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Caring about student carers

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Defining carers



A carer is anyone who **cares, unpaid, for a friend or family member** who due to illness, disability, a mental health problem or an addiction cannot cope without their support
(Carers Trust, 2017)

The study

Rationale:.....

- currently 5,422 OU students have declared caring status and numbers of students with caring responsibilities will rise
- increased OU concern about supporting carers
- little research about student carers generally and within the OU

Methodology:

- a qualitative study that ran from January - September 2019, the first in a 2-phase project carried out by the OU Carers research group (<http://intranet6.open.ac.uk/staff/ou-caring-network>)
- focusses on gaining a better understanding of students who are carers and how to support them
 - *20 telephone interviews with HWSC students carers conducted by a PhD student*
 - *sample: 16 females and 4 males*
 - *interviews were transcribed and thematically analysed*

Themes

- 1. Caring and studying**
- 2. Benefits of studying**
- 3. Studying with the OU**
- 4. Coping with OU study**
- 5. OU Support**
- 6. Suggestions for improving support for OU students with caring responsibilities**

1. Caring and studying

- positive aspects of caring: acquisition of specific skills and qualities; rewarding and emotionally satisfying to make the person for whom they care 'happy and contented'; had become focused, organised; used to functioning with high levels of stress and anxiety
- pressures of caring: many faced intense and challenging levels of caring; unpredictable nature of care; time and financial pressures
- effects on studying: behind on reading; unable to concentrate or enjoy their modules; unable to attend live tutorials and be part of a collective; feeling stressed because they could not submit their assignments on time; feeling 'drained', 'tired', "beyond tired" 'knackered' and 'exhausted'; close to giving up on studying or had failed a module previously

2. Benefits of studying

- although some experienced guilt, studying referred to as 'me time'; a valued distraction from caring; enjoyable; as a substitute for social or leisure activities
- increased their confidence and resilience
- gained a better understanding of care and caring (including relevant legislation) and this understanding meant they could provide a better quality of care
- beneficial to, and created a vision for, potential career and employment

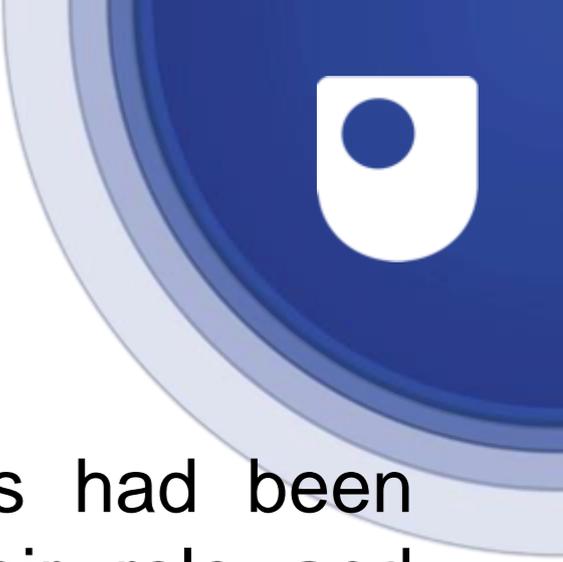
3 Studying with the OU

- the OU's flexibility and affordability were two key factors that influenced students' decision to choose the OU
- students acknowledged the OU's open access policy and saw the OU as pivotal in meeting their personal expectations for growth and development
- where students were more negative it was about the loneliness of OU study; learning materials that failed to feed into their preferred learning preferences; timing of assignments (e.g. in school holidays)

4. Coping with OU Study

- managing the pressures of caring and studying alongside other commitments is tough, and sometimes overwhelming
- pragmaticism: many accepted caring comes first, that 'you just get on with it', and all was not lost if they did not achieve their goals
- coping strategies used:
 - learning to 'go with the flow' and replanning when study time dissipates
 - working around their caring responsibilities
 - careful time management
 - being 'a bit ahead of the game'
 - strategically planning and taking time off work to manage their study
 - setting clear boundaries wherever possible and managing other people's (mostly those who were being cared for) expectations
- importance of immediate and wider family, friends and community to coping with study

5. OU Support



- many said the OU provides 'good support'
- important role provided by their tutors: the best tutors had been proactive in their contact with students, clarifying their role and accessibility and establishing clear expectations for students
- where students had spoken to tutors about their caring responsibilities these tutors had responded appropriately and supported them when they experienced challenges
- not all students had disclosed their caring responsibilities, mainly because they had not seen themselves as carers, saw it as 'my issue' or did not think available support would help them
- concern about being eligible for support if a formal diagnosis had still to be reached on the person receiving care and how carers evidenced their caring role

6. Suggestions for improving OU support for students with caring responsibilities

- some elements of face-to-face tuition to increase the visibility of their peer community but recognition of the problems imposed by geographical distance and ongoing caring responsibilities
- peer support e.g. carers forums
- financial support to help them cope with studying whilst caring
- assignment management: no submission dates in school holidays, waive University rule about no extensions on End of Module assignments/examinations for student carers

Future developments

- insight into carers' needs and lives should underpin approaches to support
- need to increase student carers' awareness of the flexibility in modules e.g. fallow periods, 'fast track' reading routes
- explore value of: multiple options for tutorial sessions, removing examinations, extensions on End of Module assignments, proactive student support, carers forums, more individual support
- follow-up study is being planned: an in-depth exploration of the value of the support identified in this first with students from across the OU