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Policing the student body: Discourses of student carers in UK policy texts

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Research Domains

Student Access and Experience (SAE)

Abstract

Over the past years, discussions about student carers' rights have gained considerable momentum, in part as a result of the disruption to academic and family norms associated with the Covid-19 pandemic. Yet research on this group remains limited (Hook et al., 2022; Lynch, 2010).

This presentation is one of two papers part of the InterCare project, an international project funded by Volkswagen Foundation (2024-2028). Having conducted a search of the UK national (e.g. UCAS, OfS) and institutional (i.e. university) websites as part of the initial stage of this project, we consider how student carers are discursively constructed in policy texts. Our 'reading' of texts is informed by Carol Bacchi's WPR method (Bacchi, 2009). By capturing perspectives and themes that have been mobilised in relation to this group, as well as reflecting on the silences of policy discourses, the presentation highlights potential new directions for research and policy intervention.

Full paper

In the UK as in many other parts of the world, the Covid-19 pandemic has disrupted the prevalent spatio-temporal norms of academic and other education settings (Moreau and Robert, 2023). The new study and work arrangements which have derived from governments' attempts to address Covid-19 have partly lifted the invisibility cloak. These arrangements have revealed how students with caring responsibilities are not an unusual occurrence, while also highlighting how this group negotiates their dual status in academic cultures often described as 'carefree' (Lynch, 2010).

In the UK, where we write from, debates about the intersections of care and academic work have gained momentum. Student carers have generated some growing interest among researchers as well as among policymakers and practitioners. In the former case (research), a recent edited volume (Hook et al, 2023) has pointed to the emergence of research exploring a diversity of caring responsibilities among students, while a few years ago, in comparison, caring responsibilities other than parenting were rarely considered. In the latter case (policy), mentions of student carers in policy documents have multiplied. A turning point came with the introduction by UCAS (the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service providing online application portals in the UK) of a 'student carer' category in the 2023 undergraduate application, with the same organisation publishing a report on the experiences of student carers in education the following year (UCAS, 2024). The Office for Students has now included 'student carer' as a category in their Equality of Opportunity Risk Register while the Scottish Funding Council has made colleges and universities' support to student carers one of their strategic objectives. The Higher Education Funding Council for Wales and the Northern Ireland's Department of Economy do not offer carer-specific policies but do support several initiatives addressing the needs of student carers. At institutional level, anecdotal evidence suggests that student carers policies have become more common.

Acknowledging the incentives now in place in each of the UK nations for individual institutions to give key consideration to student carers, we are shifting our research focus to the institutional level. With this in mind, we have conducted a search of all the UK universities' websites using a combination of keywords and a manual search of the policy section of each website. The first aim of this search is to identify which universities have developed a student carer policy or, in the absence of a specific carer policy, mention student carers. While we acknowledge that this methodology does not give us access to policies which are not publicly available, we argue that the lack of a policy accessible to all signals a lack of concern for a group of students whose presence in UK HE is now significant (UCAS, 2024). The second aim of the website search is to identify how student carers are discursively constructed through policy texts. Do these discourses reproduce the deficit tropes of care in academia or do they offer a more nuanced understanding of this group? Do they construct the issues student carers face in ways which acknowledge the multiple facets of care-based inequalities? Our search of UK websites has so far led to the identification of a total of 38 policies which were downloaded and subjected to a brief analysis regarding the policy title, the structure of the policy, the services to be contacted for support/information, and the definition of the policy recipient. A sample of policies will be further analysed using Carol Bacchi's WPR ('What's the Problem Represented to be?') method for policy analysis (Bacchi, 2009) – an approach grounded within poststructuralist theories. Our 'reading' of texts will

involve looking for presences as well as absences *in* texts (and *of* texts), exploring how the 'problems' discussed were presented and their underpinning assumptions (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016).

Ultimately, this policy review will enable us to reflect on the implications of the discursive framing of student carers from a social justice perspective (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016) and to highlight new directions in terms of policy interventions likely to generate university cultures which are more inclusive for this group.