



PARSA
ANU *postgraduate &*
research students'
association

POSTGRADUATE PARENTS

THE CHALLENGES OF
PARENTING AND
STUDYING AT THE ANU

Foreword

In my time as a representative in PARSA I have spoken to many students who have confided in me their stories of struggle and hardship. Some of the stories I have heard from student-parents have been the hardest to carry with me.

I have witnessed personally the deep sadness of parents separated from their children for months and even years at a time and parents who are trying to manage their consideration study commitments and support their families. These students need to negotiate childcare arrangements, school drop offs and pick-ups, childcare arrangements and costs all while writing their 100,000 word thesis, undertaking research, completing courses or undertaking exams.

It is evident from these results that students often do this with little support. In 2018, it is unacceptable that having a family should be so distressing.

Initiative 3.2 of the Australian National University Strategic Plan 2018-2021 states: "We will create and modify our practice, policies and culture so that admission, retention, and success for students and staff is based on ability and endeavour, whatever their backgrounds or identities."

This report details some incredibly upsetting findings that the ANU must look to overcome in order to meet its strategic goals. This report also only begins to scratch the surface of the systemic issues in our university community. However, PARSA sees this as an opportunity for the ANU to engage with this issue and create a university that meets its strategic goals through supporting all of its students.

Achieving this will create a fairer and more inclusive community, reducing the barriers that parents often face within ANU, and in society more broadly.

For years parents have been struggling in silence or in vain. It is my hope that the findings of this report start a conversation about how we can make the ANU a more family friendly place – both for parents supporting children, and parents living away from their children. To support this, PARSA has included recommendations for change, based on our results and community consultation.

ANU has an opportunity to lead the sector in supporting parents and creating a family friendly university. I hope that for all current, and future, parents in our community, this day is not far away.

Alyssa Shaw
President
ANU Postgraduate and
Research Students' Association

Executive Summary

Methodology

This report is created from the results of two parent's surveys conducted by PARSA in 2017 and 2018. Duplicated respondents have been removed.

Over two surveys, 81 individual postgraduate students responded. 47 students responded to 18 questions in 2018, and 46 responded to 13 questions in 2017. 13 questions are common to both surveys, and 12 students responded to both surveys. The survey was distributed to ANU postgraduate and research students through PARSA emailing list to all Postgraduate students, social media, and word of mouth.

Rating the ANU's support

Postgraduate students rated the ANU's support for student parents as notably inadequate.

- 36% rated support as poor or very poor; and
- A further 37% rated support as average.

Services accessed

Students are overwhelmingly not accessing the existing parents' resources such as childcare centres, parenting rooms, change tables in bathrooms and late-opening parking stations. This highlights a clear gap in communications.

- 64% haven't used any of the services; and
- Only 16% made use of the on-campus childcare centres.

Priorities

Students were asked for their top priority for improvement. These were the highest rated:

1. 26% of respondents indicated that more affordable childcare was their top priority;
2. 21% indicated parking permits for part-time student parents; and
3. 17% indicated short-term childcare options.

In 2018, students were also asked to select all of their priority areas for change. Of the eight options:

- 60% of respondents indicated on-campus short-stay childcare options;
- 55% indicated more affordable childcare; and
- 55% indicated family-friendly student accommodation.

What does the ANU need to do?

In addition to the priorities above, qualitative responses from students specified the need for significant structural, social and policy changes within the university, asking for:

- Better practical and academic support;
- Better communication;
- Child-friendly areas of the university;
- Affordable school holiday programs;
- Support networks;
- More visibility and respect;
- Alignment of university and school holidays;
- Facilities to support student-parents to attend out of school hours events and classes; and
- Carers career development funds.

The stories

Students were asked to share personal accounts, and they spoke of a range of experiences at the ANU.

The positive

Students spoke of incredibly supportive supervisors, lecturers, tutors and peers. Multiple students said that they would not have been able to succeed at university without extraordinary staff and friends who went above and beyond.

The negative

Students have had some incredibly negative experiences as parents at the ANU such as:

- Injustice of the HDR paternity leave provisions;
- Struggling to navigate parking and busses at drop-off and pick-up times;
- Being priced out of school holiday programs;
- A lack of on-campus activities for children; and
- Missing events and lectures due to childcare concerns.

Summary of recommendations

As a result of these surveys and our other work in the space, PARSA recommends:

- Scoping the problem
- Family-friendly on-campus accommodation;
- More and better resourced parenting rooms;
- Parking permit regulation exceptions for parents;
- Parent-specific late-opening parking spaces;
- More affordable childcare places on campus;
- On-campus short-stay childcare options;
- Better ANU communication to student parents about services and challenges;
- Family-friendly ANU policies regarding children in the classroom;
- Community support programs;
- Policy on the release dates of exams, timetables and offers; and
- Fairer HDR parental program leave.

Survey Results

Demographics

Although it is a small sample size, 81 individual students responded to the PARSA Parents Surveys in June 2017 and April 2018.

Of these students, 49 (60%) were domestic students, and 32 (40%) were international students. 70 of these students were primarily on-campus students. 3 (4%) respondents were future parents (either pregnant or planning for a child), 6 (7%) students were not parents at the time of the survey and 72 (89%) students were a parent to at least one child.

About the children

Of the respondents to the survey:

- 11% had zero children;
- 48% had one child;
- 27% had two children;
- 9% had three children; and
- 5% had four or more children.

Of the 72 current parent respondents:

- 79% had children aged 5 and under; and
- 31% only had children older than 5.

In 2018, students were also asked whether they had children enrolled in school in the ACT. Of the 43 respondents who indicated they were currently parents, 51% responded “Yes”.

Rating the ANU's support

Postgraduate students were asked to rate the ANU's support for student parents from very poor to very good.

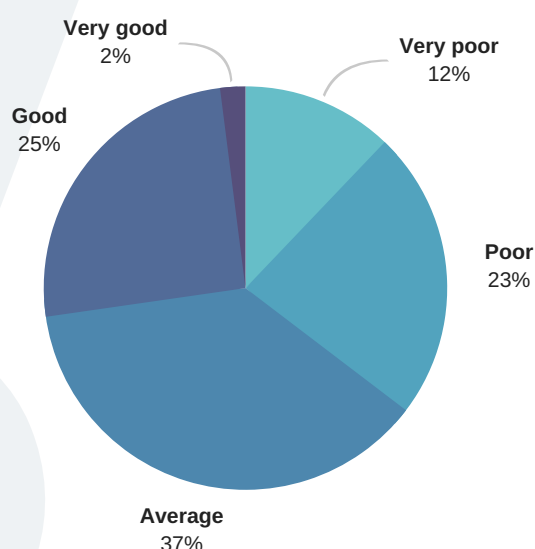


Fig. 1: Rating the ANU's support

Key areas for change

When students were given eight options and asked which was the most important area for change:

- 26% selected more affordable childcare;
- 21% selected parking permits for part-time students;
- 18% selected on-campus short-stay childcare options;
- 15% selected family-friendly student accommodation;
- 10% selected improved HDR parental leave;
- 5% selected a better policy for children in the classroom;
- 4% selected more childcare places; and
- 1% selected more parenting rooms.

In 2018, students were asked to select *all* of their areas for change. Of the eight options:

- **60% of respondents indicated on-campus short-stay childcare options;**
- 55% indicated more affordable childcare;
- 55% indicated family-friendly student accommodation;
- 49% indicated parking permits for part-time students;
- 45% indicated a better policy for children in the classroom;
- 36% indicated improved HDR parental leave;
- 26% indicated more parent rooms; and
- 23% indicated more childcare places.

What does the ANU need to do?

In addition to the priorities above, qualitative responses from students specified the need for significant structural, social and policy changes within the university, asking for:

- Better financial support;
- Better academic support;
- More supportive staff;
- More flexible arrangements;
- Child-friendly areas of the university and the libraries;
- Affordable school holiday programs;
- Better communication about the challenges and support;
- Support networks;
- More affordable public school education for international students;
- More engagement from the university as a whole;
- More respect and acknowledgement;
- Consideration of alignment of university break and school holidays;
- More visibility of parents;
- Reunion travel every semester for separated parents and children;
- Facilities to support student-parents to attend out of school hours events and classes; and
- Carers career development funds.

The stories

The positive

A few students shared positive stories of their experiences at the ANU, and one particular student gave permission for PARSA to share her story anonymously:

"I completed my Advanced Masters, and am now half-way through a PhD, solely because of the support I have received from my department. My daughter was allowed to attend day-long intensive classes when she was less than 12 months old. My lecturer and classmates did not object to nursing in the classroom.

Over the years, she has attended many lectures, come on retreats with us, and does her homework on campus after school while I am finishing up for the day. The faculty and students consider her to be a part of the department. They understand that, as a single parent, I have to come in late and leave early.

Despite this, they have fostered an environment where I am able to study and work as a tutor, arranging tutorials and meetings around my parenting responsibilities. I am following my dream to enter academia because of the fabulous support I have received from my department.

Without their support, I would have had to forgo my career and study aspirations. Unfortunately, this support is not apparent in my dealings with other sectors of the university."

The negative

Most experiences were not as positive, with students relating incredibly sad stories of stress, separation, worry and struggle. The following are responses from 5 students when asked what stories they'd like to share:

"Having school going children, I sometimes have to pick them up from school. As there is no accommodation for families on campus I have to change 2 buses to reach school and then drop my children off to the home and then come back to the university. If I was living on campus things would have been so much simpler."

"My son asked my partner to "give birth to another father" because he wants to see me.

"I purchased a ticket to return home at the end of semester to go and visit him. Reunion travel for parents with kids back home should be mandatory inclusion on all scholarship packages."

"I was breastfed [sic] my son in the toilet in one of the schools in ANU. It is not hygienic and disgusting, but my son was crying due to hungry and I had no option."

"I was forced to pretend to still be full time when my kids were born, because we couldn't afford to have the stipend stop, and there was only a few days of parental leave available for fathers. I wasn't going to not be there for my family at that time, but I shouldn't have to damage my submission prospects to make that choice.

As a general policy it is regressive and absurd for 2018 - support for student parents should be brought up to an equitable modern standard."

"I have chosen to leave my 6 months old child in my home country so that I can study well during my first year at ANU. I know that was a tough decision for me and my family."

The domestic vs. the international experience

Qualitative responses indicated that international students who don't have local established networks struggle the most. Students travelling here to study consider leaving their children in their home country in order to be able to manage, and find the sudden absence of their familiar support networks particularly confronting.

However, international students feel more supported by the university, with 44% rating support as good, and only 20% rating support as poor or very poor (compared to 16% and 45% for domestic students).

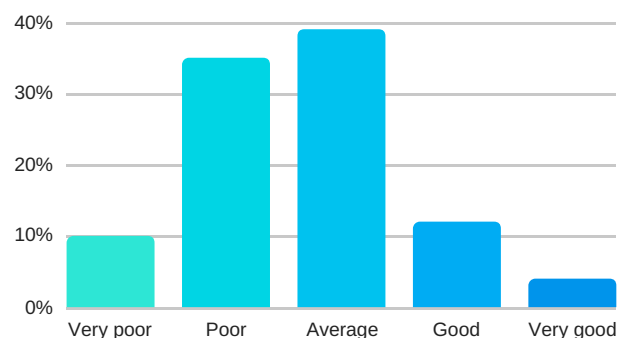


Fig. 2: International student rating of the ANU's support

Changes over time

As there are 12 students who responded to both surveys, there is a unique opportunity to compare the experiences of these students from June 2017 to April 2018.

- Two students added a child to their family between surveys;
- Three students declared in 2018 that they had used some of the on-campus services, where in 2017 they had not used any;
- Three students saw an increase in their rating of the university's support, from very poor to poor or average; and
- No students indicated that support had decreased in quality between surveys.

Overall experiences

The 2017 and 2018 PARSA Parents Surveys found that students who are parents feel that there are a lot of barriers to achieving their full potential at the ANU. They detailed distressing stories of struggling to find accommodation, childcare places, affordable services, supportive communities, supportive academic staff and feeling like they were struggling to balance their studies and their family lives.

It is clear from the results that student parents are struggling. The ANU has a clear opportunity to change the lives of many and position itself as inclusive and welcoming community. A chance to open a door to some of the best and brightest minds, to support them, whatever their background.

Recommendations

The Australian National University has a commitment to values of diversity and inclusion, as articulated in the current Strategic Plan. As such the ANU has an obligation to address the widespread issues of inequality of opportunity through ensuring that students are able to realise their potential. The ANU seeks to ensure excellence in all parts of the university. Creating a University that is a destination of choice for women, and parents, from across the world is a strategic opportunity for the ANU, as well as ensuring it's meeting its strategic values and goals.

To this end, PARSA presents the following recommendations:

An improvement in the immediate services provided to parents

Accommodation

1. Commitment from the ANU to realising family-friendly accommodation by 2021 as provided for in the strategic plan
2. Commitment to consultation with PARSA and student parents about the roll-out and design of family-friendly accommodation

Support networks

1. Creation of university-wide support networks for student-parents

Parenting Rooms

1. Obtaining Baby Care Room Awards for all Parenting Rooms on the ANU Campus
2. Ensuring Parenting Rooms are accessible across campus
3. Adequate signage for all the rooms, and accessibility for all parents who may be on campus

Parking

1. Parental exception to the parking permit regulations around enrolment requirements
2. Dedicated parking spaces on campus for parents in current and future parking structures
3. A commitment to affordable parking for student parents

Childcare

1. More childcare places on campus
2. More affordable childcare places on campus
3. On-campus short-stay childcare options, especially during exam periods and out of regular operating hours

Changes to university policy and information

Information distribution and collection

1. A specific page on the ANU website providing information for parents covering childcare, parking, college and school policies around children in the classroom, public school fees, accommodation (on-campus and off-campus), parents rooms, health cover, parental leave and crucial dates
2. Statistical information to be collected from students as to whether they have children that they have brought or plan to bring with them to Canberra, information that will be shared with PARSA so that we are able to serve them personally and appropriately

Children in the classroom policy

1. An updated university-wide policy that allows for student-parents to regularly bring their children into the classroom if the child does not create unreasonable disruption to the learning environment

Reunion policy

1. A university-wide policy that ensures that all scholarships include reunions for parents who are separated from their children during semester

Release dates for assignments, exams, timetables and offers

1. A central ANU policy with clear guidelines about the notice required for assignments, exams, timetables and offers with provisions for recourse for students whose notice does not comply

Parental leave for PhD students

1. Remove transgender exclusive language from the Program Leave of Absence webpage
2. Create an overarching PhD program leave policy. This must enforce a minimum entitlement for both parents, include foster and adoption leave, include gender-neutral language, and be easily accessible online for staff and students
3. Conduct a comprehensive audit of the current scholarships available to ANU PhD students to ensure that their conditions are in line with the new guidelines

University advocacy for students

1. For the ANU to lobby the federal government to change the legislation around OSHC to ensure that there is no waiting list for pregnancy-related cover
2. For the ANU to lobby the ACT government to change the legislation regarding public school fees for international student-parent dependents
3. For the ANU to lobby the federal government to include PhD students under the paid parental leave scheme.

Acknowledgements

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Appendix

Please find the raw data from the PARSA Parents Surveys at:

<https://www.parsa.anu.edu.au/advocacy/campaigns/parents/surveyresults>



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