

**STUDENT EXPERIENCE:**  
student community

**Research**

## Evaluating the needs of international student-parents

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Cardiff University



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## Evaluating the needs of international student-parents Cardiff University

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# Contents

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1.	Research motivations and aims	38
2.	Research methodology	38
	2.1 Online survey	38
	2.2 Focus group	38
3.	Key research findings	38
	3.1 Online survey	38
	3.1.1 Demographics	38
	3.1.2 Experiences of parenting as an international student	39
	3.2 Focus group	42
4.	Conclusions	43
5.	Application of research: key recommendations	44
6.	Ideas for further research	44
7.	Reference	45
8.	Acknowledgements	45
9.	Research team	45
10.	Contact	45
11.	Appendices	
	Appendices are available with the online version of this report:	
	<a href="http://www.ukcisa.org.uk/grants-reports">www.ukcisa.org.uk/grants-reports</a>	
	Appendix 1: online survey	
	Appendix 2: focus group moderator sheet (talking points)	

## List of tables

Table 1:	Does being a parent and/or prospective parent affect your studies?	40
Table 2:	What further help, if any, do you think Cardiff University should be providing international students who are parenting and/or are pregnant in the UK?	42

## List of figures

Figure 1a:	Online survey: respondents' levels of study	38
Figure 1b:	Online survey: respondents' gender	38
Figure 1c:	Online survey: respondents' age range	39
Figure 2:	Online survey: respondents' nationalities	39
Figure 3:	Online survey: respondents' number of children	39
Figure 4:	Online survey: when respondents' partners look after the children	39
Figure 5:	Online survey: level of ease, difficulties, parenting before and since studying	40
Figure 6:	Online survey: do you think student-parents (including prospective parents) are represented at Cardiff University?	41
Figure 7:	Online survey: services already accessed by informants	41
Figure 8:	Online survey: experiences accessing the university services	42

## 1. Research motivations and aims

It is not uncommon for international students to bring their families (spouses/partners and children) to the UK while they study. However, exact figures for such family members are unknown. National Statistics (Home Office, 2019) did not separate the number of Tier 4 dependant visas issued from the number of Tier 4 (general) student visas granted. Even if separated, it should be noted that not all family members would hold a dependant Tier 4 visa.

There has arguably been limited inquiry into the experiences and needs of such international student-parents in the UK. The researchers from the International Student Support Team at Cardiff University therefore hoped to redress this gap and broaden this area of research.

At present, international student-parents tend to seek and receive support from the University's International Student Support team, primarily in relation to their dependants' immigration and visa issues (based on staff testimony). This research aimed to explore students' experiences of the support already offered at Cardiff University as a whole, and whether more could be done to better support international student-parents and if so, in what way.

The researchers were also interested in comparisons based on gender, particularly regarding the level of support received from students' partners. The study also attempted to examine the relationship between home country and parental challenges.

This research additionally considered the possibility that such students are a disadvantaged and vulnerable group within the University and have a need for representation.

## 2. Research methodology

### 2.1 Online survey

Full ethical approval was gained from Cardiff University in advance of data being collected. The first phase of the research project involved an online survey which was sent to all students whose records were marked with: enrolment status registered or pending, the 2018 academic year, and as international. As such, it reached 8,431 students, and 3,589 students opened the email. The survey was live for approximately two weeks and received 56 responses. This seems a very small amount, however the number of international student parents at Cardiff University is also unknown (as such data is not collected), thus the response rate is hard to ascertain.

### 2.2 Focus group

The second phase of the research project invited the informants from the online survey to attend a focus group. This aimed to elicit more detailed answers than the online survey. Comparatively, this phase of the research project was not as successful as the online survey, with only three students attending the group session.

## 3. Key research findings

### 3.1 Online survey

#### 3.1.1 Demographics

Although this research targeted (non-EU) international students, the online survey for (reason/s unknown), attracted some European respondents. However, (non-EU) international student-parents remained the focus.

Most respondents were typically postgraduate research students, aged 31-40 years old and married, with one child, most likely an infant (aged between 0-4 years).

Figures 1-3 below illustrate the demographics of the survey respondents.

Figure 1a Online survey: respondents' levels of study

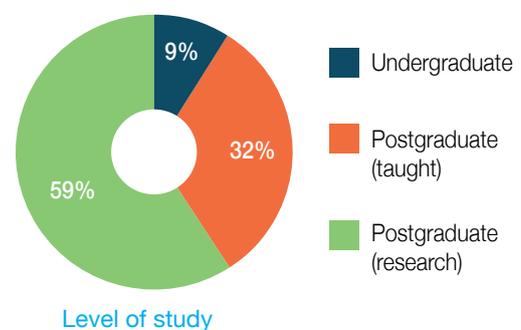
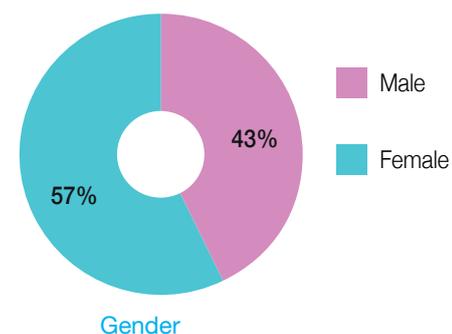
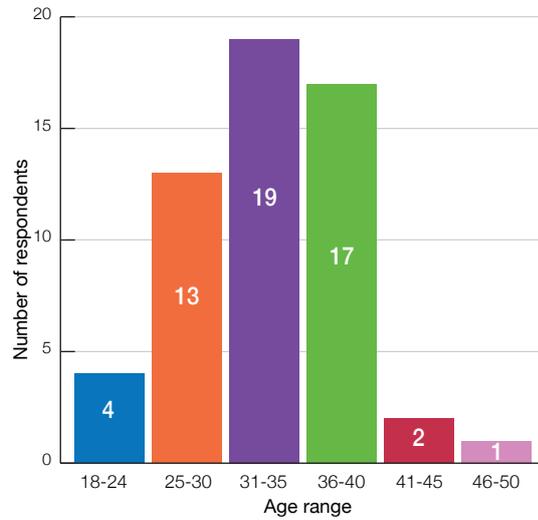


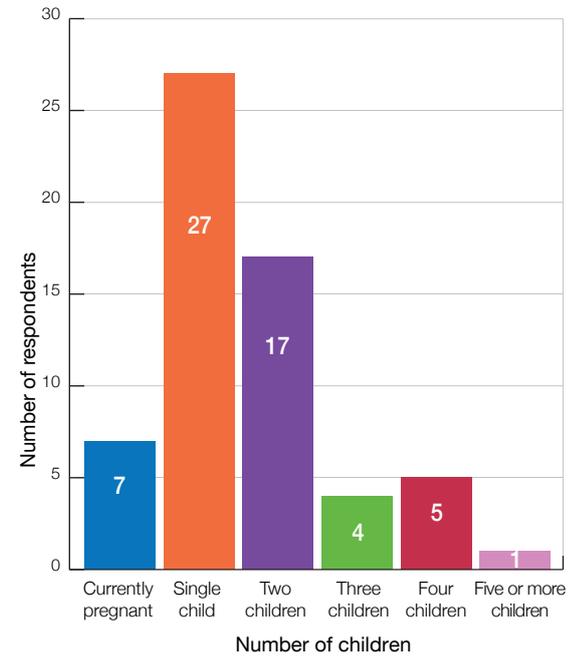
Figure 1b Online survey: respondents' gender



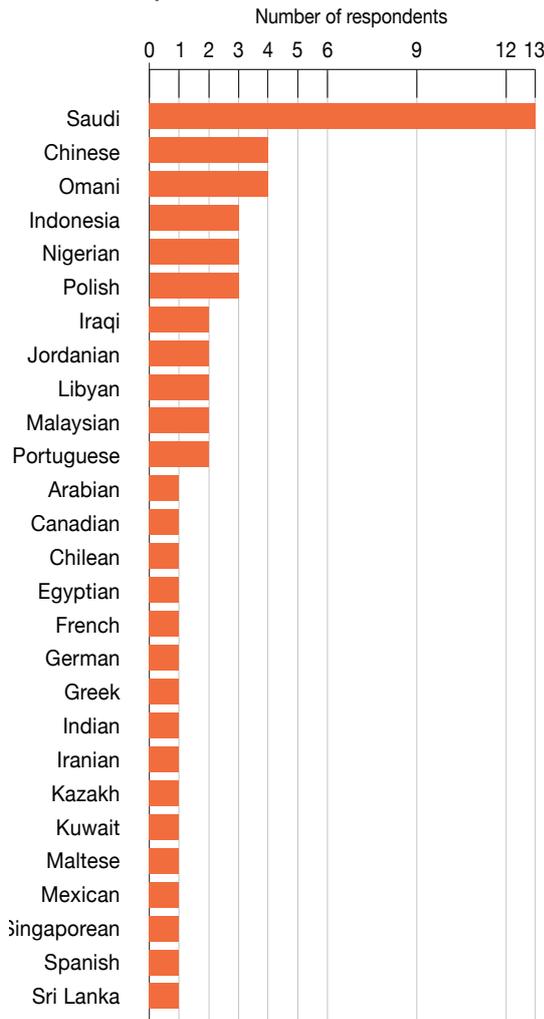
**Figure 1c Online survey: respondents' age range**



**Figure 3 Online survey: respondents' number of children**



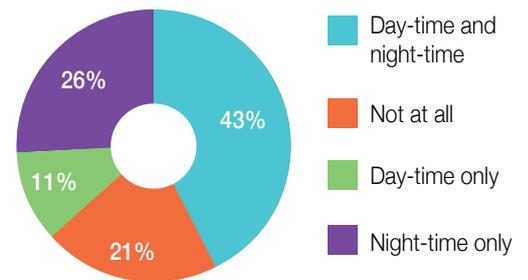
**Figure 2 Online survey: respondents' nationalities**



**3.1.2 Experiences of parenting as an international student**

The online survey also looked to determine the support international student-parents received from their spouses/partners in the UK.

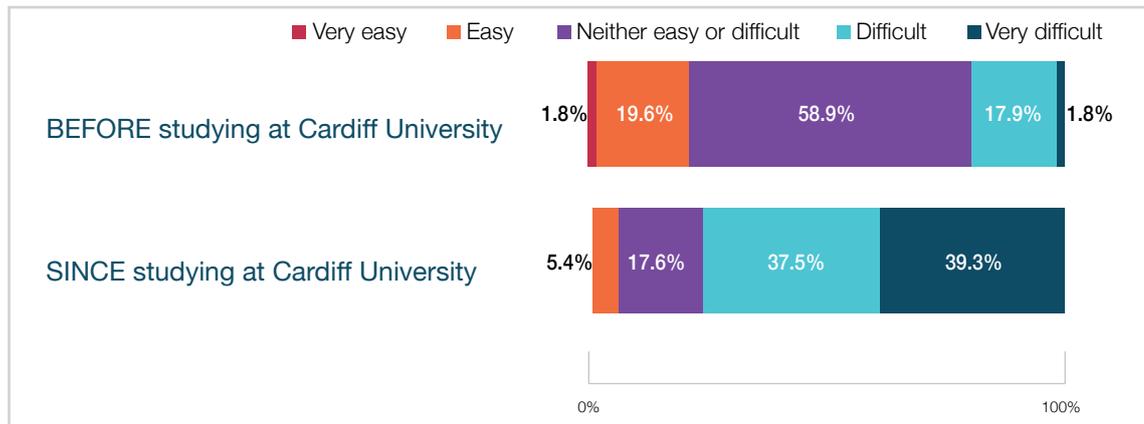
**Figure 4 Online survey: when respondents' partners look after the children**



The 26% of respondents whose spouses/partners did not look after their children were prompted to explain their childcare arrangements. These included school and day-care, no spousal/partner help with childcare due to maternity leave, and help from their mother-in-law.

Respondents were also asked to rate their experience of parenting based on ease/difficulty, both before and since arriving at Cardiff University to study. The results indicated a stark trend, when viewed comparatively (see Figure 5). Students who had previously had neutral feelings toward parenthood now felt it was 'difficult' or 'very difficult' upon studying at Cardiff.

Figure 5 Online survey: level of ease, difficulties, parenting before and since studying



In line with the researchers’ expectations, the most-cited reason for parenting becoming more difficult was time management and balancing ‘everything’, such as work, university, childcare, schooling or leisure. The lack of family support as a result of studying overseas was frequently mentioned, particularly in relation to childcare. Furthermore, nursery and day-care were said to be expensive when it featured in respondents’ answers. Other specific difficulties included: social isolation and not having friends like themselves; pregnancy and, later, breastfeeding during their studies; adapting to life in the UK.

Interestingly, several respondents also intimated their dissatisfaction with the University itself, especially tutors and supervisors, who were said to be unsupportive or lacking sympathy for their parental demands. The following answer from one respondent is indicative:

**“...my supervisor and the school would be constantly changing meetings without any support given to the fact that childcare had been arranged and paid beforehand [sic]. There would also be very little understanding of sickness and things that happen to children. These would be blamed on me as little commitment ...when the truth was that kids change things.”**

Indeed, a few respondents cited what they felt to be the lack of a clear University policy towards pregnant international students, as a stressor. (It should be noted however, these results, are not proportionate since not all respondents specified why their circumstances had become harder. Indeed, some did not give answers at all, whereas others were unclear.)

The international student-parents who indicated neutral or at-ease feelings toward their parenting role also explained their answers in a variety of ways. One respondent noted that being a postgraduate is “no walk in the park, but [they] knew what [they were] getting into. [sic]”.

Respondents were also asked if being a parent and/or a prospective parent affected their studies. The majority answered ‘yes – the results are illustrated in Table 1 below. There were some ‘greyer’ responses where students ‘sometimes’ felt it impacted on their studies.

Table 1 Does being a parent and/or prospective parent affect your studies?

Response categories	Frequency
Yes	38
Sometimes	8
No	9

In relation to the consequences of parenting while studying, having little time and/or energy featured prominently, which is consistent with the majority-experienced problem of time management.

Moreover, sleep deprivation was thematic; and struggling to focus, which follows logically. Other repercussions include: the child(ren)’s lack of family time; missing morning sessions at university; and having to take an interruption of study. One answer alluded to the psychological or emotional challenges of being a student-parent, specifically the feeling of being “torn between getting a good grade or being a good parent.”

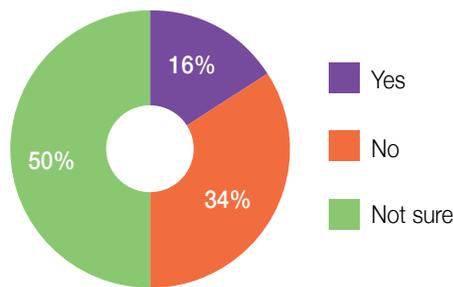
It would be incorrect to omit the more positively themed answers. Indeed, a small minority of students did not feel that their parenting role negatively impacted their studies. Those respondents that gave reasons cited their parenting demands as a motivating factor to better organise their time. Additional explanations include having adapted to the combined responsibilities of parenting and their studies; having their partner take care of the child(ren); and not having their child in the UK with them.

“One answer alluded to the psychological or emotional challenges of being a student-parent, specifically the feeling of being ‘torn between getting a good grade or being a good parent.’”

This latter response indicated a respondent for whom the online survey was not especially targeting, that is, they were not an international student-parent raising their child in the UK while they studied. Indeed, another respondent took the opportunity to ask: “I wonder why distance students with children are not included in this.” It is only in hindsight that the researchers realised they should have both explicitly defined what an international student-parent is, to themselves and to participants.

The online survey also asked respondents whether they felt represented at Cardiff University. It is important to highlight the answers illustrated in Figure 6, with only 16% confirming they did feel represented.

**Figure 6 Online survey: do you think student-parents (including prospective parents) are represented at Cardiff University?**



The lack of recognition of international student-parents also resounded clearly in a few answers in the online survey. One respondent wrote:

**“Little sleep, tiredness, no time to study at home, very busy, yet marked and graded same as other non-parent students.”**

Another respondent stated:

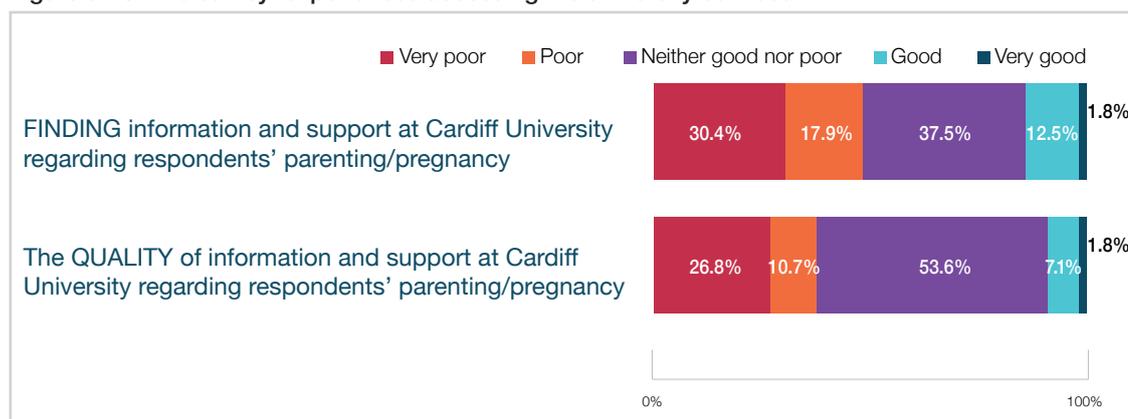
**“[...]I really do not understand how a parent can have an equal opportunity at succeeding at university and why universities don’t understand the difference between mature student with responsibilities and a 19-year-old with only their studies to worry about.”**

When asked about the support already accessed at Cardiff University, the most striking result was ‘no support received’ which accounted for over half of the total respondents. Figure 7 illustrates all responses which shows the range of services and support on offer at the University which were accessed (this was a multiple-choice question).

**Figure 7 Online survey: services already accessed by informants**



Respondents were asked to rate the ease of finding information and support at Cardiff University as well as the quality of information and support accessed. Figure 8 shows the results in both cases are broadly similar, with respondents feeling neutral towards both finding and the quality of services at the university.

**Figure 8 Online survey: experiences accessing the university services**

Finally, the researchers asked respondents what further help Cardiff University should provide for international student-parents, including those who were pregnant. The themes with their specific suggestions are listed in Table 2 below.

**Table 2 What further help, if any, do you think Cardiff University should be providing international students who are parenting and/or are pregnant in the UK?**

Category	No.	Specific suggestions
Better childcare	18	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>more affordable, vouchers/discounts for childcare</li> <li>accessible in the evening</li> <li>inclusion of older children</li> <li>day-care in specific university schools/departments</li> <li>day-care during the holidays, and activities especially for international student-parents and their children</li> </ul>
Clearer information	13	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>more university transparency about their policies and procedures (especially pertaining to pregnancy and maternity leave)</li> <li>clearer website and online information</li> <li>improved online correspondence</li> <li>more pre-arrival information</li> <li>better-informed staff</li> <li>better representation</li> <li>more assistance with forms and paperwork</li> </ul>
More material support	5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>family-friendly university accommodation</li> <li>financial support available to international student-parents</li> <li>more employment opportunities with better wages</li> </ul>
More social/psychological support	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>improved counselling and wellbeing services</li> <li>events with other student-parents</li> <li>more understanding from university tutors and lecturers</li> </ul>
More flexibility	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>to attend conferences/training</li> <li>lectures available to download</li> <li>later or amendable assessment dates</li> </ul>

### 3.2 Focus group

This was a very small sample of international student-parents but included a range of genders, nationalities and courses. Students were from Malaysia, Libya and Algeria, studying at PhD, undergraduate and Masters level. Their family situations ranged from parents who arrived with children in the UK, parents whose children had lived in the UK and had returned to their home country, and parents whose children were born in the UK. Much of the discussion was consistent with the results from the online survey. The cost of university as an international student combined with the demands of parenting, and no financial support

from the University, featured heavily in discussion. A large part of this related to the costs and inaccessibility of flexible childcare in Cardiff.

Participants also expressed concerns over the lack of advertising of support and services on the University's part, and how, for example, they did not consult International Student Support on many occasions simply because they did not think to do so. One participant in the study did not make use of the Students' Union services as she was told by friends that no-one goes there. Students suggested that more information supplied in advance, would have benefited them.



Students felt that university tutors and lecturers ought to be more understanding of the issues faced by international student-parents, which is consistent with the survey findings.

Interestingly, instead of seeking help from the University, some students reported that they relied mostly on people within their own communities. For example, when faced with a schooling issue, one participant sought advice from their peers in their home country who had experience of similar situations. Peer networking appeared to be an important strategy for some in order to seek support and advice.

The focus group also discussed whether Cardiff University Students' Union should set up a peer network to consolidate existing international student-parent communities. This would facilitate new peer relationships through regular group meetings or social events. The participants supported this idea, although with some reservations regarding sharing problems with people who may not care or fully understand their situation, eg, as a single-parent. Interestingly, the facilitators had proposed a 'support group' but students in the focus group felt deterred by this term because, as one student stated, they did not like the idea of a group "where you have to tell your problem and to explain yourself". 'Peer network' could therefore be a better descriptor. The notion of the term 'support group' having the opposite desired effect was a useful insight from the focus group discussion that had not emerged from the student survey data.

It is also important to mention the positive findings from the session. It was encouraging to hear one student emphasising the importance of spousal support during the focus group:

**"When you don't have family in the country, it's important that you and your husband or wife stay really close together and support each other. That's really important."**

In addition, the participants' children experienced no known issues adapting to life in the UK, such as schooling and learning the language, whereas the researchers had predicted otherwise.

#### 4. Conclusions

The researchers acknowledge the one month gap between phase one (survey) and two (focus group) for the small turn-out of the focus group session. It was also the period where assessments were taking place and the academic term was ending. The online survey itself was delayed due to circumstances beyond the researchers' control, in turn delaying the focus groups. Although participants were welcome to bring their children to the focus groups, the researchers recognised that they were asking some of the most 'time-poor' students to attend.

Despite the limitations of the study, it also had its strengths. It was able to identify several phenomena during both phases of the research, including the majority experience of parenting becoming harder since coming to Cardiff, and the general sentiment that not enough support is offered in relation to childcare. Additionally, the profile of international student-parents was indicated as low in the online survey and during the focus group session. Worryingly, over half of the respondents had not accessed any support from the University and a significant minority had not received any spousal support in terms of childcare. This could suggest that international student parents are a vulnerable group. Certainly, they appear to experience little representation and seem to rely on their own community or peers, with the sense that the University does not attempt to understand their needs or clearly articulate the services and information available to them.

While the researchers recognise it is not likely that universities will be able to assist with childcare expenses, there are several key meaningful adaptations that could take place easily and cost-effectively.



## 5. Application of research: key recommendations

### 1. The establishment of a peer network for international student-parents

This could act to highlight the psycho-social problems students may face while parenting in a host country and empower them to form communities, plan social events, and organise their own interests. This could help them feel more represented at university. Following the focus group the researchers became aware of the Parents and Carers Association (for all students) which was already established within the Students' Union at Cardiff University.

### 2. Connecting staff

Peer networks and/or International Student Support teams can regularly reach out to tutors and supervisors within schools to provide them with a point of contact for understanding the needs of international student-parents.

### 3. Information

Improved information from the university, including advertising of services and information offered in advance of international student-parents' arrival in the UK. For instance, clearer links and information relating to university policies and procedures (ie, to pregnancy during studies) and an estimation of the high childcare costs in the UK. This could allow students to better prepare for their move to the UK.

## 6. Ideas for further research

One striking issue for the study was the definition and lack of clarity of who counted as an

'international student-parent'. Future efforts should be careful not to exclude student-parents unnecessarily.

Another glaring issue for the study was the unknown number of international student-parents at Cardiff University, reflecting broader issues of a lack of data, recognition and representation. The remedy for this problem is further sampling, perhaps creating the necessary research parameters for a full investigation into differentiations based on nationality and gender. This was beyond the scope of this research.

In addition, the researchers recommend that there is an investigation into the attainment of international student-parents, and whether there is a gap between them and international students without parenting responsibilities. A comparative analysis with international non-parent students and native student-parents, taken as baseline measures, would be beneficial.

The presence of an attainment gap could lead to determining if international student-parents are indeed a disadvantaged and vulnerable group. The indications from phase one and the discussions arising in phase two of the study, support the possibility that international student-parents are disadvantaged and vulnerable. A group without recognition and/or formal representation is already susceptible to marginalisation.

This research has attempted to redress the research gap on international student-parents. It represents a preliminary step towards

understanding the needs of international student-parents. Further research would benefit international student-parents and their experience of studying in the UK.

## 7. Reference

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Home Office, March 2019. *Why do People come to the UK To Study?* Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/immigration-statistics-year-ending-march-2019/why-do-people-come-to-the-uk-3-to-study>

## 8. Acknowledgements

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Our deepest thanks are reserved for the international students at Cardiff University who took the time to contribute to this study. We hope our combined efforts will serve to help you and students alike in the future, both at Cardiff and beyond.

## 9. Research team

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## 11. Appendices

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Appendices are available with the online version of this report: [www.ukcisa.org.uk/grants-reports](http://www.ukcisa.org.uk/grants-reports).



The UK Council for International Student Affairs is the UK's national advisory body serving the interests of international students and those who work with them.

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