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Creating Inclusive Spaces for Students in Higher Education with Caregiving Responsibilities

Guidance and Recommendations

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About this briefing

This briefing provides an overview of findings from research led by Prof. Moreau that looks at the relationship between care and academia for different groups in Higher Education (HE) in England. The most recent publication is an SRHE report that explores experiences of senior academic staff who are caregivers, with previous research projects looking at other academics, including Early Career Researchers, and students. The research reports are listed in the references section overleaf if you would like to read about this subject in more detail. This particular document focuses on students with caregiving responsibilities. It presents recommendations for how practitioners and policy makers, at an institutional and national level, can work towards making academia a more inclusive space for these students. It follows a similar briefing paper published in June 2019, 'Creating Inclusive Spaces for Academic Staff with Caregiving Responsibilities in Higher Education'.

Background

In this document caregivers include those looking after young children as well as those who care, unpaid, for a friend or family member who is ill, disabled, or elderly. Students with caring responsibilities represent a growing presence in the HE sector, particularly since increased emphasis has been placed on access through the widening participation agenda. Yet up until recently, limited research had been conducted about this group, with the work that was done tending to focus solely on those with parental responsibilities. This

Why is this an important issue?

- Many students in Higher Education have caring responsibilities.
- Being a carer and a student has numerous negative effects on this group, including in relation to finance, well-being and health, academic progression and retention.
- Where arrangements are made to accommodate the needs of caregivers it often relies on informal arrangements made at the level of a supervisor or course leader which can create an inconsistent and precarious situation.
- By collecting more data about this group and creating inclusive policies at the institutional level, universities can enhance the ability of students to work and study without unfair barriers to their success.
- More inclusive policies can contribute to improve the satisfaction and retention of student caregivers.

body of work aims to change this trend by looking at different categories of caregivers across the HE sector. HE institutions are referred to as universities throughout this document for readability purposes.

The studies have been qualitative in nature and involved semi-structured interviews with people with a range of caring responsibilities across a variety of universities, as well as people responsible for equality and diversity in universities. The recommendations overleaf are based on participants' own views and experiences, as well as analysis of institutional policies, and subsequent discussions with a number of university HR and equality and diversity teams.

Contact the research team

We would love to hear feedback on this briefing and invite discussions with policy makers and practitioners in universities and organisations that work with Higher Education who are using the recommendations or who are interested in doing so.

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This Briefing Paper was developed by Hazel Price, Research Facilitator, Anglia Ruskin University, in consultation with HE stakeholders.

Recommendations for inclusive policies for student caregivers

For national bodies:

National HE bodies and universities can better understand the needs of student caregivers by collecting intersectional data and promoting research about this group.

- The HE Statistics Agency (HESA) should require institutions to collect data on students' family circumstances and caring responsibilities. This would expand on data already collected in Scotland and Wales, and follows UCAS's decision to do the same.
- Government should review funding policies for student caregivers, so they can access the financial support they need to succeed in HE.
- Research funding organisations should encourage researchers to develop specific proposals in this area by making it a priority area in their research agenda.
- Research in this area should be widely disseminated to university staff on a regular basis to raise and challenge stereotyped views of this group, e.g. in the form of research and information summaries sent to universities.

For universities:

Universities can better support student caregivers through the mainstreaming of care in policies and the development of 'flexible' policies which acknowledge the diversity, intersectionality and fluidity of care.

- All policies affecting students should be reviewed in light of how they affect student caregivers. The policy review and any resulting changes should be done in consultation with students and the students' union.
- Universities should ensure that timetables are released in a timely fashion and prioritise the needs of caregivers, e.g. having the option of fitting study around school hours on most courses. Universities should be more flexible when students cannot attend because of illness in the family or unpredictable care issues.
- Universities should be encouraged to develop a comprehensive Care Strategy, coordinated centrally by a member of staff with oversight of these activities, with objectives and action

points. This should be developed in consultation with student and staff unions.

- Universities should provide clear information in one place about the support available for student caregivers and how they can access it. This could take the form of a dedicated webpage, links from a central university page, and an information leaflet
- Universities should consider extending their on-site childcare provision and should be less restrictive about allowing the presence of children on campus, with appropriate consideration of safeguarding issues. This includes providing spaces for baby change, breast feeding, and extracting milk.
- Universities could facilitate student caregivers to establish their own support groups to combat feelings of isolation.
- Specific attention should be given to those caring for ill, disabled, or elderly friends or family members, as well as to single parents, BAME groups and individuals in same-sex partnerships.

References:

This policy briefing draws on the following reports and journal articles:

M.P. Moreau & M. Robertson. ['Care-free at the top'? Exploring the experiences of senior academic staff who are caregivers](#). SRHE May 2019.

M.P. Moreau & M. Robertson. [Carers and careers: Career development and access to leadership positions among academic staff with caring responsibilities](#). LFHE September 2017.

M. P. Moreau. [Regulating the student body/ies: University policies and student parents](#). BERJ May 2016

M.P. Moreau. [Towards the family friendly university? Research evidence on student parents and implications for higher education policies](#). LFHE July 2014.

M.P. Moreau & C. Kerner. [Supporting Student Parents in Higher Education: A policy analysis](#). The Nuffield Foundation. October 2012.

A short film was produced exploring similar issues:

M.P. Moreau & T. Bernard. [Carers and Careers in Academia: What Works?](#) LFHE November 2018