Family transitions in early adulthood: parental support of university students

For many families, university has become an established staging post as young people become independent adults. The process of achieving greater independence has several elements. These include living away from a family home (for about 70% of first degree students); developing financial independence; taking responsibility for oneself, including the development of practical skills; and achieving autonomy in decision-making. However this period of transition is currently particularly difficult. While tuition fees have raised the stakes for both young people and parents, youth unemployment remains high, housing costs are prohibitively expensive, and state benefits are much less generous than when the parents’ generation may have gone to university. In short, there are many reasons why students may be more dependent on their parents.

To find out how students and their parents negotiate this period of transition we interviewed 30 pairs of students and parents. The students all attended two long established universities in the south east of England. The study focussed on students who were living away from a parental home and who had at least one parent who had also been to university. Living away from home was important for many of the interviewees (both students and parents) and this was particularly clear among students whose parents lived within commuting distance of the university. These interviewees had actively chosen to live away from their parents, and had done so with the support (and frequently the financial support) of their parents.

We carried out separate interviews with students and parents in order to explore similarities and differences in their perspectives. Notably, our interviewees had positive and trusting relationships. We asked them about the contact students had with parents while at university and also the financial, emotional and practical support provided by parents. As this was a small scale, qualitative study we aimed to gain a rich understanding of interviewees’ perspectives.

It was common for parents to have played an active role in the university choice process, often accompanying their children to open days and discussing which universities to apply to. However, once the students had gone away to university, almost none of the parents had any direct contact with the university. So, while it has been reported that parental contact with universities may be increasing, once students had arrived at university we found little evidence in our sample of what is sometimes described as ‘helicopter parenting’. Only a small number of parents were highly involved with their student children and were also directive in their approach to problem solving.

It could take time for students to find their feet at university and it was relatively common for them to contemplate dropping out during their first term. Parents sometimes provided a shoulder to cry on or tried to stiffen the student’s resolve at such moments. The nature of parental involvement varied. A large group of parents were involved with their children, but were ambivalent about it because they were concerned about their children’s progress towards independence. Another large group of parents could be described as involved, but ‘holding back’, again because of the desire to perform what was recognised as a difficult balancing act between providing support and promoting independence. On the whole, the students were more optimistic than their parents about becoming independent. While these instances of emotional support during crises were in all cases transient, the provision of financial support was more enduring.
Parents varied substantially in the amount of financial support they provided to their children. Four parental households did not provide any regular contributions to the student (in each of these cases the student’s parents had separated and in each case the student was eligible for a maintenance grant). At the other extreme, a small number of parental households provided substantial financial support which meant the student did not need to take out any loans (that is, parents fully funded both tuition fees and maintenance costs). Most of the parental households however made a contribution towards student living costs and this was intended to supplement income from a student maintenance loan (and in some cases a maintenance grant). These contributions ranged from about £100 per month to £500 per month. Contributions to fees or living costs could also be made by students from money either earned in previous employment or previously received from relatives.

Some parents had not expected that the maintenance support available through student loans and grants would fall short of meeting the living costs of students. This was made particularly stark when students’ accommodation costs exceeded the value of their loan. Approaches adopted by parents to meet the shortfall included one parent returning to paid work specifically because of the additional, and unexpected, costs of supporting her children while at university, and another taking out a commercial loan which covered the additional costs.

These examples highlight the lack of clarity for parents whose children have taken out government maintenance loans and grants in identifying an appropriate level of financial support for their children to supplement the state funding.

Students and parents can be described as going through a process of financial separation during the period of study. Students developed skills in managing their finances and in exerting self-control over their expenditure. These achievements could be sources of pride to students. Sometimes this process actively involved parents, for example through providing spreadsheets to monitor expenditure, through monitoring bank accounts, or most often through enquiries about the student’s finances. Parents were more concerned about their children’s self-control over their spending than their financial planning. For students who did not receive financial support from parents there were fewer examples of such parental involvement. When students earned money from paid employment (during term or holidays) this never affected the level of support provided by parents. Students’ and parents’ orientations to both consumption and earning often included moral reasoning about the ‘proper thing to do’, as well as financial calculation.

Parents also had to decide how to approach ‘extras’ over and above any regular financial support. This was particularly the case in relation to paying for laptops (often provided as gifts, such as birthday presents, prior to university), providing financial support during holidays (often not given), mobile phone contracts (often paid for under pre-existing arrangements), travel to and from university (sometimes funded on an ad hoc basis) and paying for students to go on family holidays.

All students were in contact with their parents at least weekly, typically by mobile phone and texts, but also by email and Skype. Some students, particularly men, regarded reduced communication as a demonstration of their independence and sometimes described careful management of the information they provided to parents. Most students were satisfied with their contact with parents. Mother and daughter pairs were more likely to be in frequent contact, and more daughters than sons expressed a need for substantive emotional support. Most parents felt there was a balance to be struck between providing emotional support and letting their children make their own way. Consequently the possibility of frequent, immediate and continuing contact with students led some parents to actively hold themselves back from contacting their student children.

Technology has also made it possible for parents to be involved in students’ academic work. For example, a small number of parents had proofread students’ essays or discussed their academic studies, although in no case was such involvement substantial.

Most parents saw going away to university as a crucial step in what they hoped would be a linear journey to independence. In most cases they hoped that the student would not return home after university. Some explicitly described independence as the goal of parenting, with going away to university marking the end of the period of sharing a home. South Asian parents were different, seeing living away from home at university as a brief interlude, the expectation being that the child would return home on graduation.

On the whole, students did not share their parents’ ideas about living away at university being part of a linear journey to independence. Indeed, their ideas tended more closely to reflect those expressed recently by sociologists: there is much uncertainty about the transition to adulthood, which has become ‘de-standardised’ and non-linear. Thus, they took pride in making incremental steps towards independence,
including, for example, getting themselves up for lectures or not talking to their parents every day.

Almost all the parents interviewed had attended university in England and many had received means-tested government maintenance grants. The parents frequently drew stark contrasts between their own experiences as students and those of their children. First, parents suggested that it had been much more difficult to keep in touch when they attended university (usually via public pay telephone). Second, they felt that they had been substantially more financially independent, relying on their maintenance support, benefits and holiday work. Third, many spoke of the normative expectation that they would become self-reliant as students and live independently after graduation.

Parenting styles, technology and norms have all changed in a short period; so too has the economic, social and political context. Most of the students in our study were financially dependent on their parents – and parents felt that this dependency was greater than they had experienced. Students also tended to have more contact with, and receive more emotional support from, their parents. In short, parents have substantial involvement in their children’s higher education and perceive this involvement to be greater than when they themselves went to university.

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