

Students with caring responsibilities face significant challenges

April 19 2022, by Jessica Runacres, Daniel Herron



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Roughly 6% of the UK population [provide informal unpaid care](#), and [60% of people](#) in the UK will be carers at some point in their lives. This includes a number of people who are carers while [studying at university](#).

Informal carers are those who have a commitment to providing unpaid

[support](#) to someone who could not manage without their care. This could include preparing meals, [personal care](#), giving medicine, helping with finances, and physical help. The exact number of student carers in [higher education is unknown](#). Many [choose not to disclose](#) their caring responsibilities. Also, many universities do not have clear processes for [identifying student carers](#). This is further complicated by the fact that caring status can change throughout a student's studies.

In 2015, the [UK government acknowledged](#) that carers "face challenges participating in higher education, and they may require additional support to do so effectively". However, unless universities are aware of students with caring responsibilities, they cannot provide support.

We have carried out a [review of research from around the world](#) on student carers' experiences of [university](#). Our review draws together findings on student carers and identifies the many challenges they face—as well as the limitations of the support universities offer.

Clashing responsibilities

Student carers reported several ways in which their caring responsibilities affected their experience of university study. Some said that caring affected [their education](#). This was partly due to [time constraints](#), which sometimes meant they could not meet deadlines, complete work, or take part in [face-to-face sessions](#).

Time constraints also mean that some student carers miss out on wider opportunities at university, such as extracurricular activities and work experience. Other [practical considerations](#) that affected carers' study included the need to study near the person they were providing care for. Students built their study timetable around caring responsibilities and found it difficult to complete courses with placements.

We also found that caring responsibilities could negatively affect a student's [mental health](#). For example, research in Canada found that student carers have [lower wellbeing](#) than those who do not have caring responsibilities. Student carers in the UK reported experiencing [mental health issues](#) such as stress, anxiety and low mood.

Caring responsibilities also affect a student's physical health, such as experiencing [increased fatigue](#). Research in Thailand found that student carers are more likely to develop [lower back pain](#) than those with no caring responsibilities.

In addition, the relationship between caring and studying is not one-way. Being a student has a negative effect on their [ability to provide care](#). The challenges experienced by student carers are not necessarily an inevitable result of their caring responsibilities. Instead, they can result from the inadequate support available to them.

Financial struggles

The [National Union of Students reported](#) that two-thirds of student carers in the UK regularly worry about not being able to meet their [living expenses](#).

Full-time students in higher education in the UK are not eligible to receive the [carer's allowance](#) allocated to those who care for someone for over 35 hours a week. This is surprising, given that carers who begin university are unlikely to reduce the number of hours they spend caring.

Additionally, because of the time required to provide care, student carers are less likely to be in paid employment than students [without caring responsibilities](#).

Research suggests that [financial difficulties](#) might be partially explained

by a lack of [accessible and accurate information](#) detailing the support available. The availability of support is meaningless if student carers don't know it exists. Universities need to provide clear information specifying both the financial and practical support available to both prospective and current student carers.

Given that each student carer's situation is unique, and applying for support can be time-consuming and complex, universities need to offer personalised guidance.

Flexible support

Universities can have inflexible rules and policies that do not match up with the needs of student carers. [These can include](#) compulsory full-time placement requirements on certain courses, sometimes away from home. Student carers are also hampered by bureaucratic, slow and impersonal administration processes to gain support, as well as inflexible timetables or study requirements. As a result, student carers reported [relying on friends and family](#).

Universities should implement a flexible approach to student carer support. Such as being accommodating of reduced attendance due to care responsibilities, permitting timetable changes, and providing access to online learning materials and support.

University staff, such as lecturers, are important for identifying when student carers are struggling and for offering support. While some student carers report that they receive [academic and emotional support](#) from some university staff, all staff require training to understand the issues faced by student carers, and need [access to information](#) and services that provide support.

Finally, none of this is possible without first identifying student carers.

All universities need transparent procedures to ensure that [student](#) carers can disclose their carer status. In the UK, this could perhaps be modelled on the process for reporting disabilities, which are often reported [via a disability adviser](#).

Student carers provide a vital source of support but are not always being supported themselves to provide care and complete their university education. It is time universities did more for them.

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