



'All of us put other people first': Narratives from Bournemouth University's student carers

Summary

BU Students who also have caring responsibilities for others collaborated with BU researchers in the co-production of data collection, analysis and dissemination. The students were given cameras and asked to take a picture each day for a month. Their goal was to capture scenes that would help understand their experiences as students and carers at BU and how caring impacted on their learning experiences. They were given the freedom to portray anything they felt was relevant to the project. In addition to this, the students met with the research team for one-to-one interviews, helping the team to better understand how caring and studying interplay in students' lives.

The final collaboration between students and researchers came through participatory analysis and an exhibition. Photographs displayed were selected from a pool of over 300 images produced by the students and captions came from their interviews. The students were given final say over which images and words were used to reflect their experiences.

Background

According to the 2011 Census, 10.3% of the UK population (6.5 million people) provide unpaid care, a proportion that has remained stable since the 2001 Census (Adcock & Roberts, 2016, p. 4). 375,000 young adult carers in the UK aged 14–25 were also identified by the 2011 census (Sempik & Becker, 2014). Although there is no official data regarding the number of student carers in the UK, it is estimated that they constitute between 3% and 6% of the student population (National Union of Students, 2013).

Combining caring responsibilities with higher education is complex. The few pieces of academic research involving student carers report the negative impact of caring on their studies. Student carers have been found to feel "not a proper student", and to present issues of exhaustion and lateness when submitting assignments (Kirton, Richardson, Jack, & Jinks, 2012, p. 644). It does not come as a surprise, then, that 29% of the young adult carers survey respondents who had been to college or university dropped out due to their caring responsibilities, in a recent study commissioned by the Carers Trust (Sempik & Becker, 2014, p. 3).

The importance of the evidence regarding student carers' struggles has been recognised by the Office for Fair Access (OFFA), which considers carers as part of their remit of under-represented and disadvantaged groups. [OFFA encourages higher education institutions to provide support for student carers and dovetail this support with Access Agreements.](#)

BU pilot bursary for student carers

Bournemouth University introduced a pilot bursary for student carers during the academic year 2015/16. The pilot scheme consisted of twenty bursaries of £600 each.

The Fair Access Agreement Management Group, in view of the pilot bursary for student carers, wanted to understand how useful the funding might be to the student experience, and therefore commissioned the present research.

Methodology

The project was driven by a focus on dialogue and the generation of visual and verbal narratives that captured the 'multi-voicedness' of caring responsibilities. It was anticipated that student carers would give a 'window view' into their home environment, thus enabling the research team to listen to other voices and perspectives.

A purposive sampling strategy was followed, seeking to maximise heterogeneity in terms of gender, young/mature, cross-faculty, beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries of the bursary.

The research triangulated data from four sources:

1. *Photodiaries over a month*. This research task required participants to take "a picture a day" that best represented their daily experiences. The project provided digital cameras, and sent weekly email reminders and text messages about the photodiary.
2. *Photo-elicited biographical narrative interviews*. These focused on biographical elicitation (distant past), the university experience and caring responsibilities vis-à-vis studies. The final stage of the interview was photo-elicited: interviewees were asked to go through each photo, describe them, and explain the reasons for taking it.
3. *Participatory workshop*. This activity had a twofold aim: 1) to tap into participants experiences with the pilot bursary and support at BU and elsewhere; 2) to serve as a participatory analysis exercise, enabling participants to come up with their own findings by performing a preliminary sorting of their printed photos.

More than 300 photographs and 138,000 transcribed words comprise the data corpus informing the findings presented here. Interviews have been read line by line and, when relevant, related to their corresponding images. They were scrutinised and annotated, seeking to identify common themes that addressed the research objectives.

Theoretical perspectives and findings

This project is a participatory study, seeking to capture the experiences of student carers from their own standpoint and in their own words. It draws on Paulo Freire's (2008) work on education for critical consciousness, whereby the full engagement of students and work *with* them (and not on them) is pursued, with the goals of emancipatory action and social change during and after the research process.

Findings

- All participating student carers reported having some kind of caring role during childhood or adolescence. The transition into adulthood caring varied across the sample.
- The process of choosing University reveals the duality of the condition of being a student carer. On the one hand, they assess options as any other typical student. On the other hand, they also have to consider the implications for their caring duties. They do not present themselves as an 'alien' category, but as 'mainstream' students with added responsibilities.
- The narratives of both student carers point to the need to have appropriate mechanisms in place for students to disclose their caring role should they wish to do so.
- A recurrent element in student carers' narratives concerns the time invested in the manifold tasks that caring entails. They report planning their daily activities on a regular basis as a means to have some sense of control over their time.
- All student carers participating in the study admitted high levels of stress.
- Concerns regarding financial instability were present in all interviews.
- Caring responsibilities, financial difficulties and mental health problems often present themselves together.

- Student carers considered their interactions with statutory services as a constant struggle, sometimes described as a 'battle'. The narratives portrayed students as resourceful agents who would pursue the goods and services that the relatives they care for need, and would go to extensive lengths to achieve this. The majority of these battles seem to be won by student carers, but battling against the statutory sector takes a vast toll on them. In contrast, student carers perceive the voluntary sector as a strong ally when battling against the statutory sector.
- The boundaries between accessing academic help and obtaining pastoral (personal) support are not clear for all student carers. Accessing one-on-one support for specific circumstances and crises related to caring is shaped by both the student's willingness to disclose and by the inclination of individual members of staff to 'go the extra mile' in supporting students.
- Student carers would value the enhancement of social support available, including peer-to-peer interaction, with the role of university staff being facilitation only.
- Implementing the student carers' bursary seems to send "a clear message that BU acknowledges and values this target group of students".
- Participating student carers who received the student carers' bursary were positive about its benefits. The two student carers who commented on the logistics of the pilot bursary were approving of the institutional arrangements for receiving the funds, as well as the procedures for application.
- Allocation of funds on a first-come, first served basis has the potential to disappoint eligible students who apply too late. Ensuring that students are aware of the support sources available is paramount to avoid this.

Transfer instalments seems to be a convenient way to disburse the student carers' bursary. It allows awardees the free management of the funds, thus giving them a sense of control. This could actually help after prolonged times of stress, as a means to 'recharge the batteries' and bounce back on track for their studies.

Implications

In conclusion, this study has highlighted how universities can better support those students who also have caring responsibilities, in order to ensure that their overall experience and academic success is optimised. Some of the areas for consideration at university level include:

1. Consider disseminating information regarding BU-based support for student carers through the admissions section of the institutional website.
2. Maintaining a tick box in the enrolment forms, which would prompt student carers to self-identify, should be contemplated.
3. Promote dialogue with the voluntary and non-for profit sector in the region, and ensure that the information about their services is readily available to both student carers and staff who are in close contact with them.
4. Consider avenues to improve institutional communication channels, as well as referring academic staff to colleagues knowledgeable on specific issues (student caring in this case).
5. Preserve institutional financial support for student carers. It is recommended that the current logistics for the bursary application process are maintained, as well as its disbursement as recurring transfer instalments. Regarding amount of financial support, it is desirable to re-assess this each year, adjusting for inflation and in relation to practices across the sector.
6. Assessment of modifications of the way in which funds are allocated is recommended.
7. The expansion of social support for student carers is highly recommended.
8. It is advisable to perform continuous checks regarding the inclusivity and relevance of the definitions of student carer, unpaid caring and eligibility criteria for financial support.

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