

Single Parents and Higher Education

Barriers to access and recommendations for change

Briefing, June 2025



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Introduction

This briefing explores the barriers faced by single parents in accessing higher education (HE) in Scotland and offers targeted recommendations to improve inclusivity and support. It summarises essential information from recent research by One Parent Families Scotland on the financial, structural, and emotional challenges encountered by single parents accessing higher education and highlights necessary policy and institutional reforms.¹

Higher education is a vital pathway for single parents seeking economic stability and career advancement. However, numerous barriers—financial, institutional, and personal circumstances — limit their ability to enrol, persist, and complete their studies. This briefing will:

Identify the **challenges and barriers** that single parents face in HE.

Assess **existing support systems** at institutional and policy levels.

Provide **recommendations** for improving access, retention, and success for single parent students.

We believe that increasing HE access for single parents is not only a matter of equity but also a **key driver of economic empowerment** and social mobility for a key group in the Scottish Government's child poverty strategy.²

Background

Robertson Trust

The Robertson Trust (TRT) 'Bursary and Non-Financial Support for Mature Students' scholarship programme³ has supported over two thousand young people in Scotland since launching in 1992. The trust wanted to learn which groups are most at risk of future poverty outwith their current scholarship eligibility criteria. As a result, they were interested in exploring what a financial and non-financial support package may look like for mature learners and adult returners.

Single parents are therefore a key group, as most are mothers in their mid-thirties and 'lone parent' families have been identified by Scottish Government as a priority family group who experience multiple disadvantages or adversities.⁴ OPFS argues in a recent paper that supporting single parents to gain further and higher education qualifications enables them access to jobs with higher earnings and improved sustainability so contributing to increasing family income.⁵

¹ <https://opfs.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/OPFS-Higher-Education-for-single-parents-research.pdf>

² <https://www.gov.scot/publications/best-start-bright-futures-tackling-child-poverty-delivery-plan-2022-26/>

³ <https://www.therobertsontrust.org.uk/news-and-blogs/building-a-scholarship-for-the-future/>

⁴ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/annex-6-evidence-review-works/pages/7/>

⁵ [Why-access-to-FE-and-HE-is-important-for-single-parents.pdf](#)

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

One Parent Families Scotland

Established in 1944, OPFS has a model of involving single parents, experts by experience, in our work. We have unrivalled knowledge of the issues facing single parent families and are acutely aware of their needs in an ever-changing environment. In 2023/24 OPFS supported 5595 parents, children, and young people.

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

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

Our unique position to deliver informed research comes from our deep understanding of the challenges faced by single-parent families, as documented in our ongoing 'Impact Reports' and research reports available on our website.⁶ We have also initiated engagement most recently with parents on specific issues including climate change, employability, poverty, and child maintenance service issues.

Research methodology & outcomes

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

Surveys and focus groups conducted with single parents in HE, those who had to withdraw, those who completed their course and single parents interested in HE. **Over 280 single parents filled out the survey.**

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

Policy and funding analysis: Examined existing financial aid structures, childcare provisions, and institutional policies in Scotland.

Over 280 single parents filled out the survey The study sought to uncover both systemic and situational barriers to HE participation for single parents. The planned outcomes for the

⁶ <https://opfs.org.uk/policy-and-campaigns/policy-research/impact-reports/>

research were to:

1. Gain insight into real-time barriers for SP's presently in HE and actionable suggestions to improve the single parent student experience and retention.
2. Gain insight from HE graduates or those who did not complete their studies on what could have been improved.
3. Identify barriers preventing potential single parent students from entering HE and suggestions for wraparound support that would ease their transition to HE.
4. Recommendations for HE institutions; Scottish Government; DWP and advice agencies on how they can support single parent students access and sustain higher education
5. What a financial and non-financial support package provided by RT may look like for mature single parent learners and adult returners.

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

Research outline

We consulted single parent students/potential students on the following key areas:

- 1. What is the financial offer needed for single parent mature students to access and sustain Higher Education?**
 - What are the direct financial barriers?
 - What are the wider financial barriers e.g. childcare, tuition fees, living costs.
 - Are there any other negative ramifications to undertaking Higher Education? i.e. lack of time, lack of transport, etc.
- 2. What is the non-financial offer needed for single parent mature students to access and sustain Higher Education?**
 - What wrap around support might be needed? Examples might include - mentoring, buddying, signposting, training sessions, access to careers, mental health support, financial management training, benefits advice.

To fully understand the barriers facing single parents in accessing, staying in and successfully graduating from higher education OPFS consulted single parents in the following four categories: presently in higher education; prospective students; former students (completers) and former students (non-completers).

Single parent students and financial support

Single parent students in higher education in Scotland have access to various forms of financial support.^{7 8}

1. **Bursaries and Loans:** Eligible students can receive a combination of bursaries and loans. For example, students with a household income of less than £21,000 can receive a minimum income of £8,100.
2. **Lone Parent Grant:** This grant provides additional financial support specifically for single parents. The grant provides up to £1,305 per year. The grant is income-assessed, but benefits are not considered in the calculation.⁹
3. **Discretionary Funds:** These funds are available to help with unexpected financial difficulties, such as housing or travel costs.
4. **Free Tuition:** Scottish domiciled students studying in Scotland do not have to pay tuition fees.
5. **Part-Time Fee Grant:** For part-time students, this grant can cover up to £1,805 of tuition fees.
6. **Disabled Students Allowance (DSA):** Additional support for students with disabilities.
7. **Benefits and Earnings:** Single parents may also be eligible for certain benefits and can combine these with earnings from paid work.

Help with childcare costs

Lone Parents' Childcare Grant (LPCG) is specifically designed to help with childcare costs for single parent students in higher education in Scotland.¹⁰

- **Amount:** You can receive up to £1,215 per academic year
- **Eligibility:** You must be a single parent with at least one dependent child and meet the residency criteria
- **Application:** The amount you receive depends on your income and the actual cost.

⁷ [Benefits for lone parent students | CPAG](#)

⁸ <https://opfs.org.uk/support-and-advice/support-if-youre-a-student/financial-help-in-higher-education/>

⁹ <https://www.saas.gov.uk/guides/support-for-student-carers/lone-parents-grant>

¹⁰ [Living Costs Grants - SAAS](#)

Other childcare support options available

There are additional childcare support options available for single parent students in higher education in Scotland¹¹:

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

However, we know from this consultation that single parents point to the ‘financial burden’ of ‘giving up a job to study full-time’, and that ‘money’ is a key challenge, with several noting that working alongside their studies was essential ‘in order to pay bills’. These challenges had an impact on submitting assignments and on the retention rates of single-parent students.

Key findings from the single parent survey and focus groups

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

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

Several responses emphasised the idea that not all single parents face the same circumstances (e.g., different social support networks). This suggests a need for more personalised or individualised support services. The following key issues were raised by single parents in the consultation:

Financial barriers

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

- **Single parents have only one income to cover family costs made worse by the cost-of-living crisis:** Single parents face financial strain due to rent, food, utilities, and educational materials.

¹¹ <https://www.studentinformation.gov.scot/students/further-education/childcare-funding>

- **Insufficient financial aid:** Grants and bursaries exist but are often not **widely publicised, insufficient**, or have **stringent eligibility criteria**.
- **Welfare system conflicts:** Many single parents are hesitant to enter HE because they fear losing welfare benefits due to strict income thresholds.
- **Limited employment options:** Balancing HE, work, and childcare is difficult, restricting their ability to earn supplemental income.

Childcare challenges

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

Key issues include:

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

Institutional support and accessibility

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

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

Policy and legislative gaps

- **Single parents are not officially recognised as a priority group in accessing HE:** Many national and institutional policies fail to explicitly recognise single parents as a distinct group needing targeted support.
- **Inadequate financial support frameworks:** Current funding mechanisms do not

account for the **additional financial burden** of raising a child on your own while studying.

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

Key themes across all parent student categories

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

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

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

Recommendations

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

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

1. Enhance financial support

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

2 . Improve childcare accessibility

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

3. Strengthen institutional support

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

4. Policy Reforms and Advocacy

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

Recommendations by agency

1. Higher Education Institutions (HEIs)

Financial support

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

Childcare support

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

Academic flexibility & support

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

Mental health & wellbeing

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

2. Government & Policy Makers

Financial reforms

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

Childcare & family policies

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

Legislative & policy changes

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

3. Robertson Trust

Awareness & outreach

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

Policy advocacy

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

Community & Peer Support

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

- Bursary support to buy materials, books, licenses, electronics, software etc.
- A bridging fund to help pay up front for deposits for childcare whilst waiting for UC to reimburse parents.

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

Conclusion

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

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

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



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