

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (Included Submissions)

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What are the Support Needs of Students with Caring Responsibilities?

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Research Domain: Student experiences (SE)

Abstract: Carers provide unpaid care to those who due to illness or disability cannot cope without their support. In the United Kingdom, the priority given to widening participation has heightened awareness that carers can be disadvantaged within higher education. Drawing on Tinto's Longitudinal Model of Student Integration, this paper reports on the findings of a research project investigating the experiences, study strategies and support needs of student carers. Interviews were conducted over two years with 62 students studying at a distance in a United Kingdom university. Inductive thematic analysis has been carried out and is in progress. Preliminary results suggest that student-carers share the challenges of carers in other settings. Carers adopted a range of time, boundary and social commitment management strategies to deal with caring-study conflicts. Distinct approaches to manage demands can be characterized as connected/solo and rigid/flexible management strategies. Recommendations for support are made.

Paper: Carers provide unpaid care to a friend or family member who due to illness, disability, or mental health problems cannot cope without their support (Carers Trust, 2020; International Labour Organisation, 2018; Larkin, 2012). In the United Kingdom, with widening educational access an increasingly higher priority (Office for Students, 2020), there is a growing awareness that carers often experience overwhelming difficulties in higher education (Kettell, 2020; Sempik and Becker, 2014). This paper reports on the interim results of a two year research project into the support needs of carers studying at a single higher education distance learning institution.

The demands on carers to juggle commitments to study, caring and sometimes employment can adversely affect the social, financial and academic dimensions of their academic life (National Union of Students, 2013). The time poverty, fatigue and lack of flexibility typically associated with caring can cause lateness, absence and missed deadlines, for example (Becker and Becker, 2008; Gonzalez-Arnal and Kilkey, 2009; National Union of Students, 2013). Carers may eschew university-based social engagements, including those with the potential to cater to their particular social and academic needs (National Union of Students, 2013). Student-carers can also experience financial difficulties and hardship which threaten their capacity to continue with their studies (Becker and

Becker, 2008; González-Arnal and Kilkey, 2009). They may also have limited freedom in course choice as they typically attend their local university in order to maintain their commitment to caring (Sempik and Becker, 2014). Of considerable concern is that, as a consequence of these difficulties, the attrition rate for student-carers can be four times higher than that of other students (Kettell, 2020).

Universities are obligated to actively work to retain student carers and support their success (Carers Trust, 2018). Although by one estimate, student carers make up three to six percent of the United Kingdom's student population (National Union of Students, 2013), strategies to address their needs are, to date, somewhat nascent (Office for Students, 2020). This paper adopts Tinto's (1975; 1994; 2006) Longitudinal Model of Student Integration to frame the challenges of student-carers in terms of their career goals, identification with and capacity to meet the demands of the academic work and social affiliation with the setting. While recognising the significance of student-carer agency in managing the demands of studying while caring, the project also rests on the premise that particular institutional support strategies are needed to retain this group. The project therefore has two research aims:

1. To conduct an in-depth exploration of student carers' experiences and views of good support for their study.
2. To build an understanding of the strategies used by student-carers to manage studying while caring.

The project is a two year qualitative study. 62 student-carers studying at a distance in a United Kingdom Higher Education institution were drawn from across the university and from a range of study programmes. 30-60 minute interviews were carried out and recorded. These interviews were transcribed and are in the process of being analysed using thematic analysis.

Preliminary results suggest that student-carers share the challenges of carers in other settings – financial limitations, time poverty and challenging, exhausting and unpredictable demands. Some carers reported losing a sense of a career trajectory as caring demanded more of their time. For some, studying substituted for leisure or social activities – 'me-time,' an opportunity for self-rejuvenation and for some, a guilty break from the demands of caring. Others studied in a care-related area, visualising a career path in which they became more skilled as carers or could capitalize on their experience to move into a related profession in health and social care.

In terms of adapting to the demands of study, distance learning was chosen for its flexibility. However, caring often conflicted with the time demands and routines of successful study. Carers adopted a range of strategies to actively manage their time, boundaries and social circumstances. A provisional sense of distinct management strategies is emerging from the analysis which can be characterized as solo and connected. Solo studiers met their academic and caring commitments by eschewing potentially supportive academic peer engagements and any institutional accommodations of their circumstances. In addition to the need to contain study requirements so as to attend to care demands (and potential future crises), impression management also appears to be a key factor in adopting this strategy. In contrast, connected studiers were sustained by peer and faculty support and capitalized on institutional flexibility around study deadlines and other requirements. Consequently, student adaption to study incorporated both the academic and social dimensions of Tinto's model. The paper will make recommendations for institutional support for carers.

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