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Who Cares?

Identifying, understanding,
and supporting the study,
work and life balance and
wellbeing of students with
caring responsibilities

Final Report



2024

About ‘Who Cares?’

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Any views expressed here are those of the project investigators and do not necessarily represent the views of the SMaRteN network or UKRI.

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1 Research Summary

The background to the study

Students with caring responsibilities include students who are parents or guardians of children, and students who care for an adult family member or friend who could not manage without their help. Research shows that these students can find university study more difficult than students without caring responsibilities.

These students can find it challenging to balance the demands of their studies with their caring responsibilities. These difficulties can cause stress and anxiety. They are more likely to experience loneliness and find it difficult to take part in the academic and social aspects of university life compared to other students (Dent, 2020; Scott and Varner, 2020). Other research suggests that universities don't always understand the needs of students with caring responsibilities, or know about how to support them to overcome these challenges (Gregerson and Nielsen, 2022).

What were the aims of this research?

We wanted to work with students with caring responsibilities and those who support them during their studies to understand more about the challenges they experience at university.

The research aimed to:

- Improve our knowledge about the mental health and wellbeing of students with caring responsibilities while they are at university
- Find out more about the university experience of students with caring responsibilities and how they balance their different roles and responsibilities
- Create practical recommendations for universities to improve the support they offer for students with caring responsibilities.

The researchers wanted to answer the following questions:

- How do diverse students with caring responsibilities experience university?
- What is the relationship between feelings of engagement and wellbeing for students with caring responsibilities?
- How can universities support and represent the interests of students with caring responsibilities effectively?

Our recommendations for universities

We recommend that the higher education sector takes the following steps to address the challenges faced by students with caring responsibilities:

1. **Improve your knowledge of the care commitments of your students**

Recognising that care commitments are not static, offer regular opportunities for students to disclose their caring and/or parenting responsibilities, for example, annually at the point of enrolment.

2. **Communicate the support available effectively**

Students with caring responsibilities are a time-poor group who may not have time to search for support information. Use direct communications and explicitly set out the range of support options available. Ensure that information is available pre-enrolment to enable students to make informed decisions about their university choice.

3. **Work with students to co-create institutional policy**

Ensure students with caring responsibilities can contribute to creating a policy which addresses their specific needs and sets out your commitment to them in a single document.

4. **Work with local and external organisations**

Third sector organisations and local authorities have expertise in supporting students with caring responsibilities. Joined-up working can help to improve the range and continuity of support available.

5. **Create a ‘care-full’ campus**

Ensure there are family-friendly spaces on campus. Recognise and value the skills and contributions made by students with caring responsibilities.

How was the research carried out?

The researchers used a mixed methods research design. They carried out a review of recent research to understand more about the current evidence about studying with caring responsibilities and identify gaps in our knowledge. They invited students with caring responsibilities to complete a survey which asked questions about their mental health and work-life balance. The researchers also asked for volunteers to talk in detail about their experiences in a research interview.

One hundred and seven students (n=107) from across the UK completed the survey and eighteen (n=18) took part in a research interview.

The research was overseen by a Steering Group which primarily consisted of students with caring responsibilities as well as student support and wellbeing staff, academic researchers and a representative of a national charity which supports carers. The Steering Group helped to clearly define what caring responsibilities and work-life balance meant to them, at the outset of the project.

What were the main findings of the research?

The survey found that students with caring responsibilities were providing lots of different kinds of care to their loved ones, including emotional support, help with domestic tasks and end of life care. Some students (n=24) were 'multigenerational carers', caring for both children and adults.

Many of those who completed the survey were struggling to balance their study, work and care commitments. Around 40% reported low levels of wellbeing and 60% reported difficulty engaging with either the social and academic aspects of university life.

The students who took part in the research interviews described the difficulties experienced at university. The demands of study, work and care often conflicted, leading to feelings of stress and guilt.

Many participants described having a supportive tutor or lecturer who helped them to find ways to juggle these conflicts. Some students had benefitted from more flexible study options introduced during the COVID-19 pandemic but noticed that online study options and flexibility were now being reduced or removed.

Financial difficulties could be an issue, for example, access to state benefits while studying was limited and paid work added further to the time pressures experienced.

The students also highlighted some strengths which caring responsibilities brought to their studies, such as being motivated, having good time management skills and a sense of perspective which helped ground them. However, these strengths were rarely acknowledged by their university.

About the research team and funder

This research project was undertaken by Rachel Spacey, Rebecca Sanderson and Amy Zile from October 2021 to August 2022. The idea for the project was based on their own experiences of studying whilst caring and the impact it had on their mental health.

'Who Cares?' was paid for by the UKRI-funded student mental health organisation SMaRteN, grant number ES/S00324X/1.

The research team would particularly like to acknowledge and thank the project Steering Group for its work and all the students with caring responsibilities who took part.

2 Introduction

This project report presents the findings of ‘Who Cares?’ undertaken by Rachel Spacey, Rebecca Sanderson and Amy Zile from October 2021 to August 2022. ‘Who Cares?’ was funded by SMaRteN, grant number ES/S00324X/1.

It details the motivating factors behind the project, the findings of the rapid evidence review, the online survey, and semi-structured interviews with Students with Caring Responsibilities (SCRs) in UK Higher Education (HE).

The findings are discussed, and several recommendations are made.

This report presents a comprehensive but concise overview of the research project for readers.

Detailed findings from the project can be found in a number of other publications - please see 9: Further Information. Useful resources from the project which the authors hope will be utilised by others working with SCRs are also included in section 9.

3 Background

Historically, widening participation efforts have focused on students from working class backgrounds (Robinson and Walker, 2013) but recently a broader awareness of inequalities in tertiary education has developed, with those associated with disability, race and gender increasingly explored by Higher Education (HE) scholars (Wolbring and Lillywhite, 2021; Arday and Mirza, 2018; Burke, 2006). The role of poor wellbeing and mental health in generating or worsening educational inequalities has also come under increased scrutiny in recent years (Newton and Rowe, 2018; Olaniyan, 2021). Yet despite this increased focus on tackling inequality in HE, some minority groups and the challenges they face remain hidden or overlooked. One such group is Students with Caring Responsibilities (SCRs).

Research indicates that this group experiences conflicts of identity and stresses resulting from the tension between their educational and caring commitments. These pressures impact upon their student engagement, experience, sense of belonging and their wellbeing; they may experience loneliness, feel excluded from their institution and unable to participate in the academic and social aspects of university life compared to other students (Dent, 2020; Scott and Varner, 2020).

Academia has been theorised as a care-free environment (Lynch, 2010) in which ‘ideal’ students are assumed to be present, academically and socially engaged with their institution and fully committed to their studies (Wong and Chiu, 2020). Moreover, entry into HE is assumed to align with a life biography in which tertiary studies are confined to early adulthood and students are assumed at this life stage to have no dependents (Gregerson and Nielsen, 2022). Students who need to take time out to care for others may feel stigmatised in this care-free environment. The wellbeing of SCRs is noted to be particularly vulnerable in this climate as they may struggle to spend sufficient time on their studies and/or find time for leisure activities (Day, 2019).

Caring is a fundamental human activity, with most people providing care to an adult, child or both on a short- or long-term basis at some stage in their lives. Care activities are typically gendered, performed mostly (though not exclusively) by women, and considered low value, low status and burdensome within Western cultures (Dhar, 2020; Maximiano-Barreto et al., 2022).

Caregiving has also been associated with negative outcomes in relation to physical and mental health (ONS, 2013; Kayaalp, 2021). Despite the prevalence of caregiving within the general population and the potential impact on the mental, physical, and financial wellbeing of those who provide care, data on the number of SCRs was not routinely collected by UK HE institutions at the time of project inception (UCAS, the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service through which all UK based university applications are made, included the option for applicants to HE for 2023 entry onwards to disclose if they have parenting or caring responsibilities in their application (UCAS, 2022)).

There were therefore considerable knowledge gaps about the work-life balance of students who care for young children and/or adults and the intersecting nature of the challenges they face, such as being more likely to be a mature student or first in family to attend university, which merited greater attention.

Using student-researcher co-production driven through a steering group of which the majority of members were SCRs, our cross-disciplinary, mixed-methods project aimed to:

- Develop the evidence base about SCRs experience and wellbeing
- Improve understanding of the university experience of SCRs and the challenges of achieving work-life balance
- Identify practical ways for universities to improve their support for SCRs.

It addressed the following research questions:

- How do diverse SCRs experience university?
- What is the relationship between feelings of engagement and wellbeing for SCRs?
- How can universities support and represent the interests of SCRs effectively?

4 Rapid Evidence Review

This section of the report presents selected findings of a Rapid Evidence Review (RER) undertaken to support Who Cares?. Scoping reviews such as RERs are typically used for answering broader questions than systematic reviews and identifying the types of available evidence (Tricco et al., 2018). As the review was designed to inform the development of a larger mixed-methods research study, the review was conducted in a short time frame to synthesise any relevant material and inform selection of scale measures for the survey as this was felt to be a more appropriate approach for the timeframe of this work than a systematic review.

We present the evidence available in relation to SCRs experience with a focus on identifying pertinent or significant factors which constitute specific challenges for this group, and which may impact upon their mental health.

All articles deemed relevant were reviewed by the authors and any disagreements were discussed and resolved. Some additional papers or 'grey literature' were identified through references and searching relevant organisational websites such as Carers First and the National Union of Students. This took the total number of studies identified for inclusion in the review to seven (n=7).

The participants within the studies were drawn from undergraduate, taught post-graduate and doctoral researcher cohorts. Most studies (n=5) focussed on student parents with only two paying specific attention to student carers. Most participants in the studies were of female gender. It is unclear if this reflects a greater involvement of women in caregiving, a bias in the study samples, or both.

Most of the studies identified for review had drawn on qualitative data, using semi-structured interviews as a data collection tool. Moreau (2016), however, was a policy analysis incorporating some findings from semi-structured interviews whilst Kirton et al. (2012) utilised mixed methods. No quantitative studies were identified which considered student carers and parents' mental health in UK HE at the time of undertaking the RER in 2022.

Key Challenges

- a. Time Poverty
- b. Guilt
- c. Financial Pressures
- d. Invisibility of Care

a. Time Poverty

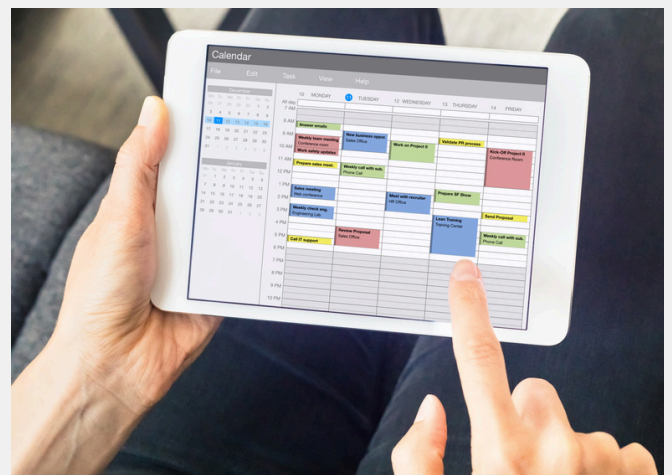
Time poverty was identified as a challenge across all the studies. As SCRs have previously been identified as a 'time poor' population in terms of both quantity and quality of time (Conway et al., 2021), this was unsurprising. Moreau and Kerner (2015) highlighted how their participants employed time management strategies such as studying while their children slept and reducing or eliminating their leisure time to try to balance the competing demands of study and parenting. However, the unpredictable nature of the care needs of children meant that any balance achieved was fragile and easily disrupted.

Time spent travelling to and from university was identified by Thomas et al. (2021), with lectures or seminars often overlapping with the need to drop children at school or nursery, with students being late as a result. Some SCRs experienced embarrassment and felt negatively judged by academic staff in these instances, and it also meant that their caring responsibilities were brought out into the open where all could see (if they disclosed the reasons for their lateness), which was sometimes unwanted (Kirton et al., 2012).

Thomas et al.'s (2021) study adds to Moreau and Kerner's (2015) description of the time management strategies employed by student parents by considering the use of digital technology amongst student mothers. Fitting study around parental activities was facilitated through the availability of asynchronous learning such as pre-recorded webinars, and these resources were highly valued by these participants, allowing study at a time and in a location which best suited the student.

'Unfriendly' family or carer practices such as the late release of academic timetables presented a challenge for student parents in Moreau (2016) and Moreau and Kerner (2015), as childcare takes time to organise and spaces within nurseries or wrap around care provision for school age children may be limited. The students in Kirton et al.'s study (2012) also felt penalised for having to take time off from their studies due to their caring responsibilities.

Moreau and Kerner (2015) highlight how the time pressures incurred by the necessity to juggle paid work, study, domestic work and care, underlining the gendered expectations around women's primary role and expectations of care and domestic work, something mirrored in Brooks' study (2013) with UK participants.



The late release of academic timetables presented a challenge for student parents in Moreau (2016).

b. Guilt

In five of the seven studies, participants expressed feelings of guilt associated with being a SCR. The guilt could often manifest towards their studies, feeling that they were not able to be a 'proper' student (Kirton et al., 2012). For the SCRs in Thomas et al. (2021), there were feelings of guilt about studying in the home when children were present or discouraging children from using technology as a form of entertainment, when they themselves were using technology to study. The feeling that they were not doing enough as a parent or as a student was noted in Moreau and Kerner (2015), and the parents in Brooks' (2013) study felt guilty that they used their leisure or personal time to study.

Students in Marandet and Wainwright's study described the desire for 'quality time' with their family and the ways in which the pressure to use evenings and weekends for study compromised this, while Brooks (2013) also highlighted the nuance that students in her study felt that study enabled them to be a positive role model for their children and was not necessarily incompatible with being a good parent.

Moreau and Kerner (2015) drew out these mixed feelings in relation to the juggling of study and parenting, linking them to the social construction of gender roles and mothering, which some of their participants were aware of, resolved by accepting a short-term guilt about being a poor parent with the hope of realising the financial and role model benefits of being a successful graduate.

Kettell's (2020) study highlights the pressures facing carers; one student in their study described how her family felt neglected when she began studying and resisted her need to prioritise. Another described feeling shamed by friends who felt her caring responsibilities should be prioritised over her studies. Unlike parents, there was no suggestion that this guilt could be mitigated by reinventing themselves as a role model or the prospect of greater financial security.

Kirton et al. (2012) also highlight some of the complexity associated with being a carer and student, in particular not wanting the person they cared for to feel like a burden, or to portray them as such to others. Some students had to hide their study struggles from the person they cared for, for fear of that person feeling guilt and responsibility and rejecting the care they needed.

Thomas et al.'s (2021) study focused on student parents' use of technology to help them manage their studies and parenting commitments. A major finding from this study was what they described as 'WIF guilt' (work interfering with family), and the guilt and anxiety arising from the strategies the SCRs' employed such as encouraging screen time in children to enable them to study. As one of the more recent studies in this sample they are the only one to reference the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on SCRs and the increase in permeability of study-home boundaries resulting from the greater use of home as a study/workspace.

c. Financial pressures

Finances were a notable stressor on SCRs wellbeing. Marandet and Wainwright's (2010) study highlights that obtaining a more financially secure future employment was an important motivation for parents in their study, particularly for the female participants. Despite this their participants reported struggling to financially support themselves with 42 per cent struggling to finance their studies and 39 per cent struggling to pay for the childcare they needed to attend classes and study. These issues were particularly acute for lone parents. The ability to engage in paid work could be impacted by lack of access to childcare and/or care crises caused by unwell children.

Moreau (2016) highlights that popular understandings and stereotypes about student life do not acknowledge or accommodate the idea that students may need to be an employee to survive.

Student finance was also precarious, with late release of grants and reliance on multiple (and potentially fragile) income sources including loans and hardship funds or bursaries creating a challenge for participants.

The processes for students to ascertain their eligibility for financial support and then apply for it were so complex that they did not always obtain what they were entitled to particularly given the lengthiness of the process and the time pressures they faced (Moreau and Kerner, 2015). Financial challenges were linked to difficulties in concentration and high levels of distress; one participant described feeling suicidal due to the late payment of her student loan and inability to obtain bridging payments or even information about when she would receive the money.

Brooks (2013) observed the discrepancies in experience between student parents at higher and lower-status institutions in the UK, with the latter more likely to report financial challenges, because students at the former were more likely to be from affluent backgrounds or have access to scholarships.

Moreau and Kerner (2015) highlighted the financial challenges facing international students who pay higher fees but are often ineligible for hardship bursaries and grants.

The role of finances was often intertwined with relationships with significant others. For example, in Brooks' study (2013) participants benefited from a full-time working partner to help support them financially and pay for childcare. However, if SCRs relied on a partner financially, this impacted on their ability to attend opportunities such as external seminars or conferences (Moreau and Kerner, 2016), because it might disrupt their partners' work commitments to juggle childcare responsibilities.

Reliance on multiple (and potentially fragile) income sources created a challenge for students with caring responsibilities.

d. Invisibility of care

Four of the studies in our review made explicit reference to the invisibility of care within institutional policies and practices in HE and the challenges this brings to SCRs.

Moreau (2016) found institutional documents rarely mentioned parenting and concluded that accessing relevant support and information would be challenging. She linked this with a wider invisibility of pregnancy and care arising from the norm of care-free academic study and work. The marginalisation of student parents was sometimes illustrated in the physical exclusion of children from university campuses. She concluded that student carers and parents are not just invisible in academia but are actively constructed as 'other' who do not belong there.

Marandet and Wainwright's students (2010) described being a minority group, isolated, and lacking a sense of belonging. This was of particular concern in the early months of a degree programme where these students who were mature, felt frustrated by the immature behaviour of the younger students in class and the sense that the student culture was dominated by young, white, middle-class students with the dominant social culture - drinking alcohol.

Kettell's study (2020) shows that being hidden was sometimes a conscious choice. Carers in their study talked about not wanting to identify themselves because they felt conscious of being stigmatised and considered unreliable or less likely to achieve good grades. Students described feeling stressed by competing commitments to the point of considering withdrawal from studies, and the precarity associated with being dependent upon the empathy and goodwill of a lecturer when asking for flexibility around deadlines or attendance. This made them question their ability to succeed in HE. The bureaucratic barriers to accessing support meant students' circumstances may be less visible to the institution and their access to appropriate support was compromised.

Kirton et al. (2012) emphasised the hidden nature of caring responsibilities for their participants who often did not wish others to know. This was linked to a sense that disclosure could lead to being perceived as inferior, self-pitying, or that they were using caring responsibilities as an excuse.



Rapid Evidence Review Summary

The rapid evidence review aimed to identify the key issues that impact on the wellbeing of SCRs. Time poverty, guilt, financial pressures and the invisibility of care were highlighted across the evidence base.



Student parents and carers are often considered as separate groups within HE bureaucracy and funding streams - this review suggests they share familiar challenges.

The bulk of research into SCRs has taken the form of qualitative enquiry, with quantitative elements primarily being collection of demographic data.



Much of the evidence focuses on student parents, particularly student mothers. Further work is needed to understand the experiences of male students who provide care.

Whilst student carers have been identified as an under-represented and disadvantaged group by the OfS, limited institutional resources for SCRs in universities were identified within the existing literature.



The role of ethnicity was not examined by the studies although other research suggests this may have an impact. Moreau and Kerner (2015) did highlight the challenges facing international students who care.

5 Method

Student co-creation was at the heart of this project which embraced participatory research approaches.

The following steps were taken to embed this approach within the study:

- The project idea was student generated - team members who designed the project had lived experience of studying, caring and mental health issues;
- Feedback on the submission was sought from SCRs at the host institution;
- The project was overseen by a steering group of which most members were students;
- The steering group included a minimum of two students identified as being of a Minority Ethnic background;
- Participation was flexible according to participants' commitments (including asynchronous participation) to fit around caring responsibilities and studies;
- Student steering group members were reimbursed for their time;
- Steering group members were given the opportunity to contribute to data collection, analysis and outputs.

Steering Group

Members included:

- Students with caring responsibilities from UK HEIs
- Professional services support staff with responsibility and/or oversight for SCRs and their wellbeing
- Academic researchers with expertise in care and/or equality, diversity and inclusion
- Representatives from relevant national and local third sector organisations advocating on behalf of carers.

The first meeting of the Steering Group was held online. Membership and terms of reference were discussed and agreed. Key concepts were debated and finalised (see below) including how caring responsibilities and work-life balance would be defined. The ways in which the team could ensure participation in project governance and research was accessible to all Steering Group members was also explored.

Four meetings were held in total during the duration of the project.

Definitions

1 Students with Caring Responsibilities

Undergraduate, postgraduate taught or postgraduate research student of any age, nationality, gender, ethnicity, or religion who:

- Cares for a child or children as a biological or adoptive parent or foster carer, and/or
- Cares for, or helps to care for, an adult or child (for example, a friend, sibling, parent or grandparent) who needs help because of their illness, frailty, disability, a mental health problem or an addiction and cannot cope without their support. This care is unpaid, and/or
- Supports emotionally or through advocacy to social and/or medical services, an adult or child (for example, a friend, sibling, parent or grandparent) who needs help because of their illness, frailty, disability, a mental health problem or an addiction and cannot cope without their support. This care is unpaid.

2 Study, work and life balance

The project proposal had originally used the term 'work-life balance' but this became 'study, work and life balance'. This incorporates all forms and levels of study and work commitments. Student members of the Steering Group felt that some students might think of their studies as work, for example, a postgraduate research student identifying as a professional researcher whilst some students may not identify their studies with the term 'work' but with other, paid employment whether study related or not.

Online survey

An online, cross-sectional, open survey was designed and hosted on the JISC online survey platform.

It was open for ten weeks from June to August 2022.

The objectives of the survey were to:

- examine the relationship between feelings of engagement and wellbeing for SCRs
- improve understanding of the university experience of SCRs
- ascertain the challenges of achieving study, work and life balance
- identify practical ways for universities to improve their support for SCRs.

Questions were designed to capture the following information:

- Demographics
- Study
- Caring responsibilities
- Employment
- Study, work and life balance
- Wellbeing and mental health
- Student engagement.

The survey received institutional ethical approval from the University of Lincoln's online system LEAS (Ethics ref: 2021_7189).



A total of 107 participants completed the survey in full. Data was analysed using IBM SPSS v.25.0. Responses to the free text boxes were analysed utilising Braun and Clarke's guidance for thematic analysis of survey-based data (2013).

Any university student at a UK HE provider who were parent(s) and/or carer(s) were eligible to complete the survey.

For a more detailed discussion of the survey results please see our publication:

Spacey, R., Sanderson, R. and Zile, A. (2024) The care-less academy? Making space for parents and carers in Higher Education. Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning Journal, 26(1), 7-33. <https://doi.org/10.5456/WPLL.26.1.7>

Online interviews

The interview questions were agreed with the Steering Group and were based on a combination of factors:

- issues of interest not considered appropriate for the online survey
- initial responses to the online survey
- suggestions from the literature
- the lived experience of Steering Group members.

Interviews took place online at a time agreed with the student and each received a £20 e-voucher as a thank you. The audio of the interview was recorded with their consent and was transcribed and then analysed by the research team.

Interviews explored:

- the student's circumstances
- their caring responsibilities
- whether they were in employment
- if they identified with the term 'carer'
- how they felt about their study, work and life balance
- how they coped during crises of care
- how this all affected their wellbeing
- sources of support
- the strengths and attributes of SCRs
- if their place of study was SCR friendly
- their plans for the future.



Students were asked to consider the strengths and attributes studying whilst caring had given them.

Eighteen SCRs who had completed the online survey and expressed an interest in taking part in a follow-up interview were interviewed during 2022.

Interviews were undertaken by the research team and one of our Steering Group members who was also a SCR, Dr. Lynn McBain.

6 Findings and Discussion

This section brings together our analysis of the survey results and the interview data to highlight the key findings of the Who Cares? study.

We had to set out to:

- improve understanding of the university experience of SCRs and the challenges of achieving work-life balance
- develop the evidence base about SCRs experience and wellbeing
- identify practical ways for universities to improve their support for SCRs.

These three overarching aims and what we found in relation to them are discussed in the following sections. We have also included a further section which we have named Care Capital. This emerged from discussions in the Steering Group which led us to include questions in both the survey and the interviews about the advantages of being a SCR and what experiences and skills SCRs bring to the academic environment.

Please note we have used selected results from our analyses of both the survey data (quantitative and qualitative) and the interview data (qualitative) in this section and overall report for the purposes of brevity.

We also asked our participants a range of questions specifically exploring the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on their experiences as SCRs which we have not included here but which we hope to publish soon.

We would like to signpost readers to 9: Further Information for details of our other project outputs including forthcoming publications.

Our participants

Survey participants

A total of 107 participants completed the survey in full who were mainly:

- Female (n=86)
- Aged between 30-39 and 40-49 (n=71)
- Of White ethnicity (n=80)
- Non-disabled (n=80)
- Commuter students (n=73)
- In employment - around a fifth did not engage in paid work (n=23)
- Working between 0 and over 41 hours per week (n=70)
- Not in receipt of income from other sources (n=73).

Over 20 different nationalities were represented of which British was the most common (n=65).

The largest groups were studying at postgraduate research/PhD level (n=41) and Foundation level (n=35).

Popular subject areas included Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) (n=30), Arts and Humanities (n=25) and Medicine and Allied subjects (n=23).

They were studying at more than 20 different HEIs in England and Scotland. We do not know if there were any participants from Wales or Northern Ireland.

Their caring responsibilities

- Most were primary carers (n=56)
- Almost half identified as a carer (n=51)
- Most lived with the person they cared for (n=79)
- Around a fifth were caring for family members/a partner (n=25)
- 24 SCRs were multi-generational caregivers
- Over half were co-parenting a child or children (n=56)
- Almost a fifth were lone parents (n=19)
- Around one tenth were parenting a disabled child (n=11)
- The largest proportion were parenting children across multiple age groups (n=31).

Forms of care

- Domestic care (shopping, domestic tasks and transportation) was the most popular form (n=38)
- Administrative care (dealing with finances, obtaining medical appointments or applying for benefits and other support) (n=29)
- Emotional care (helping with managing emotions and mood) (n=28)
- Personal care (washing, dressing, eating, going to the toilet and transfer from bed) (n=16)
- End of life care (n=6).

Interview participants

Eighteen SCRs who had completed the online survey and expressed an interest in taking part in a follow-up interview were interviewed in 2022. The interviews took place over MS Teams and were recorded with the participants' consent. Interviewees were asked to say a bit about themselves at the beginning of the interview and so some interviewees provided more biographical information than others. We have given our interviewees pseudonyms for the purposes of writing up and sharing their experiences throughout this report.

Name (pseudonym)	Caring and other characteristics	Study level and mode
Bridget	Female; Mature; Foster carer; Pregnant; Commuter, Works part time.	Undergraduate, full time
Darcy	Female; Low income background; Secondary carer to sister; also emotional support to Mum and sister.	Undergraduate, full time
Madelaine	Female; Middle class; Mature; Mother/parent; International student.	PhD
Duncan	Male; Carer for Mum; Commuter; Gay.	Undergraduate
Saimah	Female; Mother; Middle class; North African immigrant background; Lesbian.	PhD
Sarah	Female; Mature; Carer for elderly parents; Mental health problems.	Masters

Table continues on p. 25

Name (pseudonym)	Caring and other characteristics	Study level and mode
Louise	Female; Mature; Carer for Mum; Works part time.	UG part time
Hazel	Female; Mature; Lone Parent; First in Family; White; Works part time.	Masters full time
Aisha	Female; Mature; Carer for parents; International student; Asexual; Mental health issues	PhD Full Time
Yvonne	Female; Mature; Mother; Married; White; Voluntary work.	PhD Full Time (distance)
Lisa	Female; Mature; White British; Carer for adult daughter and elderly mother.	PhD Part time
Audrey	Female; Mature; White British; Lone parent; Mother; Cares for elderly parents; SpLDs (Specific Learning Difficulties); Commuter; Works part time.	UG Degree Full Time
Rosario	Female; Mature; Latina; Lone parent; Works part time.	Masters full time
Melanie	Female; Mature; White; Mother; Lives with partner; Works full time.	UG Degree Full Time
Xiu	Male; Mature; International student; Wife and son remain at home.	PhD Full Time
Jewel	Female; Mature; Mixed race; British; Mother; lone parent; Cares for grandfather; Works full time.	UG Degree Full Time
Isha	Female; Mature; International student; Mother; Husband and son live with her.	PhD Full Time
Nadia	Female; Mature; White British; Mother; Husband; Christian; Works full time.	PhD Part Time

University experiences and Study, Work and Life Balance

When we put together our project proposal, we knew that engagement with both their institution and their peers and achievement of study, work and life balance was likely to be different for SCRs, but little research had been undertaken. We explored the ways in which SCRs with different characteristics experienced university and the challenges of achieving balance.

Who Cares? was designed to be as open a study as possible in terms of encouraging a wide range of students to participate including both undergraduates and postgraduates; Home, EU and International students and students who cared for children and/or parents or other family members. Unsurprisingly, participants came from very different backgrounds and were studying in a range of circumstances beyond that of the traditional, young, undergraduate student.

What became clear in the thematic analysis of the interview transcripts were the ways in which the different characteristics of SCRs and the circumstances within which they found themselves all intersected in a myriad of ways affecting their experiences. Indeed, some of those characteristics intersected in ways that highlighted some clear challenges for SCRs which usually compounded the difficulties of achieving study, work and life balance and less frequently, facilitated it.

For example, socio-economic issues - the need to work - to find and secure paid employment to live, sometimes prevented SCRs from fully engaging with their studies but even students who were financially supported by a partner or family whilst they studied were not worry-free as the feeling of reliance on another person was sometimes uncomfortable and created a pressure on the student that undertaking study (or further study) would be instrumental in securing a better income in the future.

The majority of our survey participants worked, and the largest proportion worked between 31 and 40 hours a week (16.8 per cent). Most SCRs felt that their income was not sufficient to meet their needs (n=43) whilst for approximately one quarter, it was (n=17) and for approximately one fifth, it was sometimes enough (n=24).

Audrey:

I have to admit it, that some lectures, they get missed. Because of course, I've got to work. I work 27 hours a week as well. I've got bills to pay. Luckily, I work from home. Luckily, I don't have to commute there.

Other characteristics which emerged particularly during the interview data analysis were those of neurodivergence, race/nationality/ language, cultural notions and expectations of parenting and care, gender, tensions between different caring responsibilities, commuter students, family networks and support/partner (and the lack of), mature students and mental health were all pivotal in shaping the experience of SCRs.

The university experiences of SCRs were affected, and more often than not in a negative way, by the inflexibility of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) which was illustrated in numerous structural and cultural practices which either disadvantaged, demoralised, or made them feel that their identity was that of a deficit position – not an ideal student. This was illustrated in practices such as timetabling, specifically, that university holidays did not align with school holidays.

This was a particularly acute problem for Bridget who was a full-time commuter student, foster parent, in part time employment and experiencing a very problematic pregnancy. She had noticed that the flexibility which HEIs utilised during the lockdown periods of the pandemic such as offering recordings of lectures had been withdrawn with the return to face to face teaching such that she questioned the value of having to travel into sessions which involved just note taking rather than undertaking practical activities.

Inflexibility in relation to attendance for SCRs who worked was also observed, creating an environment where the student felt that their individual circumstances were not being considered and they were penalised. Several interviewees referred to their institution collecting data on their status but were unclear if that data was acted upon to enhance or support their experience. Whilst Louise felt that she was more likely to disclose her caring status now she had been at university for some time, when she enrolled she did not feel comfortable and was not clear that there were any advantages to disclosure.

Data collection held the promise of institutional flexibility for student differences, but these expectations were not always met. SCRs who are international students experienced inflexibility above and beyond the institution itself with visa arrangements which did not appear to take the demands of parenting into consideration. Madelaine described how her international student visa limited her maternity leave to four months.

Flexibility was related to individual staff rather than the institutions themselves. Some participants described their good fortune at having a supportive tutor, lecturer, supervisor or institutional culture as opposed to a university policy on students with caring responsibilities. Whilst some institutions did have policies relating to student parents and/or carers, they weren't perceived to be flexible enough to adapt to individual students' circumstances such as the experience of Bridget, a commuter student who was expecting a child.

In the survey we used the work/nonwork interference and enhancement scale (Fisher et al., 2009) to explore balance. SCRs felt that their work and study interfered with their personal life and vice versa, far more than enhancing it. Worryingly, the majority of survey participants felt their work/study meant they neglected their own personal needs, that their personal life suffered, and that they were often too tired to do the things they would like to do. Personal life often encroached on work/study, with over 70 per cent of SCRs feeling that the time they spent on work/study was affected by their personal life - often worrying.

The rhythms, and patterns of caring, working and studying do not align in such a way that SCRs feel that they have a good balance. Moreover, attempting to manage all the different elements in their life frequently had a negative impact on their wellbeing and their mental health.

For example, if there was a care crisis – an unexpected problem affecting their caring responsibilities or the person they cared for in some way, any attempt at managing to study alongside caring was difficult at best. Unexpected crises could impact on a student's attendance and this was stressful because of the repercussions and ramifications of this. In some circumstances, dealing with a care crisis could lead to an interruption in studies. However, experiencing a crisis proved to be a lot less stressful if a SCR had supportive lecturers.

The impossibility of achieving study, work and life balance emerged from the interviews and the idea that something always had to 'give' in the pursuit of academic studies. Since care commitments for the most part are inflexible, it was the 'life' aspect of balance which suffered the most. Lack of time for personal care impacted on wellbeing and mental health. Madelaine described how forms of self-care were 'squeezed' even tasks such as getting washed.

Attempting to juggle all the competing demands might also lead to negative consequences, affecting friendships and relationships, feelings of guilt and ultimately mental health problems.

A minority of SCRs felt that they were able to successfully manage their study, work and life balance in a way that they were happy with. This was attributed to either the support they received from a partner or the flexibility of the institution they studied at. For example, Saimah found that studying for a PhD was possible even with a young baby because she was able to schedule her time in the lab around her commitments. Sarah found that the rhythms of their studies and caring commitments aligned as they attended an institution whose provision was delivered in the evenings which meant they could secure a part time job with an employer who was able to accommodate their requests regarding working days.

Madelaine: I would say... time to like rest and reflect, just little bits of time like having a cup of tea and reading a book, going for a walk, like those types of recharge times, they're completely squeezed. Taking a shower. Those are squeezed.

Experiences and wellbeing

Students' sense of institutional belonging, social and academic integration and psychological wellbeing have been linked, but no studies had examined the nature of this relationship for SCRs. Our survey incorporated and adapted (where necessary), the work/nonwork interference and enhancement scale (Fisher et al., 2009) to measure study, work, and life balance; the Warwick Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS) (Tennant et al., 2007) to measure wellbeing and the Psychological Sense of School Membership scale (Goodenow et al., 1993) to explore belonging. We also created our own questions to measure engagement with institution, academic studies, extra-curricular activities, and social life following discussion with the Steering Group.

We found that our sample had varying levels of wellbeing, with over 40 per cent scoring under 42 (the cut off point for classification of low wellbeing). Very few of the students had energy to spare (under 10 per cent), and the sample rarely felt relaxed with only six students reporting feeling relaxed often or all the time.

SCRs ability to engage with their institution was felt to be low, with almost 60 per cent giving a score of below 5 (where 0 is low and 10 is high engagement). This was even higher for ability to engage with their academic studies, with 60 per cent scoring a 4 or lower, suggesting they struggled to engage with their university and their academic work due to their caring responsibilities.

Our sample struggled to engage with a social life at university, with almost 40 per cent scoring their engagement a 0, and no students scoring their engagement over an 8.

When asked what stopped them from engaging with their institution, their studies, extra-curricular activities and social life, the most popular reasons were always lack of time followed by caring responsibilities. There were multiple barriers cited relating to engagement, but they could be financial, practical, cultural and structural such as the cost of getting to university and parking there, the timing of events, lack of and cost of childcare or a perception that social and extracurricular activities weren't aimed at them. They noted that it could be difficult for postgraduates/mature students/distance learning students/minority students to fit in; they felt judged by staff for having caring responsibilities; they experienced isolation and felt belonging was generally facilitated by networking experiences that they just didn't have the time to engage in. Some SCRs were also clear that they did not have any expectations in relation to belonging because they had different priorities.

Whilst our sample did not always feel part of their university and they were not included in lots of activities, they did feel respected within their institution and very few wished they were attending a different university.

In relation to experiences and wellbeing we did find a number of statistical correlations which suggested that there were relationships of medium strength between feelings of belonging to an institution and taking part in extracurricular activities. We also found that SCRs who felt their personal life enhanced their work/study (i.e. they could achieve a balance) being more likely to engage with extra-curricular activities and feel more belonging to their institution. Conversely, students who struggled to achieve some kind of balance (their personal life interfered with their work/study) were less likely to engage with extra-curricular activities and socially. SCRs who felt less belonging to their institution were more likely to have lower wellbeing.

As might be expected, SCRs who felt they had a balance, had higher levels of engagement, belonging and wellbeing and vice versa.

Picking up on the ideas in the survey where some SCRs described not feeling part of their university or excluded because of practical barriers to engagement such as cost and timings and drawing on the work of Kathleen Lynch (2010), we identified evidence of the “hidden doxa of carelessness” (ibid., 60) within the narratives of our interview participants. SCRs described encountering attitudes and practices which marginalised, stigmatised, or even disadvantaged them.

Care exclusionary practices suggested underlying assumptions about the flexibility and ability to prioritise studies that students were expected to have. These included the late release of timetables, lack of suitable childcare provision and numerous barriers to engagement with studies and extracurricular activities.

There was evidence of a disconnect between the ways in which SCRs were described and their needs understood by their university. There was also a limited cultural understanding of care, or of care from the carer’s viewpoint. Some of the SCRs who took part in the study challenged the language being used to describe them, both by their institution and by the research team:

Isha:

Unpaid care? I wouldn't say it like that. Maybe because somehow, in my, the cultural beliefs or kind of the beliefs, it doesn't. It is a job which is not supposed to be paid... You cannot match up the value of it, I think so, because it comes out of love and responsibility...

Louise:

I don't know if I want to be labelled as a carer, even though I know that I am.

Audrey:

I try not to think about it until now, and then I start getting a bit tearful.

Some participants spoke of a sense of being out of place at their institution. Examples included a perception that their university was more focussed on recruiting and supporting younger students and the limited acknowledgement of the complexity of SCRs lives and commitments as reflected in university policies and practices. Some indicated that they accepted having a less rich university experience as an inevitable consequence of caring while studying. In particular a lack of opportunities or support to engage with non-academic or extra-curricular aspects of university were commonly reported. These appeared at times to be linked to an internalisation of the narrative that care responsibilities, particularly parenting, were a personal choice and therefore individual issues - by implication these were not the concern of the university.

Assumptions that students were care-less were also evident in accounts of course related trips and placements. One Allied Health student spoke about the challenges around securing a local placement to enable her to continue caring for and breastfeeding a young baby. This student described the lack of accommodations to enable her to continue her clinical placement, necessary to fulfil the course requirements, and a general sense of being out of place.

Guilt was an emotion that many of the SCRs described or alluded to when it came to how they juggled their studies alongside their caring commitments. This was particularly acute in relation to the time (or lack of) that they spent with their families.

There was a sense that some tasks and responsibilities were more valid than others. Sarah described how they justified to themselves that time spent studying, working, caring, and volunteering were all legitimate activities but taking time for themselves was not. They felt guilty spending time on self-care even though they were a full time live-in carer.

Ultimately, for some of the interviewees, the seemingly impossible task of juggling their study, work and life balance and the attendant guilt they felt at the perception that something within that balance was missing out, negatively impacted their mental health.

Jewel:

Oh you know, it's a bit too much. And it's difficult to know, where, what, because I know that something has to give somewhere but I don't know where at the moment.

Bridget:

It was very obvious with my clinical educator that it was inconvenient that I was pregnant. I don't think she'd ever had a pregnant student before, which is fine, and I can't imagine it happens all the time. But it was very inconvenient for her, and she kept making comments about it.

Practical ways to support SCRs

Research suggests that due to the conflicting demands of their additional responsibilities SCRs face more barriers to participation in university life, including access to support services and engaging with conventional student representation mechanisms. This is likely to perpetuate inequalities, including gaps in access, attainment, and wellbeing. We felt it was important to try and gauge what support SCRs had utilised and their experiences of it, as well as their suggestions for what might make their university experience better.

Awareness of institutional support for SCRs prior to enrolment was incredibly low amongst survey respondents (n=9) and not much higher after enrolment (n=17). SCRs tended to seek this kind of information online.

When it came to the accessibility of university services in terms of their physical accessibility, such as car parking and public transport links, only 20 percent of survey respondents agreed that they were accessible (n= 22). In response to the question about the accessibility of online and remote university services, for example, online or telephone appointments, SCRs were clear that this approach was favoured with 52 SCRs judging them accessible. When asked if they felt they were able to engage with support at their university in the way they preferred, of the 63 responses the most popular was 'Yes' (n=30) and 'Yes (but with limits)' (n=8).

Perceptions of their institutions as carer and parent friendly varied greatly with the largest group of respondents answering 'don't know' in response to this question (n=29) whilst the same proportion felt that their university was SCR friendly (n=23) or 'not really' (n=23). A minority of respondents were clear that their institution was not carer and parent friendly (n=13), and a similar proportion felt that their university was making efforts to improve - 'it's getting better' (n=11). For respondents who selected 'other' their comments highlighted that childcare availability did not meet their university commitments; childcare was too expensive or there was not enough available; support for SCRs was inconsistent and dependent on individual staff.

We also asked survey respondents how they felt about being open about their circumstances with others at their place of study. Of the 89 responses to this question, the most popular response was 'comfortable' (n=51). Respondents described how being open about their caring responsibilities might help others in a similar situation and help promote understanding amongst students and staff as well as lead to better support for SCRs:

I just wish I wasn't sometimes made to feel guilty or inferior, as if having decided to study was a foolish thing given my caring circumstances. I have also sought an extension of my studies where my caring circumstances should have been taken more seriously in my opinion. It's not a level playing field.

However, a considerable proportion of SCRs expressed unease and/or felt uncomfortable disclosing (n=28) fearing negative perceptions from other students and staff.

Amongst the interviewees, most SCRs were either not aware of a SCR, carer and/or parent policy at their place of study or had checked and found that their institution did not have one. They were rarely aware of any targeted support or specific services for SCRs. Students reported a reliance on empathetic lecturers and tutors to 'bend the rules' for them to enable them to accommodate the often unexpected demands of their care commitments. Madelaine, for example, spoke warmly about her supervisors and how they had made their own caring responsibilities visible. She was very clear that her supervisors would be the "first port of call" if she was struggling as opposed to approaching the School or College unless she really had to. Similarly, Duncan felt that the institution itself was rigid but individual staff could be understanding and supportive to SCRs.

Some interviewees had clearly benefited from the institutional support available to SCRs at their institution; this was sometimes targeted support or more universal support available to all students. Targeted support mechanisms included the existence of Students' Union groups for parents, for example, whilst some SCRs found that accessing universal support services such as financial advice, wellbeing services and mental health support and the chaplaincy were beneficial to them and was important for SCRs who were time poor.

Yvonne:

I've been able to access support services at my university online quite easily and I'm quite pleased with that. So, they have a listening service which is quite lovely actually... And then also student counselling which I have also accessed, is online.

Peer support was also important to many of the interviewees who found that informal WhatsApp and Facebook groups set up by themselves or fellow students were incredibly helpful in creating a sense of community.

One area of support that SCRs found particularly challenging in terms of institutional provision and support was that of childcare. This included lack of university nursery provision or lack of places where there was provision, the cost of childcare or its limited nature. In the absence of institutional provision, childcare arrangements were often precarious which made studying challenging. Yvonne described how they were always "begging for favours from grandparents" whilst Melanie also talked about the lack of practical support as the university nursery was closed:

Just sometimes my husband works, and I'm faced with, you know, difficulty. I had to ask my sister. She's studying as well. So, we kind of, she would miss a class for me and the next week I will do the same for her.

There was also the issue of childcare for students whose children were too old to access nursery provision but required supervision during the school holidays, for example, Hazel described how she had not realised there was university holiday club provision for older children when she first started her studies but now her son was 13, frustratingly, he was too old to attend the clubs. The interviews highlighted that navigating the different childcare options whilst studying was complex.

For interviewees who were carers and had been young adult carers prior to their university studies, support from third sector organisations had been incredibly important in relation to their caring responsibilities but it became clear that once at university, this local support ceased when they turned 18 which was disconcerting:

Darcy: Before I turned 18, at home, I had loads of support from [local charity]... and that was for like, I went to like young carers groups and I even had a short spell of counselling and they were just like, fantastic so I was really sad when I turned 18... the discontinuity of support was definitely something I noticed from like, school to uni.

Duncan also described the lack of communication, coordination, and consistency of support across, not only local authorities in general but between the local authority that they were under and/to university:

You know there are some local authorities that are absolutely brilliant at it and they've developed things. The cross-communication between the authorities is what's failing because I don't think my local authority actually have an assessment.

Finally, support from the government in terms of benefits and from institutions in the form of bursaries and hardship funds emerged as another form of support which was frequently confusing and arbitrary. Amongst the interviewees, eligibility for benefits and support varied greatly since the cohort included UK and non-UK students, undergraduates and postgraduates, students who were in paid employment and students who were caring for their own children (of varying ages) and/or parents, siblings, or grandparents.

Saimah, for example, highlighted how in her experience as a PhD student with a young child, the current benefits and incentives system in the UK created pressure for her to find work on top of full time study and caring as she would not be eligible for tax free childcare. She had sought financial advice at her institution but had been told there was nothing on offer to support childcare.

Rosario had found that she was able to navigate the state benefits system during her undergraduate studies and had lived on Universal Credit for a year whilst she studied. However, following a Masters degree she was offered the opportunity to go onto PhD study but was unable to do so since she would not be eligible to receive Universal Credit and the student loan she could take would not cover her living costs.

SCRs were asked to share their thoughts as to how their university or institution could be more carer and parent friendly. Of the responses to this question, the most expressed sentiment was that HEIs should take caring responsibilities into account when timetabling/planning activities whilst targeted promotion of services to SCRs was also suggested. Other suggestions related to institutional policies and sector commitments; flexibility and accessibility in learning provision; family friendly campuses and promoting student integration.

Institutional policies and sector commitment to SCRs

- University policy for SCRs including maternity/paternity
- Parity of provision for SCRs across an institution
- Acknowledge SCRs situation as a mitigating circumstance
- Review university policies around employment/voluntary work to ensure students who need to work are not discriminated against
- Sector commitment to supporting SCRs.

Flexibility and accessibility in learning provision

- Release timetables earlier
- More flexibility in relation to remote, online participation
- SCR friendly online sessions, for example, acceptable for a SCR to turn their video off if required
- Record all sessions where possible
- Take caring responsibilities into consideration when planning activities/events, for example, avoiding clashes with school holidays.

Family friendly campuses

- Subsidised nursery
- Close proximity of nursery provision
- Priority spaces at nursery
- Childcare funding
- Allow children to attend events
- Creche at library
- SCR friendly study spaces
- SCR friendly sports facilities
- Breastfeeding spaces on campus
- Car parking spaces for SCRs.

Promote student integration

- Acknowledge SCRs situation and talk openly about caring responsibilities
- Online social opportunities for SCRs
- Institutional support for SCR groups
- Targeted promotion of services to SCRs
- Tailored SCR IAG pre-access
- More financial support for SCRs
- Pay scholarships/bursaries on time.

Care Capital

In discussions with the project steering group the researchers were mindful to be sensitive of inadvertently reproducing deficit narratives of care, particularly in the context of western education where care is often positioned as a problematic activity which prevents desirable forms and levels of engagement with education-related activities. Within the participant narratives there was evidence of both the strengths and benefits which care responsibilities could offer the participants in their personal and educational endeavours, as well as evidence that some participants took steps to resist the intrusion of such narratives and care-exclusionary practices.

It was considered important during the Steering Group meetings to explore the positive aspects of SCRs' student experience and so a question was formulated for inclusion in both the online survey and the interviews. In response to 'what strengths has being a SCR given you?' (n= 85) the largest group of responses related to time management (n=30). A total of 21 different strengths were detailed. A very small number of participants did not feel that being a SCR had given them any positive attributes (n=7).

Strengths were perceived in terms of skills such as time management, organisation, problem solving and juggling numerous responsibilities.

Participants described a strong drive and determination to pursue their studies, referring to 'focus', 'motivation', 'work ethic' and 'pride' in what they were doing:

Gives me motivation to persevere through the tough times as I am setting an example for my son. I also have better time management now than when I was younger as I know there is very limited time available to fit in all the studying that is required.

Some SCRS referred to their resilience and growing sense of self-belief. They described how being a SCR had made them more confident and independent:

I feel more capable and feel good about myself being able to help my loved one.

Qualities that are generally associated with caring were seen as strengths in this context, such as being compassionate and emotionally intelligent:

I have patience, empathy for others who might be finding things hard, both in personal or student life.

The other main strength identified by participants was that being a SCR gave them a sense of perspective. Sitting comfortably alongside the motivating features of studying in HE, the realities of their situation led to an acceptance of factors that were sometimes beyond their control:

Provision of focus and relevance – being able to put things in perspective and understand what really matters in life.

There was strong evidence of the strengths SCRs derived from their lives as carers and/or parents. Participants described soft skills which helped them with their studies. Time management, multitasking, focus and motivation were commonly raised. Some participants also recognised the value of their perspective and orientation towards their studies which was considered to make them more motivated whilst balancing a realistic expectation of themselves:

Sarah: I could say that we [the carers and parents] did bring that... enthusiasm to the class and kind of like willingness to do the work, and I think that is because... you're doing it 'cause you want to. It's not easy, it's not like 'Well, I have nothing else to do' 'cause you have got other things to do so you really want to do it, so you've got that enthusiasm.

Some participants spoke of the direct benefits their caring experiences had on their studies, for example, drawing on their care-related knowledge to inform their research practice. However, participants who enrolled on taught courses did not find that their care experiences were recognised in the classroom.

Several interviewees spoke of their resilience to challenges. However, there was a sense, as noted above, that the challenges they were dealing with were an individual concern which required resilience (“[I] just get on with it really”), self-motivation and high levels of organisation. As such the emotional labour expended in developing this resilience, managing workload and in maintaining sufficient boundaries between care, study and work activities was hidden, and was rarely visible or explicitly acknowledged within the context of their studies. Some participants expressed resistance to conventional ideals about work-life balance which didn't feel relevant or realistic for them:

Hazel: When you've been through some of the worst things in your life and then you know, sort of being stressed about an assignment and that kind of thing, like university, [it] is not the only thing in my life and it's not like, the be all and end all

Audrey: If you need to work four jobs, to pay your bills and feed your children, you work four jobs. If you don't need to, then you don't. But you just have to just do what you do, what you need... it's getting harder and harder and harder and harder. But no, there's definitely no such thing as a balance.

There was also a sense that care responsibilities could trouble and challenge the underlying assumption that universities held about 'ideal' students and staff, for example, as dedicated scholars exclusively committed to their studies and unencumbered by other responsibilities (Wong et al., 2021; Gregersen and Nielsen, 2022).

Despite the reported challenges, which were significant, many participants actively rejected deficit narratives around study and care. Some provided or benefitted from the support and solidarity of other SCRs, or drew on their experiences to shape the practices of their institution in ways which were more accommodating towards their needs.

Participants spoke of their sense of perspective, derived from the knowledge of the value of their care to their loved ones. Some interviewees spoke of being able to resist the pressure to overperform, recognising that for them, 'good enough' was a more desirable and realistic aim than perfection.

Others recognised the value of study-work-life balance, expressing a desire to prioritise their own and their family's wellbeing above their study commitments.

SCRs descriptions of their efforts to achieve study-work-life balance drew on an understanding of the value of their caregiving to implicitly or explicitly challenge performative norms and expectations of academia.

Overall, it was clear that despite the difficulties they experienced in balancing study and care, participants came to HE with considerable personal resources developed as a result of their caring roles. These resources comprised a kind of 'care capital' which could be put to use in support of self and others, enabling these participants to resist deficit constructions of their carer status.

Yvonne: [T]here's a lot of mythology... like this whole idea about a PhD that you should have been working on it constantly. The 40-year-old in me is like, well, that's just obviously not true. I mean, that's not how life works.

Darcy: A lot of people here like, they're very like, 'Oh my degree is my whole life'... [b]ut I made a point of not letting it completely take over my life... I struggle but I really have to remind myself that my priorities are not like other people's priorities, yeah?

7 Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions

This project was designed to help develop the evidence base about students with caring responsibilities (SCRs) and their wellbeing. Through the use of a rapid evidence review, survey and interviews it has provided a snapshot in time of the experiences of SCRs studying at a number of UK universities, at different study levels and stages, from assorted backgrounds and in different social, economic, cultural, and environmental circumstances. In particular, it has explored what those responsibilities look like and the ways they impact on students' ability to engage in the academic and social aspects of university, if they wish to, and their perceptions of themselves as students, carers and/or parents, all of which shape how healthy and happy, they feel.

In recruiting such a diverse range of participants to the project Steering Group, survey, and interviews, when it comes to improving understanding of what university is like for SCRs and the challenges of balance, it is of course clear that individual experiences are very different, just as it is for a postgraduate taught compared to a postgraduate research student or a 'traditional' student compared to a mature, part-time student. However, what it is possible to assert, even with a group whose own responsibilities are so different at times, is that overwhelmingly, SCRs do not feel like they have balance in their study, work, and life and many neglected their own personal needs. The Mental Health Foundation notes that work, life balance is different for everybody and it is about "making sure you feel fulfilled and content in both areas of your life" (2023, np). They suggest balance is a cycle rather than an achievement to aim at which can be achieved by regularly stopping and reflecting on what is causing you to feel stressed and unhappy and using that to make adjustments where possible. Certainly, the SCRs in this study did not feel they had a good balance and attempting to manage all the different elements in their life frequently had a negative impact on their sense of wellbeing. Unsurprisingly, the key factor affecting SCRs capacity to engage in university life was lack of time.

In terms of identifying practical ways to support SCRs in HE we offered survey and interview participants the opportunity to make their voices heard. They felt that HEIs should take caring responsibilities into account when timetabling and planning activities. More targeted promotion of services to SCRs was also suggested. Many of the interviewees, for example, had benefited from universal support services at their universities such as financial advice, wellbeing services, disability and mental health support but it was often the targeted support such as a Students' Union group or a student representative for SCRs which helped facilitate the flow of relevant information and engender a sense of community. Other suggestions from SCRs related to institutional policies and sector commitments; flexibility and accessibility in learning provision; family friendly campuses and promoting student integration. We will address some of these in our Recommendations section.

Recommendations

1. Improve your knowledge of the care commitments of your students

Recognise that care commitments are not static, offer regular opportunities for students to disclose their caring and parenting responsibilities, for example, annually at the point of enrolment.

National, sectoral data about SCRs is in its infancy and has only been collected at application stage since 2023 with the advent of the UCAS tick boxes which include being a parent and being a carer. However, caring responsibilities are not static and may change over the course of an undergraduate or postgraduate degree. Universities need to make sure they are collecting this data in some way on a regular basis or at the very least encouraging SCRs to disclose this information to a nominated member of staff or team so that it is recorded. SCRs should feel encouraged to share this information because it will help their experience not hinder it. Moreover, without knowing how many SCRs there are in HE, efforts to advocate for their requirements will be limited.

2. Communicate the support available effectively

Students with caring responsibilities are a time-poor group who may not have time to search for support information. Use direct communications and explicitly set out the range of support options available. Ensure that information is available pre-enrolment to enable students to make informed decisions about their university choice.

Levels of awareness of specific support for SCRs and universal support for all students within institutions was much lower than we had anticipated. However, we know from our own experiences as SCRs and as university staff that this support exists. But it still isn't always communicated well or enough or to the right people. (This ties in with our first recommendation – 'Improve your knowledge of the care commitments of your students'). Targeted information about support was highlighted by students in both the survey and interviews as a suggestion to help improve the experience of SCRs. We recommend communicating with SCRs repeatedly and in different ways.

3. Work with students to co-create institutional policy

Ensure students with caring responsibilities can contribute to creating a policy which addresses their specific needs and set out your commitment to them in a single document.

The SCRs we questioned were clear that institutional policies were important to them to refer to and to give them the confidence to talk to academic and professional services staff about their situation and requirements. It appeared that such policies were not universal and if they did exist either focused on student parents or student carers, when as our data shows, some SCRs are both. Working with SCRs within an institution to co-create such policies not only ensures that the diverse backgrounds and needs of SCRs are considered but also ensures a level of visibility for this group who often feel invisible.

4. Work with local and external organisations

Third sector organisations and local authorities have expertise in supporting students with caring responsibilities. Joined-up working can help to improve the range and continuity of support available.

We heard of some positive examples of SCRs who had received support prior to university from third sector organisations or from local authority services which then stopped upon them entering university. There appears to be much greater scope and requirement for universities to work with charitable organisations who support carers, young adult carers, young parents and lone parents, for example, to better understand how to support SCRs into HE and once they are there. There is certainly recent impetus to this from the regulator for HE in England for example, the Office for Students, has asked HE providers (HEPs) to work more strategically in collaboration with third sector organisations to design and implement widening participation interventions set out in HEPs' Access and Participation Plans (OfS, 2023).

5. Create a 'care-full' campus

Ensure there are family-friendly spaces on campus and recognise and value the skills and contributions made by students with caring responsibilities.

The SCRs who took part in our research suggested that family-friendly campuses were a practical way universities could support them. Spaces where children and family members were made to feel welcome. During the course of this project we have been inspired by the work of Lynch (2010) and Moreau and Kerner (2015) to think about the care-less nature of HE and our findings certainly reiterate the notion that for many SCRs, caring for others whilst they study is something that they are often embarrassed to talk about. We found that SCRs themselves have identified a range of contributions they bring to the HE space and we call on universities to consider these attributes amidst a wider conversation about how welcome SCRs are made to feel in physical and virtual learning and social spaces at university.

Future research

As with any research study, in asking questions we arrive at yet more and so we have identified areas for future research to better inform the HE sector's understanding of students with caring responsibilities:

1. International students who care – it is clear that there is a need to better understand the experiences of international SCRs in the light of UK government rhetoric around migration and restrictions introduced to limit international students bringing dependants with them from 1 January 2024. Whilst Moreau and Kerner (2015) included international students who care in their study, a specific focus on international SCRs and their mental health is suggested based on the indicative findings of our project.
2. Care capital – despite the difficulties they experienced in balancing study and care, participants came to HE with considerable personal resources developed as a result of their caring roles and in drawing out the positive aspects of studying whilst caring we feel that there is scope to better understand and develop the concept of 'care capital' which SCRs could put to use in support of self and others, within HE.
3. Institutional data on SCRs – we suggest that the scales and questions we adapted and created for our survey particularly those measuring and exploring wellbeing, engagement, belonging and study-work-life balance, could be used by institutions to generate knowledge of their own SCR populations as a baseline moving forward. Moreover, the data generated could be used by institutions with a view to co-creating an institutional policy for and with SCRs if there is none in place.

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9 Further Information

Who Cares? Publications

Spacey, R., Sanderson, R. and Zile, A. (2022) Who Cares? Identifying, understanding, and supporting the work-life balance and wellbeing of students with caring responsibilities. Research Notice. IMPact e-journal.

Zile, A., Sanderson, R. and Spacey, R. (2023) Why universities need to understand the value of carers. University World News. Feb 18 2023.

Sanderson, R. and Zile, A. (2023) Who cares about the carers? Wonkhe. March 3 2023.

Spacey, R., Sanderson, R. and Zile, A. (2024) The care-less academy? Making space for parents and carers in Higher Education. Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning, 26(1), 7-33. <https://doi.org/10.5456/WPLL.26.1.7>

We have presented our Who Cares? project findings at the following conferences and workshops:

Who Cares? Wellbeing and work-life balance of students with caring responsibilities. Diversity in Education Conference, University of Lincoln. June 2022.

Ties that bind: Reimagining participation for student carers and parents in the hybrid university. SRHE Conference 2022: Mobilities in Higher Education. December 2022.

The careless academy? Making space for carers and parents in higher education. 7th Biennial International Conference on Access, Participation and Success. April 2023.

Study, care and student mental health. SMARteN Virtual Labs for PhD Student Mental Health. April 2023.

‘Who Cares?’ survey questions: please use/adapt these questions

What kinds of unpaid care do you provide? (select all that apply)

- Parenting a child or children with a co-parent (partner or spouse)
- Parenting a child or children as a lone parent
- Parenting a disabled child or disabled children
- Providing foster care
- Providing childcare for a friend or family member’s child
- Providing care to a parent, guardian, sibling, spouse, partner or friend: help with, shopping and domestic tasks such as cleaning, transportation (to and from appointments, shops and friends)
- Providing care to a parent, partner or friend: help with administrative tasks such as finances, obtaining medical appointments or applying for state benefits (advocacy /co-ordinating care/decision making)
- Providing care to a parent, guardian, sibling, spouse, partner or friend: help with personal care such as washing, dressing and eating, going to the toilet, transfer (bed to chair)
- Providing care to a parent, guardian, sibling, spouse, partner or friend: help with managing emotions and mood
- Providing end of life care to a parent, guardian, sibling, spouse, partner or friend
- Prefer not to answer
- Other

Do you identify as a carer?

- Yes
- No
- Not really
- Don't know
- Prefer not to answer
- Other

Do you consider yourself a primary carer/caregiver (provide care) or secondary carer/caregiver (help to care for)?

- Primary
- Secondary
- It changes
- Not sure
- Prefer not to answer
- Other

Do you live with the person(s) you care for?

- Yes
- No
- Usually
- Sometimes
- Prefer not to answer
- Other

Are you a multi-generational caregiver - you provide care for two or more generations of family or friends (e.g. caring for your children and partner, or sibling and parent)?

- Yes
- No
- Not really
- Don't know
- Prefer not to answer
- Other

Please indicate your gender:

Please indicate your nationality:

Please indicate your ethnicity:

How old are you?

- 20 and under
- 21 - 24 years
- 25 - 29 years
- 30 - 39 years
- 40 - 49 years
- 50 - 59 years
- 60 and over

Do you consider yourself disabled? (disabilities may include a physical or mental health condition or impairment which has lasted for more than 12 months and has a substantial impact on your ability to carry out your daily activities).

- Yes
- No
- Don't know
- Prefer not to answer

If you are a parent, please specify the age range of your child(ren):

- 0-3
- 4-7
- 8-11
- 12-16
- 16-18
- 18+
- Prefer not to answer
- Not applicable

What type of course are you currently studying?

- HNC/HND
- Foundation Degree
- Undergraduate Degree
- Masters taught
- Postgraduate Certificate in Education
- Professional Graduate Certificate in Education
- Other postgraduate taught
- Other postgraduate research
- PhD/EdD or other Doctorate research
- Other

What subject are you studying? [list see [HESA subject codes](#)]

Which university are you studying at?

Do you consider yourself to be a commuter student? (live at home and commute to your place of study).

- Yes
- No
- Don't know
- Prefer not to answer
- Other (please specify)

Are you aware of a creche or nursery at your university?

- Yes
- No
- Don't know
- Not sure
- Not applicable
- Prefer not to answer
- Other (please specify)

Have you thought about or used this service?

- I use it
- I do not use it
- I have used it in the past
- I might use it in the future
- Not relevant to me
- Prefer not to answer
- Other

Do you undertake any paid work?

- Yes, during term time
- Yes, during university holidays
- No
- I have done in the past
- Prefer not to answer
- Other (please specify)

Are you employed by your higher education institution? e.g. as a tutor, teacher, lecturer, or researcher.

- Yes
- No
- Don't know
- Prefer not to answer
- Other (please specify)

Are you a doctoral student in receipt of a stipend or scholarship?

- Yes
- No
- Don't know
- Prefer not to answer
- Other (please specify)

On average, how many hours of paid work do you undertake per week?

Do you receive any income from other sources e.g. universal credit or carers allowance?

- Yes
- No
- Don't know
- I have done in the past
- Prefer not to answer
- Other (please specify)

Do you feel your income is sufficient to meet your needs and the needs of your family?

- Yes
- No
- Sometimes
- Never
- Always
- Has done in the past
- Prefer not to answer
- Other (please specify)

Are there are any budgeting challenges you have experienced whilst studying? (select all that apply).

- Timing of wages
- Timing of receipt of maintenance loans
- Delay in receiving wages
- Delay in receiving maintenance loan
- Insufficient amount of money from paid work
- Insufficient amount of money from maintenance loan
- Insufficient financial support from family
- Prefer not to answer
- Other (please specify)

Are you aware of any financial support available at your university for students with caring responsibilities?

- Yes
- No
- Unsure
- Prefer not to answer
- Other (please specify)

The following scales have responses on a 5 point Likert scale where 1=disagree completely, 2=disagree somewhat, 3=neither agree nor disagree, 4=agree somewhat, 5=agree completely.

Work/study interference with personal life [source: Fisher et al., 2009]

- I come home from work/study too tired to do things I would like to do
- My work/study makes it difficult to maintain the kind of personal life I would like
- I often neglect my personal needs because of the demands of my work/study
- My personal life suffers because of my work/study
- I have to miss out on important personal activities due to the amount of time I spend doing work/study

Personal life interference with work/study

- My personal life drains me of the energy I need to do my work/study
- My work/study suffers because of everything going on in my personal life
- I would devote more time to work/study if it weren't for everything I have going on in my personal life
- I am too tired to be effective at work/study because of things I have going on in my personal life
- When I'm at work/study, I worry about things I need to do outside of work
- I have difficulty getting my work/study done because I am preoccupied with personal matters at work

Work/study enhancement of personal life

- My work/study gives me energy to pursue activities outside of work/study that are important to me
- Because of my work/study I am in a better mood at home
- The things I do at work/study help me deal with personal and practical issues at home

Personal life enhancement of work / study

- I am in a better mood at work/study because of everything I have going for me in my personal life
- My personal life gives me energy to do my work/study
- My personal life helps me relax and feel ready for the next days work/study

Wellbeing

WEMWBS (Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing scale) [source: Tennant et al., 2007].

(Responses are on a 5-point scale where 1=None of the time, 2=Rarely, 3=Some of the time, 4=Often, 5=All the time).

- I've been feeling optimistic about the future
- I've been feeling useful
- I've been feeling relaxed
- I've been feeling interested in other people
- I've had energy to spare
- I've been dealing with problems well
- I've been thinking clearly
- I've been feeling good about myself
- I've been feeling close to other people
- I've been feeling confident
- I've been able to make up my own mind about things
- I've been feeling loved
- I've been interested in new things
- I've been feeling cheerful

Engagement and Membership with Institution

Engagement with institution scale

Respondents may select 0-10 where 0=I am unable to engage with all the opportunities I want to and 10=I am able to engage with all the opportunities that I want to.

Engagement with institution

- On a scale of 0 to 10 where 0 is low and 10 is high, where do you see yourself in terms of engaging with your institution? (e.g. volunteering to be a student representative).
- Are there any things that stop you from engaging with your institution? (open question)

Engagement with academic studies

- On a scale of 0 to 10 where 0 is low and 10 is high, where do you see yourself in terms of engaging with your academic studies? (e.g. providing feedback on your course, feeling like you are an active partner in your university education).
- Are there any things that stop you from engaging with your academic studies? (open question)

Engagement with extra-curricular

- On a scale of 0 to 10 where 0 is low and 10 is high, where do you see yourself in terms of engaging with the extra-curricular activities at your institution? (e.g. clubs and societies).
- Are there any things that stop you from engaging with extra-curricular activities? (open question)

Engagement with social life

- On a scale of 0 to 10 where 0 is low and 10 is high, where do you see yourself in terms of engaging with the social life at your institution? (e.g. meeting friends for a meal, going to events at the Students' Union).
- Are there any things that stop you from engaging with the social life at your institution? (open question).

Psychological Sense of Membership [source: Goodenow et al., 1993].

Responses are on a 5-point scale where 1= not at all true, 2= somewhat true, 3=pretty much true, 4= very much true, 5=completely true.

- I feel like a real part of this university
- People here notice when I'm good at something
- It's hard for people like me to be accepted here
- Other people in this university take my opinions seriously
- Most lecturers and staff are interested in me
- Sometimes I don't feel as if I belong here
- There's at least one lecturer/staff member I can talk to if I have a problem
- People in this university are friendly to me
- Lecturers/staff are not interested in people like me
- I am included in lots of activities at this university
- I am treated with as much respect as other students
- I feel very different from most other students here
- I can really be myself in this university
- The lecturers/university staff here respect me
- People here know I can do good work
- I wish I were in a different university
- I feel proud to belong to this university.

Is there anything you would like to add about your experiences in relation to belonging, engagement or identity?

Awareness and access to support whilst studying

Before you started studying, were you aware of any support available to Students with Caring Responsibilities (SCRs)?

- Yes
- No
- Not really
- Don't know
- It wasn't relevant
- Prefer not to answer
- Other

How did you find out about the support available to SCRs before you started studying?

After enrolment, were you aware of the support available at your institution to SCRs?

- Yes
- No
- Not really
- Don't know
- It wasn't relevant
- Prefer not to answer
- Other

How did you find out about the support available to SCRs after you enrolled?

Have you accessed any of the following student support services in the last 12 months?

- Careers advice (workshops, 1-2-1 appointments)
- Careers advice (website)
- Student finance (applied for a bursary, grant or scholarship)
- Student finance (workshops, 1-2-1 appointments, other financial management advice)
- Student finance (website)
- Student wellbeing (appointments or workshops about mental health)
- Student wellbeing (appointments or workshops about physical health)
- Student wellbeing (appointments or workshops about social wellbeing or loneliness)
- Student wellbeing (website)
- Academic support or development (appointments or workshops on academic skills like academic writing, statistics or English for academic purposes not delivered as part of your programme of study)
- Academic support (website for advice on academic skills like academic writing, statistics or English for academic purposes)
- Prefer not to answer
- Other university support

How accessible were the university services you used in terms of physical accessibility? e.g. car parking, public transport links, access for those with physical impairments.

How accessible were the university services you used in terms of online or remote accessibility? e.g. offering online or telephone appointments.

Do you feel able to engage with support at your university in the way you would prefer?

Do you prefer to access support:

- From the university
- From services in the community
- From national providers
- From family
- From friends
- I don't have a preference
- Prefer not to answer
- Other

Do you think your university or higher education institution is carer and parent friendly?

Do you have any ideas on how your university or institution could be more carer and parent friendly?

Thinking about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on your experience as a SCR, did the move to online learning or hybrid learning e.g. recording of lectures, online learning and socialising online, help or hinder you? (please go into as much detail as you would like here).

What strengths has being a SCR given you?

How do you feel about being open about your circumstances with others at your university or higher education institution?



Image of heart in hand by VISHWASHANTHI NAGISETTY from Getty Images available in Canva Pro.



Spacey, R., Sanderson, R. and Zile, A. (2024) Who Cares? Identifying, understanding, and supporting the study, work and life balance and wellbeing of students with caring responsibilities: Final Report. University of Lincoln.