. It had helped them to develop some kind of 'public identity' they felt they lacked in a society where people are increasingly defined in terms of the paid job they do, and where unpaid caring responsibilities are no longer valued.

*You're not just a mum anymore at home doing nothing...You've actually done something worthwhile, got something to show at the end of it...* (FE PT, lone parent, pre- and school age children, not in employment while studying)

*Studying has enriched my life a great deal, just the experience and challenge of learning new things everyday instead of vegetating at home.* (HE FT, couple, school age child, not in employment while studying)

While, studying as a means of having a life and an identity independent of one's caring and domestic role was predominant among parents who were not working, it was by no means limited to this group, as the quote below from a working mother shows:

*I decided to do this [degree course] for me... because it was for me as Amanda, not mum or wife... It's nice to have something that's just for you.* (HE PT, couple, school age children, in employment while studying)

### 6.2.3 Life skills

Finally, personal development for some parents meant having gained what they perceived as 'life skills', such as time management, communication and assertiveness. Again these were impacts of learning that tended to be mentioned by parents who had been out of paid employment for some time. Having been able to fill what some parents perceived as being major skill gaps was also mentioned as an important outcome of learning. Basic literacy, numeracy and IT skills were what parents tended to see as vital, as they affect not only employability, but also the ability to function in a society where these skills are increasingly required in every day activities.

As a mother who had done a basic skills course organised by her child's school explained:

*It [studying] gives you confidence in yourself, I mean if you can't read and write it's a problem.* (FE PT, couple, school age child, in employment while studying)

*I mean all knowledge is good and it's given me confidence working round the computer. I mean initially the children knew it better than I did and that's quite demoralising, someone of 40 to be, you go in and say, Anne how do you...? (laughter) I mean, I don't wanna be a person of 90 who*

*don't know how to use modern technology. (FE PT, couple, school age child, in employment while studying)*

Unlike all other aspects of personal development, which seemed to be linked primarily to the experience of studying, regardless of whether this was done in FE or HE, the development of life and basic skills was, by and large, mentioned by parents on FE courses.

### **6.3 Employment and employability**

Given that, as explained in Chapter 1, the research focused mainly on parents who did courses which were to a greater or lesser extent work related, it was not surprising to find that a wide range of employment related benefits were mentioned. While the type and length of course might have determined how and to what extent parents felt learning had affected their employment and employability, as with personal development, virtually all parents believed that studying had had a positive effect on different aspects of their (current or future) working life.

The employment benefits of learning mentioned by parents could be seen as being part of a continuum, where parents' position depended on the combination of a range of factors, including their employment status, their reasons for studying and the type of course undertaken. Key points on this continuum are explored in the rest of the section.

#### **6.3.1 Learning as a first step towards a return to work**

At one extreme of the continuum we find parents who had been outside paid employment for some time and for whom a return to learning seemed to represent the first (sometimes tentative) step towards a return to paid employment. These also tended to be parents with low skill and qualification levels, and who were very uncertain about their employment prospects, because of their perceived lack of human capital and relatively long absence from the labour market.

This group of parents were, by and large, 'exploratory' learners and therefore studied in FE, and tended to do short, skill 'enhancing' courses (e.g. IT, basic skills), rather than training for a specific occupation. For this group studying had not yet resulted in any concrete actions (e.g. exploring career options, applying for jobs), but had certainly increased their confidence and work motivation, as the parent below who took part in a Fresh Start course explained:

*... 'cos I really had – had a shocking few years and ...I didn't have much confidence, and that the course helped me and made me want to start...do a job – and ...the courses that I've done...have helped me sort of want to do another course... (FE PT, lone parent, school age children, not in employment while studying)*

### **6.3.2 Learning as part of the 'return to work' plan**

Further along the continuum there were parents who were also not in paid work when they started studying, but had much clearer ideas about their future employment and saw the course(s) as part of their 'return to work' plan. This group included a mixture of low skilled/qualified parents who believed they needed to study in order to strengthen their labour market position, as well as better qualified parents, who nevertheless believed they needed to up-date their skills before returning to work. A sub-group within this group also included mothers who since having children had been in very part-time jobs, usually not in their field of work, and who were now planning to return to work full-time or to get a 'proper job'.

All parents in this group were 'vocational' learners. The kind of courses done by these parents tended to be related to specific occupations (e.g. childminding, accountancy), or were designed for those returning to work after a career break. They seemed more likely to be found in FE rather than HE. Parents in this group had now returned to work (or to a 'proper job') or were actively seeking work; in both cases parents had seen the course as having greatly contributed to this.

*It's given me a lot of confidence in myself 'cause I feel like now I can do something... I'm not afraid to go and apply for a job or I'm not afraid to say things to people because I know that I've got the knowledge of certain things...If I didn't have all those certificates and I didn't know nothing I might still be home on Income Support doing nothing and very depressed.  
(FE PT, lone parent, pre- and school age children, in employment while studying)*

### **6.3.3 Learning and career goals**

Next on the continuum there were 'vocational' learners who, although employed, wanted to progress in their job, widen their career prospects, change career or specialise in an area of work. Also, there were parents who had to undertake specific courses to comply with professional requirements and/or health and safety legislation. This group was very mixed in terms of socio-economic profile; it included parents who felt stuck in low skill and boring jobs and wanted to find a more interesting and better paid job, as well as professionals (e.g. nurses, social workers, teachers) who wished to specialise or change career.

The kind of courses done by these parents tended to be related to specific occupations and were done both in FE and HE, although predictably, the specialist professional courses tended to be in HE. Parents on whole felt that studying had either already helped them to fulfil their career goals (e.g. got a promotion, changed job, moved to another kind of work), or was likely to do so in their future, as the quotes below illustrate.

A mother who felt she had been stuck in an unchallenging job for too long explained that studying had helped to open up career prospects:

*'Cos there is more to life than just going to work in a job that you hate everyday 'cos you can do something better and you're better than what people might think... (FE PT, couple, school age children, employed while studying)*

Another mother explained that, through various courses, she had been able to move on from a shop job she did not like, to working in a school office and eventually secure a job as teaching assistant, and had now just completed a diploma in nursery nursing:

*There's so many avenues it [the course] opens because it's not only just the childcare, it's all the other jobs that you can go into that's to do with childcare when you've had a few years' experience... you can become managers of nurseries ... you can work for the council, you can go back to college (FE PT, couple, school age children, in employment while studying)*

A mother who qualified as a Registered General Nurse in the mid 1980s, after several years in nursing went to university to study for a Diploma in District Nursing and then topped up her diploma credits to get a degree explained:

*I wouldn't have got the promotion without it...Because nowadays you can't get these sort of jobs without having these sort of qualifications or at least be working towards them. So I wouldn't have the job that I have now without all the studying if I'm honest. (HE PT, lone parent, school age children, in employment while studying)*

Interestingly studying had allowed some parents to pursue a career which enabled them to better reconcile work and family life. For example, a lone mother on maternity leave at the time of the interview, who used to be a care worker, had recently completed a childminding course and was now a registered childminder. She hoped that childminding will make it easier for her to reconcile paid work with looking after her children, than her previous job, which required her to work shifts.

## **6.4 Family life**

While, as discussed in the previous chapter, studying could represent a strain on some families, respondents also talked about the many ways in which the family as a whole, as well as individual members, had benefited from their learning.

### **6.4.1 Benefits for the family as a whole**

Some parents talked about a higher standard of living for the family as one of the benefits of learning, as studying had enabled them to obtain higher earnings (or were predicting they will be able to do so). For example, a mother who had started a Diploma in Nursing after a six year career brake predicted that, when she qualifies and gets a nursing job, they will be able to move out of their council flat, buy a bigger and nicer house, in an area with good schools for the children:

*I want a house, very materialistic, I know, but it is nice to have your house 'cos this is a council house at the moment, just somewhere nice 'cos there's only two bedrooms and I've got two kids so their bedroom is really small you know.... (HE FT, couple, pre- and school age children, not in employment while studying)*

Similarly a parent who after having children decided to train as an accountant explained:

*They've had holidays abroad ...they've all got sort of nice clothes, they've all got a telly in their room... and those nice things don't come from fresh air. (HE PT, couple, school age children, in employment while studying)*

Courses which had resulted (or were expected to result) in higher earnings and therefore better living standards were mainly, but not exclusively, undertaken in HE by 'vocational' learners. While HE courses generally might be expected to increase earning potential (e.g. because they tend to be higher level, provide professional training), this result could also partly reflect our sample composition, which included parents in both full- and part-time HE courses, while all parents in FE were studying part-time, with some having done very short, basic skills courses.

Parents for whom personal development, and in particular being more '*than just a mum and a wife*', had been an important outcome of learning, also thought that this indirectly had a positive impact on the whole family. Parents talked about being a '*happier and better person*' as a result of studying, which in turn improved their relationship with the rest of the family. A lone mother, who gave up work seven years ago when her daughter was born, and had recently gone back to study in preparation for a return to work, explained when talking about the impact of studying on her child:

*It's hard to put a finger on it but I think because I'm more aware that I'm all right (laughs)... I can do this. Just the confidence thing from inside I think that kind of reflects on to Naomi. And I think she's probably seen a change in me, I've been happier without a doubt because I've had some sort of purpose, some sort of goal and it's not actually pushed her out, it's kind of pushed us together. (FE PT, lone parent, school age child, not in employment while studying)*

Also as another respondent who had returned to study recently and had done various short courses explained:

*My husband says I'm more relaxed, mellowed out [because] I've done something for myself, apart from the kids, and I've enjoyed it. (FE PT, couple, pre- and school age children, not employed while studying)*

#### **6.4.2 Benefits for children**

As well benefiting the family as a whole, learning was seen as having had a positive impact on individual family members, with a great emphasis placed on the variety of



ways in which courses had affected children, as outlined below. These benefits did not seem to be associated to particular learner types, nor did they seem related to the sector where parents studied.

Parental learning was believed to have shaped children's attitudes on the value of education, parents thought that the effort and determination with which they had pursued their studies will encourage their children to carry on studying after 16.

As a mother on a full-time degree course explained:

*...she (daughter) thinks I'm 'wonder woman' and wants to be just like mummy when she grows up. (HE FT, couple, school aged child, not in employment while studying)*

For parents who had been out of work and relying on benefits, learning had provided a positive role model for the children, that is, a way out of unemployment and benefit dependency.

The course had also given some parents the skills and confidence to become (more) involved in their children's school work and life, for example, by helping them with their homework or helping out at their children's school. Also, parents reported that, older children in particular, were very aware and very proud of their parents' educational achievements. Furthermore, learning could mean shared experiences, as parents and children studied and worried together about their respective courses and exams.

A mother who was undertaking a part-degree course explained that because of her studies:

*...I can now help the boys out with their homework, we sit together and do our home work...my learning is being passed on to my children, so that's a positive side of it. (HE PT, couple, school age children, in employment while studying)*

Another parent explained that after completing her Art degree course she started to help out in her sons' school and '*...the kids are so proud of me*'.

Parental learning had also meant that some children had received more non-parental childcare than they would have otherwise received (e.g. started attending nursery earlier, for longer hours, attended an out of school club). This was seen in some cases as having had a positive impact on the children, because they had been able to develop socially, be with other children and take part in recreational and sport activities. For older children, parents' learning might have meant that they had to become less reliant on parental help for every day activities, but again this could be seen as having a positive effect, as it had encouraged them to become more independent.

Parents also talked more generally about having become better parents as a result of learning because, in addition to the impacts mentioned above, learning had

broadened their horizons, had made them consider more carefully the pros and cons of different ways of parenting.

### **6.4.3 Benefits for partners**

While in discussions of how learning had positively affected respondents' families, the focus tended to be on children, partners were also mentioned as benefiting from respondents' learning experiences. Examples were reported of partners returning to study, as a result of the respondent's positive learning experience, and of a couple's life being enriched by the shared learning. As a respondent explained:

*It [studying together] was fun, plus it got us time together, he would do his things, I'd do mine ... in this way we got time to do things together which we wouldn't normally do, made the evening different. (FE PT, couple, pre- and school age children, not employed while studying)*

Finally, there were examples of (usually male) partners having to make a greater contribution to caring and domestic responsibilities while the respondent was studying, which could then lead to what was perceived by the respondent as a more equal distribution of these responsibilities within the family.

Again as with benefits for children, a positive impact on partners did not appear to be associated with courses in a particular sector or with learner type.

## **6.5 Social networks**

The 'social' dimension of learning (e.g. meeting new friends, getting out of the house) was a benefit of studying that was widely mentioned, but was particularly important for parents in circumstances which can lead to social isolation. While on the whole learning was seen as one of the many opportunities parents had to socialise, for some studying could be a crucially important way to meet new people and establish social networks. This kind of impact did not seem to be related to learner types or sector of study, but to specific circumstances. Groups for whom this outcome of learning could be particularly important included:

- parents who did not work and did not live near family and friends
- lone parents
- parents with heavy caring responsibilities (e.g. who had a child with special needs and/or elder care responsibilities).

A parent who had a child with special needs and had not been able to go back to work because of the level of care required by her child and elderly in-laws, explains the benefits of the course as follow:

*...you need an excuse to get up and get out... I think you can [otherwise] slip into vegetable state, if you are not careful... [through the course]... you form new friendships, you've got a group and you see each other each week... and you tend to help one another, again [other] people who have been at home and maybe not studied for years. (FE PT, couple, school age child, not employed while studying)*

Similarly, for a lone mother with a young child with special needs, who did not work and did not know anybody in her estate, a course specifically targeted at lone parents provided a very important opportunity to meet parents in the same position:

*I didn't really know no-one when I moved here so like I've got to know a lot of mothers that are in the same position as me. (FE PT, lone parent, pre- and school age children, not in employment while studying)*

## 6.6 Conclusion

Progression to further learning was a very common outcome of studying. However, for 'exploratory' learners (all studying part-time in FE) who had made the first tentative step back into education and were still considering the costs and benefits of learning, future (and possibly more employment focused) learning could depend to a considerable extent on the support available for studying (e.g. advice and information about learning options, help with childcare and funding for courses).

Outcomes linked to personal development were widespread across all learner types and therefore among both FE and HE students. However, the development of 'life' and basic skills was predominant among 'exploratory' learners (all in FE). Again whether this group would be likely to do more learning to enhance further their skills could depend largely on the support they might have access to.

Various employment related impacts were predictably more closely associated with 'vocational' learners and to some extent to the sector of study. For 'exploratory' learners (all in FE and part-time) courses had not yet led to any concrete employment outcomes, but had increased work motivation and for those not in employment, the learning experience might lead to an eventual return to work (possibly via further learning). For those in the 'vocational' learner group who were not in employment, the course had been a key element of their plan to return to work or to a 'proper job', these were more likely, but not exclusively, to be found in FE. For other 'vocational' learners the course had contributed to the achievement of specific career goals, could be found both in FE and HE.

Respondents mentioned many ways in which their families and specific family members had benefited from their learning, this kind of impacts were reported by different learner types studying both in FE and HE. Finally, the 'social' dimension of learning was particularly important for some groups who, because of their family circumstances and substantial caring responsibilities, were rather isolated.

## **7 SUPPORT FOR STUDENT PARENTS**

As discussed in the previous chapters, parents were studying for a wide range of reasons. Their choices of courses and institutions were shaped by a complex inter-play of factors, and their learning experiences were very diverse. The kinds of support student parents need reflect this diversity and complexity, with parents in different circumstances requiring different types and levels of help. In this chapter we summarise the main barriers faced by student parents and the kinds of support that could help them to overcome these barriers.

### **7.1 Barriers faced by student parents**

The research has highlighted some key barriers faced by parents which might discourage them from engaging in adult learning, considerably limit their learning options and progression to further studies, and affect their ability to fully participate in a course and get the most out of it. These barriers are summarised below.

#### **7.1.1 Lack of information**

Lack of information about adult learning options and different kinds of support available for student parents could represent a serious obstacle, particularly for parents who were not very highly motivated and who thought learning was not 'for them'. These tended to be parents who left education early, were poorly qualified and had little experience of adult learning. They were also parents who were not in paid employment or in low skilled jobs, and therefore did not benefit from the encouragement and support other parents received from their employer to undertake training and learning.

Because parents with these characteristics were more likely to be found in FE, lack of information about learning options was more likely to affect student parents in this sector. However, inadequate information about support for student parents also affected those in HE, particularly those on full-time courses, who were more likely to need substantial support (especially with childcare).

#### **7.1.2 Inadequate funding support**

Financial circumstances could clearly limit parents' course options and discourage some from progressing with their studies. Course fee levels were important in influencing parents' choices about where and what to learn, and in some cases even whether to learn at all. This was particularly evident among low income parents, for some of them the availability of free/low cost courses had been crucial in determining their return to learning. However, some parents found that having done the 'basic' courses, their progression to more advanced courses might be limited by the significantly higher costs of these courses.

Lack of or inadequate funding levels, but also lack of easily accessible information about funding schemes (including childcare support) was also another barrier. The complexity of funding schemes, combined with the discretionary nature of some of

these, could be a disincentive to applying for funding, as this was seen as a time consuming process with no certainty about the outcomes.

Financial issues affected student parents in both FE and HE, although in different ways. For FE students (all part-time) high course fees and lack of information about funding support would tend to limit considerably what they perceived to be feasible options for further studies. For parents studying in HE, inadequate funding and lack of information about support schemes could mean that parents studied part-time, rather than full-time, as they would have preferred. Also among full-time HE students in particular, lack of funding (especially for childcare) could negatively impinge on their academic performance.

### **7.1.3 Lack of childcare**

Lack of affordable childcare was another barrier which could limit learning options, progression to further learning and academic performance. Childcare cost was again particularly likely to be a considerable obstacle for low income families, for whom these costs could represent a considerable proportion of the family income. Related to this, was the difficulty that some mothers faced in justifying paying for childcare for a 'non-income generating' activity, particularly if their partner was the main or sole income earner. Affordability seemed to be an issue particularly for parents of children in some age groups and in some geographical areas. For example, some parents said that in their area the only options for children under three and school age children were childminders and, for the former, private nurseries. Childcare costs could also present a problem for parents who were on full-time courses, because not only they had many contact hours, but a considerable amount of study time was also required, as well as, in some cases, cover for work placements.

Inflexible childcare provision also emerged as an obstacle for some parents. This was related to opening hours and days; as discussed standard opening times were not suitable or sufficient for parents who were doing twilight or evening courses, weekend courses and whose placements might require work at atypical hours. Lack of childcare during school holidays was also an issue for parents who attended lessons during these times, or needed the time for private studies or work placements. Flexibility was also linked to being able to vary the hours and days childcare was used, in line with the course requirements. Parents talked about providers (both group settings and childminders) being inflexible, and requiring, for example, parents to pay for a full-time place, even if childcare was only required for part of the week, or the day. This was particularly an issue in geographical areas where childcare was in short supply and providers were believed to be particularly inflexible.

Again while parents in both FE and HE were affected by the lack of (affordable) childcare, they were affected in different ways. These differences were again partly linked to the composition of our sample, with all those in FE being part-time students, and some having undertaken very short courses; while the HE sub-group included both full-time and part-time students. For parents studying in FE, the lack of adequate childcare and/or of the means to pay for it were more likely to affect their views about future study, with many options being ruled out because of lack of (affordable) childcare. For HE students lack of affordable childcare was an issue that

was of more immediate relevance, some had opted for part-time courses, because they could not find and/or afford the childcare needed to study full-time. Others (and particularly those studying full-time) reported high stress levels and poor academic performance, because they could not find (and/or afford) the childcare they needed to keep up with the course.

#### **7.1.4 Family 'unfriendly' educational institutions**

On the whole educational institutions came across as being rather family 'unfriendly'. This did not apply to all courses and all institutions, and indeed in the previous chapters we saw some examples of very family friendly courses, organised, for example, in nurseries and schools. Also FE colleges tended to be perceived as more family friendly than HE institutions, and among the latter, pre-1992 universities and specialist colleges were seen as particularly family unfriendly. However, the general view was that, by and large, educational institutions are still mainly geared to meet the needs of young, 'commitment-free' students, and have done very little to adapt to the growing number of parents who return to study.

## **7.2 What kind of support do student parents need**

The barriers to learning outlined above suggest four key areas where policy intervention might be most effective in encouraging and enabling parents to study, these are outlined in the rest of this section.

### **7.2.1 Information, advice and guidance**

The research has provided plenty of evidence that information, advice and guidance on learning would be of crucial importance for some parents. These would need to cover a range of areas including:

- the range of courses available in the local area and advice and guidance on their suitability for parents with different needs and aspirations
- the format of courses (e.g. method of teaching, tuition times, assessment procedures) and which would be most suitable to meet parents' needs given their circumstances
- childcare and other financial support for student parents, and help with identifying and applying for different funding schemes
- facilities provided by educational institutions, and in particular if and how these might be particularly targeted at those with family responsibilities (e.g. childcare facilities, flexible support services, courses run in community venues, etc.).

The research evidence suggests that it would be extremely helpful to parents if information, advice and guidance about the areas listed above were available from a single source, at the moment parents might have to piece together this information from a range of sources, which might provide partial or even contradictory information. While educational institutions would obviously play a key in this respect, information, advice and guidance should also be available from organisations which are more easily accessible by parents, such as schools, nurseries, family and community centres and public libraries. Furthermore, the study has shown that outreach work to 'advertise' programmes specifically targeted at parents

can be very effective in reaching those who could benefit most from learning, but might be, for a range of reasons, reluctant to return to education.

### **7.2.2 Funding for learning**

The research found that courses available free of charge or at a very low cost (e.g. basic skills, IT) played an important role in encouraging and enabling parents to study, particularly those from low income families and who might lack some basic skills. However, having helped parents to fill some basic skill gaps and having raised their aspirations and expectations, one should consider extending this free/low cost strategy to other courses, that will allow parents to progress with their studies. As discussed earlier, because of the nature of their courses, this change would particularly affect parents in FE .

The research evidence has clearly pointed to the need to publicise more widely the range of funding options available for student parents in different circumstances. The need to simplify funding schemes and application processes also emerged very clearly from the study.

Grants and loans had also been crucial in influencing the learning choices of some parents (particularly those studying full-time) and without these they would have not been able to do the course. However, the level of grants and loans were generally not considered sufficient and would need to be increased to meet parents' needs, especially costs associated with raising children. There was also some evidence that grants were more effective than loans, as the prospect of having a large debt at the end of the course was a 'risk' some parents did not believe they could take, given their family responsibilities.

The research evidence suggests that these changes would benefit both FE and HE student parents. The former would be more motivated to remain in education, particularly as a wider range of learning options, possibly more in line with their career aspirations, would be open to them. A higher level of funding for HE students might also mean a wider range of options (including full-time study), while full-time student parents in particular would be much better placed to get the most out of their course and successfully complete it.

### **7.2.3 Childcare support**

Childcare was obviously a central factor in some parents' decision to study and also what and where to study. There were four main area where intervention would be important in helping student parents:

- increase provision for children under three and out of school services
- childcare and courses for parents provided in the same venue, which could mean educational institutions providing a range of childcare facilities (for all age groups, including, for example, recreational activities, sport and homework clubs for older children), but also running courses where parents and children are (e.g. in nurseries and schools)
- financial help provided directly to parents that can be used for the type of provision parents believe would better suit them and their children, and for

regular, as well as ad hoc childcare (e.g. the latter might be necessary during assessments, work placements, study days, residential schools, etc.)

- encourage and enable childcare providers to be more flexible and responsive to parents' needs, for example, by providing childcare at atypical times (e.g. early morning, late afternoon, weekends) and during school holidays; crucial also for some parents the ability to be able to vary their childcare arrangements, in terms of times and days, in line with their course requirements.

The research evidence has shown that problems associated with lack of affordable childcare were more likely to be mentioned by parents in HE, but this is again probably partly due to the nature of their courses (e.g. many were studying full-time and were on rather demanding professional courses). However, the above measures to improve access to affordable childcare would probably benefit many student parents, regardless of where they study.

#### **7.2.4 Family friendly learning environments**

The study has shown that in order to become more widely accessible to parents, educational institutions need to review most aspects of their service, in particular:

- teaching and assessment arrangements need to be more flexible in terms of when and where teaching takes place, and how and when students are assessed
- support services (e.g. libraries, computer centres) also need to become sufficiently flexible (e.g. in terms of opening hours, loan periods) to meet the needs of busy parents, who might not be able to go into college very often and might need to access these facilities outside standard hours
- children should be made to feel welcome in educational institutions, for example, libraries and computer centres could provide 'children's corners' so that parents can take their children with them if they need to; college canteens should have high chairs and colleges' sports facilities should be accessible to children, particularly older ones
- courses for the whole family should be provided, so that parents and children could study together, not necessarily on the same course, but in the same place
- more should be done to bring educational institutions closer to local communities: more local based learning facilities and centres would be more accessible to parents and save travel time.

Ultimately making educational institutions more family friendly would require greater consultation with parents about the format of courses and support services. As we saw earlier, one of the examples of good practice we identified was that of a teacher training course (targeted mainly at parents) where students were consulted over the format of the course. This resulted in a course that fitted very well with parents' needs, and it was argued that some parents would have not been able to undertake the course or stay on it, if it had not been so flexible and responsive to the needs of those with family responsibilities.



### 7.3 Who would benefit from additional support

The research evidence suggests that the support measures outlined above would benefit parents who, from a policy point of view, are crucially important, including:

- *Parents with low qualification and skill levels and low earning potential:* we saw how a combination of information about learning and its potential benefits, free/low cost courses which took into account parents' needs can play a crucial role in motivating and enabling these parents to study, and this can in turn improve their position in the labour market.
- *Parents who have been out of paid employment for some time:* again as highlighted earlier, for some parents participation in a course could represent a first tentative step towards a return to work, while for others learning was an essential part of their return to work plan.
- *Lone parents:* given that lone parents are more likely than other parents to be out of work, to be low skilled and therefore have a low learning potential, as a group they would benefit considerably from the range on support measures listed above. However, this group would particularly benefit from additional childcare support, as they do not have a partner with whom to share childcare responsibilities; as the findings on partnered mothers showed, the childcare help provided by the partner played an important part in enabling some of them to study.

## 7.4 Conclusion

The main barriers faced by student parents, the different types of support needed to overcome these barriers, and the groups likely to benefit from the expansion of student support in different areas are summarised in the table below.

<b>Barriers</b>	<b>Types of support</b>	<b>Who would benefit and how</b>
Lack of information on learning options and support for learning	Information, advice and guidance available to student parents from a single, easily accessible source on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Range and format of courses</li> <li>• Financial support, including for childcare</li> <li>• Range of facilities available at educational institutions for those with family responsibilities</li> </ul>	Encourage participation in FE and progression in FE and HE among low qualified/ skilled parents, including those not in paid employment
Lack of accessible funding schemes and inadequate funding levels	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cheaper/free courses to allow parents to progress from basic skills courses</li> <li>• Simplify and publicise more widely funding schemes</li> <li>• Higher funding levels, and grants instead of loans</li> </ul>	Encourage progression and wider learning routes (including FT study) in FE and HE among low qualified/ skilled parents, including those not in paid employment
Lack of adequate, flexible and affordable childcare	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase provision for under 3 and out of school services</li> <li>• Childcare and courses for parents provided in the same venue</li> <li>• Financial help for regular and ad hoc childcare</li> <li>• Encourage providers to be more flexible e.g. opening times and allowing parents to vary the level and times provision is used</li> </ul>	Encourage progression and wider learning routes (including FT study) in FE and HE among low qualified/ skilled parents, including those not in paid employment Lone parents particularly likely to benefit
Educational institutions family 'unfriendly'	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• More flexible teaching and assessment arrangements</li> <li>• More accessible support services</li> <li>• Children welcome in educational institutions e.g. children's corners, high chairs, access to sport facilities</li> <li>• Courses for the whole family</li> <li>• More local based learning facilities</li> </ul>	Encourage participation in FE and progression in FE and HE among low qualified/ skilled parents, including those not in paid employment

## APPENDIX A TOPIC GUIDE



P6041

JAN/FEB 2002

### COMBINING EDUCATION AND FAMILY LIFE

#### TOPIC GUIDE

##### **Aim**

To explore how student parents in FE and HE combine childcare for study and other activities (such as work/seeking work/claiming benefits) by investigating:

- What their childcare needs are in combining study and work/benefits
- How effectively these childcare needs are being met
- What impacts these childcare needs have on educational experiences and paths
- What type of support would facilitate their educational routes

##### **Introduction**

- Introductions (self and National Centre)
- Background to study (objectives, commissioned by DfES)
- Confidentiality (permission to tape record)
- Length of interview

##### **Background**

- **Home**
  - Who they live with, ages of children
- **Current activities**
  - Whether working/seeking work – type of work, where, number of hours
  - Whether receiving any benefits, what these are and whether any training is involved
  - Study – current course, institution studying at
  - Other activities undertaken (e.g. voluntary work)
  - How spend spare time
  - *(If appropriate)* Partner's current activities

## 1. Activities undertaken since compulsory education and prior to current/recent course

*The purpose of this section is to get a BRIEF chronological life/activity path followed since compulsory education. Bear in mind that some respondents will have remained in education without gaps, whilst others will have had breaks and are returning to education.*

### Education history

*Thinking back to when you finished full-time education .....*

- Age on leaving school
- Likes and dislikes at school
- Qualifications obtained
- Options considered
- What they decided to do
- Influences on decisions
- Views about value/importance of remaining in education at this stage

*For those with experience of FE (not current/recently completed course) investigate:*

- Course selected/qualifications pursued
- When undertook course(s)
- Institutions attended
- Types of courses
- Factors influencing choices made
  - Explore whether any funding issues
  - Role of childcare (and particularly funding issues)
- Reasons for undertaking courses
- *(If appropriate, i.e. if had children at the time)* Childcare arrangements whilst undertaking courses

### Employment history

- Brief work history – when they worked, type of job, for how long
  - Factors influencing choices of employment (role of children/childcare within this)
  - Experiences of job related training/continuous professional development
- Periods of unemployment/seeking employment
  - When unemployed
  - Length of time unemployed
  - Factors leading to unemployment (role of children/childcare within this)

- How managed financially (e.g.. receipt of benefits)

### **Other activities**

- What the nature of these were
  - When undertook them, for how long
  - Why undertook them (influence of children/childcare)

### **CURRENT/RECENTLY COMPLETED COURSE**

*Moving onto the course that you are currently studying/have recently completed.....*

### **Details about the course/qualification studying for**

- What qualification pursuing
- What course involves, e.g. subject areas
- Method of teaching, e.g. lecture/seminar/tutorial/work placement/mixture/etc
- Contact time, number of hours face to face teaching
- Study time inside and outside college
- Method of assessment, e.g. continuous course assessment/end of term exams/etc
- Job placement
- Costs of their course

### **MAKING CHOICES ABOUT THE COURSE**

- Reasons for entering FE/HE
  - Influence of past experiences of training/courses on decision to enter FE/HE
- Factors influencing choices
  - What to study (for example subject area, career potential, format of course, availability of funding [*remember childcare funding is discussed in more detail in section 5*])
  - Where to study

### ***If not already mentioned* PROMPT**

- Role of children/childcare/family commitments
- Influence of childcare availability at college as factor in choice of institution
- Stage in process of deciding to study, childcare and funding for childcare considered
- Whether sought information; nature of information; views about information
- Expectations of course

- Whether expectation of course met

*Where a person is currently in HE but has undertaken FE study AND were bringing up children during their FE studies, ask them to compare childcare experiences from FE days to those of HE days in sections 5 and 6.*

### **Childcare arrangements**

- Description of a typical week of childcare arrangements
  - Regular – e.g. during their work hours, their study hours, children's school term-time
  - Ad-hoc arrangements – e.g. illness, during exams or course work, children's holidays
  - Any childcare that they provide for others, e.g. joint school run
  - How these childcare arrangements compare with arrangements before studying

*For those who don't have any childcare arrangements, explore why this is the case.*

- How these arrangements were set up
  - Whether encountered any problems setting up childcare; nature of these; how resolved
  - Nature of childcare that is available; how suitable for them; how affordable for them
  - Whether college provides facilities; whether considered using ; reasons for this

### **Cost of childcare (*include formal and informal childcare*)**

Ask everybody

- What they pay
  - How it was decided
  - How they manage, whether anyone else contributes to costs
  - What cost covers, e.g. outings/trips, transport
- Whether or not tried to obtain funding for childcare
  - When and how first heard about funding
  - Adequacy of information about funding
  - What else would they have found useful to know about funding

*Ask those who sought childcare funding*

- What funding sought
- Why sought funding
- Experience of application process, if and how any difficulties resolved
- Views and reflections about process

*Ask those who receive/d childcare funding*

- What funding received
- How funding used
- Views about funding received
- What difference funding made to their decision to do course
- What difference funding made to their ability to study and work
- Whether funding made any difference to choice of childcare

### **Experience of combining childcare with study/study and work/study and seeking work/study and benefits**

*Ask all*

- Experience of combining childcare arrangements and study
  - What's worked well/less well
  - How easy/difficult has it been to:
    - PROBE** - Attend course
    - Keep up with course work
    - Pass exams
    - Undertake work placements
  - Nature of any problems encountered and how resolved them
  - How would they have managed without childcare
- *Ask those not working/seeking work* - Other factors affecting their participation in course

***Using the information gained so far about their situation whilst studying - studying and working or studying and seeking work - ask the appropriate questions.***

***Ask those studying and working***

- Experience of combining childcare with study and work
  - What's worked well/not so well
- How it has affected:
  - Work hours (FT/PT)
  - Attendance at work (absenteeism)

- Role at work (level of responsibility able to take or given at work)
- Nature of any problems encountered and how resolved
- Other factors affecting combining study and work

*Ask those studying and seeking working*

- Experience of combining childcare with study and seeking work
  - What worked well/not so well
- How it has affected:
  - Types of work able to seek (hours, location, responsibility level)
  - Opportunities to seek employment and attend interviews
- Nature of any problems encountered and how resolved
- Other factors affecting combining study and seeking work

**Impact of studying**

- Difference studying has made to their life
  - PROBE** – what ways affected:
    - Financial circumstances – e.g. changes in their eligibility for benefits due to studying, lower income due to reducing work hours
    - Employability and career opportunities, e.g. the types of jobs going for
    - Opportunity to undertake other activities
    - Role of education in future plans
    - Family life balance (e.g. parenting role/s, relationship dynamics, social life, family life more generally)
    - View of self : self esteem, independence, mental challenge

**Views about childcare support**

- Barriers faced by students with childcare needs taking part in education (e.g. choices of courses/institutions etc)
- Views about current nature and adequacy of childcare support provided for students with children
- Suggestions for improving current childcare support
- Lessons (good and bad) that they have learnt
- What has helped them cope
- Reflecting back would they do anything differently
- If had their ideal childcare arrangements, whether would have followed a different route (e.g. choice of course/place of study/length of course)

**Ways forward**

- Advice for other (working) parents with childcare needs planning to study



- Advice for DfES regarding childcare needs of student parents
- Ways in which DfES could encourage students with children to study and obtain qualifications
- Any other comments they would like to make about combining study and childcare

Thank respondent for their time, pay £15, complete receipt, and reassure regarding confidentiality

## APPENDIX B REFERENCES

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