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'Little islands': challenges and opportunities for student carers in higher education

Scott Rawlinson

Strategy, Planning and Performance Department, University of Westminster, London, UK

ABSTRACT

Student carers face multiple challenges when it comes to participation and success in Higher Education (HE). However, by listening to and acting on the voices of those directly affected, it is possible to identify opportunities to enhance their experience. This article explores the HE experience of student carers, defined here as carers of ill relatives, student parents, as well as sibling carers, via 10 semi-structured one-to-one interviews. Currently, the institution hosting this research holds limited quantitative and qualitative information about student carers – this project filled a qualitative gap. The project explored challenges to participation and success and opportunities presented by balancing unpaid caring responsibilities, work, and social life with study. Crucially, it reports on what student carers say in their own words about what would enhance their experience. The findings demonstrate the paramount importance of first identifying student caregivers and the need to establish positive staff-student relationships based on trust and empathy. Furthermore, how tailored support such as a Carers' Passport and reasonable adjustments, the sensitive sharing of stories which heighten awareness of student carers, staff training and guidance, as well as the co-creation of resources and initiatives with student carers can aid trust building and enhance the HE experience.

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Introduction

Globally, student carers face distinct challenges that can impact their academic performance (Spacey, Sanderson, and Zile 2024), their decision to stay in HE and complete their programme of study (Aylward 2023; Sempik and Becker 2013; Sempik and Becker 2014), and their mental well-being (Runacres et al. 2021). This research sets out to understand the challenges to participation and success of student carers studying at a post-1992 university in the United Kingdom and opportunities for enhancing their HE experience. In doing so, this article builds on existing research and constitutes a salient by comparing the experiences of traditional carers, student parents/guardians and sibling carers. Due to limited qualitative or quantitative data collected by the institution, little is known

CONTACT Scott Rawlinson  S.Rawlinson@westminster.ac.uk  University of Westminster, London W1B 2HW, UK

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about this diverse group of students; this has meant that student carers are underserved by interventions and support mechanisms. The Office for Students' (OfS) concluded that, along with other smaller groups of underrepresented students, while carers are mentioned in many plans, 'some of the approaches to addressing the needs of these groups are in the early stages of development or are yet to be scoped' (OfS 2020). To build the qualitative evidence base and our understanding, one-to-one semi-structured interviews were conducted with students representing a compass of caring types. The interviews focused on the nature of their exclusion and drew out remedial measures to improve their HE experience. It was paramount to conceptualise student carers in context, reflected in the definition and the adopted criteria for selection and opened valuable avenues of insight. Through this study, it has been possible to formulate recommendations grounded in the voices of student carers.

Conceptualising student carers

A (traditional) carer is defined as 'anyone who cares, unpaid¹, for a friend or family member who due to illness, disability, a mental health problem or an addiction cannot cope without their support' (Carers Trust *n.d.*). The OfS lists carers as a group underrepresented in HE institutions, and, as such, quality gaps and support needs to be addressed. However, there is presently no national data on the total number of student carers (it is estimated that 3-6% of students are carers) (National Union of Students 2013, 3) and even the identification of student carers is challenging (Taylor et al. 2021); though this might be aided by changes to the UCAS (Universities and Colleges Admissions Service) application process, the 2023 intake being the first cohort able to self-identify as carers (Aylward 2023).

It is important to acknowledge the diversity of student carers (Larkin and Kubiak 2021; Taylor et al. 2021). To reflect the institutional context, the decision was made to broaden the conceptualisation of student carers to include students with childcare responsibilities, including international students and their dependents (student parents/guardians), as well as those who look after younger siblings (sibling carers). While there are distinct experiences between caring types, multiple crossover areas exist, such as self-reported impact on academic performance and social life. As it turned out, excluding student parents/guardians and sibling carers would have meant missing out on rich veins of insight.

Understanding student carer experiences

Student carers face several barriers in HE reflected in the attrition rate for young adult carers (YACs) being greater than the national average (Aylward 2023; Sempik and Becker 2013; Sempik and Becker 2014). The literature has elaborated on the difficulties faced by traditional carers (Chisnell, Pentecost, and Hanna 2021; Sempik and Becker 2013; Sempik and Becker 2014), these include being unable to follow a fixed study routine (Day 2021); not being able to join in activities with peers; loneliness and isolation; guilt at not being fully available to those they care for due to their studies (Chisnell, Pentecost, and Hanna 2021; Kettell 2020; Runacres et al. 2021); as well as limited awareness of eligibility for targeted resources (Day 2021). Many of these obstacles are echoed by

student parents/guardians (Moreau 2012). Furthermore, caring responsibilities can negatively impact carers' physical and mental health; others have reported the financial strain of attending university whilst caring. Unsurprisingly, student carers report their caring responsibilities as affecting their decision-making (Marandet and Wainwright 2010; Runacres et al. 2021).

Encountering institutional barriers is an experience shared by different caring types. These include the infancy of inclusion policies catering for traditional carers, as well as rigidity in accommodating needs (Taylor et al. 2021). Whilst Taylor et al. (2021) found that a 'scarce' number of carers reached out for formal support, the NUS's (National Union of Students) *Learning with care* (2013) report found that when student carers did access help, they experienced varying degrees of support which was invariably uncoordinated and unsystematic. Furthermore, while UCAS's addition of a tick-box for carers on its application forms is welcomed, there is no guarantee that upon reaching university, students will self-identify as carers or be provided with support (Sempik and Becker 2014). Elsewhere, student carers expressed fear of stigmatisation if they disclosed their circumstances (Day 2021; Kurton et al. 2012). Regarding student parents/guardians, their experiences are, in many cases, institutionally invisible (Brooks 2012; Marandet and Wainwright 2010; Moreau 2016; Nichols, Biederman, and Gringle 2017).

Despite these challenges, student carers of different hues attach significant value to HE, highlighting the link between attaining a degree and improving job and career prospects (Marandet and Wainwright 2010; Taylor et al. 2021). Others reported personal development, referring to qualities such as maturity and a sense of fulfilment that what they are doing makes a real difference, as well as organisational and advocacy skills (Larkin and Kubiak 2021).

Research indicates that much can be done to support and enhance the experience of traditional student carers at HE. Firstly, identification provides a foundation to build, understand needs, and target support (Larkin and Kubiak 2021). However, many young adults do not identify as carers, resulting in underreporting (Kettell 2020). Further recommendations that could be implemented to support inclusion include flexible attendance requirements, online lectures, academic extensions, ensuring low administrative burden and access support and flexibility during episodic care issues (Cares NSW Australia 2017; Moreau 2019). Having employment-focused activities integrated into degree programmes has been recognised as important, as have the challenges carers face in fulfilling such requirements (Day 2021). These and other considerations could be captured in an academic plan tailored to student carers' specific needs.

Additionally, the early release of academic timetables, welcome packages detailing support available, first preference in selecting tutorial or seminar times, and facilitation of employment pathways and financial support may help to support student carer engagement and inclusion (Moreau 2016; Taylor et al. 2021). An undercurrent of many suggestions is the necessity of institutional flexibility and allowances for students particularly around episodic disruptions to their studies (Larkin and Kubiak 2021; Taylor et al. 2021). Support groups or online message boards for student carers may also be valuable. The Carer Passport scheme is relevant here. Once implemented, the scheme helps identify carers and link up support through an organisation-wide approach.

Furthermore, staff training could facilitate a more supportive and inclusive institutional environment (Taylor et al. 2021).

It has been noted that student carer needs of social integration may be more nuanced than the ‘pursuit of a university-based social life’, with greater value being placed on a supportive community and activities focused on academic study (Briegel et al. 2023; Taylor et al. 2021). For instance, Day (2021) found that only a minority of YACs invested time on campus outside of scheduled teaching hours. Braxton et al. (2014) found that class-based student-to-student interactive learning activities that encourage forming a student learning community are most often linked to retention (Larkin and Kubiak 2021).

Methodology and methods

The research question for the present study can be framed as follows: what challenges are faced by students with caring responsibilities and how can they best be addressed? While numerous analyses of student carer experience have been undertaken, little detailed information was known about the student carer population where this study was conducted. Furthermore, studies of student carers omitted student parents/guardians and sibling carers. It was held that a significant number of students would fall into the latter two groups and that gathering their views alongside those caring for ill relatives or friends would be helpful.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was adopted to understand student carer experiences in HE (Kettell 2020). IPA is well-suited to understanding the meanings participants hold based on their experiences, emphasising studying people ideographically (Smith and Nizza 2021). In practice, this meant that the questions asked of participants were focused on experience and interpreted ‘locally’ rather than from the starting point of a major theoretical standpoint. Therefore, the approach was grounded epistemologically in social constructivism, with a focus on the voices of the participants and the narratives they produce around HE experiences. Using NVivo data analysis software, the data was analysed using the seven steps of IPA data analysis. Aligning with this approach, analysis was initially carried out on a case-by-case basis before cross-case analysis was undertaken (Charlick et al. 2016).

As IPA works well with small cohorts, the objective was to conduct six to nine in-depth, semi-structured interviews across the university and study levels. Students were contacted via several institutional channels, including an internal communications newsletter, Instagram social media post, and the university’s bespoke forum for gathering student voice. Those interested were directed to an online expression of interest form, which asked for personal and demographic information, as well as details on the nature of their unpaid caring responsibilities.

Achieving this study’s aims relied on hearing directly from student carers; therefore, the sample needed to be purposive. Those who completed the form were asked to select the best description of their caring responsibilities, i.e. they provide unpaid caring responsibilities to a family member or friend who would not cope without their support; have childcare responsibilities; look after their young siblings; and/or ‘something else’, a free-text field where the nature of responsibilities could be elaborated upon. It was possible to select multiple statements. However, only one of the 10 students

recruited selected multiple statements. This is significant as the interviewing process revealed examples of participants holding multiple caring roles or caring for multiple people within one caring type. The author reviewed expressions of interest, and those eligible were contacted via email, which included a Participant Information Sheet detailing the project and a consent form to be signed and returned to the author.

A total of 10 students were recruited, though one was later excluded (see [Figure 1](#) and accompanying footnotes) and invited to participate in a one-to-one interview with the author on Microsoft Teams. Interviews were undertaken in the first three months of 2023 and lasted between one hour and one hour and a half. Following their interview, participants were emailed a debriefing sheet, which included project details, links, and contact information, for guidance and support. Participants were also offered a thank you payment; the interview length determined the exact amount (£20 for up to one hour or £30 for over one hour). All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim by the author, with interviewees given the opportunity to validate their transcripts. Initial coding and grouping of themes was undertaken on a case-by-case basis; this process was repeated for each case. Coding structures for each case were contrasted and compared, and themes shared across cases formed overarching themes.

ID	Caring responsibility ²
Student Carer 1	Parent/guardian
Student Carer 2 ³	-
Student Carer 3	Traditional ⁴
Student Carer 4	Parent/guardian
Student Carer 5	Sibling carer
Student Carer 6	Traditional
Student Carer 7	Sibling carer
Student Carer 8	Sibling carer
Student Carer 9	Sibling carer
Student Carer 10	Parent/guardian

Figure 1. Carer role(s) of participants.

Ethics

Human research ethics committee approval was provided. Key ethical considerations for this potentially sensitive topic included ensuring the anonymity and confidentiality of participants. Given the small sample size, there was a risk of participants being identifiable from the information they provided. There was also a risk of distress as participants were asked to disclose potentially upsetting information or experiences about their caring responsibilities. To mitigate this, participants were given details of support and counselling services at the university at the consenting and debriefing stages of the project.

The nature of student carer roles

Adopting a broader definition of student carers than typically seen in the literature requires some description of the different roles. Student carers discussed the nature of their roles. For those traditionally understood as carers, this involved assuming the role of breadwinner, household administrator, considerable travel, and various other tasks. For example, one participant travelled regularly across London at a considerable cost in terms of time and money while holding down a job and being responsible for household chores such as cooking and cleaning (Student Carer 3). Demonstrating the breadth and depth of caring roles, and in addition to being the family's sole breadwinner, one participant explained how they are responsible for arranging hospital visits for their parent, interpreting and translating medical information related to their parent's condition, alongside providing some care for their other parent. Regarding understanding complex medical terminology, they felt they had to 'educate' themselves, stating that 'it feels like ... GCSE science,' and that 'it's a huge learning curve, and it's mainly learning outside of the university' (Student Carer 6). These activities consume a substantial amount of time, contributing to the status of traditional carers as the most time-deprived caring type.

Student parent/guardian and sibling carer roles differ from traditional carers in several ways, and while they share some rough similarities, there are also some qualitative differences. In both cases, they look after young children, from newborns to those aged 10 or 11. The role combines study with nursing (student parent/guardian) or looking after (student parent/guardian or sibling carer) babies and school drop-offs and pick-ups for older children, potentially alongside household management and work; in the case of sibling carers, this role arises because they have one or two working parents/guardians. The major difference between the two roles relates to the anticipation of when the role is likely to conclude; student parents/guardians accept the duration of their role is a lengthy, indefinite one, whereas sibling carers look to a time when their sibling will have greater independence and thus no longer require their input (Student Carer 5).

The impact of caring responsibilities on participation and success at HE

Student reluctance to disclose caring responsibilities and its impact on targeting support

Interviews revealed a reluctance on the part of students to disclose their caring responsibilities to staff or peers, creating a foundational problem regarding the targeting of

support. Three variations were identified regarding (non-)disclosure of caring responsibilities. Intentional disclosure, purposefully disclosing a caring responsibility to the university through official channels such as student services, was uncommon. Instead, it occurred in an ad-hoc or sporadic manner; in other instances, it simply did not take place. None of the participants reported intentional disclosure of a caring responsibility. However, one participant did relay their experience of disclosing personal information unrelated to their caring role to the university which did not create a positive experience (Student Carer 6). In terms of ad-hoc disclosure, this took place on what participants perceived to be a 'need-to-know' basis (Student Carer 10). For others, a caring responsibility was disclosed when the need to collect a sibling from school emerged (Student Carer 5). Finally, some were unsure if they had disclosed, suggesting a need for clarity around disclosure (Student Carer 6).

The trust student carers place in their HE institution and other students may dictate disclosure. Meeting at the crossroads of ad-hoc and non-disclosure, one participant commented that: 'I've told the people that need to know', but 'I haven't told all the lecturers or anything because I don't know the lecturers that well' (Student Carer 3). The desire for privacy combined with trust-related concerns may hinder disclosure: 'So, I don't, you know, I don't really want to tell them [i.e. other students] that just ... in case ... they, kind of ... spread things around' (Student Carer 6). Not knowing who student carers are exacerbates the challenge of providing targeted and timely support.

Hierarchy of carers

Student parents/guardians and sibling carers engage in a comparative game, culminating in the stratification of caring types, which places them below traditional carers, contributing to the understatement and under-reporting of their roles. Student parents, all mothers in this study, self-consciously and without prompt, placed the role they perform relative to others: 'I mean, I don't care for and I'm not a carer to an elder [*sic*] person, *I'm only a mum*' [my italics] (Student Carer 10). Sibling carers placed themselves on the lowest rung: 'No, [be]cause it's siblings, so they [i.e. the university] don't really take that into consideration' (Student Carer 8). Additionally, sibling carers felt that while 'most' universities are 'accommodating' to parents or those looking after ill or disabled relatives, they are not to 'people who are *just looking after siblings*' [my italics] (Student Carer 7). There is a self-awareness amongst sibling carers that others have 'more serious and more demanding' responsibilities (Student Carer 5). This is an important point owing to the potential intersection between self-stratification and disclosure and the need for staff literacy and empathy regarding different student carer types. If carers question the value of disclosure, they may be less likely to offer that information.

Academic impact: attendance, concentration and assessment

Caring responsibilities impose significant, often overlapping, barriers to academic success, such as disrupted attendance, decreased concentration, as well as adverse effects on assessments (Briegel et al. 2023). Challenges pertaining to attendance affected all student carer types. Caring carries with it an unpredictability, changing

student plans abruptly: ‘Sometimes I’m not able to go to university because, you know, my ... [parent] might have an appointment [they] need ... to get to’ (Student Carer 6). One student with a young child stated that, ‘[s]ometimes I’m not able to attend classes because ... I have, maybe my [child] is not well’ (Student Carer 10). Similarly with sibling carers: ‘[I]t [looking after siblings] did affect me because sometimes I wouldn’t be able to do the classes’ (Student Carer 8). Student carers want to attend lessons but sometimes their responsibilities prevent this.

In addition, student parents and sibling carers mentioned challenges with concentration and focus as a product of the demands of caring. It might be assumed that student carers prefer to study online as they can respond quickly to any emerging caring needs. However, this view was challenged by a student parent who shared a preference for onsite learning over offsite/home ‘because of the distractions’ (Student Carer 1). A sibling carer commented that it was difficult to find a place in the home ‘where it’s absolutely certain that you won’t be disturbed’ (Student Carer 9). While ‘distractions’ and ‘disturbances’ are not experiences unique to carers, they may occupy considerable time that would have otherwise been devoted to study. The challenges may become particularly acute around exam time or assessment submission deadlines, linking focus with the third academic-related challenge: ‘revising for exams is very hard because when they’re next to you [i.e. siblings], you really can’t do it’ (Student Carer 8).

The perceived and actual adverse impact of caring on assessment and academic performance, as well as academic performance and grading, was present across all types. Concerns ranged from anxieties about missing key bits of information; meeting assessment deadlines and the interplay of these with the unpredictability at times of caring demands; absence of adjustments (i.e. extra time) taking into account caring responsibilities; and, relatedly, the perceived rigidity and one-size-fits-all approach to extenuating/unexpected circumstances claims which left students feeling as though they had to ‘sacrifice’ pieces of coursework; as well as general feelings of overwork and lack of time (Student Carer 7). One student was very candid about what they saw as the effects of their caring responsibilities on their academic performance:

So, for me it’s definitely impacted a lot on my academic performance and I feel like if I wasn’t a carer, I would have been able to spend more time on the assignments I have ...
[I]f my [parent] was, you know, just not really as dependent, I would say, I think I would be able to achieve more. (Student Carer 6)

The demands of caring mean that students can feel acutely the pressures of academic deadlines and overall performance, compelling some to question whether they should continue: ‘[T]here have been times actually when I’ve thought of not coming to university and giving up or getting a gap’ (Student Carer 10). Furthermore, while the time pressures that are part and parcel of studying and caring are acknowledged for traditional (Chisnell, Pentecost, and Hanna 2021; Kettell 2020; Runacres et al. 2021) and student parent/guardian carers (Moreau 2012; Moreau 2016), these are overlooked with regard to sibling carers.

Care, study, wellbeing and work: a balancing act now and in the future

Students with unpaid caring responsibilities are often engaged in a complex and dynamic balancing act where study demands coexist and compete with those of care, social life and

personal wellbeing, in-study financial security and employment, post-study employability, and current and future residence. The immediate demands of care, study and financial security require student carers to be firefighters, thus addressing any problems as they arise rather than with detailed planning (Moreau 2016; Runacres et al. 2021). Two traditional carers (see Figure 1) expressed the financial pressure they are under due to the need to balance study, care, and fulfil their role as primary breadwinners. One spoke with urgency on the need for additional funds: ‘I need the money ASAP because after university I don’t know what’s gonna happen ... I don’t know how I’m gonna cope with looking after my family, like, my two families’ (Student Carer 3). The other shared that whilst they receive a salary, it is still not enough, particularly given the rising cost of living. Once general necessities and bills are covered, not much money is left over, and savings are ‘practically non-existent.’ This has reached a point where the student has had to acquire a second job for the extra money it provides and in full awareness of the potential repercussions on academic performance (Student Carer 6). This was echoed by an international student with dependents and no recourse to public funds in the UK who was frustrated by the restrictions on the number of permitted working hours (Student Carer 1).

At the same time, student carers are cognisant of the short – and longer-term consequences of these firefighting activities, in terms of post-study employment opportunities, contract types, and location, accompanied by a dose of self-chastisement at thinking these thoughts. One anticipated their responsibilities becoming progressively heavier, which might mean quitting their current in-study job, which presently provides most of the household income. Whilst income would be most immediately affected, there were concerns about the effect of this decision on future employability prospects: ‘I would be sacrificing a lot ... especially in the job market nowadays, it’s quite competitive and the more experience you have, the more better [*sic*] it is’ (Student Carer 6). Others noted the restrictions that caring responsibilities placed on the type of jobs they were able to apply for (i.e. remote jobs), and contract type (i.e. part-time over full-time) and expected this to continue in the future: ‘I can only truly do ... online work experience ... [A]fter I graduate, I’m going to have to look for jobs where I can work from home, it’ll just be more convenient’ (Student Carer 9). One student parent, driven in their pursuit of future career goals, spoke of guilt at wishing to undertake further studies and apprehensiveness about their future relationship with their child whilst simultaneously not wanting to miss out on child developmental milestones (Student Carer 4). Sibling carers did not express such concerns. A credible explanation might be the knowledge that their younger siblings will grow up, have more autonomy, and not require the ongoing support of their older siblings.

That said, while student carers acknowledge that their caring responsibilities will impact their employment options and the location of their work now and in the future, extending the impact of caring responsibilities beyond the choice of which university to study at (Marandet and Wainwright 2010), this is not *necessarily* perceived as a negative. There were examples of student carers who were optimistic about finding employment that worked around their caring responsibilities (Student Carer 1). For instance, completing a degree and earning a qualification could enable a person to move up the career ladder and open access to higher-paid positions. The increased earning power would make securing outside care more affordable (Student

Carer 6). This taps into a vein of student carer attitudes that emerged throughout conversations (i.e. resilience, determination, and planning). Similar patterns of thought were expressed when discussing employment location. One participant spoke about consciously looking for jobs close to home or the location where they carry out caring responsibilities (Student Carer 3). On the contrary, others felt the need for greater independence and their ‘own space’ (Student Carer 7). The two examples illustrate a perspective contrast between a student caring for an ill relative and one caring for their siblings. Together, they highlight the diversity of student carer experiences.

The aggregative impact of the study and caring responsibilities on the social life of students is variable; while for some, it may have only a negligible impact; for others, it can mean the loss of or diminished socialising opportunities. Participants raised numerous restrictions on their social activities, including not being able to go out with friends/classmates or celebrate events (Student Carer 3; Student Carer 4; Student Carer 5); not being able to join student societies (Student Carer 5); and observing strict curfews (Student Carer 8; Student Carer 9). One student carer spoke of their social opportunities being limited to open days and ‘meetings within the university’ (Student Carer 6). However, the point was raised that with planning it was possible to get to social events (Student Carer 1; Student Carer 7). Others expressed mixed views, such as feeling free to engage in social activities as they wished while not being able to partake in some of their hobbies (Student Carer 1).

Unsurprisingly, the cocktail of financial stress, concerns about current and future employment, and reduced social life can harm well-being (Marandet and Wainwright 2010; Runacres et al. 2021). This was not confined to a single caring type. Interviewees spoke generally about the ‘pressure’ student carers are under and the feelings of stress they experience (Student Carer 3). Balancing study and care was described as ‘exhausting’ and ‘stressful’ (Student Carer 3); ‘draining’, both physically and mentally (Student Carer 6); and ‘intense’ (Student Carer 8). Others spoke of feeling ‘overwhelmed’ (Student Carer 7); or feeling guilty for not making the ‘sacrifice’ to care for a child and instead prioritising studying, leading to a self-perception that they are a ‘bad’ parent (Student Carer 4); or guilt at thinking about the deleterious effect of caring responsibilities on studies (Student Carer 6). At the same time, the experience of caring and studying fostered a positive mindset, with students demonstrating a determination to succeed despite challenging circumstances: ‘I want to be really successful, not just for me, but for [my child]’ (Student Carer 4).

Enhancing the HE experience of student carers

Student support: tailored advice and guidance, and institutional flexibility

The previous section detailed the myriad challenges faced by student carers of all types. This section focuses on what student carers said would enhance their HE experience. Being a student carer can often feel like an isolating experience (Moreau 2016); however, with the right support and signposting mechanisms in place, as well as institutional flexibility attentive to student carers’ needs, HE providers have the potential to play an experience-enhancing role (Briegel et al. 2023; Marandet and Wainwright 2010; Moreau 2012; Nichols, Biederman, and Gringle 2017). Indeed, while some

student carers are reluctant to ask university services for help, they would tell others in a similar situation to seek help from staff as well as other students (Student Carer 10).

Awareness of support is as important as its provision (Moreau 2016). At the institution where this study took place, some confusion remains about where students can go for support. Making students aware of counselling and mental health services should take place early in the student lifecycle (Student Carer 3); this could be at the application stage (Student Carer 9). Cognisance needs to extend to tools logging extenuating circumstances claims to reduce the rate students learn about such mechanisms by chance (Student Carer 1). Similarly, financial advice, support, and information about bursaries and scholarships should be communicated as early as possible. Clarifying the role and purposes of counselling support would also benefit some student carers who report being unsure if they need help (Student Carer 6). Raising awareness and preparing students could be achieved via stalls at Freshers' Fairs or student carers groups, as well as other university communications.

For those student carers aware of it, the extenuating circumstances process is greatly valued (Student Carer 1; Student Carer 3; Student Carer 4; Student Carer 8). The process must present minimal administrative burden. There needs to be effective cross-institutional links to smooth the process so that student carers do not have to repeat themselves (Student Carer 6). Additionally, one participant spoke of 'sacrific[ing]' a piece of coursework because they were restricted to making extenuating circumstances claims 'only ... like, twice a year' (Student Carer 7). Greater flexibility regarding the number of claims that can be made per term/academic year may benefit student carers. This research also suggests that standardised extension lengths for coursework deadlines may not be sufficient for student carers (Student Carer 1; Student Carer 7). Creating a tailored process through which student carers can secure extensions could be one means of addressing this issue.

The theme of flexibility extends into the areas of timetables and attendance. While it may be difficult to change lecture or seminar times to account for caring responsibilities, having a later seminar time accounting for school drop-offs and making the academic timetable available as soon as possible would enable student parents/guardians and sibling carers to better plan how to manage study and care (Student Carer 10). Selection priority would allow carers to choose a time that works best for them, removing the worry of joining a group they know will be difficult to attend. One participant believed that the emphasis on attendance does not account for the challenges of caring (Student Carer 5). Building flexible attendance requirements into student carers' academic plans would help ameliorate this pressure.

Echoing the literature (Moreau 2016), present and future financial matters often occupy the minds of student carers, particularly those who care for relatives with long-term illnesses. Time pressures mean any bursary or scholarship opportunities should be made as visible and uncomplicated to complete as possible (Student Carer 6). Additionally, several students carried out paid roles at the university. These roles formed an important source of income, helping to pay household bills and purchase food or travel. Furthermore, student carers may require tailored careers and employability support due to their circumstances and the jobs they can do regarding contract type and location.

Effective support requires a tailored approach owing to varied experiences and circumstances (Briegel et al. 2023; Larkin and Kubiak 2021). Student parents returning

after a break due to raising a child may need support transitioning back into education: ‘I needed ... appropriate guidance ... [C]oming back to school, it’s really difficult’ (Student Carer 4). Tailored guidance and support may help to ease the transition of people with young children (back) into study. There is scope for such guidance to be co-created through collaboration between the institutions and those with lived experience. Furthermore, exam periods can be acutely stressful as carers look to balance revision with caring responsibilities. Additional mental health and wellbeing support could be considered around and during the exam season (Student Carer 6).

Maximising the autonomy and ‘downtime’ of student carers

It has been demonstrated that caring responsibilities can feel restrictive (Student Carer 1; Student Carer 4; Student Carer 5; Student Carer 7). The responsibilities undertaken can limit the jobs or internships they apply for and opportunities for self-care (Student Carer 3; Student Carer 4). Independence and autonomy are greatly valued (Student Carer 5; Student Carer 1; Student Carer 8). Closely related to this is the availability of downtime for wellbeing and self-care away from their caring responsibilities (Student Carer 3; Student Carer 8). This could be simple activities such as walking, reading, or playing video games. What works is unique to each carer, where university communications can help is sharing advice and tips or providing a platform to enable this on how to balance caring and studying from those with lived experience.

Student carers constitute a set of highly organised students who report being in a better place when they can plan their time. For example: ‘[T]he first strategy is having a schedule;’ ‘it’s all about time management really, you know, and being able to work around [my child’s] time, not just mine’ (Student Carer 1); ‘I use Google Calendar to organise everything’ (Student Carer 6). Others keep multiple diaries (Student Carer 3), use lecture recordings, and strive to commence assignments immediately. Most student carers had developed effective time management strategies. However, existing carers may benefit from peer support (Student Carer 10). Providing modules, workshops, or guidance on effective time management, including first-hand experience and advice from other student carers, may help existing and new carers arriving at university.

Building strong foundations of empathy, trust, belonging and networks

To share information about their caring responsibilities, student carers need to trust their home university and perceive that it cares about them as individuals and their circumstances. They want university staff to empathise with their situations. The outcome can be very positive when student carers feel the university cares or caters to their needs. Neglecting this may lead to carers perceiving institutional indifference to their circumstances (Student Carer 1); this issue is shared by different institutions (Moreau 2016). Addressing empathy and/or trust shortfall requires genuine and meaningful collaboration and dialogue. For example, students identifying as carers could work in the early stages of the student lifecycle with personal tutors or other support services to discuss how they can best be supported, trust that their needs will be acted on, and express how widely they want information about their caring responsibilities to be shared.

Furthermore, various support initiatives, including building networks, may increase engagement and belonging. Student carers report feeling isolated (Student Carer 10). In this study, student parents reported feeling different or apart from other students (Student Carer 1; Student Carer 10). A sibling carer compared carers to 'little islands', evoking a sense of separateness or detachment from the rest of the student body (Student Carer 5). To tackle isolation and/or lack of belonging, student parents/guardians were generally receptive to setting up a group for student mothers (no student fathers were spoken to), either online or in person (Student Carer 1). Holding a stall for student mums during welcome weeks, and signposting by personal tutors could encourage engagement (Student Carer 1; Student Carer 10). This also highlights the gendered experience of caregiving, with women more likely to hold caring responsibilities (Brooks 2012; Marandet and Wainwright 2010). Thus, failure to act risks doing or compounding a particular disservice to female students.

While the emphasis on developing groupness and community is especially salient for student parents/guardians (Briegel et al. 2023; Scharp and Hall 2019), such endeavours need not be restricted to this group (Student Carer 3; Student Carer 5; Student Carer 6; Student Carer 9). The essential requirement is to understand student carer interests and needs and to signpost to appropriate initiatives, networks, or communities. There is also room for staff training on the roles and responsibilities of student carers to be developed, further breaking down barriers to belonging and strengthening empathy (Student Carer 3).

The introduction of a Carers Passport, done sensitively, could help tackle issues of support, planning, and flexibility related to academic study. The Passport helps to identify and put in place a support system for carers. For example, a Passport might include a provision for automatic assignment extensions. For faculty and the institution, a Passport would indicate to prospective students that it understands them and has mechanisms to support them. The advantages of a Passport from a student carer's perspective include the reduction in the need to repeatedly explain their situation; gives a clear signal that universities are acknowledging their unique and challenging circumstances; raises awareness of the student carer population and provides the impetus for support and services; and fosters increased (self-)identification which may help to strengthen a sense of belonging. This point loops back to that raised around collaboration and dialogue. To be trusted and subscribed to by student carers, and to be successful, precisely what the Passport looks like needs to be co-created by those most likely to feel its effects. Building such foundations will help HE providers tackle the stubborn but crucially important issue of disclosure – if unpaid carers trust their host university and feel it 'gets' them, they will be more likely to disclose, and the support mechanisms can be implemented.

Conclusion

We have seen how a reluctance to disclose caring status may derive from a deficit of trust in the institution and a perceived lack of empathy; the self-stratification of student carers into a hierarchy was also offered as one possible explanation as to why some students do not reveal their caring responsibilities. The study then explored the range of participatory challenges student carers faced, before offering suggestions on how these might be addressed. Flexibility is vital in meeting student carer needs, be this in terms of

attendance or deadline extensions. Additionally, student carers value solid planning, which universities can support through tuition on time management tools and skills. Fostering empathy, trust, and belonging is arguably the most crucial requirement. Various strategies are available that universities could invest in, in collaboration with student carers, to enhance the experience of this valuable student demographic. The composition of the host institution's student population drove the inclusion of student parents/guardians and sibling carers. This decision opens a new vista of future research. While traditional and student parents/guardians are comparatively well-served in the literature, sibling carers remain largely unseen. Furthermore, given the small sample size, quantitative investigation of the academic and well-being impact of caring responsibilities for student parents/guardians and sibling careers would be a welcome addition. Delivering on these areas would diminish the sense that some student carers feel of being cut adrift, and so that they no longer have to feel like islands unto themselves.

Note

1. This is unpaid in the sense that carers carry out their caring roles without remuneration, not that they do not receive financial support from government, other organisations, etc.

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Notes on contributor

Scott Rawlinson, Institutional Research Analyst, Strategy, Planning and Performance department, University of Westminster, London, UK.

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