

Supporting student carers

Carers often find it difficult to balance their caring role with other commitments, including education. It is important that tertiary institutions understand the challenges carers face and how they can be better supported during their time at university.

OVERVIEW

Carers are individuals who provide informal care and support to a family member or friend who has a disability, mental illness, drug or alcohol dependency, chronic condition, terminal illness or who is frail aged.

Young carers are carers aged 25 or younger. According to the ABS *Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers* there are 904,400 carers in NSW.¹ The majority of carers (63%) are aged over 45. However, one in ten carers (11%) are young carers.²

While 60% of university students are aged under 24 it is also important to remember that some mature-age students are also likely to be carers or former carers.³ For example, there are approximately 7,000 carers aged 45-54 studying at universities in NSW.⁴

Carers are more likely to not be in the labour force than non-carers⁵ and many carers remain outside the workforce for years at a time.⁶ As a result, some carers may have out-dated skills and substantial gaps in their resume, making them less competitive in the job market.⁷ Mature-age carers and/or former carers may also be studying in order to retrain or upskill.

IMPACTS OF THE CARING ROLE

Each person's caring role is different. Having a conversation about ways in which each carer can be better supported is one way to assist carers at university.

Overall, carers have lower levels of educational attainment than their non-caring peers.⁸ This is often attributed to the difficulties many carers have in balancing caring with work and/or study.⁹

A person's caring role can impact on their studies in a number of ways, for example;

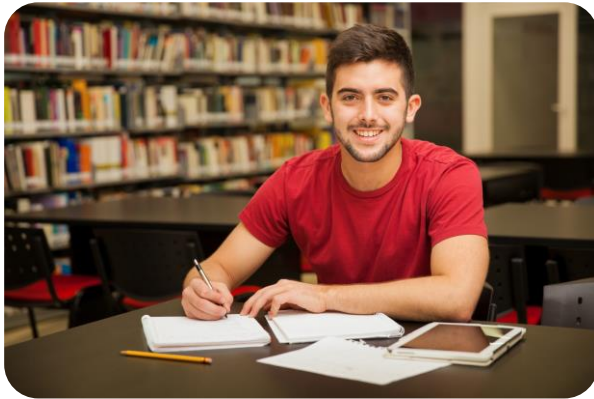
- Carers have higher rates of absenteeism and may have difficulties in completing assignments due to competing caring responsibilities.¹⁰
- Emergencies or episodic conditions may make it difficult for a carer to complete an assignment or exam on the specified date.
- Some carers may be unable to complete internships or placements that are located far from where the person they care for lives, or for extended periods of time where replacement care arrangements are required.
- As carers tend to live in lower income households¹¹ they may also experience difficulties in affording living costs, tuition fees and additional costs associated with tertiary study, such as text books and equipment.¹²

Case Study

Jane* is 18 years old and lives away from home to study at university. Jane travels every 2-3 weeks to her family home in a regional area to help care for her younger sister with and father. Her mother is the primary carer for both family members.

Jane balances her university course with a casual job in hospitality. She tries to complete assignments ahead of time, as she never knows when an emergency will arise. She often studies through the night, and at one stage was missing two or three nights of sleep per week due to course deadlines.

*Name changed



UNIVERSITY POLICIES

Many universities in Australia and internationally have adopted a range of policies to support carers. However, policies differ between institutions.

This section addresses specific policy areas universities can consider when seeking to create a more carer-inclusive environment including;

- Admissions criteria
- Orientation week
- Academic support
- Internships/practical components
- Non-academic support

ADMISSIONS CRITERIA

In recognition of the disadvantage that carers experience, some universities factor caring responsibilities into the admissions criteria for new students. As carers are more likely to live in low-income households, some universities also offer scholarships to carers as part of student equity policies.

ORIENTATION WEEK

Orientation Week provides an opportunity to engage student carers and make them aware of the supports that are available to them at the beginning of the academic year. For example, the student equity office could conduct outreach activities and have a stall for carers during Orientation Week. Alternatively, if carers are identified during the enrolment process, a Carer Welcome Pack could be offered to student carers.

ACADEMIC / CENTRALISED SUPPORT

The name for this type of support differs by university and may include; liaison officer, disability adviser, student support adviser or special needs support. The liaison or student support officer can act as a mediator between the student carer and the relevant faculty/unit convenor in order to provide the carer with the appropriate adjustments for their studies to accommodate their caring role. This reduces the onus on the student carer to repeatedly describe their caring role and provide exhaustive amounts of paperwork.

FACULTY SUPPORT

At some universities student carers may be referred to consult a student support adviser located within the specific faculty of their studies. While this may be appropriate if a carer's studies are within a single faculty, for others where they may be studying units located within multiple faculties this may mean consulting with various student support advisors and providing the same documentation many times over.

UNIT CONVENOR

This is the least preferred option for student carers as it requires a carer to provide documentation to every unit convenor for their course. A carer must repeat their situation multiple times and provide copious amounts of documentation. This system may also result in different outcomes and adjustments based on the individual unit convenor.



INTERNSHIPS OR PRACTICAL COMPONENTS

Depending on each caring role, internships or practical components may be difficult to complete in their prescribed fashion. Sometimes simple adjustments could benefit the carer, for example, making adjustments to the length of time the carer is required to complete the internship (full-time hours to part-time). Similarly, undertaking an internship that is located far from where the person they care for resides may make it unfeasible to complete the internship, particularly if the carer needs to arrange respite services. Considering internships that are closer to where the carer lives may be a simple solution.

It is also important to consider the out-of-pocket expenses the carer will incur as a result of undertaking these course components. Providing financial assistance grants to cover the cost of transport and meals, for example, may assist a carer to complete their course.

NON-ACADEMIC CARER SUPPORT

Many carers also benefit from the provision of social, emotional and peer support, such as carer support groups or referral for counselling, mentoring, or information about income support and other services to assist them in their caring role.

SUMMARY

- Carers tend to have lower levels of educational attainment than non-carers.
- Carers often find it difficult to balance their caring role with their studies and other commitments.
- Each caring role is different, so each carer might require different adjustments to their studies.
- Carers are often required to submit copious amounts of documentation to have the appropriate adjustments made
- Universities should consider current policies in which carers are supported and develop more carer-inclusive practices.

KEEP IN MIND

In accordance with the NSW *Carers (Recognition) Act 2010* a carer is anyone who provides informal care and support to an individual who has a disability, a medical condition (including terminal or chronic illness), has a mental illness or is frail and aged. Eligibility for support should match such legislative definitions.

Many student carers who are not primary carers may also require assistance with their studies, fees or emotional support. Eligibility for carer support should not be dependent on whether the carer identifies as a 'primary carer' (the person who provides majority of the care).

As carers may be caring for someone who does not have a disability, it is also important to consider the placement of information available to carers. Placing carer support information alongside support available to students with disabilities may make it harder for carers to find information specific to their needs.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Student carers should be reflected in all policies particularly in regards to admissions, orientation, academic and non-academic support.
2. Universities should develop policies that require carers to provide the minimum amount of documentation to support carer requests for reasonable adjustments.
3. Eligibility for carer-specific support should be available to all carers regardless of the condition of the person they care for.
4. Eligibility for carer-specific support should not be based on whether a carer is a primary carer, and should be available to all carers.
5. Carer support should be delineated from disability support to assist carers when navigating student support information.

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