

Progressively, advanced foreign studies might then ensure that an in-depth study of whatever focus would not fail to account for the broader cultural and institutional setting in which it occurs. Comparative awarenesses could be made explicit aims of such studies and could be developed intra- as well as inter- culturally, temporally as well as spatially. The departure point for such studies might vary; it might, for example, be political rather than literary, the present rather than the past, Austria rather than Germany, provincial rather than Parisian. It is important, however, that we ensure that whatever the initial perspective, it comes to be seen as an integral part of a more complex whole, the most advanced studies of which would require a battery of inquiry skills drawing upon and confining a range of disciplinary perspectives. Initial topics would be chosen with at least some reference to their potential for leading into and developing more general perspectives. Such integration could help to safeguard against texts being seen as arbitrary and hence unplanned in relation to language development programmes or as pretentious in that they form a kind of specialised addenda to a generalised language learning approach. More importantly, except for the philologist, language would come to be seen as a tool for something beyond itself. In this respect it may be seen that the implementation of the principles outlined here, without being specifically vocational, would nevertheless ensure that each student could develop a more vocation-oriented profile of studies than the traditional courses concentrating on literary scholarship have permitted to date. Moreover, such studies should provide students with a more flexible range of perspectives of 'use' in their private as well as their occupational lives. Modern language studies would then achieve their more proper broader aims, and the tyranny of the traditional improper understanding of 'culture' would be reduced accordingly.

Let us stress that we are in no way suggesting that the university abandon its cultural role for a purely instrumental role. The university remains for the foreseeable future perhaps the last resort where pure inquiry may take place in a spirit of independence, and the "philosophically" based departments must continue to educate towards a liberal culture, free of economic, political and social demands. At the same time, they are doing everyone a grave disservice by attempting to ignore or disparage the students' own desires and interests. Accountability and flexibility, realistically based on current and projected staff levels are vital to the future of all "traditional" university departments but to none more so than departments of modern languages.

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## STUDENT PARENTS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE

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The past decade has seen a steady rise in the proportion of students aged 25 or more (from 22% to 30%) and in the proportion of women students (from 30% to 36%).<sup>1</sup> In addition to these well-documented changes the proportion of parents, especially mothers, seems to be rising also.

A variety of factors may have contributed to the appearance of parents on university campuses. There have been some changes in the policies affecting tertiary institutions (e.g. the introduction of the N.E.A.T. scheme in 1973 and the abolition of tertiary fees in 1974) and in the re-employment policies of the Victorian Education Department. It is difficult to assess the impact of these factors since research into any of them is either incomplete or non-existent. Initial reports on the effects of fee abolition<sup>2</sup> suggest that it has made almost no difference to the overall composition of the university student population. Insufficient time may have elapsed for any such effects to appear but it seems likely to be minimal, since tuition fees are only a small part of the costs to the individual of a university education and children from the very poor segments of the community leave secondary school before the final year. The N.E.A.T. scheme was a response to the rising numbers of parents returning to study<sup>3</sup> but its subsequent effect is unknown. No research into the effects of the Victorian Education Department's re-employment policies has been conducted.

Changes to the regulations of various educational institutions have probably had less impact on the composition of the university student population than the major social changes occurring outside them. The average family size has fallen and child-bearing is completed by a younger age now than it was twenty years ago.<sup>4</sup> These comparatively young mothers may then wish to begin or return to tertiary studies. The pressures on them to remain at home with young children have relaxed to some extent so that they may feel able to undertake tertiary studies even before their children begin school.<sup>5</sup> The coincidence of a decline in the average age at which people first become parents with an increase in the average length of years of education may have produced a number of students who begin families before graduating. More young single mothers are keeping their children<sup>6</sup> and these women may be strongly motivated to acquire professional qualifications in order to support themselves and their children. As

single mothers are comparatively rare in the population it is unlikely that this change in social practices would have had a major impact on the composition of the university student body.

Several issues have already arisen concerning the provision of care for the children of student parents. Federal and State policies on child-care provide for the establishment of neighbourhood centres to accommodate all those children living in the area.<sup>7</sup> Very few of these centres have yet been constructed<sup>7</sup> so many parents have to travel considerable distances to reach one and compete with full-time working parents for scarce places. If the parents work or study in suburbs remote from where they live, neighbourhood centres can involve them in arduous journeys, anxiety over the welfare of their distant children and unnecessary curtailment of breast feeding for infants. The provision of on-campus child-care has been advocated<sup>8</sup> in order to reduce the amount of travel and to provide good care at subsidized prices for students who may be unable to afford the rates charged at neighbourhood centres. However, on-campus child-care is not a student service receiving high priority in the funding allocations of Australian universities. Even when the need is recognized and centres established, few universities have provided direct grants,<sup>9</sup> although some have offered premises at nominal rents. The necessary funds have been obtained by the formation of co-operatives and limited companies among the parents.

Establishing an effective university child-care service can be seriously hampered by difficulty in determining the extent of the need. No Australian university asks questions about the number of students' dependent children and only 20% record marital status. These items are omitted on the grounds that students might find them "intrusive". As most Australian universities ask their students questions about age and national background, both of which are seen as intrusive by many people, their reluctance to ask about parenthood responsibilities seems difficult to accept on these grounds. The absence of these data has had serious consequences for child-care planning, as no university can know whether a creche is needed. There remain, in addition, questions about the effect of family formation on choice of course, graduate status and academic performance which cannot be investigated adequately.

The aim of the present study is to establish the size of the student parent sub-group at the University of Melbourne and the numbers of its dependent children, and to gather some information about parents' faculties and type of enrolment.

### Survey Design and Response Rate

The questionnaire was pilot-tested on 50 parents and 50 non-parents. Four demographic and four enrolment questions were asked of every student; parents answered another seven questions on the children's ages and their current and prospective child-care arrangements and needs. Ninety-three per cent (N=14, 730) of the enrolling students completed the questionnaire and 11% of them (N=1, 590) reported that they had dependent children. Information from every tenth non-parent and every parent was coded. The chi-square test was used to examine associations between variables and the level of significance was set at 0.02.

### Results

The four demographic variables studied were sex, age, marital status and responsibility for dependent children. The sex ratio of student parents did not differ from that of non-parents (i.e. 61% of both groups were male and 39% female). However, there were marked differences between the groups on marital status and age. Almost all (97%) of the parents were currently or formerly married but the majority of childless students were single. Two-thirds (69%) of childless students were under 21 years of age but very few (3%) of the parents were as young as this. Within the group of parents, fathers and mothers differed significantly on marital status and age. All of the fathers, but only 85% of the mothers were currently married. Of the remaining 15% of mothers, 12% were formerly married and 3% were single. Fathers were predominantly (54%) in the 25-29 year age group but 78% of mothers were aged 30 years or more.

The four enrolment questions covered graduate status, part-time versus full-time enrolment, faculty and year of course. Student parents differed from non-parents in all aspects of their enrolment patterns; they were more likely to be postgraduate, to be part-time, to be concentrated in a few faculties and to be in the second year of their course. 60% of parents but only 18% of non-parents were post-graduates. Part-time study was comparatively rare among non-parents (22%), but frequent among parents (72%). In some faculties and boards of studies (e.g. Education and Social Studies), parents were markedly over-represented, while in others (e.g. Architecture, Engineering, Medicine and Science) parents were enrolled in only half the proportion that would be expected from the overall distribution of students across faculties.

Marked differences in both demographic and enrolment patterns also occurred within the parent group. Most of the differences between parents and childless students were accounted for by the responses of mothers, while the responses of fathers resembled those of non-parents.

Fathers were enrolled in a much wider range of faculties than mothers and were well represented in those courses which lead to or advance professional qualifications. Fathers were much more likely to be enrolled in science-based courses, either those leading directly to a profession (e.g. Medicine) or not leading to a particular profession (e.g. Science) than were mothers. Over two-thirds of mothers were enrolled in humanities-based courses which did not lead directly to a profession (e.g. Arts) and another fifth (22%) were enrolled in humanities-based courses which did lead to a profession (e.g. Education). Only 18 mothers were enrolled in Law and 14 in Medicine.

As with the demographic variables, marked sex differences were found among the enrolment variables. Many of the apparent differences between parents and non-parents were found to be a function of sex differences in enrolment within the parent group. Undergraduate mothers were more likely to be in the first or second year of their courses (71%) than were fathers (61%). Mothers were more likely to be undergraduate than fathers who accounted for the increased post-graduate enrolment among parents as compared to childless students; 67% of fathers but only 48% of mothers were post-graduate students.

The typical mother was married, aged over 30 and enrolled in the undergraduate years of a humanities-based non-professional course. The typical father was married, aged under 30 and a post-graduate student in a course leading to or advancing professional qualifications.

### Numbers and ages of students' dependent children

Student parents were responsible for 3282 dependent children. Fifty-one students said that they were expecting children and they have been included in the analysis as parents of children below two years of age. Tertiary students showed a marked tendency towards small families; 509 students reported only one dependent child but only 18 (1% of parents) students were responsible for five or more children. Many students may not yet have completed their families.

Almost two-thirds of the dependent children were either at school or did not require child-care. However, for the 1,015 children less than five years of age, some form of full-time child-care is

clearly required and the younger school children would need care after school and during school holidays. Two-thirds of the children aged less than five were cared for by "other family members"; presumably a non-student parent, grandparents or older siblings. Fathers were more likely to report this arrangement (72%) than mothers (28%). Only 27% of the children in this age group were in a child-care centre. The trend to small families was most pronounced among those parents who used extra-familial child-care; only one-third of them were responsible for two or more dependent children. Presumably once a second child arrives, child-care centres are no longer a viable alternative to home care for many people (i.e. the latter is cheaper or more convenient) or else the parents are no longer students.

Unsatisfactory arrangements were reported for 456 children, including 99 children aged two years or less, 141 aged between two and five years and 216 school-age children. The majority of these were unsatisfactory to the parent rather than the child for reasons such as high costs or long travelling times. However, 68 children were directly affected by such factors as inadequate care, frequent changes of staff or simply "unhappiness". Dissatisfaction was more prevalent among parents using neighbourhood child-care centres (42% dissatisfied) than among parents using the University of Melbourne centres (28% dissatisfied).

### Discussion

Student parents were a sizeable minority (11%) of the university population which differed from childless students on all demographic variables studied except that of sex. As might be expected, parents were significantly older and more likely to be married than childless students. As a group, parents showed marked sex differences on the various aspects of enrolment where were measured. Fathers were very similar to childless students of the same age, while the distinctive demographic and enrolment patterns of the mothers accounted for most of the differences between parents and non-parents.

The majority of mothers were undergraduate students enrolled in non-professional, humanities-based courses. Overall sex differences in faculty of enrolment<sup>10</sup> may contribute to some of the sex differences within the parent group, as few women, mothers or not, enrol in Engineering or Architecture. Mothers however, are far more heavily concentrated in non-professional, humanities-based courses than are childless women; e.g. only 18 mothers were enrolled in Medicine, a faculty which has a female enrolment of 28%. The faculties in which mothers are rare were those which require their students to be physically present in the teaching environment for a large part of each day,

and usually did not permit part-time study. There remains a question about the extent to which the role of mother determines the choices of these women, over and above their personal talents and ambitions.

The excess of parents in the early years of their courses, again largely made up of mothers, suggests that their average academic performances may not equal that of fathers or non-parents. Again the picture is complicated by the greater tendency of mothers to enrol in humanities courses which are almost all shorter than science-based ones. Fathers were more likely to be postgraduates than any other group, which suggests that it is this group of parents most affected by the combination of a lowered age of family formation and lengthening years of education. The greater proportion of mothers in the over 30 years age group suggests that most of them have returned to study after a break of several years.

The most alarming finding was the large number of children currently in unsatisfactory child-care arrangements. This figure is likely to be an underestimate as parents are unlikely to admit, in essence, to being bad parents unless there is some overriding reason to leave their children in unsatisfactory care, nor are they likely to criticise child-care arrangements.<sup>7</sup> While only 68 children were involved in problems which directly affected them e.g. frequent changes of creche staff, it would be foolish to imagine that children could be entirely unaffected by the fatigue and worry caused to their parents by long travelling times and high costs. School age children formed a large proportion of those in unsatisfactory arrangements, presumably because this age group is largely neglected in child-care programmes and the need for after-school or holiday care is forgotten.

Clearly a survey of this type can only be viewed as a preliminary approach to an understanding of the lifestyles of student parents and it has raised more questions than it has answered. Do mothers have a more limited choice of course than fathers because of their greater child-care responsibilities? What is the effect of responsibility for dependent children on academic achievement? What methods do parents devise to manage dual responsibilities, and can tertiary institutions assist them? These questions could be examined by an in-depth interview approach to a smaller sample of parents; however the present authors lack the resources to do this.

Nevertheless, this survey has revealed some important areas of need. The number of children currently in unsatisfactory arrangements shows that current provision of child-care is inadequate. School-aged children were particularly likely to figure in unsatisfactory arrangements and may be

at greater risk than pre-schoolers because of the absence of facilities for the older group. As dissatisfaction was far greater among parents using local neighbourhood creches than those using university centres, local creches seem to be an unsuitable form of care for tertiary students' children. The problem of on-campus child-care has received attention only comparatively recently and both knowledge of parents' problems and provision for them is inadequate. There is no reason to suppose that the numbers of student parents will decline. Indeed, as the proportion of two-career families increases, there is every reason to suppose that the problems will become more pressing.

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