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Caring about student carers

Carer research group

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*)

Rationale for the study

- currently 5,422 OU students have declared caring status
- numbers of students with caring responsibilities will rise
- increased OU concern about supporting carers
- little research about student carers generally and within the OU
- wanted to gain a better understanding of students who are carers and how to support them. Its aims were to:
 - explore how students who are carers experience and manage (OU) study
 - provide a foundation for further University-wide research in this area
- the first in a 2-phase project and part of a cluster of HWSC scholarship projects looking at how personal challenges affect study, persistence and retention

Methodology

- a qualitative study that ran from January - September 2019
- 20 telephone interviews with HWSC students with caring responsibilities
- the interviews were transcribed and the data was analysed using an approach based on Thematic analysis
- 6 themes emerged: **Caring and studying; Benefits of studying; Studying with the OU; Coping with OU study; OU support; Suggestions for improving support for OU students with caring responsibilities**

Conclusions

- group-based student support is not always appropriate as student carers can find personal support from their primary personal support networks
- the 'standard' OU model of group support may need to be supplemented with individual support
- insight into carers' needs and lives should underpin approaches to support
- more flexible modules e.g.
 - multiple options for tutorial sessions
 - removing examinations in modules
 - building fallow periods into modules
 - providing 'fast track' reading routes
 - proactive student support
- the second study includes students from across the university in order to build our understanding of how caring responsibilities affect student study, persistence and retention. Outcomes will, be used to strengthen existing guidelines and support for these students