

Potentials and challenges of balancing education and care: An investigation of intergenerational care in the UK higher education context

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Research Domains

Student Access and Experience (SAE)

Abstract

Over the past four years, discussions about student carers' social and human rights have intensified, partly due to the disruptions to academic and family life caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, yet research on this cohort remains marginalised. This paper, as a part of a larger international project on intergenerational care relations, draws on in-depth, dyadic interviews with student carers and their care-recipients. Informed by a feminist poststructuralist theoretical framework, it examines the experiences, opportunities, and challenges faced by student carers in UK higher education institutions (HEIs) and their care-receivers, particularly within the context of a rapidly aging society. In this presentation, the preliminary findings will shed light on both research and practice gap in relation to this cohort, such as the effective approaches to create a more inclusive educational culture and the improve the social care system for student carers and those they care for.

Full paper

Background

Care is one of the most important and societally relevant aspects of intergenerational relations. As populations age, young people are increasingly likely to provide care to older adults. However, both younger and older generations have multiple roles and responsibilities beyond caregiving or care-receiving—they may be students, workers, partners, (grand)parents, volunteers, and more. Despite this, a significant gap remains in existing research on care provided by young caregivers in education to older adults. These young individuals often face challenges in balancing caregiving and education. Previous research suggests that this cohort encounter diverse challenges. Yet there are particularly at risk of experiencing physical and mental health issues, stress, time constraints, financial difficulties, and subsequently, lower academic performance, higher dropout rates, and poorer employment prospects (Hook et al., 2022; Moreau & Kerner, 2015).

Student Carers in the UK

Student carers are a relatively new category in UK policy and research discourses. Over the past four years, the field has gained momentum, in part as a result of the disruption to academic and family norms associated with the Covid-19 pandemic. Yet research on student carers remains marginalised, possibly due to the long-lasting devaluing of care work (Hook et al., 2022; Lynch, 2010). An earlier literature review has shown that research on carers in higher education tends to focus on academic staff who are parents (Moreau & Wheeler, 2023) and student carers are less likely to attract consideration, especially if they are caring for an older adult physically and emotionally. While caregiving can foster valuable skills such as compassion, resilience, and strengthened intergenerational relations, it can also generate negative outcomes, including health issues, stress, financial strain, and, in some cases, reduced quality of care or even elder abuse.

This study

This paper is part of a broader project, InterCare (2024-2028, funded by Volkswagen Foundation), which focuses on student carers aged 18 to 30 formally engaged in education, such as university students or apprentices, and aims to answer these two research questions:

1. What are the characteristics of the intergenerational care-arrangements between student carers and their older care recipients?
2. What are the benefits and challenges associated with intergenerational care arrangements for student carers and their older care recipients?

On a theoretical level, the article is informed by principles borrowing from feminist critical and poststructuralist theories which acknowledge the centrality, complexity and generative power of care in society and in individuals' lives (Tronto, 1993). We align with poststructuralist calls for critical deconstruction of discourses and the relationships of power they sustain (Davies et al., 2006), while also borrowing from feminist critical theorists' nuanced understandings of the multiple dimensions of inequities (Fraser, 2008; Lynch et al., 2016). In this presentation, the early findings from the qualitative data, i.e., 15 dyadic interviews with student carers and their care-recipients (30 participants in total) will be presented and discussed, capturing the experiences from both perspectives towards intergenerational relations, the challenges they are facing and the potentials they see. As a method, dyadic interviews involve two participants who simultaneously interact in response to open-ended questions, enables the opportunity to gain insights from the interaction between the two participants (Morgan et al., 2016; Szulc & King, 2022). Fifteen pairs will be recruited and invited to the dyadic interview, each comprising a joint interview

part with both the student carer and older adult present, as well as a part where both are interviewed separately to discuss experiences that they might not want to share with the other part of the dyad. Interviews will be audio-recorded and transcribed. The data will be analysed using structured summaries and a discourse analysis to preserve the wholeness of the narrative, while a thematic analysis will also be conducted to identify commonalities and differences across and between the pairs. When conducting the analysis, we will look for silences and presences, commonalities and differences. Key attention will be given to potential differences lined to gender, socio-economic background, ethnicity, the education programme they are enrolled in (e.g., GCSE, university degree) and the nature of their caring responsibilities.

In this presentation, the preliminary findings will shed light on both research and practice gap in relation to this 'hidden and invisible' cohort in higher education, including a deeper understanding of their everyday experiences, the effective approaches to create a more inclusive educational culture and environment, and an improved, 'care-full' educational and social care system for student carers and those they care for (Hook et al., 2022).