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# Who Cares?

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

Research  
Summary



2024

# About ‘Who Cares?’

This work was supported by SMaRteN via UK Research and Innovation [grant number ES/S00324X/1]. SMaRteN was a national research network funded by UK Research and Innovation (UKRI), led by King's College London, focusing on student mental health in higher education. The research network concluded its work in summer 2023. For more information visit the SMaRteN website: <https://www.smarten.org.uk/>

During the funded project period (October 2021 to August 2022), the authors were employed, in the following roles, and at the following institutions:

- Rachel Spacey: Research Fellow, Lincoln Higher Education Research Institute/Lincoln Academy of Learning and Teaching, University of Lincoln. (Rachel is now Policy and Engagement Officer at UMHAN (University Mental Health Advisers Network)).
- Rebecca Sanderson: Research Associate, Lincoln Higher Education Research Institute/Lincoln Academy of Learning and Teaching/Eleanor Glanville Institute, University of Lincoln. (Rebecca is now Lecturer, School of Education, University of Lincoln).
- Amy Zile: Postgraduate Researcher, School of Health Sciences, University of East Anglia. (Amy is now Lecturer in Medical Education, Senior Adviser and Research Assistant in Optimising Wellbeing at Norwich Medical School, University of East Anglia).

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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# Acknowledgements

The Who Cares? team would like to thank the following:

- Colleagues who helped support the development of the project bid
- Members of the Steering Group (students, university staff and third sector representatives) whose generosity in sharing their time, lived experience, expertise and providing critical feedback was invaluable
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- SMaRteN for funding and supporting the project (Dr. Nicola Byrom, Dr. Alyson Dodd and especially Jo Ward)
- Dr. Lynn McBain for helping with the interviews
- Students with caring responsibilities who completed the online survey and those who agreed to be interviewed. We hope we have done you justice.

## Contact

For further information about Who Cares? please contact the project team via Dr. Rachel Spacey [rachel.spacey@gmail.com] or on X: @SmartenWhocares

# 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.

## References

Dent, S. (2021) *Recognising students who care for children while studying*, Bingley: Emerald Publishing Limited.

Gregersen, A. F. M. and Nielsen, K. B. (2023) Not quite the ideal student: mature students' experiences of higher education. *International Studies in Sociology of Education*, 32(1), 76-95.

Scott, R. and Varner, B. (2020) Exploring the Research and Library Needs of Student-Parents, *College & Research Libraries*, 81(4), 598.

## Final Report

The full report is also available:

Spacey, R., Sanderson, R., & 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.

# 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>

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.

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.



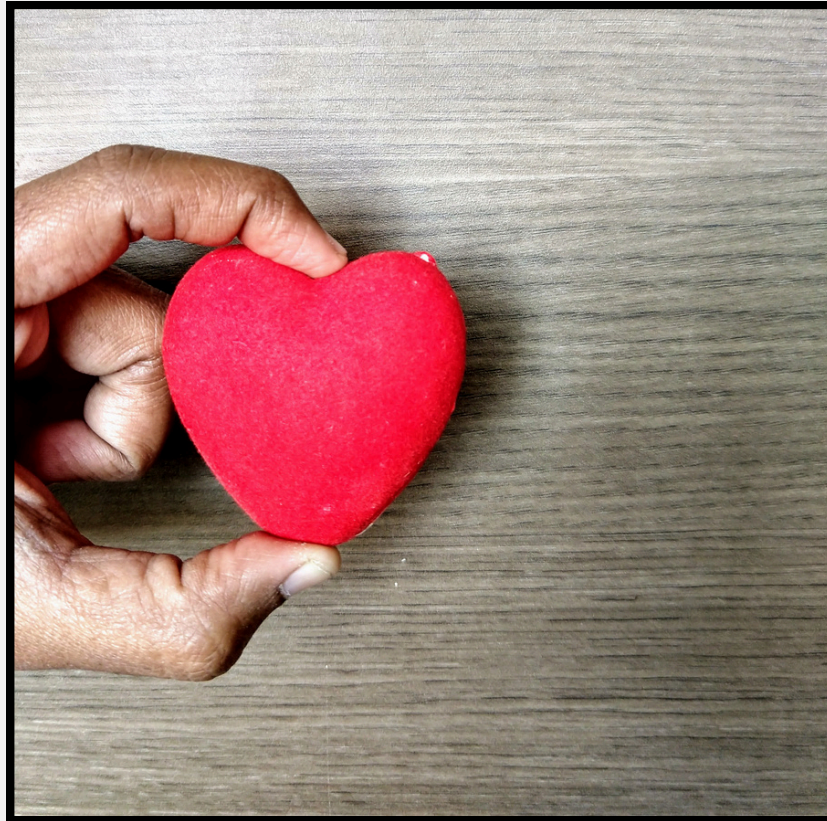


Image of heart in hand by VISHWASHANTHI NAGISETTY from Getty Images available in Canva Pro.

