

Ties that bind: Reimagining participation for student carers and parents in the hybrid university

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Research Domains

Student Access and Experience (SAE)

Abstract

Student carers and parents experience a disrupted campus geography and limitations to the extent and nature of their on-campus participation (Thomas et al., 2021). Much of the research focusses on the challenges they face, inadvertently positioning the ‘traditional’ student (available, engaged, unencumbered) as the norm and the student parent or carer as disadvantaged by the demands and expectations of the academic machine. In our presentation we share details of our study, Who Cares? involving stakeholders from universities across England and Wales to explore the experiences of carers and parents studying in the UK. Working with these student partners we imagine an academy shaped by their ethic and practice of care, considering how universities can become caring instead of greedy, providing spaces and support which respects not undermines student priorities and identities, which may differ from our current assumptions about the mobilities and needs of a typical student.

Full paper

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the fallacies in our stereotypes of the ‘ideal’ or ‘traditional’ Higher Education (HE) student. Pre-

pandemic, widening participation discourses positioned 'commuter students' as a minority group (Webb and Turner, 2020) while models of student engagement and participation problematised those learners who are not willing or able to live within student accommodation and regularly attend campus for non-mandatory events and activities (Gourlay, 2015). As the pandemic took hold the physical campus rapidly retreated while the digital university grew, and for a short time significant numbers of students saw a shift in their learning geography, participating in an online campus as remote learners (Webb et al., 2021). Yet as UK HE once again seeks to re-establish its physical spaces, often at the expense of its virtual ones, the physical locations and practical mobilities of student participation once again reassert their significance.

Student carers and parents are one student group who experience a disrupted campus geography and limitations to the extent and nature of their on-campus participation (Thomas et al., 2021) and their identity as HE students. The provision of care brings significant practical and emotional responsibilities, a commitment of time and emotional labour and the need to prioritise their dependents over and above all other requirements. With both families and universities characterised as 'greedy institutions' (Coser, 1974, In: Moreau and Kerner, 2015) hungry for their time and attention, these students are compelled to invest significant labour in balancing their care and education commitments, sometimes making significant personal sacrifices to do so (Estes, 2011).

Although student carers and parents have received limited attention from HE researchers, awareness of their experience has grown in recent years. The difficulties in participation in the wider university community, and the challenges of switching between or concurrently inhabiting multiple roles (student, professional, parent, caregiver) are increasingly being explored and understood (Thomas et al., 2021). Much of the research on student carers and parents focusses on the challenges this student group face, inadvertently positioning the 'traditional' student (available, consistently engaged and achieving, unencumbered with non-university related responsibilities) as the norm and the student parent or carer as disadvantaged and disenfranchised by the demands and expectations of the academic machine. Existing HE scholarship

rarely considers the act of care as a human and universal experience, positions student carers and parents as the norm, or considers what their caring responsibilities might bring to the benefit of the academy.

In our study, Who Cares? Understanding work-life-study challenges for students with caring responsibilities funded by the student mental health research network SMaRteN, we have worked in partnership with a group of stakeholders from universities across England and Wales to develop a mixed methods study of the experiences of carers and parents studying in the UK. In our presentation we will draw on the experiences of our student stakeholders and the outcomes of our research to detail the ways in which this student group experience and participate in university life, socially and academically, and how these patterns of participation shape their experience of the physical and virtual spaces of their academic, professional, and domestic lives. Working with these student partners we imagine an academy shaped by their ethic and practice of care, considering how universities can become caring instead of greedy, providing spaces and support which respects not undermines student priorities and identities, which may differ from our current assumptions about the mobilities and needs of a typical student.

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