ENSURING HIGHER EDUCATION CAMPUS MAPS SUPPORT VISIBILITY AND INCLUSION FOR PARENTS

A briefing resource for higher education administrators, facility managers, communications staff, and accessibility services based on research by Associate Professor Shannon Mason (University of Nagasaki, Japan) and Dr Katrina McChesney (University of Waikato, New Zealand)

Background

Many higher education staff and students are also parents, yet higher education campuses are often 'informally designated "child-free"' (Burford & Hook, 2019, p. 1345). Parents face significant challenges within higher education settings. These challenges can be compounded through inaccessible campus environments (Springer et al., 2009). It is important to consider parents as valued and visible campus users when designing infrastructure, information, and communications.

Our research

In 2022, we reviewed publicly available campus maps for all 37 Australian and 8 New Zealand public universities to identify what parent-related facilities were evident. Of 281 distinct teaching and/or research sites, only 36% had maps showing any parent-related facilities. The most frequently shown facilities (although still relatively rare) were childcare services (26% of sites) and parents' rooms (25%). It was unclear what some facilities entailed and who could access them, further restricting accessibility.

Why is this important?

- **Supporting staff and student parents:** Engagement in higher education and the workforce is good for individuals, their families, and wider society. To meet their children's needs while pursuing their studies and/or careers, parents need practical support such as safe, high quality childcare; facilities to support breastfeeding and baby changing; and accessible facilities (e.g. lifts and ramps to accommodate strollers).
- **The importance of campus maps:** Maps are important information sources for current and prospective students and staff. Some institutions might offer parent-related facilities that were not shown on the publicly available campus maps we examined. However, past research (e.g. National Union of Students, 2009) shows that student parents in particular often do not know what facilities are available to them on campus. Clear, informative, and complete campus maps are valuable supports for staff and student parents.
- **Normalising parents in higher education:** Hinojosa and Saul Kittilson's (2020) visibility cue theory of representation argues that in order to improve attitudes and facilitate increased inclusion, marginalised groups' presence in public settings needs to be made visible to wider society. Showing parent-related facilities on campus maps promotes the visibility and normalisation of parents within higher education communities, encouraging access, inclusion, and engagement.

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RECOMMENDATIONS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

Ensure maps are available for all campus sites
- While all universities in our study had maps available for their main campus, 36% of campus sites had no maps available. Parents using these campuses lack information on relevant facilities, making the university less inclusive and accessible for these campus users.

Ensure parent-related facilities are available and marked on all campus maps
- Staff and students who are parents may be users of any/all campus sites. It is unlikely to be practicable for them to travel to a different campus each time they need to access a parents' room or baby changing facility. This means relevant facilities need to be evident at all campus sites.

Consider a range of possible facilities to support parents on campus
- Facilities indicated on campus maps in our study included childcare services, parents' rooms, baby changing facilities, nursing rooms, and parking facilities (e.g. dedicated parking for parents with strollers/young children, or a dedicated drop-off zone outside a campus childcare service).
- Other facilities that could support parents include play areas, bookable family study spaces, and child-friendly/breastfeeding-friendly eateries.

Ensure maps provide clear information about the parent-related facilities available
- It was not clear what some facilities in our study actually entailed or who could access them. For example, a "change room" might be for baby changing or it might be for adults to shower and change before/after sporting activities. A "parents' room" might just mean a baby change table in a unisex or accessible toilet, or it might be a dedicated private space with comfortable chairs for breastfeeding/milk expression, a fridge and power outlet to support milk expression, and a microwave to support formula/baby food preparation. Some facilities may be open to all, while others may only be for staff or may require key or contacting security staff to gain entry.
- Campus maps should clearly outline what facilities are provided as well as explicitly stating who can access them and how. Campus users from other cultures/contexts as well as first-generation students may not be familiar with local, cultural, or institutional norms in your context.
- A good example of clear information on a campus map comes from the University of Technology Sydney, whose map stated: "UTS parents rooms are available for staff, students and visitors. These rooms offer a change table, sink and comfortable chair for breastfeeding in a quiet space."
- Photos and/or icons can also help users understand what facilities such as parents' rooms entail.
- Links to further details on the university website could also be included on campus maps.

Ensure facilities are adequate to meet the needs of parent campus users
- Toilets are not suitable spaces for breastfeeding or milk expression. While a baby changing facility might be located in a toilet, parents also need other spaces that are quiet, hygenic, and private to allow for infant feeding, as well as explicit acknowledgement that breastfeeding is welcomed in any area of the campus.
- Remember that parents can be of all genders and may also have other accessibility needs. If a baby change facility is located within a toilet, ensure it is a unisex and accessible toilet. Use gender-neutral labelling (e.g. "parents' room" rather than "mothers' room").
- Consulting with campus users can provide valuable insights about the adequacy and accessibility of current facilities, the clarity of information on maps, and any unmet needs or areas for improvement.

Ensure the information shown on campus maps is up-to-date
- Campus facilities change over time. With maps today being largely hosted on university websites, regularly updating maps is easier and less expensive than when paper maps dominated.

Consider creating parent-specific campus maps
- Some university campuses already have other targeted maps available (e.g. walking/cycling maps, accessibility maps). Consider creating a parent-specific map or a parent-focused layer/filter on an interactive map. Include all facilities and information that might assist parents, such as feeding/changing facilities; elevators and ramps for strollers; parking information; and lawn or playground areas where children can play.

Maintain the visibility of parent-specific facilities on general campus maps
- Even if a parent-specific map is developed, retain the visibility of parent-specific facilities on main campus maps in order to promote the visibility of parents and children on campus, normalise their presence, and send a message of acceptance to current and future campus users, regardless of their parenting status.

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> According to Gulson and Symes (2007), '***the language of exclusion is, by and large, spatial; who's in, who's out, at the heart, on the margins***' (p. 99) …
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> Our findings show that there remains ***significant need for improvement*** among Australian and New Zealand public universities in terms of the most basic forms of physical provision for those among their student and staff cohorts who also happen to be parents. ***Without these provisions, parents remain on the margins***, burdened by the added pressures of parenthood with limited acknowledgement of or support for those pressures.
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> - Mason & McChesney, 2023, p. 11 ([link])

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