Who Cares? : Supporting students with caring responsibilities

Selected findings from '*Who Cares?:* Identifying, understanding, and supporting the study, work and life balance and wellbeing of students with caring responsibilities' by Rachel Spacey, Rebecca Sanderson & Amy Zile

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Who Cares?

Funder

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Project aims

- **Develop the evidence base about SCR wellbeing and experience**
- **Improve understanding of the university journey and challenges of achieving work-life-balance**
- **Identify practical ways for universities to become care-inclusive.**

Who Cares?

Approach and methods

- **Participatory philosophy**

- **Oversight and contributions by steering group comprised mainly of SCRs plus practitioners, academics and third sector organisations**

- **Data collection: survey and interviews**

- **Survey measures included WEMWBS (Warwick Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale), the Work/Non-Work Interference and Enhancement scale (Fisher et al., 2009) and the Psychological Sense of Membership scale (adapted) (Goodenow et al., 1993)**

- **Online semi-structured interviews with SCRs.**

What is Care?

Care is a fundamental human activity

"*An emotionally invested, responsive activity to meet the needs of those who are dependent*" (Oliker, 2011, 968)

Student parents have responsibility for caring for a biological or adoptive child or for fostering a child on a short or long-term basis.

Student carers are responsible for providing unpaid care to a partner, friend or family member who needs support due to illness, disability, a mental health problem or an addiction and cannot cope without their help (NHS, nd)

'Sandwich' or multigenerational carers do both.

What is a Student with Caring Responsibilities (SCR)?

Undergraduate, postgraduate taught or postgraduate research students of any age, nationality, gender, ethnicity, or religion who:

- Cares for a child or children as a biological or adoptive parent or foster carer

And/or

- Cares for, or help to care for, an adult or child (for example a friend, sibling, parent or grandparent) who needs help because of their illness, frailty, disability, a mental health problem or an addiction and cannot cope without their support. This care is unpaid.

And/or

- Supports, emotionally or through advocacy to social and/or medical services, an adult or child (for example a friend, sibling, parent or grandparent) who needs help because of their illness, frailty, disability, a mental health problem or an addiction and cannot cope without their support. This care is unpaid.

Care in university contexts: what do we know?

- Care-giving associated with negative physical and mental health outcomes (ONS, 2013)

- SCRs may feel unable to spend sufficient time on their studies and have limited or no leisure time (Day, 2019).

- SCRs may find it difficult to take part in academic and social activities on campus (Dent, 2020; Scott and Verner, 2020)

- Issues with timetabling, financial pressures and feelings of inadequacy (Marandet and Wainwright, 2010; Moreau and Kerner, 2015).

Survey findings

- Participants felt that their work/study interfered with their personal life and vice versa, far more than enhancing it

- Most felt that work/study meant they neglected their own personal needs

- These feelings had a significant impact on their wellbeing.

- Certain types of care had an impact on wellbeing levels:

  - *Emotional care*
  - *End of life care*

- Wellbeing levels negatively impacted social and extracurricular activities - students with lower levels of wellbeing less likely to engage in social or extra-curricular activity.

Duncan

- Duncan is an undergraduate at a post-1992 university

- He has cared for his mum for many years but was never formally registered as a carer with his school or local authority

- Duncan finds university processes put him under pressure.

- Feels frustrated by the lack of awareness and support for young carers offered by his university and the local authority

I actually challenged the lecturer and said 'show me your carers policy' and he said 'we don't have one'.

Bridget

- **Undergraduate health student**

- **Pregnant and a foster carer**

- **Commuter student**

- **She struggled with her studies during her pregnancy due to health issues.**

- **Bridget feels pessimistic about achieving any kind of work-life-balance once her baby is born especially when it comes to placements.**

And it is just incredibly tiring and it's tiring on your brain and on your body and you're very conscious of the four hours that you're, you know, driving, walking from your car to the uni, walking back, driving home.

Saimah

- Recently completed an MSc and now studying for a PhD in Science

- Would like to become an academic

- Parent to a toddler

- Feels her university is 'accessible' and lecturers are 'really understanding' and 'flexible'

- But stills feel pressure to hide her responsibilities.

- Experiencing significant financial pressures and difficulties balancing paid work, being a parent and studying

- Feels guilty about taking time for herself *'I feel really selfish'*

- Wider pressures on parents and disadvantage of intersecting characteristics.

Audrey

There's so many other things that go along with it that I would love to do, but I can't. I'm always that one. You have to say 'Oh, I can't'. That's the most upsetting thing, 'cause it's so much more to university than that. There's so much more to school and education. Basically, what I'm doing is I'm passing tests, I'm passing exams. That's what I'm doing. I'm only just getting, well not just getting 2:1s, but it's... And it's like when you know that you could do better but that's the thing. Yeah, my job is being a student and I'm not doing my job properly.

I try not to think about it until now, and then I start getting a bit tearful.

Greedy institutions and care-less universities?

- **Greedy institutions (Coser, 1974) make excessive demands on our time exerting 'subtle pressure' to freeze out other commitments (Sullivan, 2013, 3)**

- **Moreau and Kerner (2015) characterised universities and families as greedy institutions leaving staff and students who care feeling guilty, torn and inadequate**

- **HE practices and culture as careless (Lynch, 2010)**

- **Many (most) of our participant' experiences reflect this.**

Strengths and attributes - care capital?

Challenge to notion of care as a problematic activity:

- Skills such as time management, organisation, problem solving and juggling numerous responsibilities

- A strong drive and determination to pursue their studies: 'focus', 'motivation', 'work ethic' and 'pride' in what they were doing

- Growing sense of self-belief - more confident and independent

- Compassionate and emotionally intelligent

- Gave them a sense of perspective.

Summary

- Care is a normal human activity but in education (and other contexts) it can be perceived as problematic
- Universities contribute to the challenges SCRs face
- These challenges impact the wellbeing and mental health of SCRs
- Pockets of good practice do exist and suggest care-full institutions are possible.

Supporting SCRs: Good practice and priorities for change

- **Improve your knowledge of the care commitments of your students (*recognise that they are not static & offer regular opportunities for students to disclose them*)**

- **Communicate the support available to SCRs effectively**

- **Work with students to co-create institutional policy**

- **Work with local and external organisations (*joined-up working can help to improve the range and continuity of support available*)**

- **Create a 'care-full' campus (*visibility of care amongst and for staff and students, family-friendly, recognise SCRs contributions*).**

Who Cares? useful publications

<u>Final Report</u>: Published in 2024. 57 pages.

Spacey, R., Sanderson, R. and Zile, A. (2024) *Who Cares? Identifying, understanding, and supporting the study, work and life balance and wellbeing of students with caring responsibilities: Final Report.* University of Lincoln.

<u>Article for WPLL</u>: Focuses on the survey results.

Spacey, R., Sanderson, R. and Zile, A. (2024) The care-less academy? Making space for parents and carers in Higher Education. *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning Journal,* 26(1), 7-33. <u>https://doi.org/10.5456/WPLL.26.1.7</u>

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