Where are all the parents? An analysis of visibility, representation, and information for parents on university websites

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Abstract

Student parents, staff/faculty who are also parents, and parents of prospective or current students all form part of university communities, yet these groups have each received relatively little attention. Underpinned by the visible cue theory of representation, this study considers the extent to which parents are represented, made visible, and provided with information via higher education institution websites. Using web searches and manifest content analysis, we examined the text and images on 45 Australian and New Zealand public university websites. 592 webpages were identified that represented or targeted parents or parenting within the university community. All 45 universities had some parent/ing-related website content, but this content was largely restricted to dedicated parent-facing pages. Moreover, representations of parents were intersectionally thin, reproducing normative depictions of parents as able-bodied, non-Indigenous, and women. Websites are not politically neutral texts, but represent institutions' deliberate self-curated depictions of their idealised identities and target communities. On the

websites we examined, parents were *there but not there*: nodded to through some information and representation, yet restricted to particular corners of the website space. Universities must recognise parents as equal members of their communities and ensure better representation, visibility, and support for parents to facilitate equitable participation.

Keywords: diversity, equity, higher education, inclusion, parenting, website analysis

Introduction

Higher education institutions increasingly pride themselves on their efforts to engage and support diverse communities, recognising this as a marketable as well as a moral good. However, compared to other non-traditional groups, parents have received relatively little attention in higher education contexts (Andrewartha et al., 2024; Welsh, 2024).

Both staff and students can be parents. In Australia, for example, one in eight tertiary students, and one in three part-time students, are parents (Andrewartha et al., 2022). Parents work at all levels of higher education, from casual and ancillary staff to senior executive leaders (Moreau & Robertson, 2019); span all genders; and include non-biological (e.g. adoptive/foster) parents. Parents are also only a subset of those who care for dependent or university-aged children: grandparents, extended family, members of Indigenous family/community groups, and other carers may also play important roles and have been acknowledged within the higher education literature (Hook et al., 2022; Moreau & Wheeler, 2023). While this paper focuses specifically on parents, it is important to acknowledge this wider landscape of care/rs in higher education.

Higher education is often "informally designated 'child-free'" (Burford & Hook, 2019, p. 1345), creating a need for equity-focused work centring on parents in higher education contexts. This paper contributes to this effort by examining the visibility and representation of parents and parenting on university websites.

The curation of any organisation's public-facing website involves deliberately configuring a range of tools and techniques to tell desired stories about the organisation's brand (Grayson, 2024). Some messages, values, and people are made prominent, while others are less visible—sending important messages to website users about who and what implicitly belongs. Website materials thus represent institutions' values, assumptions, and norms, including in relation to non-traditional groups. Examining representations of diversity within websites is "a well-established process" (Jonsen et al., 2021, p. 624), including within higher education (Estera & Shahjahan, 2019; Gabel et al., 2016). Such work includes not only textual but also visual analysis providing "an opportunity for raising questions about what is in/visibilised and envisioned within material and virtual representations" (Belluigi, 2025, p. 1048).

This paper reports an analysis of the websites of all Australian and New Zealand public universities, focused on understanding the visibility and representation of parents. Australia and New Zealand are similar sociocultural contexts with comparable public university structures; together, these two countries allowed for a sample of 45 universities of varying sizes, urban/rural/regional contexts, research intensities, and student/staff compositions. Past research has highlighted challenges faced by academic mothers (O'Shea et al., 2023) and student parents (Andrewartha et al., 2022) in these countries, making it important to further explore issues related to parents in Australian and New Zealand university settings. To inform the paper, the next section reviews previous work in relation to parents in higher education contexts.

Literature review

Parents occupy multiple roles in higher education. Below, we consider literature around student parents, staff members who are also parents, and parents of prospective or current students.

Student parents in higher education

Student parents are engaged in parenting their own children while engaged in higher education. Scholars have highlighted the importance of equitable access and participation for student parents for decades, highlighting issues such as childcare (Fadale & Winter, 1991), financial pressure (Gerrard & Roberts, 2006), and non-inclusive academic and social environments at university (Marandet & Wainwright, 2009). Despite such work, student parents remain underrepresented in higher education today (Briegel et al., 2023) and still face significant challenges including financial pressures (Williams et al., 2022), childcare arrangements (Williams et al., 2022), stereotypes and social expectations (Pearson, 2019), managing time and competing responsibilities (Peterson, 2015), and maintaining mental health and wellbeing (Dotterer et al., 2021).

The challenges student parents face are not just personal in nature. Institutional policies and practices negatively impacting student parents include "lack of family-friendly events, ... unaffordable/lack of on-campus childcare services, lack of campus-based resources, and insufficient financial aid … [and] class scheduling conflicts with on-campus childcare policies"

(Ajayi et al., 2022, p. 1267). Student parents can also face difficulties accessing or even being aware of available institutional support; institutional gatekeeping; and “care-blind campus environments” (Sallee & Cox, 2019, p. 635) that lack facilities such as breastfeeding or childcare spaces (Andrewartha et al., 2022; Mason & McChesney, 2024). In contrast, family-friendly institutional environments, policies, and practices have been found to enhance student parents’ academic outcomes (Ajayi et al., 2022).

Student parents are not a homogenous group, and many are multiply disadvantaged due to intersectional considerations (Hook et al., 2022; Sallee, 2019). Sole parents (Hook, 2016) and refugee, migrant, or international student parents may have less support than other student parents. Some students enter higher education as parents already, while others become parents during their studies, necessitating transition and adaptation (Roy et al., 2018). Parents caring for ill and/or disabled children face unique challenges. Finally, the nature of student parents’ programmes of study (e.g. discipline of study, undergraduate/postgraduate, taught/research, on-campus/distance) will shape their experiences of higher education and its intersection with their roles as parents (Hook et al., 2022; Mason et al., 2023).

While many studies consider the experiences of and/or support for student parents, these students have frequently been omitted from broader conversations around widening participation in higher education (Andrewartha et al., 2022; Hook et al., 2022). This has contributed to a paucity of data on student parents’ presence and outcomes in higher education, including in Australia and New Zealand. Parenthood will intersect with many of the other demographic attributes highlighted in widening participation work (e.g., ethnicity, social class, first-in-family status, gender, age, educational background), but the frequent omission of an explicit focus on student parents reinforces the persistent construction of higher education as “care-less” (Spacey et al., 2024, p. 7) and “child-free” (Burford & Hook, 2019, p. 1345).

Higher education staff who are also parents

Many academic, general, and contract staff are also parents and, like student parents, must contend with higher education institutions’ care- and child-free cultures and structures (O’Shea et al., 2023). However, academic faculty who are also parents have not been as frequently considered within research as have student parents—and non-academic staff parents have been considered even less (Moreau & Wheeler, 2023).

Higher education staff who are parents face many of the same challenges as student parents: childcare and logistical pressures, stress, a lack of supportive facilities on campus, and difficulty maintaining personal wellbeing alongside their professional and parenting obligations. Such challenges, along with negative or discriminatory attitudes toward academic parents, have been documented since the 2000s (e.g. Stockdell-Giesler & Ingalls, 2007; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2005).

Parenting in academia is highly gendered. The negative career impacts of parenting are known to be more pronounced for women than men (Crimmins, 2019), including in terms of the gender pay gap (Stephenson, 2024). Academics' constructions of the meaning of being a parent also vary by gender (Rosewell, 2022). Within the enduring "bachelor boy" (Moreau & Wheeler, 2023, p. 3) culture of higher education, womenfaculty are expected to perform as if they are care-less and child-free (McChesney & Locke, 2023; Thornton, 2013). This culture can easily be internalised; for example, in Ikonen and Korvajärvi's (2023) study, mothers working in research contexts turned to a neoliberal discourse of 'choice' which "obscure[d] ongoing inequalities … [and] left little time for these women to stop and think about the situation on a wider scale than how to find or maintain their own value in the system" (p. 800).

Parents supporting their student children

A third group comprises parents who are supporting their (typically school-leaver-aged) children as they enter or attend higher education institutions. These parents may visit campus and provide emotional, financial, and/or practical support to their children. As with other groups of parents, this group is not homogenous; parents' own educational background as well as their demographics will shape their experiences and interpretations of higher education and the ways they support their children's journeys.

The earliest work linking parents and universities focused on this group (rather than on student or staff parents), exploring parental support, educational beliefs, educational background, and engagement as important forms of social capital for students (Brooks, 2004; Perna & Titus, 2005). Students with access to this capital have better experiences and academic outcomes than those without parental support (Mishra, 2020). Parental support has often been studied in the context of historically under-served or under-represented groups, including first-generation students (Sy et al., 2011), low-income students (Roksa & Kinsley, 2019), women (Sy et al.,

2011), and neurodivergent students (Van Hees et al., 2018). While parental support is important, the predominance of work positioning parents as support people rather than as university students or staff/faculty themselves arguably continues to locate parents on the periphery of higher education institutions.

Little research has considered the experiences of these 'supporter-parents' themselves. One exception is Harper et al.'s (2020) study, which found that in supporting first-generation students entering higher education, parents and family members "experienced their own transition … [which] included navigating a relationship with a university" (p. 556). The parents in Harper et al.'s study called for institutions to better understand and respond to the needs of students' parents as key support people and influencers of student success.

The present study: Aims and rationale

Overall, existing literature highlights the challenges faced by parents in higher education settings. There has been a comparative lack of engagement with parents compared to other non-traditional groups in higher education settings. While parents occupy multiple roles within higher education, the overall category of 'parents' remains positioned at the periphery of many higher education institutions.

To further explore this positioning, our study aimed to answer the overarching question, 'How visible are parents and parenting on Australian and New Zealand university websites?' Our theoretical foundation is Hinojosa and Caul Kittilson's (2020) visible cue theory of representation, which argues that to facilitate equitable participation, underrepresented or nontraditional groups must not only be able to enter restricted spaces but must also be *visible* within those spaces. Visibility encourages others to see that they, too, can enter such spaces; as children's rights activist Marian Wright teaches us, "You can't be what you can't see". We are thus interested in whether universities (through their websites) make parents visible, signalling to other parents that they, too, can be—and belong—within higher education.

This study considers parents in multiple capacities because visible cue theory leads us to be concerned with *any and all* representations of parents. While groups such as student parents, staff parents, and supporter-parents should not be conflated, there may well be a visible cue effect if (for example) student parents see other parents represented on a university's website.

(As a parallel example, Indigenous students would likely benefit not only from seeing other Indigenous students represented on a university website but also from seeing Indigenous faculty/staff and wider members of Indigenous students' families/support communities portrayed—creating a sense that Indigenous people overall are integral parts of the university community.) Groups of parents in higher education are also not mutually exclusive. Many postgraduate students also undertake paid work within universities, and many higher education staff undertake further study during their employment. Some students or staff may also be simultaneously supporting their university-aged children. Recognising these intersections supports our decision to consider parents broadly rather than focusing only on a single way parents might be positioned in higher education contexts.

To date, visible cue theory has not been applied outside the context (politics) it was developed in. Our study innovates by adopting this theory in a new context (higher education). However, other work on diversity, equity, and inclusion affirms the importance of visibility (e.g. Ferfolja et al., 2020; Lewis & Simpson, 2012). Since our study focuses on the choices (in the form of website content) of organisations, visible cue theory provides a way to understand the discursive impact of what is made (in)visible and how this contributes to equity, diversity, access, and inclusion.

By considering how parents are represented on Australian and New Zealand public university websites, we extend scholarship on parents in higher education. Critical discourse analysis and website analysis have previously been used to explore institutional identity, social constructs, and how equity and diversity are represented within university websites (e.g. Saichaie & Morphew, 2014; Svendsen & Svendsen, 2017). Knight et al. (2024) also recently used a website scan to review Australian university websites for support information for care-experienced students, an example of considering representation of a particular non-traditional group using website analysis. Each of these past studies raised concerns about the discursive work done by university websites and highlighted the need for ongoing critical attention to these platforms. We add to this body of work with our examination of the visibility, representation, and information support for parents on Australian and New Zealand public university websites.

The following research questions guided the study:

RQ1. What is the overall representation of parents and parenting on these university websites, as determined by:
   a. The number of webpages?
   b. The extent to which those webpages relate to parents and parenting?

RQ2. What is the focus of the identified webpages?

RQ3. Which groups are represented as parents?

RQ4. What types of parents are represented, in terms of:
   a. parenting pathways?
   b. roles and relationships?
   c. marginalised groups?

RQ5. What overt visual representations of parents and parenting are found on these webpages?

Together, these research questions allow us to consider how visible parents and parenting are across these university websites (RQ1), what information is provided for parents (RQ2), who is made visible (RQ3-5), and how parents and parenting are represented (RQ3-5).

Methodology

Search strategy

We examined all Australian (n=37) and New Zealand (n=8) public university websites. As university websites are publicly available and our research did not involve human participants, institutional ethical approval was not needed.

We ran Google searches and also used each university website's inbuilt search function. The Google search string for each university was:

> *university name + (adopt OR adopted OR adoption OR baby OR babies OR care OR carer OR child OR children OR families OR family OR father OR maternity OR mother OR parent OR parenting OR parental OR parents OR paternity OR pregnancy OR pregnancies OR pregnant)*

For the 8 New Zealand universities, we added two further keywords in Te Reo Māori: *tamariki* (children) and *whānau* (family).

All 45 institutional websites offered an inbuilt search function. On each website, we manually searched using each of our keywords in turn, recognising that not all institutional websites will necessarily support Boolean search operators.

For each Google search, we reviewed the first 60 results returned. For each institutional website search, we reviewed the first page of search results for each keyword; if an institution's website did not sort results into pages, we reviewed the first 10 results per keyword.

Eligibility

Across both the Google and institutional website searches, pages were deemed eligible for our analysis if they represented or targeted parents or parenting within the university community. We excluded webpages that highlighted research or publications about parenting, information about courses or community programs (e.g. child development), or news stories featuring children visiting campus without parents (such as a one-off field trip), because none of these positioned parents/parenting as part of the university community. University policies relating to child protection, working with children, and family violence were also excluded because these would encompass people and situations other than parents/parenting. We retained policies about staff and/or students bringing their children onto campus. Webpages related to carers were carefully checked to determine their eligibility, since the term 'carer' is used differently in different contexts. Webpages were included in our study only when 'carer' included parents.

Data analysis

Each eligible webpage was analysed by two coders. A manifest content analysis approach was adopted, which sees the identification of observable, surface-level content "without the need to discern intent or identify deeper meaning" (Kleinheksel et al., 2020, p. 128). Procedures were followed to increase inter-coder reliability, as recommended by Cofie et al. (2022). A detailed codebook was developed, and regular dialogue between the two coders encouraged shared meaning around codes.

Analysis for RQ1-4 considered both textual and visual elements. For RQ1(a), we undertook a simple count of the number of webpages found. For RQ1(b), if all elements within a webpage related to parent/ing, the page was coded as being 'fully' parent/ing focused. Webpages that also included information not related to parenting were coded as 'partly' focused; webpages mentioning parent/ing in one sentence or less, or containing a single visual representation without any other detail, were coded as 'superficial'.

Analysis for RQ2 and RQ3 involved coding the main focus of each webpage (RQ2; for example, childcare, parental leave, student profiles) and the groups being represented as parents (RQ3; for example, students, staff, parents of students). In both cases, codes were inductively developed based on the webpage content and negotiated among the two coders.

Determining the representation of parents of minoritised groups (RQ4) was more complex. We sought explicit mention of people's identities and experiences in text but also coded when images clearly showed parents from minoritised groups (e.g., parents with non-white skin tones, parents in wheelchairs). We acknowledge that this approach is not reflective of self-identification and may problematically conflate skin colour with ethnicity. As such, in line with previous studies, we applied this approach cautiously to "capture broad … categories as they would likely be interpreted at a glance by the intended audience" (Ahn et al., 2023, p. 5) but avoided making assumptions about actual identity. Visible cue theory (Hinojosa & Caul Kittilson, 2020) leads us to argue that the diversity evident in the overall representation of parents on university websites is important even if the people featured might identify themselves differently.

Finally, because of the increased visibility that visual representation can provide, we conducted a separate and more detailed analysis of webpage images for RQ5. We manually reviewed each image, coding for representations of parenting only when overt. For example, a woman sitting in an office, who may indeed be a mother, would not be coded as a representation of parenting unless this was apparent in the image, such as by having a child sitting on her lap. While we acknowledge that parenting is not always overtly visible, in keeping with visible cue theory, we sought explicit examples where parenting was made visible to website users.

Limitations

Website analysis opens opportunities to consider the discursive power of these institutionally controlled platforms, but also has limitations. First, because websites are dynamic, our analysis

provides a snapshot of the content available at the point in time when each search was conducted. This is an inevitable characteristic of web-based research.

Second, web-based research involves analysing texts and images that represent something (in this case, a university). This cannot offer the same insights as observing practice or capturing people's lived experiences. However, as Saichaie and Morphew (2014) note, "because the text and images that appear on these sites provide many prospective students [or staff, or supporter-parents] with their first and only institutional impressions, the messages websites convey are incredibly important" (p. 500) Visible cue theory highlights the power of what (or who) is made visible, and we bring this lens to university websites.

At a practical level, we could only examine publicly available web content. Some information for current students and/or staff may be located on internal portals and thus could not be considered. We argue that it is meaningful to consider just the public-facing website content: only this content is accessible to those not yet part of the university community who are looking for visible cues around the normalisation or presence of parents at a particular institution. However, our results must be interpreted with a recognition that additional support for students and/or staff may be available elsewhere.

Our data collection involved identifying any/all references to parent/ing without deeper analysis of their tone or connotation. For example, one webpage about student accommodation noted that the families (including children) of students could not access the service. Our inclusion criteria meant that this webpage was included in our analysis (albeit coded as 'superficially' focused on parenting), but it does not constitute positive representation. We deliberately sought to provide a broad overview of the parenting-related content of these 45 universities. However, given that negative or exclusionary representations of parenting may do more harm than good, future research could further probe the discursive nature of website content related to parents.

Finally, our methodology is necessarily quantitative, given the large corpus of pages across 45 university websites. Analyses involving coding and then counting are common in both manifest and visual content analysis; such methods are "efficient and robust for analysing a large number of samples, focusing on the literal representation in an objective way … Quantitatively summarising across qualitative assessments [also] addresses key criticisms of qualitative analysis alone" (Ahn et al., 2025, p. 501) through allowing a larger amount of data to be

manageably examined. We are thus able to provide a broad picture of the visibility, representation, and information for parents across 45 university websites, examining the websites in a range of ways based on our research questions.

Results and discussion

This section reports and discusses the results of our analysis. We consider each of our five research questions in turn.

RQ1. What is the overall representation of parents and parenting?

Across the 45 public university websites examined, we located 592 individual webpages representing parents and/or parenting (as shown in Table 1). These 592 webpages formed the corpus for the subsequent analyses.

Table 1. Number of pages representing parents and/or parenting within 45 university websites

Number of pages per institutional website	Australia (37 universities)	New Zealand (8 universities)	Total (45 universities)
Lowest	5	8	5
Highest	34	22	34
Average	13	12	13
Total	493	99	592

Overall, universities had an average of 13 individual webpages mentioning or targeting parents or parenting. Given that university websites are generally large entities with many pages and sub-pages, an average of just 13 pages featuring parents or parenting seems low. Considering the visible cue theory of representation (Hinojosa & Caul Kittilson, 2020), limited visibility of parents and parenting may communicate that these institutions are not places for parents.

Moreover, as shown in Table 2, of the pages that included representation of parents or parenting, most (80%) were in fact fully focused on parents and parenting. Parents and parenting are predominantly featured only on dedicated, parent/ing-focused pages rather than being visible more widely across a university's website. This finding reinforces constructions of

the university overall as “care-less” (Spacey et al., 2024, p. 7) and “child-free” (Burford & Hook, 2019, p. 1345).

Table 2. Extent to which pages representing parents and parenting were focused (fully, partly, or superficially) on parenting

Extent of focus on parents/ing	Australia		NZ		Total	
	Pages (n=493)	Universities (n=37)	Pages (n=99)	Universities (n=8)	Pages (n=592)	Universities (n=45)
Full	397 (81%)	37 (100%)	78 (78%)	8 (100%)	475 (80%)	45 (100%)
Part	73 (15%)	28 (76%)	16 (16%)	7 (88%)	89 (15%)	35 (78%)
Superficial	23 (5%)	13 (35%)	5 (5%)	4 (50%)	28 (5%)	17 (38%)

RQ2. What are the focuses of the webpages that feature parents and/or parenting?

We identified 18 areas of focus mentioned more than once across the dataset (Table 3). The most common foci were childcare, enrolment support for parents of high school leavers, and parental leave information for staff. Many other topics, however, were covered only by smaller numbers of universities, suggesting that parents at some institutions may not have access to potentially important or helpful information. Information that international students with children might need (relocations, housing, schooling) was only provided by a minority of institutions, as was information about general supports for student parents (targeted programmes and initiatives, financial supports) or about students’ rights and responsibilities when parenting on campus (breastfeeding and children on campus policies or information).

Universities’ traditional reliance on school-leaver markets was reflected in the prevalence of information and support for parents, particularly targeted to prospective students. Less common was information and advice that could be of use to parents once their children have begun university, suggesting an enrolment capture rather than a learner success focus.

Table 3. Areas of focus on pages related to parents and parenting, by frequency

Focus	Description	Australia	NZ	Total

		Pages (n=493)	Universities (n=37)	Pages (n=99)	Universities (n=8)	Pages (n=592)	Universities (n=45)
Childcare	On-campus and local childcare facilities, childcare support, government assistance	114 (23%)	35 (95%)	26 (26%)	8 (100%)	140 (24%)	43 (96%)
Enrolment support for parents	Information about university choice, entrance procedures, supporting children for parents of high school leavers	101 (20%)	31 (84%)	25 (25%)	7 (88%)	126 (21%)	38 (84%)
Leave	Parental leave entitlements for staff,[1] and support for returning to work after parental leave	100 (20%)	32 (86%)	11 (11%)	5 (63%)	111 (19%)	37 (82%)
Facilities and services	Including baby change tables, parking permits, parents' rooms, nursing spaces, etc.	53 (11%)	27 (73%)	10 (10%)	5 (63%)	63 (11%)	32 (74%)
Student profile	Profiles of students who are parents,[2] student parents sharing experiences and advice	45 (9%)	15 (41%)	13 (13%)	6 (75%)	58 (10%)	21 (47%)
Accommodations	Accommodations such as flexible work/study arrangements, extensions on assignments	46 (9%)	21 (57%)	9 (9%)	4 (50%)	55 (9%)	25 (56%)
Parents supporting students	Information about supporting students at university, generally those newly enrolled	29 (6%)	16 (43%)	11 (11%)	4 (50%)	40 (7%)	20 (44%)
Breastfeeding support	Policies for breastfeeding staff/students, encouragement and advice[3]	30 (6%)	13 (35%)	1 (1%)	1 (13%)	31 (5%)	14 (31%)
Children on Campus	Policies and information related to children visiting campus with their parents	23 (5%)	17 (46%)	4 (4%)	3 (38%)	27 (5%)	20 (44%)
Relocation	Information and support for (particularly international) students relocating with children	21 (4%)	18 (49%)	3 (3%)	3 (38%)	24 (4%)	21 (47%)

Programs and Initiatives	Mentoring and support programs, equity initiatives, workshops and seminars	16 (3%)	10 (27%)	3 (3%)	2 (25%)	19 (3%)	12 (27%)
Financial	Scholarships, grants, and other financial support for staff or students who are parents	15 (3%)	10 (27%)	2 (2%)	2 (25%)	17 (3%)	12 (27%)
Housing	University housing and accommodation options for student parents	5 (1%)	5 (14%)	3 (3%)	3 (38%)	8 (1%)	8 (18%)
Staff Profile	Profiles of staff who are parents, staff parents sharing advice and experiences	3 (1%)	2 (5%)	2 (2%)	2 (25%)	5 (1%)	4 (9%)
Schooling	Information about compulsory schooling and the local education system	4 (1%)	4 (11%)	-	-	4 (1%)	4 (9%)
Covid	Advice for student and/or staff parents studying/working at home during Covid-19	3 (<1%)	3 (8%)	-	-	3 (<1%)	3 (7%)
Pregnancy safety	Information about working safely while pregnant, including working with chemicals	2 (<1%)	2 (5%)	1 (1%)	1 (13%)	3 (<1%)	3 (7%)
Health insurance	Health insurance information for international students (includes pregnancy, family cover)	1 (<1%)	1 (3%)	1 (1%)	1 (13%)	2 (<1%)	2 (4%)

[1] Includes seven cases related to postgraduate students (NZ=7)
[2] Includes six cases where the student's child is also a current student (AU=4; NZ=2)
[3] Does not include webpages that only state the existence or position of breastfeeding areas; these are coded as 'facilities.'

RQ3. Which groups are represented as parents?

Table 4 shows the frequency with which the 592 webpages represented groups of higher education stakeholders or participants as parents. Multiple representations were seen on many webpages.

Table 4. Groups represented as parents on university websites

Group	Details	Australia		NZ		Total	
		Pages (n=493)	Universities (n=37)	Pages (n=99)	Universities (n=8)	Pages (n=592)	Universities (n=45)
Student	Undergraduate and postgraduate students with parenting responsibilities	220 (45%)	36 (97%)	47 (47%)	8 (100%)	267 (45%)	44 (98%)
Staff	University employees with parenting responsibilities	210 (43%)	36 (97%)	36 (36%)	8 (100%)	246 (42%)	44 (98%)
Parents of students	Parents of current and prospective students	133 (27%)	33 (89%)	36 (36%)	8 (100%)	169 (29%)	41 (91%)
Public	Visitors to the university and users of on-campus services such as childcare	31 (6%)	18 (49%)	7 (7%)	6 (75%)	38 (6%)	26 (58%)
Unclear	(Conceptualisation of parents unable to be coded with confidence)	23 (5%)	13 (35%)	1 (1%)	1 (13%)	24 (4%)	14 (31%)

Student parents were the most prominent, being featured in 45% of pages and 98% of university websites overall. This finding aligns with past research showing student parents to be the most researched carers within academia (Moreau & Wheeler, 2023). However, staff parents in our study were not far behind student parents in terms of visibility, contrasting with the stark difference documented in Moreau and Wheeler's literature review.

RQ4. What types of parents are represented?

Parenting takes a range of forms. Parenting pathways were explicitly mentioned on 99 webpages of 35 universities (Table 5), with pregnancy the most commonly represented pathway. While navigating pregnancy in higher education settings is challenging (Moreau, 2016; O'Shea et al., 2023), other parenting pathways present unique challenges for parents and families and need to be made visible in higher education contexts. Two webpages from New Zealand acknowledged matua whāngai, a customary Māori practice where a child is raised by someone other than their birth parents (usually a relative).

Table 5. Parenting pathways evident on university websites

Parenting pathway	Australia		NZ		Total	
	Pages (n= 493)	Universities (n=37)	Pages (n= 99)	Universities (n=8)	Pages (n= 592)	Universities (n=45)
Pregnancy	79 (16%)	29 (78%)	13 (13%)	6 (75%)	92 (16%)	35 (78%)
Adoption	65 (13%)	28 (76%)	6 (6%)	4 (50%)	71 (12%)	32 (71%)
Foster/permanent care	32 (6%)	12 (32%)	1 (1%)	1 (13%)	33 (6%)	13 (29%)
Surrogacy	17 (3%)	9 (24%)	-	-	17 (3%)	9 (20%)
Matua whāngai	-	-	2 (2%)	2 (25%)	2 (>1%)	2 (4%)

Table 6 shows the parenting roles and relationships that were explicitly mentioned or represented. Mothers were the most frequently represented, found on almost three-quarters of the universities' websites. As above, then, normative constructions of parenting in terms of both gender and parenting pathways seemed evident in our analysis.

Table 6. Parenting roles and relationships evident in university websites

Parenting role/ relationship	Australia		NZ		Total	
	Pages (n= 493)	Universities (n=37)	Pages (n= 99)	Universities (n=8)	Pages (n= 592)	Universities (n=45)
Mother[1]	52 (11%)	27 (73%)	14 (14%)	6 (75%)	66 (11%)	33 (73%)
Father	19 (4%)	13 (35%)	8 (8%)	5 (63%)	27 (5%)	18 (40%)
Heterosexual couples	1 (<1%)	1 (3%)	7 (7%)	5 (63%)	8 (1%)	6 (13%)
Same-sex couples	5 (1%)	5 (14%)	1 (1%)	1 (13%)	6 (1%)	6 (13%)
Single parents [2]	6 (1%)	6 (16%)	3 (3%)	3 (38%)	9 (2%)	9 (20%)

[1] Includes four single mothers and one teen mother.

[2] Four cases explicitly refer to mothers

Diverse groups of parents who were explicitly represented are shown in Table 7. Parents hold other intersecting identity positions that may privilege or marginalise them in the higher education environment (Sallee, 2019). We found few representations of parents of Colour, Indigenous parents, low-income parents, LGBTQ+ parents, or disabled parents, thus—again—

reproducing normative constructions of parents. The websites in this study lacked intersectional representations of parenting; an intersectional lens is important for promoting equity in higher education (Nichols & Stahl, 2019), and university websites are spaces where intersectional diversity could be proactively acknowledged.

Table 7. Representation of parents' sociocultural identities within university websites

Identity	Australia		NZ		Total	
	Pages (n= 493)	Universities (n=37)	Pages (n= 99)	Universities (n=8)	Pages (n= 592)	Universities (n=45)
Parents of Colour	76 (15%)	33 (89%)	27 (27%)	8 (100%)	103 (17%)	41 (91%)
-- Incl. Indigenous parents	*6 (1%)*	*6 (16%)*	*7 (7%)*	*3 (38%)*	*13 (2%)*	*9 (20%)*
Low-income parents	6 (1%)	6 (16%)	-	-	6 (1%)	6 (13%)
LGBTQ+ parents	4 (1%)	4 (11%)	1 (1%)	1 (13%)	5 (1%)	5 (11%)
Disabled parents	3 (1%)	3 (8%)	1 (1%)	1 (13%)	4 (1%)	4 (9%)

The representation of parents' diverse identities was the only area of our research in which noteworthy differences between Australian and New Zealand universities' websites were seen. New Zealand university websites contained much greater representation of fathers (63% of NZ universities vs 35% in Australia), single parents (38% of NZ universities vs 16% in Australia), and Indigenous parents (38% of New Zealand universities vs 16% in Australia).

RQ5. What overt visual representations of parents and parenting are found?

The most common visual representation of parenting was photographs of parents studying or working alongside children, followed by stock images of parents with a newborn baby. Several icons highlighted parenting-related associations and groups (Table 8).

Table 8. Overt visual representations of parenting within university websites

Visual representation	Images	Pages	Universities	Details of representation
Images of parents working/ studying with children	20 (18 unique)	15	10 (AU=7, NZ=3)	Mothers (x17) and fathers (x3) working or studying with young children, a partner also present in 4 photos. Images are stock photos (x7) or real (x13), posed in a home setting (x11), on-campus (x3), or indeterminate location (x6).

Images of parent with newborn baby	10 (6 unique)	10	4 (AU=4)	Stock image of baby feet, hands, and/or faces, with adult hand or chest visible, one face visible (partly obscured, male)
'Breastfeeding Friendly Workplace' icon	7	7	5 (AU=5)	Icon denoting accreditation as a breastfeeding-friendly workplace by the Australian Breastfeeding Association
Images of graduating parents	6	5	4 (AU=4)	Real images of graduates (all women) posing with baby (x2), young child (x1), 2 young children (x2), and young adult children (x1)
Images of pregnancy	6 (5 unique)	5	4 (AU=2, NZ=2)	Stock images of pregnant people (x3) of which two show only torso, sonogram (x2), couple with pregnancy test (x1)
'Engaged Parent Network' icon	1	1	1 (AU=1)	Icon includes cartoon outline of an adult and two children, with the text 'ENGAGED PARENT NETWORK Culture Community Coaching Collaboration'
Image of breastfeeding	1	1	1 (AU=1)	Stock image of baby breastfeeding, mother mostly obscured
'Student Parent Union' icon	1	1	1 (AU=1)	Icon includes cartoon image of three arms held by each other, with the text 'STUDENT PARENT UNION Connect Support Advocate'

Few images were identified that clearly represented parenting *on campus*. Instead, images of parents with newborn babies, breastfeeding, and pregnancy were all stock images in indeterminate locations. Only three photos of parents working or studying with children were clearly situated on campus, reproducing a distinction between home as the place for children and campus as a place without children (Burford & Hook, 2019).

Women were more frequently shown among the visualisations of parenting, and all photos of graduating parents depicted women. The images on these university websites thus reproduce a cultural norm positioning parenting as women's work, as seen in past research (Moreau & Wheeler, 2023).

Breastfeeding was particularly poorly represented among the visual data: across 45 public university websites in two countries, we could only identify one visual representation of breastfeeding. Breastfeeding has previously been framed as "taboo" in academic contexts (Geuskens & Colombo, 2020, p. 103), and insufficient support for staff breastfeeding or expressing milk on campus is problematic for both staff and students (Burns & Triandafilidis, 2019; Mason & McChesney, 2024). Better visibility of breastfeeding as one element of parenting could contribute to positive change.

Reflections

This study examined the visibility and representations of parents and/or parenting on 45 university websites. Recognising that websites are deliberately configured texts that represent an institution in its preferred ways and seek to reach targeted populations (Grayson, 2024; Saichaie & Morphew, 2014), we located and analysed 592 distinct webpages that included representations of parents/parenting. Our study sits against a backdrop of widespread university engagement in equity-related endeavours in Australia, New Zealand, and beyond—but also against a backdrop of parents and parenting receiving far less equity-related attention than other (undoubtedly important) groups (Andrewartha et al., 2024; Welsh, 2024).

All 45 universities had some representation of parents and/or parenting on their public-facing websites, meaning that parents and parenting were not entirely invisible. Staff parents, in particular, were better represented across these websites than we had expected based on previous studies (Moreau & Wheeler, 2023).

However, overall, parents were *there but not there*. Representations of parents or parenting were largely restricted to a relatively small number of pages (on average, 13 pages per university) whose content was parent/ing-focused; representations of parents were not woven through the images or textual content across the websites in their entirety. Parents are thus restricted to their own metaphorical corner of these institutional websites, simultaneously constructing parents as present but "other" in the wider university environment and reinforcing constructions of the university as "care-less" (Spacey et al., 2024, p. 7) and "child-free" (Burford & Hook, 2019, p. 1345). Our findings align with past research including O'Shea et al.'s (2023) study, which concluded that Australian universities "continue to push us [mothers] … to the margins of the academy" (p. 2542). This othering is compounded by the lack of rich, intersectional representations of parents across the 592 webpages we examined: parents continue to be constructed predominantly as women, able-bodied, and non-Indigenous, and parenting is situated predominantly within heteronormative family contexts and outside the physical environment of the university campus.

To exclude—intentionally or unintentionally—any group undermines the claims universities frequently make about their commitments to diversity and inclusion. Past research has challenged the way institutions' equity commitments "articulate 'imagined worlds'" that are not

borne out by institutional practices (Baker et al., 2021, p. 836). Under-supporting a particular group (such as through insufficient information or limited visibility in institutional materials) has real personal impacts on current and prospective staff, students, and other members of a university's community. Finally, conceptualising diversity unidimensionally rather than intersectionally means efforts to support (for example) Indigenous students may be undermined due to a lack of information and support for (for example) parents, some of whom are likely to be Indigenous.

Our analysis shows that while Australian and New Zealand public universities have begun to acknowledge parents and parenting through their public-facing websites, there is significant room—and need—for improvement. Hinojosa and Caul Kittilson's (2020) visible cue theory of representation highlights the importance of thoughtful, diverse, and widespread representation of parents and parenting within such websites.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of our study, we encourage those involved in the curation of higher education institutions' websites to critically consider the visibility and representations of parents within those websites. As members of the institutional community, parents—including staff, students and parents of current or prospective students—warrant visibility in websites and other texts that represent the institution's community. This visibility communicates to others that parents belong in the context of a university, in line with the visible cue theory of representation (Hinojosa & Caul Kittilson, 2020).

The list of content foci presented earlier in Table 3 offers a possible checklist for content curators in terms of ensuring that an institution's website provides a comprehensive range of information for current and prospective members of the institution's community who are also parents. However, we also encourage website curators to do more than just check for the basic inclusion of representations and information for parents. Parents should be woven in inclusive and representative ways across the whole of an institutional website, rather than being restricted to a small number of pages that are specifically for parents. Moreover, the representations of parents need to be diverse, acknowledging that parents come from a range of intersectional backgrounds that can and should be made visible.

Further research could usefully extend our study, considering questions such as: How do website users perceive the visibility, representation, and information for parents on university websites? And is there a difference in the visibility, representation, and/or information for parents on the websites of private universities, or those of universities in different sociocultural or geographic contexts?

Conclusion

University websites are key texts that represent higher education institutions to the world. Owned media "represents the media that brands control the most" (Grayson, 2024, p. 11). Institutional websites are not politically neutral texts; they make some people and ideas visible while silencing or peripherising others through invisibility.

This study examined the visibility, representation, and information for parents on the websites of all 45 public universities in Australia and New Zealand. Through analysing the textual and visual content of 596 pages that represented or targeted parent/ing within the university community, we have uncovered the limited (in extent) and narrow (in nature) representations of parent/ing these websites conveyed.

To support equity and inclusion in higher education, parents—like other non-traditional groups—must be *seen to be there* (Hinojosa & Caul Kittilson, 2020). However, on the university websites we examined, parents were instead *there but not there*. Our study demonstrates the importance of attending to the discursive power and political implications of visibility and representation on university websites. With invisibility being a powerful form of exclusion (Mason & McChesney, 2024), we must continue to follow Hinojosa and Caul Kittilson's (2020, p. 731) advice that "visibility should not regularly be assumed but should instead be empirically tested."

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