

## Supporting and mentoring young mothers at university. A nursing and midwifery innovation.

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Dr Jennifer Rowe<sup>1</sup>; Dr Margaret Barnes<sup>1</sup>; Ms Rachel Reed<sup>1</sup>; Ms Kendall George<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>University of the Sunshine Coast, Queensland, Australia

Dr Jennifer Rowe

School of Health and Sport Sciences, Faculty of Science, Health and Education

University of the Sunshine Coast, Maroochydore, DC 4558, Australia

Email: jrowe1@usc.edu.au

### Background

Having a child in adolescence is associated with socio-economic disadvantage for young mothers. Their personal and social development and educational and career advancement are hampered. Support programs have been found to assist young mothers to complete high school but beyond high school the educational gap between young mothers and childless young women as well as between young and older mothers persists. Providing social support to young mothers to facilitate their successful engagement and completion of post secondary education is potentially a means to improve young mothers' opportunities.

### Innovation

In this paper we discuss a mentoring and support program for young mothers engaged in university study that was developed by a team of nursing and midwifery academics. The team was motivated by a commitment to concepts of equity, access and social inclusion that underpin current tertiary education agenda and nursing and midwifery professional values. This motivation, combined with the team's maternal and child health knowledge and expertise led to the establishment of a facilitated, internet based networking space for young mothers enrolled in programs at one, Australian, regional university. This pilot project included both in-person and on-line elements and was facilitated by a representative of the team. The project also involved an evaluation component, where participants had the opportunity to contribute to a focus group interview to reflect on the program. Ethical clearance was gained for this element of the program from the Human Research Ethics committee of University of the Sunshine Coast.

### Discussion and implications

The project was successful in providing young women with a network of peers, and a trusted mentor - a source of information and support on a range of matters of concern, including both personal and academic. The young mothers who participated liked having a networking space to 'drop in and out of', communicating and identifying with other young mothers, but they also commented on their need to 'reach out' beyond their young mother circles. What is clear from this project is that the young mothers who make it into tertiary study are motivated and have already moved through a number of hurdles. However, their support needs remain complex, but may be intermittent and difficult to pinpoint, and require personal relationship and trusted mentors to facilitate solutions.