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We need to start caring for the carers

Juggling caring and study is often made more difficult by the rigidity of course structures and study requirements

by **LISA ANDREWARTHA**

In Australia, there are 2.65m people who provide unpaid care for family and friends with a disability, illness, or a broader need. These individuals play a vital role in society. However, due to high demands on time and energy, carers are [less likely to participate in education and employment](#), and are at increased risk of physical and mental health issues. The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly [increased the demands on carers](#). Providing more support for carers to access and succeed in higher education could help to counter these challenges, and widely benefit the economy and community.

[We surveyed](#) students with caring responsibilities and found that they are an asset in higher education and highly motivated to succeed. Student carers possess a range of qualities developed through their caring roles that are beneficial to themselves and their peers. These strengths include time-management, empathy, patience, and resilience, as well as specific expertise with relevance to areas of study, such as nursing skills and knowledge of disabilities. Carers also improve the broader student experience by regularly sharing knowledge and different perspectives, advocating for other students, and assisting with coursework.

Despite these strengths, [our research](#) found that support for carers in Australian higher education is limited and inconsistent across institutions. A major barrier to increased support is the inability to systemically identify carers at application or enrolment. Juggling caring and study is often made more difficult by the rigidity of course structures and study requirements.

For examples of useful initiatives and support programmes, Australia could look to the [United Kingdom](#) where student carers are an established group in higher education and frequently referenced in widening participation plans. In the UK, universities and colleges have a consistent method of identifying carers within course applications, and provide a range of targeted support, including outreach activities, flexible arrangements, peer groups, and bursaries. The [Carer Passport](#) scheme operates in some UK universities as an effective method of recognising student carers, assessing their individual circumstances, and coordinating institution-wide support.

In the Australian higher education sector, there is a similar need and opportunity to develop specific policies to attract and support those who care for others. We need to start caring for the carers.

Lisa Andrewartha, Senior Advisor Research and Strategy, Centre for Higher Education Equity and Diversity Research, La Trobe University l.andrewartha@latrobe.edu.au [@LTU_CHEEDR](#)