Between Cradle and Degree

Student Parents in Higher Education

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KÁROLI GÁSPÁR UNIVERSITY
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Higher education institutions have good reason to recognise and respond to the specific needs of student parents. This is not only a matter of supporting students' well-being and academic achievement; it is also closely tied to wider goals of social justice and equal opportunity. For student parents, staying in higher education can be particularly demanding because they must navigate family responsibilities and academic requirements simultaneously. In this sense, the higher education years may generate a range of constraints that can shape, and sometimes deter, the decision to have children—although only some of these constraints fall within an institution's direct control. Still, when universities provide flexible learning arrangements, they can ease day-to-day pressures and, in turn, improve students' chances of completing their degrees. Measures of this kind help student parents remain fully included in the academic community and can support their later success in the labour market.

To identify, on a sound scholarly basis, which policy interventions can realistically be planned and implemented within the remit of higher education institutions, the National Association of Large Families (NOE), in cooperation with four higher education institutions, launched an international research project under the Erasmus+ programme in autumn 2023. The project

is entitled "Fostering Inclusive Learning Environments: Strategies for Supporting Parenting Students in Higher Education,"[1] The project's primary aim is "to reduce the barriers faced by students with children in higher education institutions."[2]

In addition to NOE, which is responsible for overall coordination, four higher education institutions participate in the project: Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary (Hungary), J. Selye University (Slovakia), Sapientia Hungarian University of Transylvania (Romania), and the Ferenc Rákóczi II Transcarpathian Hungarian College of Higher Education (Ukraine).

Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary (KRE) is a medium-sized higher education institution that has operated under its current name since 1993. Its predecessor, the Pest Theological Academy (renamed the Budapest Reformed Theological Academy after the 1873 unification of the city), had already existed since 1855. With the university's establishment in 1993, educational institutions of the Reformed Church that already existed and had operated since the nineteenth century were relaunched and subsequently brought together under the leadership of what became Károli Gáspár University.

Today, more than 9,000 students pursue their studies at five faculties—the Faculty of Law, the Faculty of Humanities and

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[1] The Erasmus+ project entitled "Fostering Inclusive Learning Environments: Strategies for Supporting Parenting Students in Higher Education" was implemented with the support of the European Union. Project ID: 2023-1-HU01-KA220-HED-000156058.

[2] Nagycsaládosok Országos Egyesülete (NOE), "Projektről", September 1, 2023, accessed June 30, 2025, https://csalad-es-egyetem.noe.hu/projektrol/

Social Sciences, the Faculty of Economics, Health Sciences and Social Studies, the Faculty of Theology, and the Faculty of Pedagogy—and across three cities: Budapest, Nagykőrös, and Kecskemét. The five faculties offer programmes in the humanities, health sciences, economics, theology, law, teacher education, and the social sciences at bachelor's, master's, single-cycle, and postgraduate levels.

Sapientia Hungarian University of Transylvania is a small higher education institution operating in four Transylvanian cities. Teaching at the Târgu Mureș (Marosvásárhely) campus began in October 2001 with five degree programmes; as a result of the continuous expansion of its programme portfolio, students could choose from 17 programmes in the 2024/2025 academic year. Instruction has likewise been ongoing at the Miercurea Ciuc (Csíkszereda) campus since 2001. At both the Târgu Mureș and Miercurea Ciuc campuses, programmes are shaped by regional needs and are offered in fields including economics, the humanities, the social sciences, and engineering. In 2002, Sapientia established its Cluj-Napoca (Kolozsvár) teaching site with four programmes. Finally, in 2015 the university created a new study centre in Sfântu Gheorghe (Sepsiszentgyörgy), which initially operated as an off-campus unit of the Târgu Mureș campus, but has functioned as an independent faculty since 2023.

In the 2024/2025 academic year, 2,278 students study at Sapientia Hungarian University of Transylvania across 33 bachelor's programmes and 13 master's programmes; 1,934 are enrolled in bachelor's studies and 344 in master's studies.

The establishment of J. Selye University was approved by the Slovak Parliament in 2003, and the act on its foundation entered

into force on 1 January 2004, making it possible for teaching to begin in the 2004/2005 academic year. Although Hungarian-language programmes exist in Slovakia in a dispersed form, J. Selye University is the only independent legal entity in Slovakia that offers university study programmes specifically for an ethnic minority in its mother tongue, that is, in Hungarian.

The university is based in Komárno (Komárom), one of the main cultural centres of the Hungarian community in Slovakia, and it has three faculties: the Reformed Theological Faculty, the Faculty of Economics and Informatics, and the Faculty of Education. Each faculty is located in a separate building. The university community also has access to a conference centre, a sports hall, and a student residence hall.

According to the latest staff register (October 2024), the university employs 223 people: 127 academic staff and 96 non-academic staff. The student body numbers 1,632, with 1,183 students enrolled full-time and 449 studying part-time (correspondence).

The establishment of the Ferenc Rákóczi II Transcarpathian Hungarian University began in 1993–1994, when it operated as the Transcarpathian Hungarian Teacher Training College under the auspices of the Nyíregyháza College. In 1996, it received official authorisation to operate from the Ministry of Education of Ukraine. The institution has since undergone a series of organisational changes. Today it not only provides higher education in Transcarpathia, Ukraine, but has also built its own institutional network from kindergarten through to secondary education, alongside units that support talent development and provide arts education. Thanks to this institutional network

and its substantial facilities, the university plays a central role in organising events in Berehove (Beregszász) and the wider region. Even during the Russia–Ukraine war, it has been able to continue in-person teaching and, while complying with the stricter rules and restrictions introduced under martial law, it seeks to maintain conditions as close as possible to those in place before the outbreak of the war. In the 2023/2024 academic year, 1,698 students studied at the university, including 1,014 full-time and 684 part-time (correspondence) students. The institution offers programmes at bachelor's and master's levels in a range of fields, and it also provides a venue and organisational framework for off-site programmes delivered by other universities, primarily from Hungary.

As the above indicates, the institutions that served as sources of information for the research represent a highly diverse set of universities and colleges. The studies conducted within the project can play a key role in developing and implementing policy interventions that support higher education students in deciding to have children and in raising them. The findings provide insight into the living circumstances, priorities, and challenges of student parents, enabling decision-makers to adopt targeted and effective measures. Drawing on the survey results produced within the project, decision-makers will be able to design interventions that directly support university students as they start families and navigate parenting responsibilities.

Our aim is to lay the groundwork for interventions that can be designed and implemented within the remit of higher education institutions. The research therefore set out to answer and to better understand, two main questions:

1. What factors hinder family formation and parenting during higher education studies?
2. What forms of support could be provided to encourage the participation of student parents, or the decision to start a family while studying?

The research is organised into three phases: carrying out the research steps, planning interventions, and, finally, defining the evaluation tasks. In the first phase, researchers at each of the four participating universities conducted two focus-group discussions with university students raising young children.

This volume presents the findings from the first and second phases of the project. The opening two case studies are intended to foreground the importance and relevance of the topic. Next, the literature review sets out the study's theoretical foundations and synthesises findings from earlier, comparable international and Hungarian research. The methodology chapter then describes in detail the focus-group approach used in the first phase, including the sampling procedures applied at the four universities. The subsequent chapters present, institution by institution, the experiences of the participating higher education institutions, and their key lessons are brought together in the concluding synthesis chapter. The final chapter summarises recommendations that are feasible to implement in practice.

Taken together, the volume not only offers a detailed view of the Erasmus+ project's results but also provides practical guidance for higher education institutions seeking to create an inclusive learning environment for student parents.

FAMILY AND CAREER? FAMILY OR CAREER?

Case Studies on Student Parenthood and University Study

Ágnes Sántha

There is little doubt that combining university study with the transition to parenthood can be profoundly demanding. We see the value of our research in the fact that it offers up-to-date findings on an issue of clear relevance to both family policy and education policy. The two case studies that open this volume are intended to bring the realities of student parenthood into sharper focus by presenting the lived experiences of student parents in an accessible, concrete way. In what follows, we use pseudonyms to introduce one success story and one account of failure.

Our first participant met the challenges of student parenthood with strong willpower and clear purpose. This success was made possible by the emotional and financial solidarity of a multigenerational family: the grandparents provided material security for the young family as well as in-kind support.

By contrast, the protagonist of our second story did not manage to realise her professional plans. We follow the story of a high-achieving, ambitious young woman for whom the role of mother is paramount. She is convinced that it is not possible to study and parent at the same time, and that a choice is therefore unavoidable.

“I don’t think I tripped and fell!” A case study of a success story

In 2018, Virág completed her bachelor’s degree in health sciences as a full-time student. Her path is exceptionally rare: while studying full-time and becoming a parent, Virág still finished her degree without taking time out or deferring any semesters. In similar situations, most students leave university.

During her first year of university—at the beginning of her first serious relationship—Virág became pregnant with her first child, and she gave birth in her second year. Looking back, she speaks about that period with gratitude. Alongside support from her family, she credits her success to the understanding and practical help of instructors and peers, and to informal workarounds that allowed her to keep going: “Even after nearly seven years, I’m still very grateful. If I could start over, I would choose the same route again—together with the community we faced this head on with from the beginning.”

At nineteen, in her first year at university, Virág was caught off guard by the news that she was expecting a baby. Her family initially reacted with shock as well. Even so, she and her partner—now her husband and the father of their two children—made a deliberate decision to continue the pregnancy, to marry, and to carry on with her studies at the same time. Over time, her parents also became more accepting, and her daughter was born into a supportive, multigenerational family setting.

Several factors shaped her decision not to interrupt her studies and not to defer a semester. As Virág puts it: “I got so much support—from my family, from my fellow students, and from

my teachers too. But I still give myself credit as well because I believed then—and I still believe now—that it's easier to study when you're young ('while the iron is hot') than it is to get back into it after taking several years off. Without being goal-oriented, I wouldn't have managed it."

At the beginning, she lived in the university residence hall, where those closest to her welcomed the news of the pregnancy with genuine happiness. The first words of encouragement came from her roommate, and in a moment of uncertainty that reassurance helped her find the determination to act. Among fellow students, reactions were more mixed: some were pleased for Virág and urged her to continue, while others were already saying goodbye, convinced that there was no realistic way she could go on.

At the university, she attributes completing her bachelor's degree largely to the support of a group of instructors. When she first learned she was pregnant, her immediate reaction was to defer her studies, and she planned to submit a formal request to that effect. Virág approached one of her instructors in confidence, to ask whether such a request had to be filed with a specific university body. The instructor, however, tactfully discouraged her from writing it. "I don't think I had ever received encouragement from anyone on that scale before. That was the turning point—after that, I already knew what I had to do."

In retrospect, Virág experienced the university environment as clearly supportive overall. "Most of my teachers were empathetic, and their goodwill often seemed limitless. […] The positives outweighed everything else, and only the good memories remain: the breaks when people would stroke my belly, all

the treats they spoiled me with, my classmates coming to visit the baby, the open day when my ten-month-old daughter came along and my classmates could meet her, and the graduation ceremony, when I could graduate wearing the same cap as my two-year-old daughter. Even now, remembering these moments makes me genuinely happy."

During Virág's pregnancy, the semester itself was manageable, and she was able to participate in classes almost as usual. After giving birth, however, her circumstances changed substantially. To cope with her new responsibilities, she moved back in with her parents and began commuting to the university each day. The main downside was that she had to abandon an optional teacher-training (pedagogy) track she had already started. Although it would have provided a teaching qualification alongside her bachelor's degree, the sessions were consistently scheduled for late afternoons and evenings, making attendance unrealistic.

Instructors also responded supportively to the new situation. During the teaching period, the most concrete form of assistance with academic requirements was that a few instructors waived the attendance requirement for Virág's lectures and made the course materials available to her. In other words, she received limited accommodation in terms of participation: she was able to access some lecture content online. Beyond this, she did not benefit from any further advantages—"which I also think is right. I chose this difficult path, and I expected all of its challenges." Even this limited concession, however, provoked some jealousy among a few fellow students.

For more demanding courses, Virág decided that, even where exemptions might have been possible, she would still attend lectures in order to master the material. In subjects where she struggled, her fellow students tutored her and helped her catch up.

In this new situation, the hardest part was coordinating and planning ahead: knowing exactly which day and time she needed to be on campus, and arranging in advance for the baby's father or the grandparents to take care of the child. After the initial period of complexity, the family developed a routine and became more practiced at sharing responsibilities at home; over time, they settled into the new division of labour. The role of the (still relatively young) grandparents deserves particular emphasis. They fully committed themselves to caring for their grandchild—almost as a full-time job—and they also ensured the young family's financial security so that their daughter could continue studying full-time.

For Virág, the one real downside was that she was completely excluded from campus social life. Beyond meeting her academic obligations, she could not take part in any other programmes and could not experience the freedom usually associated with student life. "I only heard the stories during breaks—about the evening hangouts in the square, the shared evening plans. A lot of the time it hurt, but at that point my priorities were simply different."

During the semester, the most difficult tasks to manage were group work and collaborative projects with other students, since these typically took place outside scheduled classes. "It was hard to fit in activities after class—especially if I didn't just have to stay at the university, but had to get somewhere else (for

example, to a classmate's home). Working together always went well, but I still had this feeling that I really ought to be heading home, so I always suggested a faster pace. The easiest was an individual project because I could put it together calmly at home between naps and feedings. I always really liked working that way."

The defining personal trait in Virág's story is her strong sense of purpose. She got through exam periods by treating the teaching period as preparation: she studied steadily throughout the semester and did not leave learning the material for the exam period itself.

"Whenever I had time, I was buried in my notes. My method was to make sure I was always more or less up to speed on what information we had covered up to that point. I kept going back to earlier material and tried not to forget it. If I'd tried to gather everything and learn it all at once right before the exams, it wouldn't have worked, because every minute of my time was accounted for." Compared to the teaching period, the exam period felt harder—mainly for psychological reasons. Virág describes a strong pressure to live up to expectations, which she experienced as an obligation toward those who had supported her decision and made it possible to organise her everyday life. She wanted to prove herself worthy of the trust her teachers and family had placed in her. "I always felt that I didn't want things to end in failure; I wanted to meet the expectations of the people who trusted me, who were understanding and supportive. That's what I felt before every exam period. My daughter was born at the end of November and she was two weeks old when my first exam started. Once we got home from

the hospital, going through my notes became part of my daily routine. That exam period was exhausting."

At the same time, her situation was not easier than her peers' in terms of assessment: the exam schedule and the format of evaluation were the same as for everyone else.

A significant share of the health sciences curriculum consists of supervised practical training carried out at external partner institutions. Most partner sites are established and recur from year to year, but students may also propose an organisation where they would like to complete their practical training—such as a medical practice, a hospital, or a local government office. If the organisation is willing to host them, the university supports bringing that site into the programme.

For practical reasons, these partner institutions are often located in students' home towns. This can make completing the practical training easier, and it can also support students' later entry into the labour market, in some cases by creating employment opportunities. Virág made use of this option by choosing the local municipality in her home village as the site for her practical training. Working in a familiar environment, among people she had known for years, reduced the burden of commuting, saved time, and increased her sense of comfort and confidence.

Among the university services available to Virág, the library proved the most useful. Between classes and during breaks, it offered a place where she could use time productively and keep up with her studies. This, too, reflected her strong sense of purpose and her careful ordering of priorities—something the double burden of studying and parenting effectively demanded

of her. She could not afford to waste "dead time," even if spending that time differently might have helped her integrate more easily into student social life.

Overall, at least within health sciences, Virág experienced the bachelor's programme as family-friendly. "In my situation, it showed what it means to accept, help, and encourage another person—to make things easier for them in difficult circumstances. That's what a family does, too."

At the same time, the family-friendly character of the programme in Virág's case depended entirely on informal factors; she did not encounter any formalised forms of support. She also emphasises that she does not regret the absence of formal options, because she does not consider preferential treatment of individual students appropriate for any reason—including parenthood.

For this reason, she believes that academic requirements should not be altered for student parents, and that offering advantages on this basis is unnecessary and conflicts with norms of fairness. Looking back, she identifies a more flexible timetable and the introduction of more practical training as measures that could form the core of formal support for student parents. Second, she mentions potential financial incentives. "I'd consider distance-learning options and online study a good idea in certain programmes. And for full-time study, reducing contact hours, making the programme more flexible, and including more practical training. When it comes to taking the circumstances of student parents into account, the most urgent step at the university would be introducing online lectures, and, in programmes where it is feasible, developing a distance-learning

mode. Beyond that, finances can also be a condition if a student parent wants to study in higher education. If families received discounts or tuition-free education, more student parents would take advantage of higher education opportunities."

Virág's willpower and determination were indispensable in balancing study and family life. At the same time, structural factors also contributed to her success: daily commuting was feasible from a town relatively close to the university, and grandparents were available to help with childcare.

"I had big plans and dreams" When family life and studying do not fit together

The subject of our second case study is Lilla, who began a bachelor's programme in health sciences as a full-time student in 2020. She became pregnant in her first year, at the very beginning of her relationship. After a long period of uncertainty, she gave up her university studies because she and her partner did not see continuing in higher education as compatible with taking on the role of a mother—even though her family would have supported her in continuing.

Lilla married, and her child was born into a supportive family. Still, she experiences it as a failure that she felt forced to give up her professional ambitions. She is now the mother of two children and describes her life as happy and fulfilled, yet it took her a long time to come to terms with the belief that, from a very young age, God had intended motherhood to be her primary calling.

Cases like this are far more common than the success story presented in the previous case study.

Lilla had always been a strong student: she graduated from secondary school with excellent grades. She began her higher education studies with energy and enthusiasm, and her relationship also started around this time. The news of her early, unexpected pregnancy—and the sense of despair that took hold of her—remain vivid even four years later. As she recalled the period, the emotions she described from the outset were almost entirely negative: fear, despair, panic, and helplessness.

Her partner did not react with the same despair; he proposed immediately. The wider family also welcomed the news, which helped Lilla begin to process her fear and, not least, her embarrassment and sense of shame. This was made more difficult by the fact that she had known her partner for only a few months. "The way our families responded to the situation—their willingness to help and their support—gave us a lot of strength and courage for this very big task, especially since we were a young couple in love. People close to us were surprised, but they reacted positively to the news of the baby."

Compared with the reactions of close family members—those Lilla describes as the "significant others" in her life—the responses of more distant acquaintances were more divided and often openly critical. Because Lilla cares deeply about others' approval, these reactions frequently upset and discouraged her. In her view, becoming a mother at nineteen is not seen as something to be proud of today, and she felt anxious about the possibility of disapproval from her peers. What helped her through this period was the emotional security and firm value

framework provided by her partner: “Other people’s opinions really did matter to me, but then my boyfriend—who is now my husband—helped me put things back in perspective. With his support, I managed to make myself understand that I don’t owe anyone an explanation.”

In Lilla’s account, God is a recurring point of reference. Her own faith and that of her family, together with her conviction that every event in our lives forms part of a larger divine plan—never mere chance, and still less a punishment—brought the young couple reassurance and acceptance in this critical situation. The option of terminating the pregnancy did not arise for them. Lilla’s recollection is shot through with a sense of surrender to divine will: “People make plans, God decides. I’ll leave university behind; I want to devote all my time—everything—to the baby. I don’t want to take a single precious moment away from her just because ‘Mum doesn’t have time right now, she has to study.’ If God wanted it this way, then so be it: I’ll face this new situation and, with my whole heart, choose motherhood.”

Since she had only just begun moving toward her professional ambitions—and as a first-year student had been attending university for only a few weeks—Lilla had not yet formed close, trusting friendships with her fellow students. Integration was made harder by the fact that, like many of her peers, she commuted daily, which largely ruled out the forms of socialising typically associated with student life. Nor was it insignificant that prevailing age norms around starting a family also heightened her anxiety about potential negative reactions from her peers: “I didn’t develop a relationship with anyone close enough to tell them because I’d only been a university student for about three

months. If I'm completely honest, I was afraid of the reactions, so I didn't want to share something so personal with anyone. In a way I was also trying to avoid the situation, and I didn't want to—and couldn't—come up with answers to the questions people would have asked me: 'What are you going to do now?', 'You didn't quit, did you?', 'You were wrong to quit.'"

In the early phase of Lilla's pregnancy, secrecy toward her peers became a defining feature of her daily life, rooted in a sense of shame about becoming pregnant "too young." The same embarrassment shaped her relationship with her instructors, who also remained unaware of her situation. Although she had already decided to leave university, she still wanted to prove—to herself and to her family—that she could perform well. She therefore focused all her energy on studying, determined to complete her first academic year with strong results.

"I just carried on quietly, and between bouts of nausea and feeling unwell I tried to concentrate on what the lecturer was explaining. I didn't want to show even the slightest sign that might give it away—I wanted to give everything time." During our conversation, Lilla recalled that both her immediate and extended family were fully supportive of her continuing her studies and offered the practical help she would have needed with childcare. Alongside that support and the trust they placed in her, the family left the decision about whether to continue her studies entirely to Lilla.

Lilla also identified another consideration that helped her make sense of her decision, even alongside her sense of failure, by allowing her to see its positive side. Because studying had always been important to her, she had lived with persistent

anxiety and a drive to meet expectations from early childhood. This was intensified by the fact that, as the daughter of parents from a small village, she later had to prove herself in a high-performing, urban secondary school. Privately, she had long wished for the constant pressure to ease. For that reason, the thought of stepping away from higher education brought a certain relief: she felt she might finally be released from the expectations she placed on herself, and those her environment placed on her, to excel academically and achieve professional self-realisation.

As for the stance of people within the university, she did not share her situation with either classmates or instructors. For that reason, it cannot be stated with certainty that they would have been supportive if she had considered continuing her studies. Still, Lilla felt that if the possibility of continuing had arisen for her at all, most of her teachers would likely have stood by her and would have made allowances—for example, by partially exempting her from class attendance requirements. She also believes she could have counted on support from her peers, even though as a student parent she would not have been able to become a "full" member of the student community or participate in activities beyond the classroom, since she would always have put her family first. Even so, she did not want to rely on help from fellow students.

Lilla emphasises that a lack of support was not decisive in her choice to prioritise family and give up her studies. Instead, she frames it primarily as a question of values: she believes that, for a young child, the mother's exclusive presence is essential; the mother is the primary figure in a child's upbringing, and she

wanted to commit to that role with full attention. For her, there was no compromise between studying and family—even though she experienced the decision as a crisis. “Part of me was sad, and part of me was relieved. But I knew one thing: I didn’t want to—and I couldn’t—carry on like this. So I quit while it was still fresh and shifted my focus to the baby and to this new situation.”

Lilla’s decision to choose family reflects a traditional view of gender roles. For her, being a wife and a mother is not only the primary role but effectively the only role. In her view, family life and studying cannot coexist because the “natural” sequence of life stages is first education, then employment, and only then starting a family. Although that order was reversed in her own case, she does not see the solution in trying to do both at once and doing neither perfectly. From her perspective, parenting and studying simultaneously is simply not feasible.

She also considers such a situation harmful in two ways. First, she believes her family would have suffered if she had prioritised studying. Second, the constant guilt she anticipates would have prevented her from meeting academic requirements because responsibilities at home would have undermined her ability to concentrate. In addition, her perfectionism would not have allowed her to lower her standards and accept weaker academic results. “I had big plans and dreams, and it took me a long time to ‘process’ this, so to speak, and to let it go—at least to some extent. I’ve been a perfectionist my whole life. If I had to, I would stay up late into the night and do nothing but study and study; I’d recite the material, and if I got even a single word wrong, I’d start the whole thing again… in short, I was almost

pathologically perfectionistic. And I'd be lying if I said I didn't feel: 'You really fell flat on your face now!'"

Her decision to end her studies was preceded by careful deliberation and many sleepless nights—made even harder by the fact that her main reference group, her former secondary-school classmates, were all studying at university and living the lifestyle that goes with it. Watching them and hearing their stories, she often questioned whether she had made the right choice, even long after the decision. "It was hard to swallow—really hard—that I, who had always put studying first, would suddenly stop, just when I'd only just started. All the work and effort I'd put in suddenly seemed to come to nothing, and I had to prove myself in a new role."

At the same time, the presence of her young child and the child's dependence on her—and the sense of fulfilment Lilla found in motherhood—repeatedly brought her back to an answer and reassured her that her decision was right. Over time, the initial sense of failure has eased, and four years on she has no doubts about the correctness of her choice.

Summary

The case studies above present the early stage of the life trajectories of two female university students. Their paths began in much the same way: hardworking and talented, both young women entered university with strong professional aspirations. In their long-term relationships, they became mothers at a young age, and both welcomed the unplanned yet desired new lives

they were expecting. Motherhood, however, pushed their trajectories in different directions. With considerable effort—and with the support of a multigenerational family—Virág completed her university studies, whereas Lilla chose motherhood and gave up her professional plans.

The two women's social positions are also similar. Both come from rural backgrounds, both are the first children in their families, and both imagined a first-generation path into the professional middle class. They began their studies at the same higher education institution, whose generally supportive attitude—despite the absence of an institutionalised system of family support—suggested that successful degree completion was possible. The divergence in their trajectories points not only to different understandings of family values, parental roles, and the social place of mothers, but also to differences in how their families and student communities responded to their situations, as well as to the contingent, ad hoc nature of institutional family-support measures.

The aim of our project is to help make universities more family-friendly places where young parents are not forced to choose between family life and continuing their studies. Instead, during the particularly sensitive period of raising young children, they should be able to study with equal opportunities alongside their peers, supported by the moral and material resources of higher education institutions.

STUDENT PARENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Éva Sztáray Kézdy – Zsófia Drjenovszky –
Kornélia Hires-László – Ágnes Sántha

University study and earning a degree can, in many cases, be understood as a family undertaking. It requires not only financial resources from the family as a whole, but also sacrifice, time, understanding, patience, and sustained support. This is especially true for students who already have their own family while enrolled—particularly if they are raising children. For student parents, continuing in higher education brings additional challenges and pressures. On the one hand, students with children must not only meet their own needs during their studies but also carry responsibility for their family's financial security, which increases economic strain and intensifies financial constraints. On the other hand, they must divide their time and energy between progressing successfully in their studies and fulfilling the demands of parenting and other family responsibilities.

As a consequence of the difficulties involved in combining family formation with university study, only a small fraction of students begin higher education while already having children, or have children during their studies. Over the past thirty years, a widely observed trend has been the marked postponement of key milestones of adulthood—such as first marriage and the birth of a first child—one explanatory factor being the expansion

of higher education. Because fertility is biologically limited, postponement also increases the likelihood that the number of children actually born will fall short of the number that was planned or desired. As a result, in Hungary and across the wider Carpathian Basin, in parallel with demographic trends elsewhere in Europe, the total fertility rate is not sufficient to ensure natural population replacement.[1] Family-friendly and child-friendly measures and conditions within higher education institutions can therefore contribute to addressing—or at least mitigating—the demographic crisis.

In this chapter, we present the literature review that provides the conceptual point of departure for the research.

Situation of student parents in higher education

In Western societies, the pursuit and transmission of knowledge were long treated as activities that should remain insulated from domestic responsibilities and childcare. The "typical" university student was therefore implicitly imagined as a middle-class man—and, crucially for the purposes of this study, as someone

[1] Péter Őri and Laura Szabó, "A népesség száma és szerkezete" [Population Size and Structure], in *Demográfiai portré 2024* [Demographic Portrait 2024], eds. Judit Monostori and Péter Őri (Budapest: KSH Népességtudományi Kutatóintézet [Demographic Research Institute, Hungarian Central Statistical Office], 2024), 185–205; Pál Péter Tóth, *Népességfejlődés – népességfogyás I–III* [Population Development – Population Decline, vols. I–III] (Budapest: GlobeEdit, 2024).

without children. From the second half of the twentieth century onward, this picture began to shift, and the twenty-first-century expansion of higher education has further reshaped the student population.[2]

In Hungary, no statistical data are available—either at national level or within higher education institutions—on how many students are raising underage children. For that reason, we can only assume that student parents constitute a relatively small and, in many respects, hidden group within higher education. According to the Eurostudent VI rapid report, based on a 2016 survey of 7,202 students across 25 higher education institutions, 11.7% of students have at least one child, and for 5.1% the youngest child is aged ten or older.[3] Eurostudent's 2022 data collection indicates that 9.5% of university students in Hungary have a child; only 4% have a child under the age of six, and a further 0.9% have a child between seven and nine.[4]

In comparison with Hungary, the overall proportion of student parents is somewhat higher in Romania and Slovakia, and closer to the EU average (12.2% and 12.1%, respectively).

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[2] Marie-Pierre Moreau and Charlotte Kerner, *Supporting Student Parents in Higher Education: A Policy Perspective* (Bedfordshire: University of Bedfordshire, 2012).

[3] *A felsőoktatás szociális dimenziója Magyarországon* [The Social Dimension of Higher Education in Hungary], *Eurostudent VI Rapid Report* (Budapest: Oktatási Hivatal, 2018).

[4] Kristina Hauschildt (Ed.) Christoph Gwosć, Hendrik Schirmer, Sylvia Mandl, and Cordelia Menz, *Social and Economic Conditions of Student Life in Europe: Eurostudent 8 Synopsis of Indicators 2021–2024* (VBW Publication, 2024), p. 41.

This difference, however, is largely explained by the higher share of students with older children. In other words, in these countries students more often enter higher education later, already as parents, and obtain a degree after a delayed start. When we focus specifically on students raising young children, the proportions in our target countries—Hungary, Romania, and Slovakia—are similar: around 4.5% of higher education students are raising a child aged six or under.[5]

Ukraine is not an EU member state, so it is not included in the Eurostudent survey data. Nor are national-level statistics available there on university students who have families and children.

The number of academic studies and scholarly publications aimed at mapping the situation of student parents and the difficulties they face is also limited.[6] In Hungarian scholarship, attention has tended to focus instead on university students' plans for family formation,[7] on how educational attainment relates to childbearing,[8] or, more generally, on the circumstances of students enrolled in non-traditional study modes

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[5] Ibid.

[6] Ágnes Engler, *Kisgyermekes nők a felsőoktatásban* [Women with Young Children in Higher Education] (Budapest: Gondolat, 2011).

[7] Viktória Molnár, "Felsőoktatásban tanuló nők és a gyermekvállalás" [Women Studying in Higher Education and Childbearing], paper presented at the XVIII Vajdasági Magyar Tudományos Diákköri Konferencia (VMTDK), Novi Sad (Újvidék), 22–24 November 2019.

[8] Zsuzsanna Veroszta and Zoltán Györgyi, "Képzési háttér és gyermekvállalási tervek" [Educational Background and Childbearing Plans], *Educatio* 30, no. 2 (2021): 184–205.

within higher education (evening or part-time/correspondence programmes).[9]

International research suggests that the number of pregnant and parenting students has been increasing steadily.[10] As a result, a growing body of work—predominantly qualitative, though including some quantitative studies—examines their circumstances. Many of these studies emphasise that, although the number of students with children is rising, they remain largely invisible. Universities and their key actors—including instructors, fellow students, and administrative staff—therefore tend to expect student parents to fit into traditional university culture while also meeting their parenting responsibilities.[11] Research on student parents also broadly agrees that these students are highly motivated to study and to complete their programmes successfully.[12] Their motivation reflects, on the one hand, a

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[9] Ágnes Engler, *Hallgatói metszetek. A felsőoktatás felnőtt tanulói* [Student Cross-Sections: Adult Learners in Higher Education] (Debrecen: Debreceni Egyetem Felsőoktatási Kutató és Fejlesztő Központ, 2014).

[10] Marie-Pierre Moreau and Charlotte Kerner, "Care in Academia: An Exploration of Student Parents' Experiences," *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 36 (2013): 1–19; V. Brown and T. R. Nichols, "Pregnant and Parenting Students on Campus: Policy and Program Implications for a Growing Population," *Educational Policy* 27, no. 3 (2013): 499–530.

[11] Marie-Pierre Moreau and Charlotte Kerner, *Supporting Student Parents in Higher Education: A Policy Perspective* (Bedfordshire: University of Bedfordshire, 2012).

[12] L. A. Tighe, T. E. Sommer, J. Sabol, and P. L. Chase-Lansdale, "Improving the Education and Wellbeing of Student Parents," *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 1532 (2024): 10–17.

desire to maintain and develop their knowledge and skills while raising children and, on the other, an effort to improve their labour-market prospects through the acquisition of an additional qualification.[13] Despite this motivation and purposeful approach, however, they encounter numerous obstacles within a higher education environment that implicitly treats student life as care-free by default,[14] and many experience the attempt to combine study with family life as a burdensome strain.[15]

Student parents have to meet the demands of a dual role—and, for some, a triple role if they are also in paid work. They must perform both as parents and as students, coping with everyday challenges while also meeting academic requirements. As a result, they often live under constant pressure to do well in each sphere.[16] The parents studied (primarily mothers) described their daily lives as busy, complicated, multifaceted, and overcrowded,[17] which requires highly deliberate planning and logistics. Even carefully

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[13] Engler, *Kisgyermekes nők a felsőoktatásban.*

[14] Moreau and Kerner, "Care in Academia."

[15] Engler, *Kisgyermekes nők a felsőoktatásban.*

[16] Ryan Christian T. Bustillo, Rouie Christine T. Bustillo, and Jay Ann Vie Sayson, "Navigating the Dual Roles: Understanding the Unique Challenges of Student-mothers in Pursuit of Higher Education," *Ignatian International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research,* vol. 2, 2024/2, 58–69.

[17] Tighe et al., "Improving the Education and Wellbeing of Student Parents"; K. P. Andres, "Two Faces of a Mom: Student Mothers' Lived Experiences in a State University," *International Journal of Multidisciplinary: Applied Business and Education Research,* vol. 2, 2021/5, 406–412.

designed schedules, however, are frequently disrupted by unforeseen family demands, such as illness or nights without sleep.[18]

The studies repeatedly highlight difficulties in managing time,[19] which often leads, on the one hand, to missing classes, decreasing the priority of studies, and struggling to concentrate on academic work, and, on the other hand, to feeling that there is not enough time for their children.[20] Family responsibilities require a constant state of readiness, while university requirements and deadlines, according to these accounts, cannot be considered family-friendly.[21] Balancing the dual role is made harder still by the fact that both domains can be understood less as time-bounded tasks than as open-ended, demand-driven obligations. As a result, each completed task may be accompanied by the perception that one could have done more—been a better parent, or a more successful student.[22]

Because raising children also entails additional costs, student parents must contend not only with their own financial situation but also with the challenges of establishing and maintaining their family's economic security.[23]

International and Hungarian research suggests that student parents are generally older than their peers and that more of

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[18] Moreau and Kerner, "Care in Academia."

[19] Ibid.

[20] Bustillo, Bustillo, and Sayson, "Navigating the Dual Roles."

[21] Moreau and Kerner, "Care in Academia."

[22] Ibid.

[23] Tighe et al., "Improving the Education and Wellbeing of Student Parents."

them also work alongside their studies and childcare.[24] As a consequence, they may find it harder to connect with fellow students, receive less peer-based information that would help them navigate university life, and, compared with students without children, are more likely to struggle with a sense of separation and isolation.[25] One survey found that only a small fraction of student parents feel they are part of the university community.[26]

The literature suggests that the difficulties outlined above—together with the multiple demands of balancing roles and meeting expectations—often lead to emotional strain and, in more severe cases, to mental-health and other health problems.[27]

Alongside these difficulties, the student parents studied also reported a number of perceived benefits associated with their situation and their decision, and their narratives highlighted advantages linked to the dual role.[28] A strong motivating factor during their studies was the belief that their investment would

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[24] V. Brown and T. R. Nichols, "Pregnant and Parenting Students on Campus: Policy and Program Implications for a Growing Population," *Educational Policy* 27, no. 3 (2013): 499–530.

[25] Bustillo, Bustillo, and Sayson, "Navigating the Dual Roles."

[26] Michelle Briegel, Sonya Jakubec, Andrea Shippey-Heilman, and Paxton Bruce, "Barriers and Supports for Student-Parents in Higher Education," *Transformative Dialogues: Teaching and Learning Journal* 15, no. 3 (2023): 12–21.

[27] Tighe et al., "Improving the Education and Wellbeing of Student Parents"; Moreau and Kerner, "Care in Academia."

[28] Ibid.

be likely to pay off both in the short and the long term.[29] This encouraged persistence: by adapting to their circumstances with the necessary flexibility, they were able to "realise their dreams" and earn a university degree.[30] Other studies report that student parents develop coping strategies to manage competing responsibilities, and learn practices of effective time management, financial management, and self-motivation. They typically sought individual solutions, relying on the empathy and understanding of instructors. During their studies, they experienced that sustained effort makes it possible to reconcile their roles; this, in turn, motivated them to pass on to their children the value of learning and the conviction that faith and hard work can make goals attainable.[31]

Demographic and sociological links between parenthood and educational attainment

An inverse relationship between educational attainment and fertility rates has now become a global pattern. The association is stronger in economically less developed countries, where rising levels of mothers' education are linked to an even more pronounced decline in the number of children than in wealthier

[29] Engler, *Kisgyermekes nők a felsőoktatásban*.

[30] Andres, "Two Faces of a Mom."

[31] Bustillo, Bustillo, and Sayson, "Navigating the Dual Roles."

countries.[32] Hungary's population has been declining since 1981; on 1 January 2025 it stood at 9.54 million. This reflects the balance of births and deaths, with the decline slightly offset by positive net international migration.[33] In other words, over recent decades the number of deaths has consistently exceeded the declining number of live births. The fall in the number of births has been driven not only by a shrinking number of women of childbearing age, but also by reduced fertility, the causes of which are highly complex. One important explanatory factor is that women's average age at the birth of their first child has increased. "Today, women begin family formation and childbearing at an age when, three decades ago, they had almost finished doing so."[34] It is also important to note that while the age at first birth has not shifted since 2000 among mothers with low levels of education (those who have completed only eight years of primary schooling), among women with tertiary qualifications it rose from 28.7 to 32.0 years.[35] Alongside the postponement of first births, the age at first marriage has also increased over

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[32] Jessica Nisén et al., "Educational Differences in Cohort Fertility Across Sub-national Regions in Europe," *European Journal of Population* 37, no. 1 (2020): 263–295.

[33] Központi Statisztikai Hivatal (KSH), *A népesség, népmozgalom főbb mutatói* [Key Indicators of Population and Vital Events] (Budapest: Központi Statisztikai Hivatal, 2025).

[34] Ibid., 139.

[35] Balázs Kapitány, "Gyermekvállalási kedv és termékenység Magyarországon – európai kitekintéssel" [Childbearing Intentions and Fertility in Hungary, with a European Outlook], *Pannonhalmi Szemle* 31, no. 4 (2023): 32–45.

recent decades,[36] especially among those with higher education.[37] At the same time, demographic research points out that despite the spread of non-marital partnership forms and the rise in non-marital births up to 2015, a larger share of children are still born within marriage (76% in 2023).[38]

This postponement of marriage and childbearing—partly because fertility is biologically time-limited—means that the number of children actually born often falls short of the number that was planned or desired. It should be added, however, that the realisation of childbearing plans is more likely among married university graduates.[39] Even so, the decline in births cannot be attributed to the expansion of higher education, since the lowest numbers of children are observed among those with secondary

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[36] Központi Statisztikai Hivatal (KSH), *A házasságkötési magatartás változásának demográfiai jellemzői* [Demographic Characteristics of Changes in Marriage Behaviour] (Budapest: Központi Statisztikai Hivatal, 2017).

[37] Anikó Gregor, "A hazai ifjúság demográfiai jellemzői és az azt alakító tényezők" [Demographic Characteristics of Hungarian Youth and the Factors Shaping Them], in *Margón kívül. Magyar ifjúságkutatás 2016* [Beyond the Margins: Hungarian Youth Research 2016], ed. Ádám Nagy (Budapest: Excenter Kutatóközpont, 2016), 7–35.

[38] Központi Statisztikai Hivatal (KSH), *Magyarország, 2023* [Hungary, 2023] (Budapest: Központi Statisztikai Hivatal, 2024).

[39] Balázs Kapitány and Lívia Murinkó, "Párkapcsolati változások, termékenységi trendek" [Partnership Changes, Fertility Trends], in *Társadalmi Riport 2020* [Social Report 2020], eds. Tamás Kolosi, Iván Szelényi, and György I. Tóth (Budapest: TÁRKI, 2020), 146–170.

education, particularly skilled manual workers.[40] Fertility by educational attainment follows a U-shaped pattern: both lower and higher levels of education are associated with higher fertility, that is, a greater likelihood of having children.[41] Further research also indicates that (in 2018) the highest number of live births was observed among homogamous couples—that is, couples from the same social group—where both parents have tertiary qualifications.[42]

In Romania, the completed cohort fertility rate among women with tertiary education is 1.12, the lowest figure recorded in any EU member state. Moreover, Romania shows the largest gap between the completed fertility of women with tertiary education and that of women with lower levels of education.[43] In this context, the continuing rise in women's participation in higher education further reduces the number of births—despite the fact that pronatalist incentives tend to benefit the middle classes.[44]

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[40] Balázs Kapitány, "Bimodális (kétcsúcsú) termékenységi görbe Magyarországon – leíró eredmények és lehetséges okok" [A Bimodal (Two-Peaked) Fertility Curve in Hungary: Descriptive Results and Possible Causes], *Demográfia* 61 (2018): 121–146.

[41] Ibid.

[42] Zsuzsanna Veroszta and Zoltán Györgyi, "Képzési háttér és gyermekvállalási tervek" [Educational Background and Childbearing Plans], *Educatio* 30, no. 2 (2021): 184–205.

[43] Jessica Nisén et al., "Educational Differences in Cohort Fertility Across Sub-national Regions in Europe," *European Journal of Population* 37, no. 1 (2020): 263–295.

[44] Malina Voicu and Razvan Papuc, "Fertility in Romania: The Delay of the Second Gender Revolution," *Transylvanian Review of Administrative Sciences,* no. 69 (2023): 133–149.

Although Slovakia still has a relatively high fertility level overall, the relationship between educational attainment and fertility is clear here as well: on average, the higher a person's education, the fewer children they have.[45] Eva Fekiačová's analysis shows that the differences by educational level are so pronounced that even among the youngest cohort of women with completed fertility (those born in 1961), the pattern remains stark. In the two lowest education groups (women with no completed primary education and those without a school-leaving examination), fertility still reaches the level considered necessary for reproduction (with completed cohort fertility rates of approximately 2.6 and 2.3, respectively). Even women with a school-leaving certificate come close (2.05). By contrast, women with tertiary education do not reach this level (1.75), and a similar tendency can be observed in earlier cohorts as well. At the same time, as Branislav Šprocha shows,[46] with the exception of the group with no education, these values tend to move closer to one another across cohorts within the different educational groups.

In Slovakia it is also true that the higher a woman's education, the later she has her first child. According to statistics from 2014, this age already exceeds 30 among women with tertiary

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[45] Eva Fekiačová, "Vplyv vzdelania na reprodukčné správanie v kontexte nízkej plodnosti na Slovensku po roku..." [The influence of education on reproductive behavior in the context of low fertility in Slovakia after...], in *RELIK 2021: Reproduction of Human Capital. Mutual Links and Connections. Conference Proceedings* (Prague: Prague University of Economics and Business, 2021), 177–186.

[46] Branislav Šprocha, "Zmeny v kohortnej plodnosti žien Slovenska v spojitosti s najvyšším dosiahnutým vzdelaním."

education, whereas at other education levels it falls between 20 and 29 years (the unqualified show an extremely low value, around age 20; among the two middle education groups, ages 27 and 29 are typical).[47]

As a result of the war, it is extremely difficult to provide a reliable statistical overview of Ukraine's population size or of any robust trends within it. Even before the outbreak of the war, Ukraine had conducted only one population census, in 2001; since then, estimates of the total population have been based on projections rather than comprehensive enumeration. Official population figures rely on the statistical office's estimates, and the number of people currently living in the country is commonly placed between 29 and 31 million—a range that many researchers, especially those analysing migration processes, have questioned.[48]

There is, however, broad agreement that Ukraine faces a serious demographic crisis, as highlighted both by Ukrainian demographers[49] and by experts working for international organisations.[50] Current post-war scenarios emphasise, in particular, the shift in the gender balance resulting from military action, as well as the negative consequences of forced migration.

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[47] Fekiačová, "Vplyv vzdelania."

[48] Maryna Puhachova, "The Russian–Ukrainian War: The Possibility of Assessment of Demographic Losses," *Statistics of Ukraine,* no. 105 (2024): 61–68.

[49] Ella Libanova, "Resilience of the Socio-Economic System of Ukraine to the Shocks Caused by the War: Specifics of Formation and Response," *Demography and Social Economy,* no. 58 (2024): 3–23.

[50] *European Demographic Datasheet 2024* (UNICEF, 2024).

Population decline had already begun before the war escalated in 2022, driven not only by migration patterns but also by a turn toward negative natural population change.

Because basic demographic statistics were already lacking before the war, we also have no data on student parents. The phenomenon examined here can therefore be illustrated only indirectly, using two types of information: first, data on marriage patterns; and second, changes affecting higher education introduced under the 2022 state of emergency. On the website of the State Statistics Service,[51] it is noted that in 2024, compared to the previous year, divorces became more frequent on average, marriages were less common, and the number of prenuptial agreements increased. According to official data from the Ministry of Justice,[52] 150,000 marriages were registered in 2024—a 20% decrease compared with the preceding year—while 34,200 divorces were recorded, 30% more than in 2023. In other words, one divorce occurred for every five marriages.

In the year the war began, after the introduction of the state of emergency, the centralised advanced-level school-leaving examination was abolished. Instead, applicants could apply to higher education institutions by submitting a motivation letter alongside their standard secondary school-leaving certificate.

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[51] OpenDataBot, "На п'ять шлюбів в Україні припадає одне розлучення" [One Divorce for Every Five Marriages in Ukraine], 2024, https://opendatabot.ua/analytics/marriages-divorces-2024-6

[52] Ministry of Justice of Ukraine, "Інформація про результати роботи органів державної реєстрації актів цивільного стану" [Information on the Results of the Work of State Civil Status Registration Bodies] (Kyiv, 2024), https://minjust.gov.ua/actual-info/stat_info

In parallel, a National Multidisciplinary Test was introduced for school leavers; in 2023 and 2024 it was expanded and tied to more stringent requirements, becoming the core baseline condition for admission. In 2022, these changes created a specific opportunity for Hungarians in Transcarpathia: for those who had previously struggled to obtain the advanced-level certificate—primarily because of Ukrainian-language tests—an alternative route became available, and many took advantage of it.

In the previous chapter, we noted that a major source of motivation for student parents during their studies was the expectation that their investment would pay off in the long run.[53] Labour-market uncertainty strongly depresses childbearing intentions—an effect that can be mitigated by obtaining a higher education qualification.[54] A countervailing mechanism, however, is that those with higher income and education levels tend to attach higher expectations to parenthood, and therefore estimate "the higher cost of raising a child properly."[55]

Given what we know about the demographic relationship between childbearing and educational attainment, and in light of the difficulties faced by student parents discussed in the previous chapter, there is a clear need for policy measures and action plans—whether at national level or within higher education institutions—to encourage family formation during studies and to improve the situation of student parents.

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[53] Engler: *Kisgyermekes nők a felsőoktatásban.*

[54] Veroszta and Györgyi, "Képzési háttér és gyermekvállalási tervek."

[55] Ibid. 190.

Policies addressing student parents

International research on student parents consistently shows that, despite their growing numbers, students with children have received limited attention in policy-making to date.[56] This makes it necessary—on the basis of research that documents their experiences, views, and proposals—to develop and implement policies that address their situation, whether general, institution-wide, or programme-specific.[57] Student parents are often effectively "invisible" both to the institution and to their peers, yet they are expected to adapt to the same institutional arrangements and requirements as students without children. This, too, underlines the importance of designing such policies carefully and on a solid empirical basis.

Research suggests that, beyond their relative invisibility, student parents often struggle to find their way in university life for a more practical reason as well: their circumstances leave them with fewer points of contact with fellow students, which limits opportunities to share experiences. In addition, institutions often provide them with little targeted information—through sources or advisory channels[58]—about what services are available to them, if any.[59] Studies also indicate that only a small

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[56] Moreau and Kerner, "Care in Academia."

[57] Briegel et al., "Barriers and Supports for Student-Parents in Higher Education."

[58] Brown and Nichols, "Pregnant and Parenting Students on Campus."

[59] Kristen Springer, Brenda Parker, and Catherine Leviten-Reid, "Making Space for Graduate Student Parents Practice and Politics," *Journal of Family Issues* 30 (2009): 435–457.

number of higher education institutions have official guidelines for supporting student parents; and even where such guidelines exist, university staff members are frequently unaware of them and of the services and options that could be offered. As a result, students are left to deal with problems arising from their situation on an individual basis.[60]

Policy analysis, together with evidence on student parents' views and experiences, indicates that action plans and guidelines aimed at improving their situation—and encouraging parenthood during studies—must be designed with this distinctive dual position and its associated difficulties in mind. A central requirement is to enable students to organise their schedules around childcare responsibilities and, more broadly, to ensure a supportive learning environment.[61]

The literature also highlights that one of the most important family-focused support services is clear, accessible information about available university resources,[62] including any financial support that may be claimed.[63] Orientation can be strengthened through free courses offered by the institution, properly trained university mentors, or the formal organisation of peer-support groups for others in the same situation.[64] In practice, however,

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[60] Ibid.; Bustillo, Bustillo, and Sayson, "Navigating the Dual Roles."

[61] Tighe et al., "Improving the Education and Wellbeing of Student Parents"; Briegel et al., "Barriers and Supports for Student-Parents in Higher Education."

[62] Ibid.

[63] Tighe et al., "Improving the Education and Wellbeing of Student Parents."

[64] Ibid.

students typically rely on informal networks and personal contacts rather than on institutional support structures. While information shared within these networks can be helpful, it is often uneven and incomplete.

Another important need is to ensure supervision for students' children while the parent attends classes or prepares for exams and assignments. Universities also need an appropriate, calm space on campus where parents can care for their child (breastfeed, change a diaper) or where someone can look after the child during teaching hours.[65] A common finding is that where targeted programmes have been introduced for student parents, participating parents were more likely to complete a degree than members of the control group.[66]

These findings suggest that a family-focused approach is crucial for supporting and improving student parents' educational pathways and university success.[67]

The effective introduction and implementation of specific measures and services, however, depends above all on a conscious, empathetic attitude toward the issue across the institution and among all participants. Policies implemented within a broadly supportive institutional culture can improve student parents' circumstances and strengthen their sense of belonging within the university community and its culture.[68]

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[65] Ibid.; Briegel et al., "Barriers and Supports for Student-Parents in Higher Education."

[66] Tighe et al., "Improving the Education and Wellbeing of Student Parents."

[67] Ibid.; Briegel et al., "Barriers and Supports for Student-Parents in Higher Education."

[68] Ibid.

Designing and introducing policies that support student parents and encourage parenthood is a complex, comprehensive undertaking that requires the involvement of multiple stakeholders. For this reason, in 2023 the National Association of Large Families (NOE), together with several higher education institutions, launched an international Erasmus+ project entitled "Supporting Inclusive Learning Environments—Strategies to Support Student Parents in Higher Education." The project aims to develop a research-based policy intervention delivered in three phases: "the first is almost purely the implementation of research steps; the second phase is mixed but typically focuses on intervention design; and the third phase consists of evaluation tasks."[69]

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[69] *Családosok a felsőoktatásban* [Student Parents in Higher Education]: *Research Plan* (Budapest: National Association of Large Families (NOE), 2024).

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METHODOLOGY FOR STUDYING STUDENT PARENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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This international project on family-friendly higher education examines how institutions can better support student parents so they can thrive both academically and in family life. The research is organised around two questions:

1. What factors hinder family formation and parenting during higher education studies?
2. What forms of support could be provided to encourage the participation of student parents, or the decision to start a family while studying?

The target group consists of students who are raising, or have raised, young children during their university studies. Under the eligibility criteria, participants were defined as either (a) students raising a child under the age of 14, or (b) graduates from the past three years who raised a child under 14 while studying. This includes students enrolled (or previously enrolled) in bachelor's, master's, or long-cycle programmes, in either full-time or part-time (correspondence) mode. Within the Erasmus+ framework, the project is not a scientific study in the conventional sense;

rather, it is a policy intervention grounded in social-scientific research methods. The research can play a key role in shaping and implementing policy measures that support parenthood among people in higher education. It offers in-depth insight into students' living conditions, priorities, and challenges, enabling decision-makers to adopt targeted and effective measures. Sociological research, in particular, can identify the specific barriers that discourage university students from becoming parents. Understanding these factors is essential if interventions are to address the issues that most strongly influence students' decisions about parenthood.[1]

In the first phase of the project, student focus groups were organised at all four institutions. In April and May 2024, a total of eight focus-group discussions were conducted.

Focus group research

Focus group research is a qualitative method used in the social sciences. By drawing on group-dynamic mechanisms, it can elicit participants' motivations, attitudes, and emotions in relation to particular events or stimuli—often aspects that are not fully conscious, may operate at a subconscious level, and can even be suppressed. In a typical focus group, a trained moderator leads a discussion with around 6–12 participants who share relevant characteristics, centring on a specific topic (the

[1] Családosok a felsőoktatásban. Kutatási terv [Student Parents in Higher Education. Research Plan] (Budapest: National Association of Large Families (NOE), 2024).

"focus").[2] The purpose is not to collect objective, quantifiable data, but to create a setting in which participants can articulate thoughts, experiences, opinions, perceptions, and attitudes that often become clear even to them only through social interaction, and take shape during the discussion itself.[3] The goal is not for participants to persuade one another, reach a compromise, or resolve a conflict or problem, but to enable the widest possible range of views to be expressed in an open and honest conversation about the topic.[4]

Such discussions are often held in a dedicated room equipped with a one-way mirror, allowing the commissioning party or an expert to follow the conversation without being visible to participants. Alongside in-person formats, focus groups may also be conducted by phone, via video call, or online. The last of these originally referred to asynchronous, chat-based discussion, whereas today it typically means real-time interaction with audio and video on a videoconferencing

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[2] István Síklaki, *Vélemények mélyén. A fókuszcsoport módszer, a kvalitatív közvélemény-kutatás alapmódszere* [Beneath Opinions: The Focus Group Method as a Core Method of Qualitative Public Opinion Research] (Budapest: Kossuth, 2006); Nóra Schleicher, *Kvalitatív kutatási módszerek a társadalomtudományokban. A Budapesti Kommunikációs és Üzleti Főiskola jegyzete* [Qualitative Research Methods in the Social Sciences: Course Notes of the Budapest College of Communication and Business] (Budapest: BKF, 2007), 62–65.

[3] Ibid., 62.

[4] Lilla Vicsek, *Fókuszcsoport* [Focus Group] (Budapest: Osiris, 2006).

platform.[5] When designing the study, the choice between offline and online delivery should be made by weighing advantages and drawbacks. Online formats make scheduling and implementation easier, since no physical venue is required and it is simpler to agree on a time; audio and video recording are readily available, making the approach time- and cost-efficient. At the same time, researchers must account for potential technical problems and for the fact that group-dynamic mechanisms appear only in a limited way online, which can reduce both the momentum of the discussion and its emotional intensity.[6]

A trained moderator—ideally someone with relevant subject-matter familiarity—prepares and leads the session and later analyses it on the basis of transcripts made from the audio and video recording. A good moderator must be able, on the one hand, to create a spontaneous, relaxed, informal atmosphere and, on the other, to keep the discussion under control: maintaining focus and managing difficult cases or problematic situations. The moderator also needs to balance participation so that everyone has an equal chance to speak, while encouraging honest contributions and the emergence of new ideas—something that can be supported through openness

[5] Éva Sztáray Kézdy and Zsuzsanna Szvetelszky, "Távolléti fókuszcsoportok eredményei a 2020 tavaszi érettségivel kapcsolatos tapasztalatokról" [Findings from Remote Focus Groups on Experiences Related to the Spring 2020 School-Leaving Examination], *Socio.hu* 11, no. 1 (2021): 90.

[6] Sztáray Kézdy and Szvetelszky, "Távolléti fókuszcsoportok," 94; Síklaki, *Vélemények mélyén,* 125.

and genuine interest.[7] It is crucial that the moderator does not judge or evaluate what is said. Nor is it the moderator's task to correct statements that are inaccurate or inconsistent with reality. Throughout, the moderator must remain encouraging and neutral so that each participant can express their own perceptions, experiences, and views.

Focus group participants are usually not selected through probability sampling. Instead, recruitment is based on criteria relevant to the research question, and groups are formed after preliminary screening. The purpose of the screening questionnaire is to ensure that all participants meet the precise criteria defining the study's target group. Because non-probability, expert sampling is used, the sample does not represent the study population; the findings therefore cannot be generalised statistically to the full target group. By aggregating and analysing the views and attitudes expressed in discussion, however, it is possible to map the diversity of the phenomenon, identify its different variants, and detect potential patterns. In this sense, the results can be understood as supporting a form of variation-based generalisation.[8]

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[7] Vicsek, *Fókuszcsoport,* 212–230; Nóra Schleicher, *Kvalitatív kutatási módszerek,* 65–66; István Síklaki, *Vélemények mélyén,* 67–69, 102–109.
[8] Vicsek, *Fókuszcsoport,* 240.

Sampling at Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary

The process of organising the focus groups[9]

At Károli Gáspár University, the aim was to ensure that the call for participation reached all students who might fall within the target group. To this end, information about how to apply for the focus-group discussions was circulated through a range of channels. First, in early April 2024, an announcement was sent via the university's electronic student administration system (Neptun). This message informed students about the launch of the project, the methodology selected, and the exact dates of the focus groups, for which they could register.

According to the Educational Directorate, in addition to the Neptun message the information was also sent by email to two student cohorts: (1) all active students at the university (7,692 individuals), and (2) students who completed their studies between 1 January 2020 and 2 April 2024 (either by earning a degree or completing coursework requirements) (7,663 individuals). This broad outreach was necessary because—unless a student reports it and explicitly consents—the university cannot record who is raising a child under the age of 14 (for data-protection reasons). As a result, the call could not be targeted exclusively to the intended group.

[9] Based on information provided by the Department of Scientific Research, Applications and Project Coordination of Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary.

The timing of the announcement coincided with the semester's training week, which made it possible to approach each faculty individually and to promote the call at events with larger audiences, especially those thematically linked to the project.

In total, 25 people indicated that they would like to take part in the focus-group discussion; of these, 14 met the study's precise eligibility criteria.

(The information provided by applicants was validated by the Educational Directorate, which also confirmed programme levels, correcting data where applicants had entered them inaccurately.)

Composition of the focus group sample

As a result of the organisational process described above, 13 participants were ultimately assigned to two focus-group sessions at Károli Gáspár University. Allocation was guided by the following criteria:

1. full-time and part-time (correspondence) students should be represented in roughly equal proportions;
2. participants should be distributed across faculties as evenly as possible;
3. applicants from the psychology programme should be allocated evenly between the two groups;
4. programme levels should be balanced.

The organisation and allocation process also made clear that the chosen target group—students raising children under the age of 14—is one of the most heavily burdened segments of the

student population. In addition to studying and raising young children, many participants also work. Several raise their child alone, and many have no support when it comes to childcare.

Seven people were initially assigned to the first focus-group session. One participant, however, was unable to arrange childcare, and the group size therefore decreased to six.

Table 1. Details of participants in the first focus group

Faculty	Title of programme	Level of programme	Mode of study	GRADUATE / Year of graduation
Faculty of Law	Law	Undivided (long-cycle) programme	Full-time	
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences	Social Behaviour Analysis	Master's programme (MA)	Full-time	
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences	Teacher Education	Undivided (long-cycle) programme	Full-time	
Faculty of Pedagogy	Kindergarten Teacher	Bachelor's programme (BA)	Part-time (correspondence)	
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences	Sociology	Bachelor's programme (BA)	Part-time (correspondence)	
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences	Psychology	Bachelor's programme (BA)	Part-time (correspondence)	x 2021

Among the participants there were both first-year and final-year students. Three participants had one child, and three had two

children. Five women and one man took part in the discussion. Several participants entered university as career changers, meaning they were not studying for their first degree.

Six people were initially assigned to the second focus-group discussion. One person misread the date, and another participant withdrew on the day due to work commitments, so the group size again fell to four. All of them had active student status at the time the focus group was conducted.

Table 2. Details of participants in the second focus group

Faculty	Title of programme	Level of programme	Mode of study
Faculty of Law	Law	Undivided (long-cycle) programme	Full-time
Faculty of Economics, Health Sciences and Social Studies	Nursing	Bachelor's programme (BA)	Full-time
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences	Sociology	Bachelor's programme (BA)	Part-time (correspondence)
Faculty of Law	Law	Undivided (long-cycle) programme	Part-time (correspondence)

Among those who participated in the second session, three were raising one child and one participant was raising four children. Three of the four participants were in a relationship; one was raising their child alone. All had previously earned a degree in another field.

The focus groups were conducted in person at Károli Gáspár University's building on Reviczky Street, in the Tanstúdió operated by the Department of Communication and Media Studies within the Institute of Communication and Social Sciences (Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences). In addition to the students, two university researchers were present; they alternated between the roles of moderator and assistant. Before the discussion, participants signed the relevant data-protection statements. The discussions lasted one and a half hours and were recorded in audio and video. Using the Alrite.io automatic speech-recognition tool, studio staff produced a transcript from the audio track. The storage device containing the video recording and transcript was handed over to the researchers in the presence of a member of staff from the Rector's Office Department of Scientific Research, Applications and Project Coordination. The researchers compared the Word transcripts with the audio recordings, anonymised the text, and then submitted the finalised material to the research coordinators.

Composition of the questionnaire sample

Some students either did not meet one or more eligibility criteria or were unable to attend either focus-group session in person. They nevertheless indicated to the organisers that they would be happy to support the research in another way. Following guidance from the NOE's professional coordinator—and with the exception of international students—a short questionnaire with open-ended questions entitled "As a Student Parent at University" was sent to every current or former student who had previously registered interest, whether or not they met all

criteria. Respondents could complete it and return it by email together with the required data-processing consent statements.

During recruitment, 14 people indicated that they would be willing to share their views, experiences, and suggestions on the topic, and the questionnaire was therefore sent to them. Of the 14, seven completed questionnaires were returned.

Table 3. Details of participants in the questionnaire survey

Faculty	Title of programme	Level of programme	Mode of study	GRADUATE / Year of graduation
Faculty of Law	Law	Undivided (long-cycle) programme	Part-time (correspon-dence)	
Faculty of Law	Foreign affairs specialist advisor	Postgraduate specialist training	Part-time (correspon-dence)	x 2023
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences	Psychology	Master's programme (MA)	Full-time	
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences	Psychology	Master's programme (MA)	Full-time	
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences	Mental health support professional	Postgraduate specialist training	Part-time (correspon-dence)	
Faculty of Theology	Religious education teacher (Religion and education teacher)	Master's programme (MA)	Part-time (correspon-dence)	
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences	Communica-tion and Media Studies	Master's programme (MA)	Part-time (correspon-dence)	Withdrew from the programme

The sample included students raising one, two, three, or four children, as well as one respondent who was expecting a baby. Two of the seven participants were raising their children alone.

Staff from the Rector's Office Department of Scientific Research, Applications and Project Coordination, together with KRE's data-protection officer, reviewed the returned documents and anonymised them. The researchers received the completed questionnaires only after anonymisation, for the purposes of analysis.

The original documents and the anonymised versions are stored on a USB drive by the Rector's Office Department of Scientific Research, Applications and Project Coordination, together with the audiovisual materials.

Sampling at János Selye University

The process of organising the focus groups

Because János Selye University's data-protection rules do not allow the student administration office to keep records of this type of personal data, we had no information on how many students with young children attend the university, or who they are. After several rounds of consultation, the only feasible option was to circulate a call for participation—first through the university email system and later via the Student Council—inviting students to register for the study. Given the university's small size, with three faculties and roughly 1,700 students, the number of student parents is likely limited, and we did not expect to be able to recruit participants in large numbers. It is also likely

that only a small proportion of those affected responded, and even among those who did, not everyone was ultimately able to attend the scheduled sessions. In the end, two focus-group interviews were conducted, each with four participants.

The two interviews took place in consecutive weeks. The first was held entirely in person, supported by one moderator and two volunteer assistants. The second used a hybrid format: half of the participants joined online, and the session was led by a single moderator. In both cases, video recordings were made after participants signed consent forms, and the discussions were transcribed, with assistance from Microsoft Word's speech-to-text function.

Composition of the focus group sample

We sought to reach students across all three faculties. However, given the recruitment difficulties, we also personally encouraged—within our own faculty (the Reformed Theological Faculty)—students we knew who met the criteria. As a result, one of the groups ultimately consisted exclusively of students from this faculty.

Participants in the discussions included:

- a female bachelor's student in full-time study with a four-month-old baby; she gave birth during her studies and has already returned to attending classes;
- a female master's student in full-time study with one primary-school-aged child and one adult child; she had her child earlier, postponed her studies, later requested an individual study arrangement, attends many classes, and also works;

- an older male PhD student in part-time (correspondence) mode with five children; he previously experienced becoming a father while a final-year full-time student, currently works alongside his studies, and still has a primary-school-aged child;
- a former female student with a preschool-aged child, who began a full-time bachelor's degree already as a parent but soon dropped out because of organisational difficulties, and was also working at the time;
- a female student with six children, who started a full-time bachelor's degree relatively late and also works;
- a female student with a primary-school-aged child, who began a part-time (correspondence) bachelor's degree already as a parent and also works;
- a male student with a school-aged child with a disability, who began a full-time bachelor's degree on an individual study arrangement already as a parent and also works;
- a female master's student who does not yet have children but is married; she studies full-time alongside work on an individual study arrangement.[10]

The group was therefore highly diverse in terms of number of children, age, mode of study, employment, and prior experience with the issue.

[10] In line with the project's scope, the target group also encompassed students who do not currently have children but intend to start a family in the near future.

Table 4. Details of participants in the first focus group

Faculty	Title of programme	Level of programme	Mode of study
Teacher Education Faculty	Hungarian Language and Literature – English Language and Literature Teacher	Bachelor's programme (BA)	Full-time
Teacher Education Faculty	Kindergarten Pedagogy and Public Education	Bachelor's programme (BA)	Part-time (correspondence)
Faculty of Economics and Informatics	Corporate Economics and Management	Bachelor's programme (BA)	Full-time
Faculty of Economics and Informatics	Corporate Economics and Management	Bachelor's programme (BA)	Full-time (withdrew from the programme)

Table 5. Details of participants in the second focus group

Faculty	Title of programme	Level of programme	Mode of Study
Reformed Theological Faculty	Theology	Doctoral programme	Part-time (correspondence)
Reformed Theological Faculty	Missiology, Diaconia and Social Care	Bachelor's programme (BA)	Full-time (with an individual study schedule)
Reformed Theological Faculty	Missiology, Diaconia and Social Care	Bachelor's programme (BA)	Full-time (with an individual study schedule)
Reformed Theological Faculty	Missiology, Diaconia and Social Care	Bachelor's programme (BA)	Full-time (with an individual study schedule)

Sampling at Sapientia Hungarian University of Transylvania

The process of organising the focus groups

At Sapientia Hungarian University of Transylvania, the rule is that any research involving university students—whether affecting them or including them as participants—requires approval from the university leadership. This study followed that procedure and was implemented with the endorsement and authorisation of the University Council. In the first step, we identified student parents informally through department heads and teaching staff. The researchers approached every department, and the programme coordinators—who are responsible for liaising with students—personally contacted those they knew to be raising young children. This informal approach was necessary because the university does not keep records of students' family status, so there is no itemised list of students raising children under the age of 14. Our institution is small and functions as a close-knit community in which teaching staff and the student body are generally aware of which students are raising children. This collegiate atmosphere made it possible to identify the target group.

Composition of the focus group sample

In the focus-group discussions conducted at Sapientia Hungarian University of Transylvania, 14 participants took part in total. When organising the sessions, we initially aimed to make the participant groups as heterogeneous as possible in both discussions, according to the following criteria:

1. balanced representation of the faculties in Târgu Mureș (Marosvásárhely), Cluj-Napoca (Kolozsvár), Miercurea Ciuc (Csíkszereda), and Sfântu Gheorghe (Sepsiszentgyörgy);
2. a broadly similar age distribution across the two focus groups, where possible;
3. a broadly similar gender distribution across the two focus groups.

In practice, however, it proved difficult to find times that suited participants—avoiding clashes with study and work commitments and allowing them to arrange childcare. As a result, we had to set aside virtually all of the criteria listed above, retaining only one requirement: that participants were raising one or more children under the age of 14.

Table 6. Details of participants in the first focus group

Faculty	Programme title	Programme level	Mode of study
Târgu Mureș (Marosvásárhely)	Mechanical Engineering	Bachelor's programme (BA)	Full-time
Târgu Mureș (Marosvásárhely)	Horticultural Engineering	Bachelor's programme (BA)	Full-time
Miercurea Ciuc (Csíkszereda)	Human Resources	Bachelor's programme (BA)	Full-time
Cluj-Napoca (Kolozsvár)	Diplomacy and Intercultural Studies	Master's programme (MA)	Full-time

Among the participants were students enrolled in bachelor's programmes (horticultural engineering, mechanical engineering,

and human resources), as well as one student who had enrolled in a master's programme with the aim of obtaining a master's degree. One participant had moved back from abroad with their family, and was encouraged to enrol at the university by their spouse and parents.

Table 7. Details of participants in the second focus group

Faculty	Programme title	Programme level	Mode of study
Târgu Mureș (Marosvásárhely)	Computer Science	Bachelor's programme (BA)	Full-time
Târgu Mureș (Marosvásárhely)	Computer Control Systems	Master's programme (BA)	Full-time
Miercurea Ciuc (Csíkszereda)	Communication and PR	Bachelor's programme (BA)	Full-time
Miercurea Ciuc (Csíkszereda)	Sociology	Bachelor's programme (BA)	Full-time
Sfântu Gheorghe (Sepsiszentgyörgy)	Agricultural Engineering	Bachelor's programme (BA)	Full-time
Sfântu Gheorghe (Sepsiszentgyörgy)	Forest Engineering	Bachelor's programme (BA)	Full-time

The second focus-group discussion likewise included a mix of bachelor's and master's students, although the clear majority were studying at bachelor's level. Among them was a participant who, after raising several children, returned as an adult to a long-held ambition to continue their education. Another was already working in the field and enrolled in order to obtain a formal credential for knowledge and skills they effectively already possessed.

Because of participants' tightly scheduled everyday lives—the constant balancing of university, work, and parenting—and because the four locations (Târgu Mureș [Marosvásárhely], Cluj-Napoca [Kolozsvár], Miercurea Ciuc [Csíkszereda], and Sfântu Gheorghe [Sepsiszentgyörgy]) are separated by several hundred kilometres, the focus groups were conducted online via Google Meet. The discussions took place in a confidential, relaxed atmosphere. From the research team, one lead researcher and one assistant attended each session.

Sampling at Ferenc Rákóczi II Transcarpathian Hungarian College

The process of organising the focus groups

Based in Berehove (Beregszász), the Ferenc Rákóczi II Transcarpathian Hungarian College is a relatively young, degree-awarding higher education institution and, compared with the other participating universities, much smaller. For this reason, it does not have faculties; instead, it is organised into departments. Given the institution's size, the atmosphere is close-knit and personal connections are stronger. The search for suitable student parents for the interviews therefore relied on these relationships, supported by the Study Office and the College's seven departments. In total, we identified fourteen students who met the study criteria and sent them an invitation through the College's internal messaging system. Twelve students replied with consent. We then offered several possible dates and ultimately conducted two discussions with five participants each.

Composition of the focus group sample

Implementing both sessions proved challenging because most participants were not only student parents but were also often in paid work alongside raising children. In the year the Russian–Ukrainian war broke out, the admissions process was changed nationwide: instead of a centrally administered advanced-level school-leaving examination, applicants could apply using a motivation letter attached to their previously obtained standard school-leaving certificate. Many Transcarpathian Hungarians who remained in the region and whose plans to continue their education had previously been blocked by the advanced-level examination took up this opportunity; as a result, more people began higher education in September 2022. In the discussions, male participants emphasised how much studying means in their lives: it not only fulfils a long-held aspiration, but also provides an exemption from conscription in the prevailing dangerous situation. For full-time students, the College offers flexible class attendance if a student is in employment or, as a student parent, applies for it on the grounds of childcare responsibilities; this corresponds to what Hungarian higher education would call a "preferential" or individual study arrangement.

Table 8. Participant data from the first focus group.

Department	Programme title	Programme Level	Mode of study
History and Social Sciences	History Teacher	Bachelor's programme (BA)	Full-time
History and Social Sciences	History teacher	Master's programme (MA)	Full-time
History and Social Sciences	History Teacher	Bachelor's programme (BA)	Full-time
Pedagogy, Psychology, Primary Teacher Education, Early Childhood Education, Educational Leadership	Primary Teacher Education	Master's programme (MA)	Full-time
Pedagogy, Psychology, Primary Teacher Education, Early Childhood Education, Educational Leadership	Primary Teacher Education	Master's programme (MA)	Full-time

In the first discussion, bachelor's-level participants were second-year students, while those in master's programmes were first-year students. At both levels, participants were substantially older than their cohort peers, and they often highlighted generational differences—how classmates ten to fifteen years younger approach studying and life more generally in very different ways.

Two men and three women took part; three participants had two children and two had one child. Everyone was employed, and one participant was on maternity leave from her previous workplace when she decided to continue her education. Working student parents in full-time study meet course requirements under the flexible class-attendance arrangement, with specific requirements varying by programme.

Table 9. Details of participants in the second focus group

Department	Programme title	Programme level	Mode of study
Philology	Ukrainian Language	Bachelor's programme (BA)	Full-time
Pedagogy, Psychology, Primary Teacher Education, Early Childhood Education, Educational Leadership	Kindergarten Teacher Education	Bachelor's programme (BA)	Full-time
Mathematics and Informatics	Mathematics — Informatics	Bachelor's programme (BA)	Part-time (correspondence)
Pedagogy, Psychology, Primary Teacher Education, Early Childhood Education, Educational Leadership	Kindergarten Teacher Education	Bachelor's programme (BA)	Part-time (correspondence)
Philology	English Language	Bachelor's programme (BA)	Full-time

The second discussion included only second-year bachelor's students—participants who had entered the College via the motivation-letter route. They spoke openly about how pleased they were that a long-standing dream had finally been realised: they could continue studying, and in the emergency context it was no longer an obstacle if they did not have sufficient proficiency in the state language. Four women and one man took part, including a married couple, who described in detail how they coordinate family life with studying. Two participants had one child, two had two children, and one had three children.

The discussions were held in the College's media centre, in a studio set up for interviews, and were led by an experienced moderator. Audio and video recordings were made. After transcription, participants were anonymised; all participants had been informed of this prior to the discussion. The audio and video materials and the transcripts were archived at the Hodinka Antal Linguistics Research Centre operating within the College, and were then forwarded to the NOE project lead.

Methodology of analysis

Audio and video recordings were made of the focus-group discussions on the basis of participants' informed consent. Verbatim, anonymised transcripts in Word format served as the basis for analysis. In the results chapters, quotations from the focus groups are attributed using pseudonyms, and all information that could identify participants has been removed. In analysing the transcripts, we used a partly deductive (theory-driven) and partly inductive (data-driven) approach. On the basis of the research questions, analytical dimensions, and the focus-group guide, we developed an initial code list, then expanded it inductively with

further codes and sub-codes through repeated readings of the texts. During coding, relevant passages were assigned the appropriate code(s). We then collated and interpreted the text segments associated with each code, identified similarities and differences, and drew conclusions.[11] The results are first presented by institution and then synthesised across the focus groups conducted at the four institutions.

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STUDENT PARENTS AT KÁROLI GÁSPÁR UNIVERSITY OF THE REFORMED CHURCH IN HUNGARY

Zsófia Drjenovszky – Éva Sztáray Kézdy

At Károli Gáspár University, we conducted two focus-group discussions in April and May 2024, with six and four participants respectively. During recruitment, several students indicated that they would very much like to take part and share their experiences as student parents, but were unable to attend on the dates offered. They were therefore given the opportunity to contribute by completing a short questionnaire with open-ended questions. Alongside the anonymised transcripts of the focus-group discussions, the analysis also included the seven completed questionnaires returned in this way.

Results

Even from the composition of the sample it was clear that we were dealing with a highly diverse target group. A closer look at participants' family circumstances—and at why they chose to pursue their studies while raising a child—confirmed this diversity. In some cases, parenthood began during university studies in an unplanned way: "When I applied to the institution where I started the programme, I didn't even know my little boy was on the way. So the application had already been submitted—it

was basically a done deal—when I found out he was coming." (Alexa) In another case, although the child had been planned, the mother was already approaching the end of her studies: "My daughter was born in my fourth semester at university." (Bori) There were also cases where the couple had planned to have a baby, but when it did not happen, they decided it was the right time to study: "When I started university, we were planning to have a child, but it didn't work out. When I enrolled, I was thinking that if the IVF worked, I wouldn't even enrol—but it didn't. Then later, fortunately—probably partly because I started this programme and felt more settled emotionally—our little boy did come." (Bogi)

For others, studying began with a child already in the picture—often not for a first degree. They took on the demands and constraints this involved because they were genuinely interested in the programme: "I knew I wanted to finish it at some point—I knew it interested me […]. So even then—my child was still in kindergarten—I knew this was going to be a tough ride…" (Anna) For some, returning to study was a deliberate career change; for others, curiosity was the main driver: "For me it wasn't a necessity anymore to finish it. So, in an ugly word, it was more like a hobby." (Andi) They were under no illusions that studying while raising a child would be difficult, but because both mattered to them, they chose to go ahead. Coordinating work, family responsibilities, and study commitments over time, however, proved challenging, and programmes often took longer than planned: "My little boy is the priority—so there's a reason I'm in my seventh year of a four-year programme." (Alexa)

Already during the enrolment phase it became clear that time is the central constraint for this target group. The challenge is compounded by the need to arrange childcare. In almost every case, the main—often the only—source of support was the participant's partner. "With my husband's very, very strong support—one could even call it self-sacrifice—I'm able to do this." (Bogi) Knowing this, some timed the start of their studies to coincide with their child's enrolment in childcare or school, thereby easing the burden on their partner: "I prepared for this deliberately—only when both of my girls were already in an educational institution, and now the younger one is too. That's why I can attend full-time because while they're there, I can be there as well." (Böbe) In other cases, when there was no alternative, families relied on external help—most often a babysitter. Only one participant mentioned friends or grandparents, in a situation where both parents were studying. For the group we interviewed, however, the Covid period was distinctly positive because it made it possible for mothers to follow teaching from home while caring for a young child: "Covid started then, actually, and what helped me was that for a long time I didn't have to be away from her." (Bori)

In what follows, we present the experiences reported by students raising young children at the university. We first describe how their immediate university environment—peers and instructors—responded to their situation and what forms of help and support were available to them during their studies. We then turn to their views and experiences of the teaching period, followed by the examination period, and finally to the institutional environment.

Immediate environment

Peers' attitudes

We first wanted to understand what kinds of reactions students encountered at university when their peers and instructors learned that they were student parents.

A clear distinction emerged between the communities of full-time and part-time (correspondence) students. In full-time programmes, the average age tends to be much lower and it is rare for students to have children. As a result, there is a greater gap—both in age and in day-to-day concerns—between student parents and their classmates. Even so, this typically does not create difficulties. Most often, parenthood simply does not come up, and many peers are not even aware of it. "They're quite young […] and it's really not typical—at least in our full-time programme I don't think anyone has a child—and it doesn't really come up." (Berta) "It's simply a completely different life situation." (Alexa) Student parents themselves know that their private lives differ in many respects from those of their peers, so they generally do not raise the topic. "My classmates who were born in 2000 aren't really interested in what was going on with my child at home yesterday, or which school we're choosing—those just aren't their priorities, and I don't push it either. It doesn't belong there. Mostly we talk about academic things anyway, and there's plenty to talk about." (Alexa) When it does become known in some context that someone has a child, the reaction is usually positive. "They welcomed me with a lot of warmth and happiness, and they really did accept me. For us it was more like something interesting than any kind of source of

conflict." (Böbe) "They reacted very positively. I felt like everyone liked it." (Roni)

Only one participant reported a negative experience, specifically in terms of how much additional practical support they could expect from classmates: "I first met my classmates in a Facebook group… and out of the dozen-or-so people, there was only one who was genuinely helpful." (Bíbor) Most participants, however, did not feel a need to ask for special assistance on the basis of their family situation: "I don't feel like I need help more than others because I also help others when they need it." (Alexa)

Among part-time (correspondence) students, the picture was quite different. In one respect the situation is similar: children are not a major topic in day-to-day study interactions. The reasons, however, run in the opposite direction. Part-time students tend to be older; most have children themselves and understand what this stage of life entails. "I'm in part-time study, and in our group people are older […]. The minority are the ones who don't have children. Some have teenagers, and that's different from having a baby or a small child—where the issue is: what do I do with the child on Friday–Saturday, or how do I find time to study? So when they found out I was expecting a baby, they were happy and mostly just wondered how I would manage it." (Bogi) "Older, with families, with kids […] for most people it was simply a given." (Bori) Unlike full-time cohorts, part-time groups also tend to know more about one another's private lives—likely because they are together more intensively on weekends, spending full Saturdays in classes and breaks. "Everyone knew about everyone—how many children they had,

how old they were, where they were at: applying somewhere, starting kindergarten, being at university, about to finish." (Andi) Because life circumstances are often similar, student parents tend to understand one another better, and asking for help is easier. At the same time, participants did not see having children as a blanket excuse for relying on others: "When it was clear someone could have done their part, but in group work they couldn't work with us and basically did nothing, then the community did start to exclude them a little." (Andi)

Instructors' reactions

In general, students do not share with instructors that they have children. It rarely comes up, and they do not feel a need to raise it. "They don't know. Or rather, I never refer to it." (Alma) Participants mentioned a few situations where it became known for specific, practical reasons—most often because a problem arose or an administrative situation made it unavoidable: "There are instructors in my case who had to find out, unintentionally—for example during course registration." (Anna) One student described requesting to leave during the second half of a class for a family reason, which was received positively: "Once I asked if I could leave for the second half of a class because of a family matter—my child's birthday—and the female instructor took it very positively." (Roni) In some programmes, disclosure is more likely because the cohort is small or because personal life situations connect directly to the subject matter: "In my case they know—our major is quite small […] and it's unavoidable that we bring in our own life situations in different case studies or similar contexts. So I think many people know I have a small

child, and they're very supportive and also interested." (Alexa) In these fields, real-life experience linked to the curriculum can be viewed as an asset: "In addition to these programmes, a lot of the pedagogy and psychology instructors also make use of my experience in seminars. […] It's useful for the group that I'm there and can share my own parenting experience." (Böbe)

Accounts of instructors' reactions varied considerably. Some participants described neutral or negative experiences: "They're completely neutral about the topic. […] And honestly, one of them is even passive and dismissive when it comes to offering any kind of help…" (Berta) Most, however, reported a more supportive stance from instructors: "I experienced such courtesy and kindness from the teachers who put the timetables together that even in September–October they stopped me in the corridor to ask: can you manage it? Will it work like this?" (Böbe) "Overall my experience has been good—either they don't know I have a daughter, or if they do, they're basically accepting." (Bíbor) Another participant noted that instructors in part-time (correspondence) programmes appear more accustomed to these situations and, for that reason, tend to be more flexible: "What I see, again, is that in part-time programmes the instructors are more used to these situations. Maybe that's why they're more flexible." (Bori)

Overall, then, most instructors do not know students' family circumstances, partly because students prefer not to disclose them and do not like to invoke parenthood as a justification. Even so, certain situations make it visible that a student has children. When that happens, instructors' responses are typically neutral, and more often positive than negative.

Student life and community

Student parents rarely participate in university social life beyond the classroom. During classes and teaching hours they try to maintain good relationships, but they generally do not have the time to spend their free time on campus or with classmates on top of family responsibilities and their pre-existing circle of friends. As one participant put it: "At university there was good team spirit and so on, but outside of that no one really had time—and given our life situations it simply wasn't the focus. Instead, everyone was focused on their families." (Bori) In full-time programmes, the age gap can also make participation in student social life more difficult: "I feel like I'm a bit out of place in my classmates' lives because I'm also working around the idea that I come in when I can, and then I run straight back because they're waiting for me at home." (Bíbor) One participant said she prepared herself in advance for this difference: "I trained for this for months—mentally, physically, in every way. Really, so I wouldn't exist among them like their grandmother…" (Böbe) and she even enjoyed being in a cohort from a very different generation: "It's brilliant. Sometimes when my classmates get going and start talking, there are times I don't understand half of what they're saying." (Böbe)

In full-time study, then, most social interaction is confined to the time students are physically at university: "Obviously, bigger events—like a freshmen's ball or anything like that—I have no idea about them, and I couldn't have gone anyway. But sometimes after university, or in a free period, we'll sit somewhere—at the local corner pub, or whatever you call those places." (Anna)

Others form closer ties with a smaller circle, typically with people in similar life circumstances who can better understand one another's constraints.

Among part-time (correspondence) students, shared activities outside the university are even less common—and there is often less demand for them. Many are in employment; a larger proportion are older and have families; and participating in university events would come directly at the expense of time with family. For this group, distance is also a structural constraint, since many commute from outside the city. As a result, they also tend to build relationships primarily during teaching time. Because teaching is often scheduled across two consecutive days, that intensity can still allow for occasional evening gatherings: "In part-time study there aren't really big parties—just the odd evening get-together." (Bogi) In other words, the emphasis is less on extracurricular events. Instead, spending whole days together can foster a supportive community that matters both socially and academically: "We met on Saturdays, and I think it felt really good for everyone—and we also kept in touch by messaging." (Andi)

For student parents who are constantly managing time scarcity, community can be particularly important because close relationships also make it easier to meet academic requirements. This is one reason why taking a leave of absence may feel like a poor option: it is precisely the person who most needs a familiar, supportive community who risks losing it. As one participant explained: "I didn't want to drop out of this community, because a community formed in our cohort and we help each other—with course materials, worked-out exam topics,

everything […]. I'd be worried about what the cohort below us is like—whether I could fit into that community later, and whether it would work as well as this does." (Bogi)

Teaching period

Course registration

For student parents, course registration is a critical pressure point because the family's day-to-day routines for the entire semester have to be organised around the timetable that results. "For us this really is the most critical part, I think." (Anna) "Choosing the courses and then organising life around them—this is much more the moment when, at the start of the semester, I know what I'm taking on, and then I set everything up accordingly." (Alexa) Parenthood also makes students' schedules far more constrained, particularly in terms of how long they can be away from their child: "If I have a longer day, I can take on a lot of classes in one day—but then I know that for that day I'll call a babysitter and coordinate with them. So I'm coordinating with quite a few people around the timetable, and also relative to my job." (Anna) Another participant described building her schedule around the childcare timetable: "When I'm registering for courses, one key consideration is that I try to build my timetable around the nursery's schedule. […] I need help with the mornings—either from my husband or my mother—so that getting to nursery runs smoothly. And then, at the end of the day, it usually works out that I can get there on time." (Alexa)

To make it easier to meet course requirements more flexibly, students can apply for a preferential study arrangement. "I do

apply for this lighter arrangement, and fortunately I always get it […]. In the justification I include that I have a daughter who goes to daycare, and therefore she gets ill often." (Berta)

For student parents, constructing a workable timetable matters especially because if it cannot be aligned with their life circumstances, it generates further difficulties (time management) and additional costs (for example, babysitting). Mornings and late afternoons are typically the hardest to manage—especially when lectures are scheduled at fixed times, when seminars offered at suitable times fill up quickly, or when administrative staff or instructors are not particularly helpful in resolving clashes. When problems arise, students generally prefer not to invoke their child as a reason. Instead, cases tend to be handled individually and informally, in ways that depend heavily on the particular instructor or administrator involved. At present, participants identified only one formal accommodation that is clearly available: applying for a preferential study arrangement.

Course completion

During the teaching period, students typically encounter two main types of class. Lectures tend to have more fixed and standardised times and requirements, with limited room for adjustment. Seminar requirements, by contrast, can vary widely, and this diversity can pose particular challenges for student parents. For that reason, we wanted not only to identify the difficulties they face, but also to understand whether they want accommodations at all—and, where certain tasks are especially hard to manage, what kinds of conditions or frameworks would genuinely make things easier.

Across both focus groups, a shared view emerged: participants generally do not want to ask for concessions. “I don’t think it’s good for any mother if the whole thing is made completely easy.” (Alexa) They were also clear that they were not seeking preferential treatment: “It’s really not an expectation. In fact, sometimes I’m explicitly glad when something doesn’t work out because then I know I’m not being treated as an exception—like, ‘poor thing, let’s just let her pass.’ That shouldn’t be the main goal.” (Anna) “I want to learn the same things as everyone else. I really don’t like it when they point out who I am—in the sense of making me feel like an outsider. Sometimes I have to write that I have a child, but otherwise I’m asking for equal treatment.” (Bíbor) As noted earlier, most instructors do not know who has children—often because students deliberately avoid foregrounding parenthood: “I don’t put my child out in front of me like that, so that people would pity me or help me because of it.” (Alexa) In their own framing, they are at university to learn. “I didn’t want to graduate by just scraping through exams, because we’re talking about human lives here—and the point of this programme and this qualification is not to ‘get away with it’.” (Alexa) Those who were working toward an additional degree also tended to describe taking their studies more seriously than younger classmates.

In the sections that follow, we outline the seminar requirements students encountered and how they managed to reconcile these with family life.

Class attendance

While lecture attendance is typically optional and students can prepare from the materials provided, participation in seminars is usually compulsory. Sustaining regular attendance alongside family responsibilities is one of the most demanding parts of studying as a parent. One participant described how quickly the "allowed" absences can be exhausted when children become ill: "What I struggle with is when the kids are sick […] because then I can miss three classes, but that's not always realistic. I'll need to find a longer-term solution. […] The problem is when they suddenly get ill and I've already 'planned' my three absences, and then a fourth or fifth one slips in." (Böbe) For part-time (correspondence) students, the issue is often even more acute because attendance is required on teaching weekends and therefore demands full-day childcare: "These classes are almost every weekend […] so it's mandatory that I'm there. That's really my biggest difficulty—finding a solution—because my husband has to take leave so that I can go in on Saturday." (Bogi) In full-time study, late-afternoon scheduling—especially after nursery closes—creates recurring conflicts, and the attendance cap becomes difficult to maintain when unexpected situations arise: "I can't attend afternoon lectures because I have to pick up my child from nursery at four. If they get sick, I can't go in because I can't find help that quickly, but generally a maximum of three absences is allowed in practical classes." (Cili)

Course requirements

Course requirements vary considerably. In the focus groups, participants did not raise concerns about prescribed group work or in-class tests. They also did not describe systemic problems with written assignments as such; rather, they emphasised the individual difficulty of getting into the right mental space for substantial work amid constant domestic tasks. “What I find difficult is getting started and concentrating. I have to sit down properly and not think about putting in a load of laundry, hanging it up, and so on—and it takes a while before I can switch into the mindset that I really need to focus and do the work.” (Alma) Because these tasks are hard to fit into the day, many end up being pushed into evenings and nights. As one participant noted, some courses combine multiple in-class tests with a long written submission before students are even allowed to sit the exam: “In some places it’s a requirement that you pass both in-class tests, and then if someone adds a 20,000-character paper on top, you can sit the exam. But during Covid the whole written-assignment thing was developed to a professional level. That’s different—that’s definitely night work. When the child is asleep, you meet the deadline—obviously right up to the last minute, but still within the deadline it can be done. I’m guessing people without children don’t do it like this, but I don’t know.” (Anna)

Professional practice

In some programmes, the curriculum includes professional practice in addition to the tasks required during the teaching period and the exam period. This can be problematic because

it demands extra time beyond classroom learning and often involves longer, full-day commitments. “Organising the practical training is much harder because there’s so much of it—we do it in a hospital, or in a healthcare institution.” (Alexa) As another participant put it, occasional childcare support may be manageable, but sustained support is not: “Of course I can ask for help once a week, but I can’t ask for help five times a week. I can’t even expect that from my own mother. […] So that’s another major challenge. At the same time, my experience last semester was that people were extremely empathetic here […] including the practice supervisors.” (Alexa)

Exam period

Whether the teaching period or the exam period feels harder to manage depends on each student’s circumstances—children’s ages and number, available childcare, and the type of programme. During the teaching period, “unexpected illnesses” are a recurring problem (Böbe). During the exam period, by contrast, the strain often falls on family life: “That’s when the family side of things gets hit. You really do drop out of family life properly for a few weeks.” (Roni) This is especially true in final-exam periods in programmes where students must take multiple final exams in different subjects across different time windows, so the exam period can stretch over two or even three months. Winter exams can also weigh heavily on the holiday season, which is already particularly demanding for parents of young children. One participant described the tension this creates in a religious family context: “At that time, focusing on studies is basically impossible if you have a family. […] And winter exam

period starts right then. As a Christian, it's not credible in front of the children to say, for example, that I'll only go to church for the Christmas Eve devotion but I won't attend the Christmas communion service because I need to study […] while you go ahead without me." (Csenge)

Despite these difficulties, students—much as in the teaching period—generally do not ask for accommodations during the exam period on the basis of having children. "I don't usually refer to it—so I don't refer to it in exams either, and I don't think I should." (Alma)

Institutional environment

University services

Beyond factors directly tied to coursework, student parents may also have practical needs that would make university life more manageable. When we asked what institutional services they would find most supportive, both focus groups converged on the same request: a dedicated parent-and-baby room in every university building. "Our building on Árpád Street has been renovated, but somehow they didn't think of this during the refurbishment—even though there are a lot of student parents in a faculty of education. I think there's a real need for it." (Bogi)

Caring for infants is particularly difficult because babies are still closely dependent on their mothers: they need to be breastfed regularly, or milk needs to be expressed. As one participant described, attendance requirements in the part-time (correspondence) programme can leave families improvising in public spaces: "In the correspondence programme they expect me to be there for every class. We literally manage it

like this—because I'm still breastfeeding—my husband stays in the lobby with our little boy, and during breaks I breastfeed him there." (Bogi) Another participant stressed the minimum infrastructure required: "At least a room where you can change a nappy, and really somewhere for breastfeeding or expressing milk—because, how should I put it, I find it even more uncomfortable: breastfeeding has a sound, but I can cover myself and it's quiet; whereas with a breast pump I'm trying to find an empty room where I can sit down." (Bogi) Given this level of dependence, having infants on campus is often unavoidable—and over time, it also means nappy changes. Under current conditions, that has pushed parents toward improvised solutions, such as "quick pit-stop nappy changes on the hood of a car." (Cintia)

During the teaching period and around exams, childcare is typically arranged through fathers—"a lot of dads carried and held the baby while the mothers were taking exams" (Cintia)—or with help from grandparents. One participant recalled a short-term workaround that was clearly unsustainable as a long-term routine: "My mum came with me to campus, pushed the pram around, and I kept going out to them—but if that had been something you had to do for years, I don't think it would have worked." (Bori) There were also isolated examples of ad hoc support from university staff: "Sometimes, during written exams, our wonderful study administrator looked after the sleeping child, and sometimes the teaching assistants did." (Cintia)

Studying while raising a family

If any changes are expected from anyone—whether in policy or everyday practice—to make studying alongside parenting

workable for those concerned, an obvious starting point is responsibility. Whose job is it, and what—if anything—should be expected from the higher education institution itself? More broadly, what do student parents think an institution ought to take into account about their circumstances, and what—on that basis—should change in the demands placed on them?

Across the focus groups, participants consistently located primary responsibility with the parent of a young child. They described the decision to take on the additional burdens of study as a matter of individual judgement, and even when difficulties only become clear once the programme is underway, they try not to shift the consequences onto the university environment. "I see the first responsibility in myself, at the moment I apply. I know I'm coming with a child, which has consequences. […] First and foremost, I feel it's my responsibility: I know I'm taking this on, and I'm taking it on with a child." (Andi) As another participant put it: "I have to get to the nursery, so I solve it—I try to organise help and so on. I'm very careful that if something doesn't work for me personally, it doesn't put others at a disadvantage. So in practice, I've seen this as my task. And I don't expect it from them. Obviously this is my situation, and theirs is different. Of course, they have their own challenges too." (Alexa)

At the same time, the decision affects the whole family, and is therefore made in cooperation with the family environment, since everyone has to see in advance what extra tasks may fall to whom. Several accounts also highlighted indirect benefits in family dynamics—especially when the child spends sustained time with the father. "I also feel this has to be collaborative teamwork. Until now, at home I really was the primary caregiver, but

now that I go to university, my husband takes an equal share in family life—and that benefits him too. He's building his confidence and competence as a father, our family dynamics have improved a lot, and I don't feel drained to the bone. So for our family life, it was a very good decision that I went back to study. And the studying side is going well too. It went so well that after the first exam period I had ten 5s and two 4s—and honestly, the scholarship amount then completely shocked me." (Böbe)

Alongside the family environment, participants also raised the workplace as a relevant site of responsibility and support. They did not frame employers as responsible for the decision to study; rather, a workplace can either enable that decision through practical flexibility or become an obstacle to carrying it through. "I also think it depends most on the family—the family can give the most support, including parents and grandparents. But I'd add the workplace as another point where support can really help. From my fifth semester on, I managed to negotiate an extra day off. […] There are also various forms of support for employers, such as payroll-contribution subsidies. I could easily imagine something similar for university students, and then it wouldn't be such a sacrifice for the employer either. I think a lot depends on that." (Roni) Another participant described a comparable experience: "The workplace really does matter. While I was working, my employer was flexible—I moved to a six-hour schedule and didn't work on Fridays. But I have classmates who were told mid-semester to choose: either work or study—even though she works as a nursery assistant in a kindergarten and is training to become a kindergarten teacher." (Bogi)

Overall, then, the decision is understood primarily as the responsibility of the individual and their family. Participants do not generally expect much from the institution or from instructors, but they are grateful when their circumstances are taken into account. “It was an extra motivation, but I don’t think it can be demanded. I think it was the individual lecturer’s exceptional goodwill and flexibility.” (Alexa) The same speaker also emphasised personal accountability in meeting deadlines: “They usually give plenty of time for assignments. I knew back in February—whenever it was—about this date; it’s entirely on me that it ended up being left to the last three weeks, and then everything happened at once.” (Alexa)

That said, addressing the issues discussed earlier would materially improve the situation of those who, compared with younger peers, have to operate in multiple roles at once—parent, employee, and student: “It’s really the family and the partner. I was thinking that if I pick up my degree—obviously I don’t have to give a speech—but I played with the idea that I’m sure I’d owe it to my husband, because he’s sacrificed the most so that I could do this. He uses all his free time to help me. Even now, since he works from home, so I can focus only on studying—he cooks, cleans, takes the child to daycare and home in the afternoon; if the child is ill, he takes a day off. I don’t know whether it should be like this, but I’m very grateful, and he’s the one who helps the most. I wouldn’t necessarily expect this from the institutional side because it’s a very specific situation. I don’t think it’s reasonable to expect a university to support more than what we’ve talked about here. But I do think it would be reasonable to expect that they allow us to follow classes

online, or perhaps some flexibility beyond course registration or exam registration. Beyond that, I don't think you can demand more from a university." (Berta) That is, the primary responsibility lies with the individual, but there are several areas in which the university could help and, at a systemic level, could make it easier for students with families to complete their studies.

If an institution genuinely wants to prioritise support for student parents, participants see this first and foremost as a matter for senior university leadership. As one student put it, "it definitely has to be the person at the very top—the leadership, the rector, the dean—someone who is sensitive to this issue so that something actually happens: so that spaces are created, or timetables are adjusted, or whatever it is that helps. Or rather, not even 'helps' as an advantage, but simply doesn't get in the way." (Alma) Another participant made the same point more explicitly in organisational terms: "It's a leadership responsibility. It has to start there, and then you need procedures or practices that trickle down to the level of classes—and eventually to the smallest practical details. But I do think this is, for lack of a better word, a strategic decision by university management: if we say this is a family-friendly institution, then we should look for good practices that make that real." (Alexa) Even the handling of individual cases and ad hoc solutions, in this view, "is also a leadership decision." (Anna)

At the same time, students did not treat "individual" and "institutional" responsibility as separable spheres. They described effective support as a coordinated arrangement in which the university helps within its constraints, while the student parent continues to manage the logistics and the family contributes

where it can: “I think it should be teamwork: the university should help as much as it can within its framework. Of course, I also have to put in the work—organise everything so I can meet everyone’s expectations—and the family has to help so that I can study or even change careers.” (Bíbor)

Beyond senior leadership, participants also mentioned the potential role of the student union in shaping new directions and—just as importantly—ensuring that existing rules are applied in practice. “What I feel is that the student union could be more active in at least holding lecturers accountable for what’s written in the Study and Examination Regulations.” (Bogi)

Overall, then, responsibility is primarily understood at the individual and family level, while other dimensions function as enabling support. One participant summarised this boundary clearly: “If we’re talking about responsibility, the family solves it at its own level. You only take on what you can manage in your own micro-world. And then whatever additional support I get from the university or the state—that’s the responsibility of the university and the state from that point on, not mine.” (Böbe)

Institution-independent challenges

Finally, we turn to difficulties that student parents described as largely outside the university’s control. The most prominent theme was chronic time scarcity. One participant, who works full time, captured the basic constraint bluntly: “I work nine hours a day, then I rush from point A to point B as part of my work, and I usually get home around 9 p.m., five days a week—sometimes six. That makes it hard to attend weekend classes regularly, but even more so to prepare properly for exams.” (Cinka) With

parenting already creating a tight schedule, the remaining time contracts further, generating stress that can spill over into family relationships. As one respondent noted, “for years my children mentioned the name of ‘Nagykőrös’[1] with resentment, because as little kids it sank in that their mother disappeared from their lives on weekends—and even when I was home, I wasn’t available because I had to study a lot and I was often tense from trying to catch up.” (Csenge)

In many cases, late-night studying becomes the only viable option, but this brings a predictable cost: exhaustion and declining academic performance. As Csenge explained, “I tried to stay available to them during the day. I realised I was either taking time away from my children or from my sleep—and I chose the latter. You can’t neglect work. But in the long run it’s unhealthy and extremely draining to juggle family, parents, the congregation, the workplace—and then also fight sleep deprivation. It doesn’t help you meet academic requirements: if your mind isn’t fresh, it’s hard to concentrate, and even harder to memorise new material—you perform worse.” (Csenge) Written assignments pose similar problems. “Writing papers is difficult too,” another participant observed. “During the day I simply don’t have time because of work; after work and on weekends I can’t sit down at the computer because of my son. Even if I try, I have to get up every five minutes because of him. That leaves the evenings—really, the nights. And the quality of the paper suffers.” (Csilla)

Time pressure also feeds back into everyday household functioning. With so many competing tasks, prioritising becomes

[1] Name of the city where the campus is located.

difficult, and sustained academic engagement often becomes unrealistic. “Because my attention is split in so many directions, I can’t immerse myself in the material the way I’d like,” Csilla said. “Reading the recommended literature is, unfortunately, just a dream. Even if I manage to sit down and read, I quickly fall asleep. Or if I don’t, the next day I’m so exhausted I can barely count to two.” (Csilla) The same respondent linked these pressures to the physical conditions of studying at home: “I do the housework alone—or rather, I don’t do it because I have even less time for it. So, chaos builds up at home, and a proper study environment doesn’t exist even in a physical sense.” (Csilla)

Several participants also raised issues that go beyond the remit of universities—and, strictly speaking, beyond the scope of the study itself: the state’s role, and with it the difficulty of securing childcare, especially nursery (crèche) provision. As one respondent put it, “part of the issue sits outside—or extends beyond—the boundaries of the family and the university because this is a very wide-ranging problem. It is women who are expected to choose. […] For many people who aren’t lucky enough to have a supportive partner, grandparents, or a babysitter, the burden becomes enormous. It’s no accident that family formation is increasingly postponed: women spend their twenties and early thirties studying and then trying to establish themselves at work so that the time taken out for childcare won’t set them back as much later on. The level of the higher-rate childcare benefit, whether it’s even feasible to maintain a household while studying—especially if someone is raising a child alone and cannot rely on a partner—there are so many questions here, and state involvement is clearly necessary.”

(Bori) Another participant pointed to nursery admissions as a structural constraint: “Childcare—the nursery we talked about—lies completely outside the university and, in a sense, outside the family as well. And very often there isn’t even a system where the nursery director can simply admit whoever they want.” (Bogi)

In this sense, access to formal childcare becomes a core bottleneck in the attempt to combine study and parenting. Participants described how admission rules can require documents that are difficult to produce in precisely this life situation—such as an employer’s certificate or proof of active student status—creating a practical catch-22. “In theory, full-time students are entitled to a nursery place,” one respondent explained, “but in practice it didn’t apply to her because they said that to start in September she would already have to be in an active semester in April—when applications are submitted.” (Bogi) Another noted that only discretionary consideration made placement possible: “I needed the nursery to grant an exception because that really is the rule.” (Berta) The shortage of places is particularly acute outside major cities: “There’s huge over-subscription, and at that nursery I’m sure they wouldn’t take a full-time student at all because they prioritise those who are employed.” (Bogi) In some cases this produces a vicious circle, where the eventual decision depends on what the workplace will allow: “Weekend classes would take away family time, and in part-time study I couldn’t apply for nursery provision either—so I would have to go back to work, but my previous job wouldn’t really allow a four-day week. So at the moment I’m thinking full-time study and nursery, and then we’ll see how it goes.” (Bíbor)

Alongside these structural constraints, several respondents described the psychological strain of sustained overload. They suggested that accessible emotional support could make a tangible difference, but only if it is paired with childcare. “Self-awareness group work, or the topics in lectures and seminars, often upset me,” one participant said, “but I can’t process that tension or talk it through because there’s no adult in my immediate environment.” (Csilla) The same respondent added: “Sometimes even a single supportive conversation would help a lot—if someone could watch my son at the same time.” (Csilla) Another mother captured the longer-term tension between study demands and parenting responsibilities: “For a while, a certain level of tolerance for a mother’s studying can be expected; beyond a point, it cannot—because our actions are what give weight to our words. In the eyes of one’s children, it therefore becomes much harder to complete one’s studies conscientiously.” (Csenge)

Summary

Student parents in higher education are typically older than their peers, and many are pursuing a second degree rather than their first. Even so, they tend to be highly motivated—not only to earn a qualification as a long-term investment, but also to master the knowledge and skills it represents. During their studies, they generally do not want to claim undue advantages on the basis of their family situation; what they seek instead is understanding and empathy.

Their experiences and perceptions vary markedly across faculties and programmes. Differences are shaped by factors such as the size of the faculty or programme, the nature of the course, the characteristics and facilities of the building where teaching takes place, the amount and type of required practical training, and the attitudes of instructors as well as staff in the Academic Administration Office and departmental administrators.

Overall, the student parents interviewed at Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary evaluated the university's atmosphere—and the individual attitudes of staff and students—as largely positive. At the same time, they felt that student parents are not explicitly addressed as a group. As one participant put it, "it's a bit of an invisible thing" (Anna), which can make them feel less comfortable and can contribute to "this outsider feeling—being older and having a child" (Alexa).

In both the focus groups and the returned questionnaires, participants also proposed practical measures—for example, a dedicated information guide for student parents. If implemented, such measures could both improve the situation of student parents and support successful degree completion, while also encouraging participation by student parents and, potentially, family formation during studies. Based on the exploratory research conducted across the four institutions, the volume's final chapter presents the consolidated recommendations.

CHILDREN AND STUDYING AT SELYE JÁNOS UNIVERSITY

Rita Hegedűs

Introducing the participants

In April–May 2024, Selye János University hosted two focus-group interviews with four participants each. As described in detail in the volume's methodology chapter, the group was diverse despite its small size. Participants differed in the number of children they had, their age, their study format (full-time or part-time), whether they were employed alongside their studies, and the kinds of experiences they brought to the topic. The eight participants included people with no children, several with one or two children, and two with large families (one with five children and one with six). Alongside respondents in their thirties and forties, the sample also included someone in their fifties and a participant in their early twenties. Both full-time and part-time students took part; one studied on an individualised schedule, and one had discontinued their studies. Respondents came from bachelor's, master's, and doctoral programmes, representing all three faculties and five degree programmes in total. Most were also working while studying. Two of the eight participants were men.

It quickly became clear that, at this university, it is relatively uncommon for students to have a child after they have already started their studies. The more typical pattern runs in the opposite

direction: people who are already parents decide to enrol or to continue at a higher level. Among the eight participants, only one fit the "classic" profile of becoming pregnant while already studying; she conceived during her studies and now attends classes as a new mother. In another case, a male PhD student described completing his programme while his wife was pregnant at the time. One participant had been about to begin university when she learned she was expecting; she deferred, and eventually started her studies later as the parent of a three-year-old. Of the remaining five participants, one was still considering parenthood, while the other four were already parents when they decided to begin—or to continue—their studies.

The experiences of the focus-group interviews

By way of introduction, it is worth noting that participants clearly felt a strong need to talk about their university-related difficulties in general—so much so that it was often hard to steer the discussion back to the topic. As a result, a substantial share of the challenges they described were not directly connected to being a parent.

The two sessions also differed in participant composition, format, and interactional dynamics. The first group included two economics students and two education students, and it featured one particularly talkative participant[1] who carried

[1] István Síklaki, *Vélemények mélyén: A fókuszcsoport módszer, a kvalitatív közvélemény-kutatás alapmódszere* (Budapest: Kossuth, 2006), 34.

much of the session by recounting university stories that were often only loosely related to the research topic. The second group, by contrast, consisted exclusively of theology and diaconia students. It was moderated by a member of the faculty, conducted partly online, and placed far greater emphasis on how participants coordinated parenting with studying, with somewhat less space devoted to general complaints about university life. This second discussion also had a markedly more positive tone.

In summarising these findings—and treating the focus groups as an applied research method—we concentrate on those issues that are likely to be most relevant for understanding student parents' situation and for designing procedures that can support the reconciliation of childcare and study. For this reason, the analysis is thematic in nature and does not aim to examine communication patterns, group dynamics, or other interactional phenomena that emerged during the discussions.

Themes emerging in the discussions

After introductions and questions about motivations for studying alongside childcare, the interviews moved to participants' experiences of lecturers' and fellow students' attitudes within the university. The conversation then followed the academic calendar in sequence, addressing course registration, the teaching semester, and the examination period, before closing with additional reflections. In what follows, rather than reproducing this progression, we present the main themes that emerged

across the discussions. Many of these topics were explicitly included in the interview guide; here, however, we aim to identify recurring motifs in a way that is somewhat independent of the original question sequence.

Because the survey itself focused on students' lived difficulties and needs, the thematic overview below places particular emphasis on these issues as well. For each topic, we also provide a few representative examples; speakers are identified using pseudonyms.[2]

Difficulties and problems

Organising academic administration

Most of the problems raised concerned the organisation of academic administration. First and foremost, several participants in both discussions—convergently—criticised the lack of transparency around concrete tasks and timelines, and the absence of clear, student-friendly communication. Students beginning their studies—often older and already burdened by

[2] Annabella: an undergraduate (BA-level) student in her fifties with six children. Bíborka: a former undergraduate student in her forties with one child who discontinued her studies. Cili: an undergraduate student in a part-time programme in her forties with one child. Diána: an undergraduate student in her early twenties with a baby only a few months old; the only participant not working alongside childcare and her studies. Evelin: a master's (MA-level) student in her forties, married and without children. Ferdinánd: a part-time PhD student in his fifties and the father of five. Guszti: an undergraduate student in his late thirties and the father of one. Hanna: a master's (MA-level) student in her forties with two children.

family responsibilities—find it difficult to see which courses they need to register for, and whom they should (or can usefully) turn to when problems arise. “I kind of miss having a better, more transparent system at the university—like, which subject you’re supposed to take when; some kind of guide for first-years about which subjects they have to register for. Especially at the beginning I spent ages searching for what to take and where, and it was really hard. I didn’t even know what I had to take, what I was allowed to take. So, I see a bit of a gap there.” (Evelin) “I think one improvement would be that in first year we got, on a little sheet of paper […] the abbreviations of the subjects—what subjects we have to register for. Now in second year we didn’t get that, and it’s extremely awkward because now we’re playing the lottery—guessing what subject we have to take, what we don’t.” (Cili) “It’s the same for me, that […] it’s apocalyptic—I can’t see through it.” (Ferdinánd)

Participants also reported that it is difficult to reach administrative staff and IT support, and several felt that a helpful attitude is often lacking. “We didn’t know […] We had no idea who the appropriate person was that we could turn to for help. And the response she got—and we got as well—was basically: how did we think this would work?” (Bíborka)

The difficulty is not only navigating the existing system: certain features of the organisation itself also cause problems. These include, for example, timetables being published too late for them, and their inflexibility. “It was exactly the kind of situation where I should have been able to jump in for one or two hours of work during the day, and then if I know—say, that I’m working next week—I can change something. But at the

beginning nothing could be changed; I had to be there for those classes." (Bíborka)

While the issues listed so far are problems in their own right—especially given most participants' older age and the fact that they study alongside paid work—one difficulty is linked specifically to having children: how off-timetable activities and practical sessions are organised. Here, participants felt that no one thinks about those who cannot move around with children unless they take on substantial additional costs and logistical work. "[…] there are compulsory courses you have to complete because if people don't do them, then they haven't fulfilled the requirement and they can't move on. For example, what we have here is the swimming course, cycling, hiking, and skiing. […] you have to be there for a week, you have to sleep there. If someone has a tiny baby, the teacher doesn't care. You're not allowed to leave the place because if you leave, then it isn't signed off—it isn't completed, this course isn't fulfilled." (Cili)

Unrealistic academic expectations toward students

Participants spoke readily and in vivid detail about the difficulties they experienced during their studies; however, when the conversation turned to academic requirements, they only rarely suggested that being a parent should, in itself, lead instructors to apply different expectations. In this context, what came up most often was the issue of workload volume. "[…] and this is the negative thing I wanted to mention: people who are in full-time study, with all due respect to the exceptions—there are older students too, but there are also young people there, you

know, with no dog, no cat—meaning no child, of course—it's one thing to tell them to write assignments, 30–40 pages and so on. But for those of us who study by correspondence—on Saturdays—being expected to submit the same kind of assignments, and so forth… We do it, but not with the same expectations, not that much volume." (Cili) "[…] they dump quite a lot on us, and there are very many written assignments. If you want to write and develop it properly, that takes time—you have to do a lot of research and reading, and then write it up, if you want to do it well." (Guszti)

Instructors' attitudes

Another cluster of complaints concerned instructors' attitudes. Although many participants reported positive experiences with teaching staff, several of those who criticised them highlighted inflexibility—above all, that instructors do not allow late submission of assignments. "[…] I can come here in this kind of hybrid way, so in-person as well, and individually as well. […] A teacher can't accept this—so with these assignments, the problem was that I couldn't finish in time, and he didn't accept it. […] In my case the problem was exactly that I did what I had to do, just later. And because of that it still happened that they said no. And that felt so bad because before this, here […] there was no example of that, and now I was surprised." (Hanna) "[…] I think we can't always talk it through, that we have a family, we have a job. And I even got that back from a teacher, that… We were talking with one of the teachers, and he said that now he doesn't believe that I'm giving you an extension because you

commute from 250 kilometres away, because you have a family, because you have a workplace, which is pretty rough, and you have a lot to do." (Guszti)

From several participants' remarks it also emerged that older students are sometimes "looked at" differently. "[…] on the first day of enrolment, we showed up, and they saw my age group, then already you get kind of singled out. There was a time when they asked for our entry card, or student card, the teacher, to see whether we weren't… He asked for our card, whether we weren't some kind of inspectors, and I said, no, I'm a student." (Bíborka)

Finally, instructors' negative attitude—and their poor style toward students—also came up in several forms. "We get a lot. There are four or five teachers I adore, in their lectures themselves, their attitude, so… but the rest of the teachers are like, they kill the whole thing, literally. They, have that… that condescending way of speaking, the way XY speaks, he speaks like that all the way through. He presented something, and we also have a classmate who is a bit—well—ADHD, and a bit behind, but he has a very good mind, but he's the anxious, quiet kind, just sits there, and he used him to show what those 'losers' are like, who can be singled out, that these kinds of people, the 'losers', literally, this is how they relate to this and that, you can push them around a bit more, and things like that, so…" (Annabella) "Either at the point of applying or when we were submitting the paperwork, we were basically told: 'I have a child too, and I still manage—so you should be able to as well.' That kind of remark came up." (Guszti)

Time constraints

Issues of time management also recur regularly in the participants' comments, as we have already seen. Student parents (and those who are also in paid work) have to constantly juggle and "play chess" with tasks to make everything fit into their schedules. This is one of their recurring complaints across different topics. The following two quotations capture this well. "I think it's the assignments—the deadlines—when there are several at the same time, and then what, for us […], time—time is maybe our enemy." (Guszti) "And then you have to put things in order, and you mustn't fall out of rhythm. And as soon as an illness comes—either the child's or mine—then everything collapses. Like bowling balls. Or rather the bowling pins, when the balls knock them down." (Hanna)

Infrastructure

Finally, a smaller share of participants also mentioned infrastructural issues; in this respect, they drew attention to the complete lack of provision for caring for very young children within university buildings.

At the university there is one larger building where a lift operates. However, students are not allowed to use it—only instructors and staff. "[…] you know, at the teacher training faculty there is a lift. It says on the lift: for employees only. Now, for example me—or a pregnant woman who is going to give birth soon—should climb from downstairs up to the third or the fourth, or all the way up to the fifth because you can't use the lift." (Cili)

From the accounts it also emerges that although there are students with very young children, the only building that has a changing facility is located in such a place that it is, in practice, inaccessible with a small child. “There is one, up on the fifth. Go up there on foot.” (Diána)

In response to a question, the students also confirmed that the university has no in-house kindergarten or nursery, and it does not organise childcare either.

Solutions for reconciling family (and work) with study

Alongside the issues framed explicitly as problems, a few themes also emerged that were mentioned simply because they reflect the specific situation of student parents, rather than as complaints.

Time management

Student parents typically study in “stolen” time: in the evening, at night, or at weekends. When asked how they manage to study: “When the baby falls asleep. Thank God, as A. also said, it really depends on the child. For example, I have a child with an amazingly good body clock—she knows when it’s seven o’clock, or half past seven; within that time window she falls asleep straight away, and then she sleeps until ten or eleven, and then she wakes up again, you know, to eat. So that’s the only way it can be done.” (Diána) “I do the assignments. There are a lot right now. By next week I have to do three. So I don’t know how many nights I’ll be up.” (Cili) “[…] I generally take everything in stride, so I usually study around midnight or in

the early hours—though I also work alongside it—but it can be done." (Annabella)

However, the way they use their time is also shaped by their parental practice: with a certain routine and matter-of-factness, they mobilise the skills they already rely on as parents to handle the necessity of running multiple commitments in parallel. Ferdinánd reflects on this kind of experience: "At the same time, you can probably also see that, quite simply, distance learners or student parents may not be able to devote the same amount of time. But somehow that also has to be compensated for. And I think either earlier study experience, or the kind of problem-solving abilities a parent has, or even an exam situation—this is different. An exam is always very much about the course, but it's also always about the exam situation itself, where, with a slightly more mature or more experienced head, you might be able to perform better." (Ferdinánd)

Performance strategies ("free-riding", dividing tasks with fellow students)

Some participants also shared the techniques they use to "survive"—that is, to meet academic requirements despite an extremely tight schedule. These solutions, in one way or another, rely on cooperation among students: they borrow materials from one another and, in return, help when they can. "And then we divided these things up, or the notes, because, to be honest, there are things I don't have time for. I free-ride off the others. But they're very happy to share because then I give something back—literally, I'm really good at maths […] for example, and I also tutor them." (Annabella)

What helps reconcile the two (or three) roles?

From what students said during the discussions, a number of enabling factors also became clear—conditions that make the dual (or, together with work, rather triple) set of responsibilities workable, even if not without difficulties.

Good practices within the university

Several focus-group participants had requested and received an individualised (preferential) study arrangement. For them, this option is clearly a precondition for completing their studies. "And before I applied here, I discussed it with the management: I can come here in a hybrid way—so partly in person, and partly individually." (Hanna)

Others mentioned instructors' flexibility—for example, being able to complete course requirements during the semester. "For us, the exam period is actually handled really well because it's usually set up so that there are two in-class tests. […] During the semester. And there's one at the end of the semester, which still wouldn't count as an exam because it's not in the exam period yet: we write two tests. And if we collect enough points from those, then […] the grade is done, and we can substitute that for the exam period." (Diána)

Or they noted flexibility regarding deadlines and absences: "My experience is that my absences are overlooked—they know what the situation is, that there's a four-month-old baby there, so if I miss something, I miss it; they don't make an issue of it." (Diána)

Several speakers also praised the kind, supportive atmosphere. “At the … Faculty this is also typical—they’re very helpful. I didn’t want to make it complicated, but I studied for three years at the … University, in …, and I didn’t finish there; I transferred here, and even then, when I asked how it could work, they were very helpful in every respect.” (Diána) “Of course this university has always been quite family-like, and that certainly…, certainly helped in situations like this. In that respect I’ve always experienced goodwill and helpfulness.” (Ferdinánd)

Supportive partner and family

To carry the multiple burdens involved, family solidarity appears indispensable. In the two focus-group interviews we met six students who have children,[3] and not a single one of them failed to mention some form of family support. Most referred to their spouse, but some also mentioned their own parents or their spouse’s parents, and even an older child. At times they spoke about their family in more general terms.

The family came up in three contexts:

First, support for the decision itself and a positive attitude toward studying in general. “I would rather put it this way: I think it is very important, before starting the studies, whether with a bigger family or a smaller family, with or without children, that the decision really be in place, and that there be family support, so that this is an accepted decision. When I was studying in X,

[3] Of the remaining two participants, one does have a child but discontinued their studies very soon, while the other is married but has not yet had a child.

my wife was obviously part of that decision; we didn't particularly ask for their opinion, but my in-laws received it supportively. So… if there is this kind of background […], then these things can be handled more easily." (Ferdinánd) "I also see that family support is important—important that the family also thinks that this thing, continuing one's studies, is important for us, and that they support it because only then is it possible to devote enough time to it." (Guszti)

The second point was a more intensive sharing or taking over of tasks at home—household work and childcare. Here, interestingly, most participants described an equal division of roles with their partner; the emphasis was on having to plan more carefully who does what and when. "For me, when we plan the month, we have to organise the whole thing in advance—we need to know, like… a month and a half ahead that… First comes the family. The little one, right, and then we have to organise who will be at home when. Who can go to kindergarten when, who can take her to kindergarten when. And my husband works shifts, and I also work shifts at my workplace. So the first step is that we arrange my shift schedule—that's relatively simple; my husband works in a hospital, […] takes my shift schedule to the head nurse. The head nurse arranges my husband's shifts, and then based on that we schedule each other—who will go when, and what they will do. And the most important thing is that K [their daughter] is at the centre." (Hanna)

In one student's case, what emerges is essentially a temporary "I'll do it for you" arrangement—meaning that the speaker herself still experiences as *her* responsibility the tasks her husband is currently forced to take over: "Of course, then my

husband knows—well, Mom, D. [their little daughter], he tells her: D., Mom has to study now, so I'll be here, okay? Now I'll give the medicine, now, etc. And they understand. So I can't say anything because I have a very good family. They support me in it. Very much. And that's rare, let's face it." (Cili)

Beyond the spouse, the main sources of help within the family are the respondent's parents and older children. In the case of a student with a very young baby, it was expressed very strongly that continuing her studies would not even be possible without her parents providing childcare. "So my life is like running around. A Thursday for me looks like this: I go to the university for 8, I'm there until quarter to nine, I run home, feed [the baby], take the little one to the 'ringató'[4] session, then […] I take [her] home, drop [her] off, Grandma comes—my mother—she takes over the baby, I run back again for a 45-minute or a one-hour class, then home again—so it's chaos, on my side." (Diána)

External help was mentioned only once, briefly, in Hanna's case: "And then there are one or two people we can call. My mother has to travel here, but there are people you can rely on." (Hanna)

Finally, as a third motif—and as a refreshing counterpoint—there is the case where the family (the husband and the small child) *helped with studying:* "When there are assignments, my daughter helps me, for example, or my husband sits down and then we looked at Plato's cave together. Such a nice essay

[4] *Ringató:* a Hungarian parent–infant "rocking" session (often held in a community group) combining gentle movement, lullabies/rhymes, and basic early bonding activities; roughly comparable to a baby music-and-movement class.

came out of it. Or my daughter—when you have to make a board game—she comes over: Mom, can I help? Of course, sweetheart, come because Mom can't color anymore—then we'll do the little flowers, the little butterflies […]" (Cili)

Supportive attitude from the workplace

For someone to complete a programme while working, a supportive attitude from the workplace is also necessary—as the quotations in the previous section on the family have already illustrated. In scheduling and forward planning, employers will often take into account that the employee is studying, even if they provide no additional support. (None of the speakers, for example, received explicit workplace support, nor did they have a formal study agreement.)

Motivation can matter as well, as Cili described: "There was a really lovely … [position at her workplace]; she is now … [a higher-level position at another workplace], and she supported me a lot, and she said: 'Cilike, you have to do this—you were born for this.'"

The parental role as an advantage during studies

Finally, we note a theme that, while not directly tied to concrete forms of support for student parents, may be important for evaluating this situation. These are the reflections the participants framed as advantages: several felt that studying as a parent allows them to draw on skills already developed in family life. They have learned to organise, to prioritise, and—according to one participant—to make sense of their educational pathway in light of experiences related to their child's difficulties. "Then

starting a family—and as I said, with my daughter being born, and as I mentioned, that she is mentally ill—I met, or we met, a lot of specialised professionals here, and I noticed how helpful they are. That there are people like this, who work in diaconia too, and deal with specialised issues, and somehow that is how I ended up on this path as well." (Guszti)

Summary

Across the two focus-group interviews, we gained a detailed picture from students of the difficulties they face during their studies, and of the expectations and goals with which they pursue this activity—an undertaking that represents an additional burden for them. In the accounts, particular emphasis fell on how challenging they find administrative processes, what grievances they have concerning instructors' attitudes toward students, and how intensely they struggle with chronic time pressure.

It also became clear that combining study with parenting requires support from the family, and that overloaded students are often carried through difficult situations by the helpfulness of university administration or by instructors. Among those who were employed, favourable scheduling at work appeared to be the most important factor.

At the same time, and interestingly, when discussing problems the participants rarely highlighted parenthood itself; they tended to mention child-related, situation-specific difficulties only when explicitly asked.

A characteristic stance toward their own status as student parents emerged: I will manage; it cannot be expected that I will be treated differently; and in any case, the child is not the problem. It is apparent that they have relatively few expressed needs specifically regarding support for reconciling childbearing/parenting with studies, and they also have few concrete ideas about what would help them.

Beyond the differing characteristics outlined in the introduction, the eight participants could be grouped into three broad types: the dissatisfied, who typically blamed university administration and instructors; the strugglers, who "played chess" with their many tasks and formulated a few targeted complaints and needs; and those living in relative harmony, who kept their responsibilities under control and were generally satisfied. The youngest participant—who had an infant—belonged to this last group.

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STUDENT PARENTS OF YOUNG CHILDREN AT SAPIENTIA HUNGARIAN UNIVERSITY OF TRANSYLVANIA: CHALLENGES AND ADAPTATION STRATEGIES

Emese Emőke Tóth-Batizán – Enikő Biró

In Romanian higher education, a student group that has received limited attention is becoming increasingly visible: university students who are parenting young children. The aim of the focus group study conducted at Sapientia Hungarian University of Transylvania was to map the distinctive circumstances, challenges, and coping strategies of this group. The research paid particular attention to the barriers student parents encounter during their studies, the support they can expect from family and institutional environments, and the expectations they hold toward higher education institutions.

As described in the methodology chapter, the group of students participating in Sapientia Hungarian University of Transylvania's focus groups was relatively heterogeneous. Participants included both BA and MA students, all enrolled in full-time (daytime) programmes. This diversity made it possible to develop a comprehensive picture of how parenting affects different aspects of university life. The focus group participants were BA students in computer science, forestry engineering, agricultural engineering, sociology, communication and PR, mechanical engineering, human resources, and horticultural engineering, as well as MA students in computer-controlled

systems, diplomacy, and intercultural studies. This heterogeneity proved particularly useful, as it offered insight into the varied dimensions of student life for those parenting young children across multiple sites (Cluj-Napoca — Kolozsvár, Târgu Mureș — Marosvásárhely, Miercurea Ciuc – Csíkszereda, and Sfântu Gheorghe — Sepsiszentgyörgy), several faculties, and a range of degree programmes.

The focus group discussions highlighted a set of recurring problem areas that shape the everyday lives of student parents. The present study discusses these in detail.

Child as a Private Matter: No Additional Expectations of the Institution

All focus-group participants felt that having and parenting a young child belongs to their private life. They see it as their responsibility to organise their lives—juggling parenting, university, and, where relevant, paid work—so that having a child does not affect their studies or student status in any direction, either positively or negatively. In several cases, participants noted that only a few of their fellow students even knew they had a child. “I didn’t tell any of my fellow students, with two exceptions. I didn’t highlight it. I try to separate my private life as much as possible from my professional life and from university.” (Melánia[1], Sociology) “I don’t usually post my private life on

[1] The names of the students who participated in the focus-group interviews are fictitious. To protect participants’ anonymity, the students’ real names are not disclosed anywhere in this study.

social media, and otherwise I don't… I didn't really tell more people—only those I was closer friends with—but the reaction was neutral. I can't say anything changed; I didn't notice any particular reaction." (Iringó, Communication and PR)

The findings from the focus-group research conducted at Sapientia Hungarian University of Transylvania align with the earlier research on student parents discussed in the theoretical chapter: these students are highly motivated in their studies. In many cases, they do not disclose that they are parenting a child because they do not want to gain what they would consider unearned advantages based on their family situation. The participants did not expect any form of positive discrimination from the university. They did not consider it important—or appropriate—to report their private-life status to their instructors or to the head of department.

Several participants formulated this position explicitly during the focus group: "I try to separate my private life as much as possible from my professional life and from university." (Ábel, Computer Science) "I didn't tell the teachers because I didn't think I would be given any advantage because of it, or anything like that. […] For me, in terms of the university, everything continues the same as before, and that's why I thought there was no reason to say it because I can't expect them to treat me differently because of it—that wouldn't be fair to the others." (Tamás, Computer-Control Systems) "I function in a way that I try to keep the sectors of my life very separate—private life from professional life and from university—and that was basically the rationale: what is at university stays at university, what is at home stays at home; and that is how it worked." (Viktor, Agricultural Engineering)

It also happened that even the programme—or cohort lead—the person formally appointed by the university leadership to support newly admitted students as they navigate this new academic environment—was unaware that one of the students in their group was parenting a young child: “I don’t even know how it came out to our ‘homeroom teacher,’ so to speak—the lecturer who was responsible for us—because I didn’t tell her. But at one of the introductory events, when I was standing at the front in front of the whole cohort, she said, ‘Well, Rozália, you’re braver than I am.’ And then she announced it to the entire class. The lecturer has three children, and she said that I had started this degree alongside four children. That’s when everyone found out.” (Rozália, Human Resources)

The idea that higher education is not compulsory but a voluntarily chosen form of education also recurred in several participants’ accounts. Starting from this premise, the students included in the study felt that the additional difficulties and organisational burdens arising from having and parenting a young child are theirs to handle independently, and that it is neither appropriate nor ethical to involve the university by requesting various forms of accommodation or entitlement. “I also think that higher education is something everyone takes on voluntarily […] whether you have a child or not. It’s all optional.” (Panna, Horticultural Engineering) “I started out with these thoughts: I don’t want any special treatment. I don’t ask the colleagues who teach me for concessions—not because I work there, not because I work at all—and my children shouldn’t be a reason for anyone to give me an advantage.” (József, Diplomacy and Intercultural Studies)

Organisational challenges

The presence of a young child—especially when the child still fully requires the mother's presence—confronts (primarily) female students with situations saturated by dilemmas, challenges, and guilt. "In my experience, attending classes is obviously a challenge. It's something everyone, so to speak, has to try to solve for themselves; however, the exam period may be an even bigger challenge. For example, if someone has a smaller child who isn't the kind you put to bed and they sleep until morning—because you never know how the night will go, how many times you might have to worry that they'll get sick, or something similar. For me, that's where it felt a bit more difficult. Because during the last exam period we fell exactly into a time when our child was having cramps, or something like that, but the next day there's class or there's an exam, and that can be quite exhausting." (Melánia, Sociology) "It's a bit harder from a timetable perspective too, because the baby is still small—eight weeks old. We're still learning our way into this whole thing, into parenting, and now we're trying to manage our time as well as possible so that both I and my wife can focus fully on the university as well, and on the baby too." (András, Mechanical Engineering) "It was very, very hard. There were days when I had to say, guys, sorry, but sort out meals and everything yourselves because right now I really can't tear myself away—because it got to the point where I was running so far out of time that I could see I probably wouldn't even sleep at night in order to be able to go and sit an exam in the morning." (Iringó, Communication and PR)

In most cases, among the students included in the study, we encountered a situation in which parenting a young child was only one element complicating the relatively unobstructed completion of university studies and active participation in university life. A large share of students parenting a young child devoted their time not only to studying and parenting, but also worked full time—or, less often, part time. Moreover, this job frequently did not align with the field of their studies. This produces a cumulatively demanding life situation, which the students themselves also articulated: "It's difficult—I also find it difficult, that's true. But not from the child's side—I don't want to discourage you—because now he's a bigger boy and he can take care of himself, he finds his own activities; so it's not from the perspective of childcare, but rather this dual thing: I also have my professional work, and I'm also a student, and since I'm in bachelor's training, 95 percent of the class material is within my working hours—so from that perspective it will probably be very difficult." (Rozália, Human Resources) "For example, coordinating the timetable and work is the hardest because most of the time my classes run from 8 to 4, but that's also when I have to work, so my classes coincide with my working hours…" (Barna, Forestry Engineering) "No matter how hard a person tries, it's work that makes it difficult; the child doesn't interfere that much, but work definitely does because it isn't a fixed work schedule—rather, it's seven days a week, so to speak, often eight to twenty hours a day, especially if things happen at night as well." (Panna, Horticultural Engineering)

The presence of helper(s): spouse/partner, family of origin (extended families)

Parenting a young child, participating in a university programme, and—where relevant—also holding a job and meeting work obligations is possible for the interviewed students only through family support and spousal assistance. As the authors of this volume's theoretical section have already noted, for student parents completing university is not an individual undertaking but a shared project of the entire family. "Family" here refers not only to the small, nuclear family, but to the extended family as well. When a student mother or father has a younger child, they rely even more on grandparents' help to keep everyday life running as smoothly as possible. Many focus-group participants emphasised that without the support of a husband or wife, grandmother or grandfather, this arrangement would not be workable.

Among the students who took part in the study, almost everyone could count on help from their mother or mother-in-law with childcare, reflecting family patterns in Transylvania that still tend to operate on conservative foundations and embrace traditional values. "The situation is that, fortunately, parents also pitch in. If needed… My mother is retired; I'm the third child in the family, I'm 24, so I'm the youngest, and if needed she's happy to come and look after the child, and quite often my wife's parents—her mother as well—also helps out if we need it." (József, Diplomacy and Intercultural Studies) "In our case, Grandma tries to keep the child occupied, especially when I need to study." (Viktor, Agricultural Engineering)

The division of parenting labour between spouses also appears workable; several participants testified to this: “In the afternoon […] orthodontics—my husband started taking care of that because it involves some driving. So it was like this before, and it’s like this in this period too. I can make it to parent–teacher meetings; that’s not the difficult part.” (Panna, Horticultural Engineering) “Luckily, our timetable is such that when I’m in class, my wife is at home, and when she goes to class, I can be at home.” (Tamás, Computer Control Systems)

The presence of helper(s). University Instructors and Administrative Staff

To navigate this demanding and obstacle-laden path, students also received support from sources beyond the family. The university did not provide formal institutional assistance; however, student parents did receive occasional, informal help and encouragement from instructors and administrative staff.

Support from instructors often took the form of scheduling: instructors tried to hold classes in time slots that also made it feasible for student parents to attend. “I’m incredibly grateful to our teachers because they tried to schedule the classes in a way that worked for my classmates and for me as well.” (András, Mechanical Engineering)

In many courses, attendance at lectures and seminars was not only useful but mandatory. When student parents were unable to meet the required number of in-person sessions, instructors often responded with understanding and allowed

absences to be made up through additional assignments or written work. “From the very first moment the teacher signalled that if you can’t be present, we’ll find a way to make it up, and there is definitely the possibility that you can compensate through extra work or by taking on an additional task.” (Tamás, Computer Control Systems) “My experience was that teachers were fully supportive if you were also fair with them, in the sense that you went to them from the start and explained your situation. They said—just as Tamás did—that if a make-up was needed, then once we completed it, there was no problem at all.” (József, Diplomacy and Intercultural Studies)

Unfortunately, there were also cases where instructors adopted an inflexible stance toward student parents. They did not show empathy and responded insensitively to the problems student parents face: “The teaching staff weren’t flexible. Someone genuinely couldn’t come to class and asked whether they could follow online because they lived far away and, with work and a child, it wasn’t manageable—and there was no solution. They said you’d need permission, or I don’t know what, the whole legal background, but it can’t be done. Only if the teaching is online for everyone, then that’s different. But to have teaching in the classroom and, at the same time, have a camera or a laptop, or someone monitor it from a distance—that, no.” (Iringó, Communication and PR)

The presence of helper(s). The Child

The child plays a particularly multifaceted role in the situation under study. The participants in the research are men and women who are pursuing university studies while parenting a young child. In this life situation, meeting university requirements and successfully completing exams is a much more demanding task than it is for peers whose only responsibility is studying and obtaining a degree, perhaps supplemented by some leisure. At the same time, it is often precisely the child who, in some cases, motivated a mother to begin her studies, or whose shared learning with the child prompted a mother—who had previously only dreamed of completing university—to enroll, or encouraged a father not to stop, not to give up, but to continue his studies. The child can therefore also be construed as a kind of supporting actor: "I helped my older daughter with her maths homework. I always loved maths—this stayed with me—and I realised I was missing it in my life, so I enrolled in the computer science programme." (Ábel, Computer Science)

"When I enrolled at the university, I said, sorry, but Mum has homework too: I come home from work, and I still have to do homework and study, so you have to manage on your own. If you get stuck with something, I'll help. It became such a good routine that he became more independent, so to speak—okay, Mum has homework too—and that's how it developed." (Melánia, Sociology) "Interestingly, he has helped me several times already, and in fact I can see that even if he doesn't say

it outright, I can sometimes tell from his eyes that he finds it interesting that his father is studying too." (Tamás, Computer Control Systems)

Attitudes in the immediate environment

A key factor in how student parents integrate into the university setting is the attitude of their peers and instructors. Based on the focus-group discussions, most participants reported positive experiences: their immediate environment was supportive, and in several cases they felt their efforts were met with recognition. Classmates were typically helpful—for example by sharing notes and course materials, and by showing understanding when someone had to miss class. "I received a lot of notes from my classmates, which helped a lot because I couldn't always attend classes." (Bence, Sociology)

Instructors' attitudes presented a more mixed picture. Some instructors were flexible—for instance in scheduling, or in allowing absences to be made up—while others were less understanding. "One instructor said that if I let them know in advance, we'd find a way to make up the work. But there was also one who didn't allow me to join online, even though my child was ill." (Zita, Communication and PR)

Participation in student community life was often limited because student parents' schedules did not allow them to take part in evening events.

Challenges during the teaching period and in professional practice

The greatest challenge was coordinating family responsibilities, work, and study. During the teaching period, alongside fixed timetable commitments, it was difficult to allocate time for studying. “I studied in the evenings when my child was already asleep, but by morning I was completely exhausted.” (Tamás, Computer Science)

For this reason, students would welcome more flexible attendance options, including the possibility of joining classes online. They would also make use of make-up tasks where these are offered. However, such measures do not address the problems that arise in connection with professional placements. Summer placements were especially challenging for student parents because arranging childcare and aligning placement requirements with work commitments proved extremely difficult. “I ultimately managed my placement by moving with my family closer to the placement site for that period.” (Áron, Forestry Engineering)

Overall, students would expect more flexible solutions from the university—for example, options to complete parts of the placement within the university.

Challenges during the exam period

Similarly, during the exam period the most serious difficulties were time pressure and coordination problems. Parenting responsibilities often reduced the time available for studying. “I could hardly study during the day because I had to be with my child. So only the nights were left, and that was very demanding.” (Nóra, Human Resources) “My classes and my working hours overlap completely, so I often had to take leave.” (Bálint, Mechanical Engineering)

For this reason, students frequently referred to the need for more flexible handling of exam dates and for additional exam opportunities for student parents.

In lieu of a conclusion

The findings clearly indicate that continuing university studies places additional burdens on students who are parenting young children. These burdens relate primarily to time management, organisational constraints, and mental strain. Many participants felt that having children is a private matter and did not expect special treatment from the university. At the same time, instructors’ attitudes emerged as a key factor: while flexibility and support were evident in some cases, in other situations institutional arrangements did not provide adequate assistance for student parents.

The findings also underscore that student parents’ situation is eased by a supportive environment, such as the presence of

a spouse/partner, parents, and, in some cases, fellow students. Successfully overcoming the challenges associated with university study requires close cooperation between the family background and the university environment.

Overall, the results confirm that it would be particularly important for universities to adopt family-friendly measures—for example, more flexible timetables, distance-learning options, and services that support student parents. Such measures would not only make individual situations more manageable, but could also contribute, in the longer term, to strengthening the university's social responsibility.

As the authors of the volume's theoretical section have already explained, in Hungary and the Carpathian Basin, in line with demographic trends observed across Europe, the total fertility rate is not sufficient for the natural reproduction of society. Family- and child-friendly measures and conditions in higher education can help reduce the number of planned but unrealised births and support the management—or at least the mitigation—of the demographic crisis. Birth Gap Theory[2] addresses the fact that birth rates are declining in advanced societies, with long-term consequences not only for the economy but also for social structures. The theory argues that the issue is not merely that fewer children are being born; the decline is also uneven, with a growing share of people not having children at all. This tendency creates a demographic "gap" that, over time, can lead to labour shortages, slower economic growth, and

[2] Stephen J. Shaw, "The real reason for falling birth rates," *The Spectator* 353 (2023), no. 10182.

broader societal change. One key claim of the theory is that the drivers are not purely material or economic, but include deeper social and cultural shifts, such as changing values and expectations around family formation; the broader difficulty of navigating parenting across different social domains (including universities and workplaces) also forms part of the problem. At the same time, financial strain, workplace expectations, and mental load are all factors that substantially shape student parents' circumstances. Several participants noted that aligning university and work responsibilities is extremely demanding. Risks to mental health, including burnout, also disproportionately affect this group: many feel under constant pressure and report limited institutional support in this area.

The focus-group findings thus make clear that completing studies as a student parent involves major challenges, while strong commitment and supportive networks help many to persevere. Strengthening a family-friendly institutional approach, increasing administrative flexibility, and improving infrastructure could all contribute to enabling these students to pursue their studies in a more balanced environment. The adaptive strategies outlined here could improve student parents' university experience and, in turn, strengthen the institution's long-term attractiveness and social responsibility.

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STUDENT PARENTS AT FERENC RÁKÓCZI II TRANSCARPATHIAN HUNGARIAN COLLEGE

Kornélia Hires-László

As described in the methodology chapter, five students participated in each of the two focus-group discussions at the Rákóczi College. In focus-group research, it is standard practice to refer to participants by pseudonyms; accordingly, the first discussion included students using the pseudonyms Tibor, Diána, Sándor, Ilona, and Petra, while the second included Katalin, Emília, Vivien, Barbara, and János. In the first part of the sessions, everyone introduced themselves, stating which programme they were enrolled in and describing their family situation, including how many children they were parenting and their children's ages. Although we did not explicitly ask what kind of work they were doing alongside their studies, almost everyone mentioned either previous employment or what they were doing for work at the time. This introductory round helped participants relax and set the tone for an open, informal discussion of the topic. In the next round, we asked them to explain what had motivated them to begin studying while parenting, or to continue their studies while parenting.

Motivations for pursuing higher education

Personal motivation was present in everyone: for some it had been a childhood dream to pursue higher education, while others were driven by the feeling—based on their work experience—that they still needed this knowledge and degree. Vivien, Katalin, Tibor and János reported that after their secondary school leaving exam they were unable to continue their studies, either for various personal reasons or because of difficulties created by the admissions system. The others had previously obtained some form of qualification, but set themselves the goal of earning a degree in an entirely new profession in addition to that.

The desire to study emerged latest in Katalin's life: already the mother of a teenage child, at the age of thirty-three she first completed her secondary school leaving exam and then continued her studies in one of the Rákóczi College's off-site programmes. In the meantime, at the age of forty, she had her second child, and after completing the social pedagogy programme she eventually applied to the college's BA in Ukrainian Language and Literature, taking advantage of the admissions concession introduced in 2022 that allowed applicants to submit a motivational letter. "Then the dean asked whether I was sure I wanted to have this child now, when I was already finishing up. I told her, listen, ma'am: my biological clock is running out. If God has given it, then both will work out. They were very kind, very understanding and helpful and little by little the thesis was done, the caesarean section was done, the state exam was done, the little baby was there too—so it worked out. And then

I said, that's it, I won't study anymore, because it was very demanding back then. But then a year passed, and this admission option without the multi-test came again, and I thought to myself: Ukrainian language and literature? That's mine! And then I submitted my application, and they admitted me." (Katalin)

The men explained that, for them, pursuing higher education did not begin only from personal dreams and aspirations; rather, exemption from conscription was the most important motivation. Although personal development matters, in this case personal security takes priority. In Transcarpathia there is no direct danger, but air-raid alerts and oppressive conditions disturb the public mood and people's everyday lives. However, the most difficult situation at present is the abduction of men (often in the form of kidnapping—buses patrol the streets and abduct men in public).[1] Higher education provided protection for all men in the first year of the war, but in the second year restrictions were introduced, and this protection was abolished for those enrolled in second-degree programmes. Tibor also speaks about this: studying started out of necessity, then he came to like it, but as the semesters progress he loses momentum because he has less time for his family and his work. "However, I have to note that my main motivation really was to obtain some form of protection from conscription. But once I got caught up in this

[1] Viktória Ferenc and Kornélia Hires-László, "Kárpátaljai magyar családok a háború árnyékában" [Transcarpathian Hungarian Families in the Shadow of the War], in *Kötelékek. Családkutatás a külhoni magyarok körében* [Bonds. Family Research among Hungarians beyond Hungary's Borders], eds. Tünde Fűrész, Zoltán Kántor, and Levente Székely (Budapest: BGA Zrt – MCC–IKI – KINCS NPKI, 2024), 74–84.

hamster wheel, I liked it more and more, and I actually enjoy student life, but the deeper we get into studying, the more I realise that maybe I didn't need this…" (Tibor)

The situation of student parents compared to other students

Student parents consistently perceive the world differently from those who do not have children; having children functions as a factor that reshapes a person's values. Young people with children have different schedules, choose different leisure activities, and their plans no longer focus only on themselves, but also on shared plans for their child and family. During the discussions, participants reported such experiences on several occasions: they noted that discussing certain topics reflects markedly different perspectives among those who do not yet have children. Students enrolled in teacher training and early childhood education programmes mentioned these cases most frequently. Others, by contrast, shared experiences from what they considered the most difficult period in terms of time management and completing tasks. This viewpoint also appeared among young people of the same age, meaning that it is not only generational differences that shape these perceptions. In the following quotation, a student from the same age cohort recounts her experience; however, we also observed during the discussions that some participants—speaking as members of an age group ten to fifteen years older—emphasised that, in their view, generational differences are also intertwined with these experiences.

“What I found very interesting was that although we are almost the same age as my classmates, our problems are completely different because we come from completely different life situations. Everyone has a different focus and concentrates on different things, and as a result our interests are completely different. For example, as a mother of three children I talk to a classmate who has yet to have children, and we have completely different ideas about certain things, and we also approach problems a little differently.” (Petra)

Beyond values, leisure time is the other factor through which differences between student parents and non-parent students can be measured. Leisure time can be understood very differently in the life of a student parent than in the case of a young person who has fewer responsibilities. According to Diána, for her, studying at the college currently counts as rest: when she is sitting in class, talking and taking notes. By contrast, weekend work in the household exhausts her much more, even though she and her husband do it together. “Today I had a conversation with a classmate; she says: ‘Oh, how great, it’s Friday, the weekend is coming!’—how nice, she’ll stretch out and recover from the week’s fatigue. And I say that for me this is rest because on Saturday and Sunday for me it’s not that I’m jumping from the frying pan into the fire; rather, at the weekend I fall into the frying pan because then you have to spend some quality time with the children. Go over school things, cook, do the laundry, clean. We divide it up with my partner, it’s not about that, but for me this is the bigger work.” (Diána)

It is clear that reconciling family life is a very difficult challenge for everyone, and the interview participants also highlighted this;

however, these views never appeared as negative experiences. Rather, they emphasised that student parents have to cope with completely different living conditions than those who do not yet have children. The comparison, therefore, was made, but they never described it as complaining; they communicated it simply as a matter of fact.

Institutional support

The Rákóczi College has always been a family- and child-friendly institution. Because it operates within a small community—within the Transcarpathian Hungarian community—and because the instructors, staff, and students within it almost all know one another in some form, it functions as a people-centred institution. Attention to one another has always been a defining feature. As part of its infrastructural development, in 2023 it established a mother-and-baby room, which can be used not only by students but also by instructors, and also during events when the college provides the venue. The mother-and-baby room was created in the very first phase of the policy advisory implemented within the Erasmus+ international project—that is, already during the period of initial outreach and the development of the cooperation. Even more important is the accommodation that student parents are granted flexible attendance arrangements[2] in full-time (daytime) programmes, for which there were already precedents even before the project began. It is also

[2] Preferential study schedule

worth highlighting what the rector of the Rákóczi College stated in an individual interview: that the service offer of the institution network affects the life of every student parent in some form.[3]

We tested this phenomenon among the students; we were interested in what they themselves perceive from this process. They confirmed the advantages of a family-like institution and recounted several cases in which instructors made individual accommodations when a crisis was being experienced within the family. "So I also think, actually, like those who spoke before me, that I absolutely don't think this should be changed, because the teachers are already very empathetic. The instructors have a very good sense of how to guide us through a difficult period." (Emília)

They also described that in some cases they themselves asked instructors, in relation to their own situation, to bring forward the completion deadline, in order to relieve their burden during the teaching period. They explained that other, more diligent peers—learning from their case—also chose this strategy.

In addition to the instructors and the process of completing the individual courses, it is worth highlighting the work of the

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[3] Interview with István Csernicskó, Rector of the Ferenc Rákóczi II Transcarpathian Hungarian College, "A tanulmányi ösztöndíjak az úgynevezett akadémiai ösztöndíjak mellett vannak szociális ösztöndíj projektjeink is, amelyeknél azokat a hallgatókat…" [In addition to the so-called academic scholarships, we also have social scholarship projects in which we…], *Család és egyetem,* downloaded July 1, 2025, https://csalad-es-egyetem.noe.hu/a-tanulmanyi-osztondijak-az-ugynevezett-akademiai-osztondijak-mellett-vannak-szocialis-osztondij-projektjeink-is-amelyeknel-azokat-a-hallgatokat/

Student Administration Office ("TO"), whose staff are in regular contact with students, either in person or by correspondence. The Office staff have either been working at the college for a long time, or were themselves once students of the college, and by now they know and can recognise what kinds of issues or problems may lie behind uncertainty. Moments of discouragement or uncertainty often land with them, and if they can offer students even a piece of human advice, that may contribute to the realisation of a childhood dream, to earning a degree, and thereby perhaps to a mother's/father's later prospects. This is what happened in Katalin's case as well: "What stayed with me is that before the last exam period I went into the Student Administration Office and said that I wanted to postpone. But before that I agonised for two weeks, and I made a decision because I said, it can't be 'maybe'—it's either yes or no because it's eating me up. And then the young lady said to me: Katalin, now? Now, definitely not! Postpone after you've completed the exams." (Katalin)

The accommodations provided by the institution, instructor flexibility, administrative support, and personal attentiveness are all present at the college. Beyond these, one student highlighted two particularly important points: first, Hungarian-language instruction; and second, the opportunity to study free of charge. Only after this did he emphasise what additional benefits the institution provides for him: he framed exemption from conscription in terms of being able to remain with his family and not being forced to flee abroad, as many men have done. He also highlighted personal attentiveness, noting that instructors often provide emotional support in oppressive moments. "In my view,

first, Hungarian-language instruction, and second, it is also a very big help that you could actually get in free of charge. And as we were just talking about earlier, there was even a scholarship at the beginning—this also made things much easier. Now, because of my family situation… As a man, I have the student ID, and I can be with my family thanks to this. That's also a very big plus, and on top of that, there are also those kinds of supports from the instructors—they, so to speak, have my back, that it's perseverance, that it's not only that something will happen someday, but they also support me at that level. So there are conversations or topics like that." (János)

Balancing family and studying

Within the European cultural sphere and in the traditional family model, the larger share of parenting is carried out by mothers and wives; however, research shows that in an increasing number of families we can observe respect for gender equality.[4] This was also confirmed by students in both focus group discussions. Mothers have more tasks not only in the area of parenting, but also around the household. János, however, believes that no changes are necessary to educational requirements in the case of students with children, because studying also depends on individual ability, organisation, circumstances, and attitude.

[4] Lívia Murinkó, "A nemi szerepekkel és a családdal kapcsolatos attitűdök európai kitekintésben: értékek és gyermekgondozás" [Attitudes towards Gender Roles and the Family in a European Perspective: Values and Childcare], *Szociológiai Szemle* (2014), no. 1: 67–101.

He did not consider it important to add to his list what gender differences exist within the family—perhaps precisely because his child is only one year old and he does not yet have much experience in this area, or because he considers gender differences entirely natural. “Everyone studies differently, handles things differently, has a different capacity to cope with stress, so I think everyone has a different answer to this. My answer is that I think it’s unnecessary. Unnecessary, because just as there are difficulties in life, there are difficulties here too. You have to cope with them, and whoever takes this on knows what they have taken on.” (János)

When Sándor reached the point of evaluating the family’s time management and presented his own role in the family’s logistical process, he emphasised that the part that falls to him is, in every respect, far less than his wife’s. He developed this point immediately after three mothers had spoken about organisational difficulties and challenges in relation to childcare and housework. “After three mothers, I don’t even know whether one can say anything. Who are we to add anything here to mothers’ duties? Yes, you can sense the difference in age a bit…” (Sándor)

The logistics of family life

University or college life requires a distinctive schedule and logistical organisation from everyone. During the teaching period, class attendance and the performance expected alongside it usually entail a relatively smaller workload; as the

assessment and examination period approaches, tasks become more concentrated.

In Transcarpathia, a traditional, conservative value system predominates, and multi-generational co-residence or grandparents living within the same settlement provide the most substantial support for parenting.[5] Students with families also reported that, in their case, childcare is arranged with the help of grandparents when children are younger, and likewise when a child becomes ill and cannot attend kindergarten or school. Several mothers in the area even refer to this solution as "grandma kindergarten." "All I can say is that we have a grandmother strategy, and basically on those days I simply leave my little girl—who doesn't attend kindergarten yet, nor nursery, and given her age won't for some time—to the grandparents. It's very rare that my husband helps out…" (Diána)

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[5] Kornélia Hires-László, "A kárpátaljai magyar fiatalok társadalmi helyzete és kilátásai" [The Social Situation and Prospects of Hungarian Youth in Transcarpathia], in *Fiatalok a Kárpát-medencében a 21. század elején. A Nemzetstratégiai Kutatóintézet és a PTE BTK Demográfia és Szociológia PhD Iskola által 2018. október 26–27-én megrendezett II. Doktorandusz Konferenciájának előadásait összefoglaló tanulmánykötet* [Young People in the Carpathian Basin at the Beginning of the 21st Century. Proceedings Volume Summarizing the Presentations of the 2nd Doctoral Conference Held on 26–27 October 2018 by the National Institute for Strategic Research and the University of Pécs Faculty of Humanities PhD School of Demography and Sociology], *Kárpát-haza Szemle* 13, eds. Teréz Kovács and Gergely Molnár (Budapest: Nemzetstratégiai Kutatóintézet, 2019), 114–128.

In Transcarpathia, Hungarians predominantly live in villages, and children often attend school locally; at the same time, it is also common for them to travel to a nearby larger settlement/town or to a boarding school. Afternoon activities, too, are very often only available in town, which means children commute a great deal. In most cases, parents manage this individually, or by using buses provided by the micro-region; however, these cannot be aligned with the individual schedules that parents develop for their children because of afternoon activities. Petra—who has three children—describes this logistical process, which she manages by sharing all organisation with her husband. "In our family, if everyone is healthy—every child is healthy—and everyone can set off in the morning, then there's always just a small issue with the logistics. The children—so our oldest child—plays the piano, the oldest and the middle child go to folk dance twice a week, and besides that I study here. We have to travel from Zápszony for every single class, and the children also travel to folk dance. So my husband and I usually solve it by taking turns: if he takes them, then I come to class. If I take them, then I don't come to class, and then I try to make it up in [Google] Classroom. So if every child is healthy and everyone sets off in the morning, the two of us can usually manage it. If, unfortunately, they get sick, then the grandmothers come—thank God both grandmothers are with us." (Petra)

Priorities, value system, identity

Reconciling career and family always confronts people with difficult decisions, in which the family has higher priority—something that also follows from traditional values. "We have three small children, and every morning is very hectic, but we also try to live our lives in a way that everything fits. We try to make time for everything, to set time aside. Naturally, family comes first; as a mother, the most important thing is to raise my children." (Petra)

With regard to the future of Hungarians in Transcarpathia, it has always been a question to what extent they can endure the effects of assimilation pressures and migration processes.[6] Since the outbreak of the current Russo–Ukrainian war, these pessimistic projections have intensified further. What was visible and palpable earlier as well is that among Hungarians in Transcarpathia there is a strong local identity, which has helped in every difficult moment that this small community has survived so far.[7]

"In early 2022, on February 24, I was still in Germany. […] If we take into account Hungary, Czechia, the Netherlands, Denmark,

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[6] Kornélia Hires-László, *Hétköznapi etnicitás. Beregszászi magyarok az etnikai kategóriák szerepéről* [Everyday Ethnicity: Hungarians in Berehove on the Role of Ethnic Categories] (doctoral dissertation, Budapesti Corvinus Egyetem, Szociológia és Kommunikációtudományi Doktori Iskola, 2021).

[7] Kornélia Hires-László and Ingrid Lőrinc, "A helyben maradás többgenerációs kérdés? Gondolatok és adatok a kárpátaljai magyar fiatalok lokális identitásáról" [Is Staying Local a Multi-Generational Issue? Reflections and Data on the Local Identity of Hungarian Youth in Transcarpathia], *Y. Z.* (2022), no. 4: 29–35.

Germany—I haven't been to Slovakia yet, but if we look at it from the perspective of work, I've been to a lot of places. But in some way Transcarpathia always calls me back, and I can't detach from here. And I say this because many people are the same way. Those who are abroad—people I know, my friends—we talk, and it always comes up that it would be so good to be at home. We can't do anything, only that it would be so good to be at home. So that's why it's like this." (János)

Summary

Participants in the discussion repeatedly highlighted, throughout the section on the Rákóczi College, the positive features that the institution and its wider network provide—both for them and, through the community, for other members of their families as well. In other words, the institution's added value extends beyond the walls of the college itself. The participants reported several cases that corroborated the institution's person-centred character. Under the Rákóczi College's operating statutes, each group (programme and cohort) has an appointed curator who supports that group's work. These instructors know the students personally and closely, and this personal relationship is put to use in organising studies and in making the teaching process run more smoothly.

Another important factor is that, through the college's ongoing redevelopment and the expansion of its associated institutional network, a family-friendly environment has been created and continues to develop. Recently, two such changes

were introduced that were implemented concretely within the unit and operation of the college: first, the previously introduced option of free class attendance (preferential study arrangement) can now be requested not only by students studying alongside employment, but also in cases of family formation and childbearing. Second, a mother-and-baby room, which was established and opened in 2024. In the following figure, we sought to indicate all factors that were in effect in 2024 with respect to the life of a student with a family at the Rákóczi College.

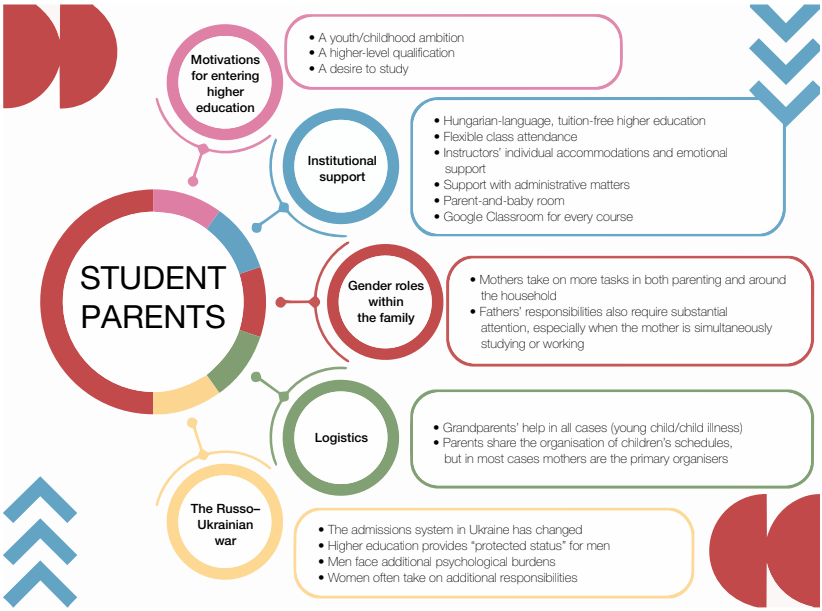

Figure 1. The situation of student parents at Rákóczi College.

The life of students with families—despite the fact that they receive a range of support—is not easy, and they regard this as self-evident. Within the family, women continue to carry a

larger share of the tasks; male students in some cases explicitly acknowledge this, while in other cases they regard it as a natural division of labour. It is, however, a fact that since 24 February 2022 men have had to cope with greater psychological strain, and the uncertain situations related to conscription exert a distressing influence on men's everyday lives. In families more directly affected by this process, more tasks consequently fall to women.

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FAMILY AND UNIVERSITY THROUGH STUDENT EYES

Rita Hegedűs

Introduction

On the previous pages of this edited volume, we read reports from four universities, and learn which major points emerged in the focus-group interviews conducted with student parents regarding the question of reconciling parenthood and higher education studies. Among these reports, some followed the pre-established interview guide more closely than others, but all of them effectively conveyed the issues that most preoccupied the students at the given institution, along with their related feelings and reflections. We now compare these experiences with the questions identified in the relevant scholarly literature. Do the same issues arise at the four observed Central European, Hungarian-language universities as those reflected in international trends? Or do the circumstances of Hungarian-minority students beyond Hungary's borders differ from those of students in Hungary, with distinct problems and pressures?

In what follows, we review the most salient problem areas in turn.

Emerging general characteristics

Diversity

Before attempting to summarize general trends, it is important to briefly note the diversity of the student population. What all four universities share is that Hungarian native speakers constitute their target group; however, an obvious difference is that we also gained insight into three universities beyond Hungary's borders, where these students belong to a minority within their respective countries. Another key feature of our sample is the high proportion of students studying in correspondence programmes and under an individual study schedule; these participants are, in most cases, also older than the average student. At the same time, at all four universities the sample also included younger student parents and those enrolled in full-time programmes. The sample also included fathers, who typically viewed the issues from a somewhat different position and interpretive perspective.

It also matters greatly how many children the respondents are raising, and of what ages, since the problems and questions raised varied accordingly. Our sample included parents with one child as well as parents with multiple children. Their children ranged from infants to young adults already studying in higher education, although our study primarily focused on parents of young children.

Invisibility, and conformity to traditional expectations as a normative demand

One of the most characteristic issue areas that frequently arises in analyses of student parents is invisibility—namely, that student parents do not appear publicly as parents, and both the university and the students themselves tend to treat conformity to expectations set for students without children as the natural baseline.[1]

This phenomenon also appeared in our study. According to the focus-group interviews, student parents at the four universities included in the study do not like to emphasize that they have children; in many cases, they do not even inform instructors or fellow students. "They don't know. Or, well, I never refer to it." (Alma, Károli)[2]

When university life is organized, it is not even certain that anyone considers student parents at all. As the analysis of Selye University also notes, when out-of-timetable occasions and practical sessions are organized, the needs of students in special circumstances are not taken into account.

At the same time, in smaller institutions instructors and university administrative staff generally know the student parents, which can constitute a significant ease. This was articulated

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[1] Marie-Pierre Moreau and Charlotte Kerner, *Supporting Student Parents in Higher Education: A Policy Perspective* (Bedfordshire: University of Bedfordshire, 2012).

[2] In indicating the interview quotations used in this chapter, we retained the referencing system applied in the analytical chapters on each university and supplemented it with the name of the university.

most clearly in the case of the Rákóczi College, but the Sapientia University chapter also emphasized the friendly character of the institution, and a similar point was raised by students at one faculty of Selye University.

A further characteristic of the universities we surveyed was that—as noted above—many older students participate, to a substantial extent in correspondence programmes or under an individual study schedule, and within this group it is observable that student parents with similar backgrounds know one another. Here, then—at least within the student community—parenthood is not invisible, but is treated as a self-evident given.

Administrative and academic procedures: rigidity and administrative burden

It is also important to address those matters in which, even if the invisibility of student parents is not the primary issue, the difficulties of administration are clearly manifest.

With regard to administration, we found that larger universities tend to be less flexible, partly as a consequence of more extensive regulation. In our study, students at the smallest institution, Rákóczi College, reported by far the highest levels of acceptance and flexibility; moreover, a distinctly family-friendly procedural framework is in place there. At Sapientia and Selye University, experiences vary by faculty and programme, but across all four institutions we observed that case-by-case consideration and individual accommodations are common.

If we look at a few concrete procedures, we can see, for example, that “preferential study arrangements” appear in two

settings (Károli and Selye University), whereas at Rákóczi College there is no need for this mechanism because student parents benefit from a general policy of flexible class attendance. In the other three institutions, seminars and practical classes are generally compulsory, and staff often have limited formal means to address the needs of student parents; under the rules, they typically cannot be exempted. That said, instructors' informal flexibility is fairly widespread in practice. "From the very first moment, the instructor indicated that if I cannot be present, we will find a way to make up for it; we can indicate that there is certainly an option to compensate through some additional work, some extra commitment." (Tamás, Sapientia)

Another issue worth highlighting is whether academic requirements are adjusted for student parents. Since none of the four institutions has regulations specifically tailored to student parents in this respect, student parents across all sites struggle with meeting deadlines for written assignments. Beyond seeking flexibility from instructors on deadlines (which they also tend to receive relatively often), they do not articulate further expectations. The volume of written assignments is likely shaped by institutional culture; in any case, during the focus-group interviews several participants at Selye University complained about an excessive workload of written submissions.

Individual solutions as a typical pattern

A related question that often arises in the literature is whether these students typically see the management of their difficulties primarily in terms of individual tactics and procedures.[3]

The students we interviewed likewise do not like to invoke their children as a justification. “They don’t know about it,” says one student at Károli: “Because I don’t hold my child up in front of me like that, so that I don’t know, people would pity me or help me because of it.” (Alexa, Károli). In the vast majority of cases, they do not feel that this is anyone else’s business: “I didn’t tell everyone in my cohort, with two exceptions. So I didn’t highlight it. I try to separate the private sphere as much as possible from the professional and the university sphere.” (Melánia, Sapientia)

What they rely on, instead, is their own effective time management, mobilising family support, and—where necessary—individual negotiation and ad hoc agreements with instructors or with university administration (for example, at Károli students often try to reach arrangements with instructors on an individual basis). Some also draw on cooperation with fellow students (as described by one participant at Selye University).

As the chapter on Sapientia notes, the participants are aware that they have taken on these commitments voluntarily, and for

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[3] Ryan Christian T. Bustillo, Rouie Christine T. Bustillo, and Jay Ann Vie Sayson, “Navigating the Dual Roles: Understanding the Unique Challenges of Student-mothers in Pursuit of Higher Education,” *Ignatian International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research* 2, 2024/2: 58–69.

this reason they do not consider it ethical to request special concessions from the university on the basis of being student parents.

Motivation

The next issue is the higher level of motivation within this group, which is also highlighted by several publications.[4]

The focus-group interviews confirmed this as well: a general finding is that students, consciously accepting the foreseeable difficulties, want to obtain the relevant qualification, and for this they often do more than their typically younger, childless peers. It was repeatedly stated that they do not ask for easing of requirements; they want access to the same knowledge as everyone else. A typical formulation is Guszti's, when he says: "[…] I think everyone has to decide, and these older students have already played it through in their heads that if we want this, if we want a degree, then we have to put work into it. Absolutely." (Guszti, Selye)

A particular situation also appears, namely that of the Rákóczi College operating in war-time Ukraine (in Transcarpathia): here, the specific motivation for male students to study is that in Ukraine those enrolled in higher education are exempt from conscription.

[4] L. A. Tighe et al., "Improving the education and wellbeing of student parents," *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 2024/1532: 10–17.

Competing obligations

A further distinctive feature relative to younger, non-parent students is the double—or, more often, triple—set of competing obligations: in addition to studying, student parents must provide care for their child(ren), and a substantial proportion also work alongside their studies.[5]

This observation also held for our sample: our student parents were not exempt from the tasks associated with caring for their child(ren). In some cases, parents or a partner take on a particularly large share (for example, Hanna, a student at János Selye University, whose parents look after her infant while she attends classes in a full-time programme), but even here it is evident that these students relate to this temporarily demanding situation in a reflective, intentional way. Several explicitly noted that everyone faces difficulties—therefore martyrdom, as a stance, is clearly distant from them.

Part of these multiple obligations is that most older students also work. In such cases, they must balance three domains. However, under these conditions, the issue of coordinating work and study emerges far more prominently, while caring for the child(ren) becomes much less salient in participants' accounts.

Among younger, full-time students raising very young children, this is, of course, less typical. Here, the configuration is different: given current trends, young students who work in large numbers alongside university can be contrasted with students who are raising an infant while studying.

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[5] Bustillo et al., "Navigating the Dual Roles."

The greatest difficulties were articulated by those students who have a child who already attends an institution (kindergarten, and in some cases a nursery), is still young, and who also work.

Time allocation

One of the most important points to highlight—closely linked to the above—is the time allocation and logistics that differ from those of students without children,[6] and within this, a major sub-question concerns the division of labour within the family.[7]

Differences between student parents and students without children

Beyond the competing obligations discussed above, the divergence in time use compared to their peers appears as a general experience across all research sites in our study. Student parents must implement a much tighter and more deliberate

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[6] Tighe et al., "Improving the education and wellbeing of student parents"; K. P. Andres, "Two Faces of a Mom: Student Mothers' Lived Experiences in a State University," *International Journal of Multidisciplinary: Applied Business and Education Research* 2, 2021/5: 406–412; Moreau and Kerner, "Care in Academia."

[7] Provides a good overview not only of the topic, but also of the male role that is particularly strongly foregrounded here: Zsófia Drjenovszky and Éva Sztáray Kézdy, "A munka és a magánélet közti egyensúly alakulása a kisgyermekkel otthon lévő apák családjában" [The Evolution of Work–Life Balance in Families of Fathers Staying at Home with a Young Child], *Szociológiai Szemle* 33, no. 2 (2023): 29–55.

daily schedule ("And then you have to put things in order, and you mustn't fall out of the rhythm. And when an illness comes—either the child's or mine—then everything collapses." – Hanna, Selye), and they need to be able to see the entire period from the very start of the semester, including all their obligations and the availability of their own support network ("Predictability is what matters, that the time slots are pinned down in advance." – Barna, Sapientia). They cannot attend classes at just any time; they must align with their child's routine and the other parent's schedule. Studying and preparing written assignments also requires advance planning. Because the 24 hours of the day are fixed, very often they cannot count on anything other than their evening/night-time rest as the time to work ("That's different—that's a night shift for sure. When the child is asleep, keeping the deadline, obviously right up to the last moment, it can still be done within the deadline." – Anna, Károli). And since things do not always unfold as one would prefer, a great deal of improvisation is also required. Accordingly, "free time" carries a completely different meaning for student parents: shared university social programmes that are natural elements of student life for their non-parent peers are simply not an option.

Family division of labour

It was clear from the focus groups that most student parents began their studies on the basis of a family decision ["I would rather put it this way: before starting studies it is very important (…) that there really is that decision and that family support, that

it is an accepted decision." – Ferdinánd, Selye], and that they cannot continue without family support. The type of help emphasised varies by speaker, but most often it concerns childcare and (greater) participation in housework.

Although the partner is mentioned first everywhere, experiences differ somewhat across institutions regarding who provides support. While at Károli respondents primarily rely on their partner, at Sapientia and Rákóczi the wider family—especially the students' parents—plays a much larger role. At Selye, responses were the most mixed: several participants referred both to parents and to the partner.

Across sites, participants spoke very little about support from outside the family; babysitters or friends were mentioned only occasionally.

Older age

Student parents, both in general and in our sample, are on average older than other students, which—among other things—may make it harder to integrate into student life and, as a result, may also mean a lower level of participation in information flows.[8] As already noted in relation to leisure time, the student parents included in our study also participate less in university community life; however, this does not mean that communities do not form. In our experience, on the one hand, most students in part-time/

[8] Bustillo, Bustillo, and Sayson, "Navigating the Dual Roles"; Briegel et al., "Barriers and Supports for Student-Parents in Higher Education," *Transformative Dialogues: Teaching and Learning Journal* 15, 2023/3: 12–21.

correspondence programmes are parents and they know and support one another; on the other hand, a substantial share of those studying in full-time/daytime programmes also take part in the life of their study group, where they share information with each other. As it is mainly extracurricular, leisure-time activities that tend to be missed, we cannot speak of isolation. There was even an example in which an older full-time student with several children reported on the role she played in the university days cooking competition (Selye University).

Administrative matters

Another difference, compared to students without children and generally younger students at some of the observed universities, was weaker ability to navigate academic administration, as well as organisational constraints arising from limited time available for administrative tasks.

Related to this are participants' more general complaints about organisational problems in academic matters—for example, inadequate information, or not knowing which courses they need to register for—since even if these affect all students, they affect student parents (by virtue of age and greater time scarcity) to a compounded degree. ("I kind of wish that this system at the school would be better and more transparent—like, which course you need to take when; there would be some kind of information sheet about what courses first-yearers need to register for. Honestly, especially at the beginning, I searched a lot for where and what I had to register for, and it was very difficult. I didn't even know what I had to register for and what I could. So I see a kind of gap here." – Evelin, Selye)

Infants

Finally, it is worth mentioning a question related to children's age. In our survey, we generally aimed to assess the situation of those with younger children (at most six years old), but several students also entered the sample who could only speak about this in the past tense because at the time of data collection they already had older child(ren). It is clear that older children entail a different set of issues.

At the same time, we also obtained information about those with the very youngest children, still in infancy, and on this basis it seems that this situation also differs markedly from the others. In practice, across all four universities this situation is currently quite rare: most female students defer a year if they have a child. Here, in addition to the general difficulties, concrete physical questions arise, such as the place for breastfeeding, getting to classes at all, being able to attend for longer than one or two hours (and, in the meantime, arranging supervision/childcare for the child). University actors—instructors, administrators, and fellow students alike—respond almost uniformly very positively to these issues; in a few places there is also a baby-and-mother room, but overall the solutions are individual.

Conclusions

One important lesson from the focus group interviews conducted at the four universities is that, even if we would like to treat students who pursue higher education alongside parenting as a single category, in reality, several distinct sub-groups can be

identified. Their life situations and pathways are diverse, and "one-size-fits-all" solutions are unlikely to work.

At the same time, it is important to recognise that these students are typically older than their peers without children—including those who nevertheless opted for full-time/daytime study. In general, and especially in the case of older students, it would be important to provide support for integration and to make their obligations more manageable.

Partly due to age—but also because this has become almost universal in higher education—these students typically work in addition to parenting. A substantial share of their difficulties is therefore highly general in nature, and this, too, requires attention (as universities do struggle with it and develop various responses).

Overall, based on the experience of the limited set of universities we examined, it appears that public policy aimed at supporting the reconciliation of family life and study should not focus only on supporting women who have children relatively early—during full-time university years begun immediately after secondary-school graduation—but should also pay attention to enabling those who are somewhat older and already have children to decide to begin higher education studies.

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CHALLENGES FACED BY STUDENT PARENTS – PROBLEMS AND PROPOSED SOLUTIONS

Bálint Duráczky – Fruzsina Mikó

The purpose of the research presented in this volume is to support university decision-makers and instructors in better assisting student parents and in developing a more flexible, inclusive learning environment. Accordingly, the project's main deliverable is a synthesis that consolidates proposed remedies to the problems raised by students. It includes practical guidance, recommendations for organisational change, and options for making timetables and teaching methods more flexible. Drawing on the experience gathered during the project, universities can not only recognise that student parents face distinct challenges that—without adequate support—may hinder academic success and contribute to dropout, but can also respond in ways that enable these students to thrive and to participate more fully in university life. The recommendations presented below are based on focus-group data collection and have not yet been discussed with university decision-makers. For this reason, it is important to note that institutional implementation may require amendments to internal regulations; it is also possible that a given recommendation is already in place as an institutional practice, but students cannot take advantage of it due to information gaps. The recommendations are presented in the following sections—aligned with the logic of the data collection—by mapping them onto semester tasks.

Proposed interventions to address course-registration-related problems

Universities can support student parents in navigating the challenges of the course registration period through a range of measures. The recommendations below aim to reduce the logistical difficulties and stress these students often face.

1. Expandign Flexible Timetabling and Options for Choosing Class Times
   a) More Alternative Time Slots: subject to instructor capacity, universities could increase the number of time slots in which courses are offered so that students can more easily align university obligations with family life. For example, a course could be available in morning, midday, and evening slots.
   b) Options for Online Participation: for those who cannot attend in person, courses could be followed online—either via live stream or through recorded video. This may be particularly useful for parents of young children.
   c) Making Part-Time (Correspondence) Provision More Flexible: for correspondence students, it would be advisable to offer alternative dates and more flexible attendance arrangements to reduce clashes with family obligations.
   d) Targeted Allowances for Student Parents During Registration: student parents could be granted entitlements such as an earlier registration window, or automatic approval of capacity-increase requests.

2. Developing Support Systems and Information Tools
   a) Transparent Course-Registration System: universities should aim for a user-friendly registration system that provides clear information on course times, available courses, and recommended course-registration pathways by semester.
   b) Consultation and Advising: a dedicated consultation period could be established for student parents, where they can receive help with registration, timetable construction, and the handling of any special requests.

3. Strengthening Istructor-Flexibility and Empathy
   a) Instructor Development: professional development could be offered to instructors on flexible teaching methods and on handling student needs with empathy. This could help instructors better understand the specific circumstances of student parents.
   b) Alternative Modes of Completion: in more cases, instructors could offer alternative assignments or make-up options for students who cannot attend every class due to family-related reasons.

4. Supporting Long-Term Academic Planning
   a) Individualized Study Plans: universities could offer individualised study plans for student parents, taking into account family and workplace obligations. This would allow students to progress over a longer time horizon and with more flexible pacing. The option of a preferential timetable is already a major support that student parents make use of regularly; however, applications are not always

approved, and fixed limits often apply (e.g., the number of courses per semester to which it can be applied). A tailored alternative—explicitly available to student parents and embedded in institutional regulations—could therefore provide substantial additional support in completing their studies.

b) Felxible Deferral and Course-Registration Adjustments: procedures should allow students to defer courses or modify registration decisions easily when family obligations require it.

These recommendations can help universities create a more family-friendly environment that supports student parents throughout their studies and makes it easier for them to reconcile family and academic obligations.

Proposed interventions to address problems arising during the teaching period

Universities can support student parents through a range of measures to help them manage challenges that arise during the teaching period. The recommendations below aim to make it easier for these students to attend classes and meet academic requirements.

1. Inscreasing Instructor Flexibility and Hybrid Teaching Options
   a) Supporting Hybrid Teaching: universities could encourage instructors to introduce hybrid formats in which classes

can also be followed online, or recordings are made available—especially for lectures. Online participation could also be offered under defined criteria for courses that do not necessarily require in-person presence. This would facilitate participation for those facing childcare or logistical constraints. Recording lectures and providing replayable audio materials would enable student parents to manage their schedules more flexibly. If a student cannot attend due to childcare or other family obligations, they could access the material later and would therefore not fall behind.

b) Flexible Handling of Absences: instructors should be encouraged to allow greater flexibility in managing absences—for example, by offering make-up opportunities through additional tasks or by arranging individual consultations. In the case of seminars, beyond the three permitted absences, additional absences due to a child's illness could be authorised on the basis of a paediatrician's certificate.

2. Developing a Family-Friendly University Environment and Infrastructure

a) Establishing Parent-and-Baby Rooms: universities could set up parent-and-baby rooms within campus buildings, where mothers can care for their children under calm conditions—for example, to breastfeed or change nappies. Such a room would be suitable for the care of infants and young children alike: breastfeeding/feeding/expressing milk; changing nappies/dressing; resting; and play (e.g.,

on a play mat or in a designated play corner). The room should provide an adequate level of privacy. This would ease the situation of mothers who attend university with their child.

b) Childcare Services: universities should consider providing childcare services where students can leave their children safely during classes (for older children, this could include creative activities, movement-based programmes, and other indoor or outdoor sessions). These services could be available either for occasional or regular use. One potential model is childcare provided by students in a university-designated space. Student supervisors could perform this role in lieu of a practicum, in exchange for credits, a scholarship, or similar forms of recognition. A further option could be parent-to-parent cooperation: one parent supervises the children of peers who have mandatory class attendance at a given time, and in return receives an exemption from attendance. In terms of location, universities could establish childcare centres on campus where students can arrange safe supervision for their children.

3. Expanding Flexible Timetables and Course-Selection Options
   a) Supporting Students from Outside the University Town: for students commuting from outside the university town, timetables should minimise long gaps between classes. In addition, universities could support travel costs or organise shared travel solutions.
   b) Providing Extended Deadlines/Extensions: within the semester, it could be possible to apply for an extension on

the basis of family circumstances; for example, for student parents the final deadline for completing a professional placement could be shifted from the end of the teaching period to the end of the examination period.

These recommendations can contribute to ensuring that student parents can continue their studies successfully and reconcile their academic obligations with family life. Flexibility and institutional support are crucial to this process.

Proposed interventions to address problems arising during the examination period

Universities can support student parents through a range of measures to help them manage the challenges of the examination period. The recommendations below aim to make exam preparation and exam-taking easier alongside family obligations.

1. Flexibility in Exam Scheduling and Expanding Choice Options
   a) Flexible Exam Times: instructors could offer multiple exam slots so that students can more easily reconcile exam obligations with family commitments. It would be important for these slots to be available across different times of day and on different days, reflecting students' diverse needs.
   b) Alternative Exam Days: student parents should be able, in exceptional circumstances (e.g., childbirth, a child's illness), to request a special exam day or to reschedule an exam time.

c) Preferential Arrangements in Exam Registration of Student Parents: this could include, for example, opening registration a few hours earlier for student parents, or automatically approving requests to increase capacity. Greater flexibility in selecting final-exam dates could also support student parents through a form of positive discrimination. This would mean allowing student parents to choose from exam dates that are further apart, so they can better coordinate exams with family obligations.

2. Providing Online Exams and Remote-Access Options
   a) Online Examination Option: universities could support online examinations, especially for those for whom in-person attendance is difficult. This would allow students to take exams from home, close to their child.
   b) Hybrid Exam Model: combining online and in-person exam options would allow students to select the most suitable format, reducing conflicts between family and academic obligations.

3. Providing Support for Studying and Preparation
   a) Early Communication of Exam Requirements: exam requirements and study materials should be communicated at the start of the semester, so that students can prepare gradually over a longer period, taking family responsibilities into account.
   b) Flexible Planning of Preparation During the Teaching Period: universities could support targeted preparation already during the teaching period, for example by providing exam topic lists or practice test tasks.

4. Creating a Family-Friendly Examination Period
   a) Childcare on Exam Days: universities could organise childcare services on exam days so that students can concentrate on their exams under calm conditions.
   b) Parent-and-Baby Rooms and Quiet Study Rooms: universities could provide quiet study spaces or parent-and-baby rooms where student parents can prepare for exams in a supportive environment.

5. Increasing Instructor Support and Flexibility
   a) Rapid Publication of Results: instructors could be required to communicate exam results as quickly as possible so that students can plan their next steps in a timely way—both in their studies and in family life.
   b) Encouraging Supportive Instructor Attitudes: universities could provide training for instructors to help them better understand student parents' situations and to respond more flexibly to problems that arise during the examination period.

These recommendations can contribute to ensuring that student parents can complete their exams successfully without this coming at the expense of their studies or family life. In this context, institutional support and flexibility are crucial.

Comprehensive intervention proposals

The possible directions, changes, and intervention points outlined above are mostly tied to a specific period or to a specific problem or challenge. Based on the focus group interviews conducted with student parents, however, the need for some more general, larger-scale interventions also emerged—interventions that would not only make it easier for admitted student parents to complete their studies, but could also position student parents as a potential target group during recruitment campaigns, strengthening the university brand by highlighting its family-friendly character. These possible interventions are as follows:

1. Information and Guidance Pack Tailored Specifically to Situations Affecting Student Parents: an information pack that brings together relevant information for student parents in higher education can offer numerous benefits. The purpose of such a pack is to make students' everyday lives easier by providing the support and information they need as a result of their particular circumstances. Student parents' time is extremely limited, so a centrally accessible information pack can help ensure they do not have to spend extensive time searching through university and other sources. Moreover, if students know that all necessary information is easy to access, this can reduce stress and help them focus on their studies and their family. The information pack can also help students learn about available forms of support—financial, social, or academic—which can increase the likelihood that

they will complete their studies successfully while raising a child. For universities and colleges, such an initiative would also be beneficial, as it would contribute to higher student satisfaction and improved academic success. The pack could include, among other things, the following:

a) Financial Support and Scholarships: information on scholarships, supports, and grants specifically available to student parents. Information on tax allowances, family allowance, and other state benefits.
b) Options for Flexibility in Studies: information on part-time, distance-learning, or flexible-schedule study options. Information on internal university possibilities (child-friendly curricula, evening classes, deferral options).
c) Childcare Options: availability and conditions of university nurseries, kindergartens, and childcare services. Information on local childcare services, either within the university or in surrounding areas.
d) Directory of Communities and Support Groups: information on student groups and communities that provide support specifically for student parents. Options to join online forums or groups where they can share experiences and receive advice. This would also support the formation of networks and communities among student parents, enabling them to share experiences and solutions for managing challenges through mutual support.
e) Physical and and Psychological Health Support: information on university medical and psychological services that can help with stress management or with health-related questions connected to childcare. Contact details for local family support services and counsellors.

f) Rights and Obligations: information on student parents' rights, including workplace and study-related allowances, as well as protection against discrimination.

2. Mentoring Programme for Student Parents: a mentoring programme could be an initiative specifically focused on their particular needs and challenges. The aim of the programme would be to provide tailored support to student parents, helping them maintain balance between their studies and their family obligations. Within the framework of the mentoring programme, more experienced student parents, or instructors who have themselves been in a similar life situation, could take on the role of mentors to support newer student parents—for example, helping newcomers manage logistical challenges, organise childcare, or build their timetable. This support could take several forms, for example:
   a) Academic Councelling: mentors could help students develop study techniques, improve time management, and learn how to coordinate family and academic obligations effectively.
   b) Emotional Support: mentors would be empathetic, understand the everyday challenges faced by student parents, and provide advice and encouragement when students feel stress, exhaustion, or uncertainty.
   c) Information Resources: mentors could share necessary information about support services available at the university, such as childcare options, scholarships, or other forms of financial support that may assist student parents.

d) Community-Building: the programme would provide participants with opportunities to connect with one another, build a community, and develop a supportive network. Through this, students could share experiences and practical suggestions for addressing everyday difficulties. Such a mentoring programme would help ensure that student parents do not feel isolated, and would enable them to continue their tertiary education with greater confidence and success.

3. Integrating Student-Parent Issues Into the Work of the Student Union (HÖK): establishing a dedicated "family section" within the student union would help ensure that the interests of student parents are represented more effectively. In addition, sharing the experiences of former student parents would be useful for new students, who could receive advice and guidance on coordinating their tertiary studies with family life. To enable this, some form of platform or forum would be needed to support exchange between former and current student parents.

4. Increasing the Visibility and Representation of Student Parents in Official Communications: in the university newspaper and on other communication platforms, the students who are featured typically represent the young, non-parent target group. Interviewees indicated that, upon seeing the focus-group call circulated within the present project, they felt for the first time that they were visible and that there was interest in their situation.

a) On the university website and social media channels, the institution could regularly feature stories and interviews in which student parents share their experiences, challenges, and successes. This would not only provide inspiration to other students but also make it visible that student parents are an important part of the university community.
b) In addition, the university could organise events, workshops, or seminars that focus specifically on the needs and interests of student parents, and could publicise these widely across the university community. In promoting such programmes, the university could emphasise that supporting student parents matters for everyone, since the institution's goal is to ensure the conditions for successful study for all students.
c) Furthermore, in university marketing materials and prospectuses it would be worth highlighting the services and opportunities aimed at supporting student parents—such as flexible timetabling, childcare options, or mentoring programmes. Such measures can all contribute to making student parents more visible and to recognising them within the university community.

5. Regular Organisation of a "Student Parents' Day" Event: a community event organised specifically for student parents would also support mutual connection and community-building. It is also important for student parents that their children know—and can imagine—where their mother/father spends time when they are at the university. If they occasionally bring their child to class, it may likewise be important that the child

can become familiar with the building in advance. For this reason, a "Student Parents' Day" would be most useful as a family day—an event spent together with children—where mutually beneficial forms of cooperation may also emerge among student parents raising children of similar ages, including in relation to childcare.

6. Enhancement of the Neptun System: providing automated approvals—especially for students with young children—would significantly facilitate the completion of administrative tasks. If embedded in the regulations, the option of automatic approval would spare student parents unnecessary time expenditure.

7. Student Parent Peer Support Group: organising a study group in which students could support one another would also have a positive effect on the student-parent community. A "student parents' group" can provide meaningful support for student parents in higher education in several ways. First, it can create a community in which students in similar life situations can share experiences, difficulties, and practical tips, thereby offering one another emotional and practical support. In addition, the group can serve as a platform for collective advocacy through which members jointly represent their interests to university leadership—for example, with a view to developing childcare services or creating more flexible study arrangements. The group could also organise informational and educational events that help members navigate the challenges of combining parenting and study. Finally, the group

can strengthen cohesion and reduce feelings of isolation, which may contribute to successful completion of studies and to improved personal well-being.

8. Extending and Specifying the Accessibility of the Study Administration Office: appointing a person within the Study Administration Office who deals specifically with the issues faced by student parents would be a major help in handling everyday matters. In addition, extending customer-service hours—potentially by ensuring online and/or telephone availability between 6 a.m. and 10 p.m.—would also be a significant support for student parents, who can often manage higher-education-related administrative matters only in the early morning or in the evening.

9. Further Targeted Supports: ensuring that participation in part-time (correspondence) programmes is tuition-free/subsidised for student parents, or providing tuition discounts, would also constitute substantial support and could increase the attractiveness of higher education for student parents, while also making it easier to have children alongside one's studies. Universities could also cooperate with students' workplaces in order to support the introduction of flexible working hours and to help students coordinate their higher education obligations with workplace responsibilities.

Summary

The proposed recommendations respond to the challenges faced by student parents raising young children, drawing on the findings of the focus groups organised at the four universities participating in the project. The recommendations were presented in alignment with the tasks and demands of the academic semester because students typically face different clusters of problems at different stages, which—by definition—call for different types of interventions.

During the course-registration period, key challenges include constructing a workable timetable that takes account of family obligations, children's activities, and work responsibilities. Students often find it difficult that class times do not align well with their lives, particularly when they clash with children's afternoon programmes. Universities could support students through more flexible timetables, a wider range of time-slot options, and the provision of online participation. In addition, mentoring schemes and greater flexibility in individual study plans could contribute to coordinating students' studies with family life.

During the teaching period, class attendance becomes a major challenge, particularly because participation in seminars is often compulsory. Organising childcare, the situation of students commuting from outside the university town, and the practicalities of breastfeeding and childcare create additional difficulties. Universities could support students' successful continuation of studies by developing more flexible timetables, providing baby-and-parent rooms and childcare options, and expanding support for hybrid teaching formats.

During the examination period, preparing for exams and reconciling exam schedules with family obligations pose especially significant challenges for student parents. Options such as online examinations, greater flexibility in exam scheduling, and early communication of examination requirements can help students complete assessments successfully.

Overall, university measures and supports—such as flexible timetables, childcare services, and expanded online teaching provision—can offer substantial assistance in enabling student parents to balance academic responsibilities with family life.

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Student parents' circumstances often remain invisible within university walls—even though their life situation may call for tailored support and flexible institutional arrangements. Coordinated by the National Association of Large Families (Nagycsaládosok Országos Egyesülete), four Central European universities collaborated within an international Erasmus+ project to examine student parents' experiences and needs through a rigorous research design. Drawing on focus-group discussions, the study not only maps the challenges participants face but also formulates concrete institutional responses—whether in the form of enhanced academic flexibility, targeted support measures, or initiatives that strengthen the inclusivity of the university community.

This volume will be of value to higher-education decision-makers, instructors, student representatives, and researchers for whom the development of family-friendly higher education is a priority.

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