



# THE STUDENT CARER EXPERIENCE IN SCOTLAND

**CARERS  
TRUST**  
**SCOTLAND**





# ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

“ In order to achieve success we have a lot to balance.”  
**STUDENT CARER**

We would like to thank all the carers, care support workers and college and university staff who took the time to share their experiences and make their voices part of this research report.

We are incredibly grateful to Mr and Mrs JMB Charitable Trust's generous support which made this research possible.

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**For student carers, there are many challenges that come with balancing studying alongside caring responsibilities. Student carers are students studying at college or university, while caring, unpaid, for a friend or family member who due to illness, disability, a mental health problem or an addiction cannot cope without their support. Student carers can be of all ages, and at all stages of their learning journeys.**

In 2014 Carers Trust undertook research into young adult carers at college and university. It found that there were particular challenges for young adult carers who were studying, with 56% saying they experienced difficulties because of their caring role and 45% noting that no one at college or university recognised them as a carer or supported them in their caring role (Sempik and Becker, 2014). This research illuminated the challenges for young adult carers undertaking studies and provided a base for further research into the student carer experience.

Work with student carers, colleges and universities has been ongoing since the launch of the 2014 Carers Trust report. The Going Higher for Student Carers Award for universities was introduced in 2017, and the Going Further for Student Carers Award for colleges in 2019 (Carers Trust, 2020). These awards aim to make it easier for colleges and universities to support student carers, by taking a 'whole institution approach to identify, support and report on student carers' (Carers Trust, 2019).

The aim of this research is to update the evidence base on the experience of studying alongside caring; and to understand the challenges for student carers in accessing support. To continue to assist colleges, universities and other professionals supporting student carers, the report concludes with recommendations to improve the studying experience for student carers.

## Research methodology

The research aimed to understand the student carer experience and associated challenges beginning with the application process, through to studying at college and university. To give the fullest picture possible, student carers, care support workers and college and university staff were invited to participate. Multiple perspectives allowed for understanding of the breadth and depth of the student carer experience.

Participants were invited to take part in the research through focus groups, qualitative interviews and completing online surveys. Respondents came from across Scotland, and from a variety of colleges, universities and carer centres. Across all methods of participation, 391 people took part.

The report analyses survey data from:

1. 137 student carer respondents.
2. 26 college and university staff respondents.
3. 33 care support worker respondents.

The report analyses qualitative data from:

1. 20 student carer interviews.
2. 15 student carers applying to college or university interviews.
3. 16 care support worker interviews.
4. 12 college and university staff interviews.

**Table 1** provides a breakdown of the characteristics of the student carer survey respondents. The majority were females attending university, with a broad spread in age range.

<b>Student carer survey respondents</b>		
<b>What age are you?</b>		
<b>Answer choices</b>	<b>Responses: 137</b>	
Under 18	2.92%	4
18-25	28.47%	39
26-34	23.36%	32
35-44	24.09%	33
45-54	18.98%	26
55-64	2.19%	3
65+	0.00%	
<b>What is your gender?</b>		
<b>Answer choices</b>	<b>Responses: 137</b>	
Female	92.70%	127
Male	6.57%	9
Transgender	0.73%	1
<b>Which of the following best describes your situation?</b>		
<b>Answer choices</b>	<b>Responses: 251</b>	
Studying at university	50.60%	127
Studying at college	31.08%	78
In the process of applying to university	4.38%	11
In the process of applying to college	2.79%	7
Previously studied at college and/or university	15.54%	39

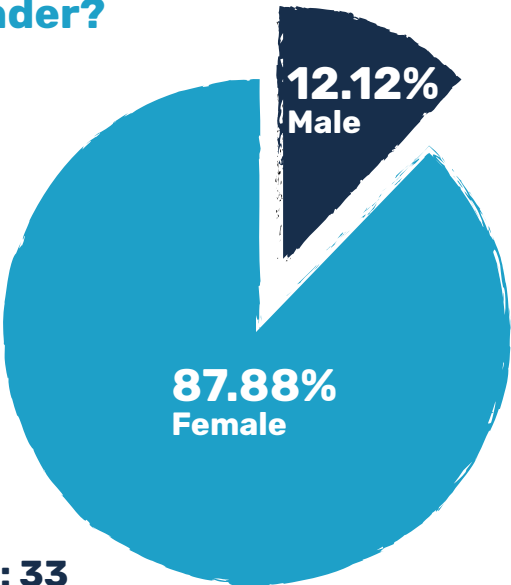
**Table 2** provides a breakdown of the characteristics of the college and university survey respondents.

<b>College and university staff</b>		
<b>Answer choices</b>	<b>Responses: 26</b>	
Female	88.46%	23
Male	7.69%	2
Transgender	0	0
Non-binary	3.85%	1
<b>Are you from a college, university, or other organisation working with student carers?</b>		
<b>Answer choices</b>	<b>Responses: 26</b>	
College	36.00%	9
University	64.00%	17
Other (please specify)		0

**Chart 1** provides a breakdown of the characteristics of the care support worker survey respondents. Care support workers’ roles were more broadly defined, including young carer worker, project lead, manager and development worker. Care support workers were predominantly from third sector organisations, supporting and working with unpaid carers and carer centres.

**What is your gender?**

**Transgender 0.00%**  
**Not listed 0.00%**



**Total respondents: 33**

As the scope of this project was to provide an overview of student carers’ lived experience, a snowball sampling technique was used, where future participants were recruited through interviewees’ contacts. Experiences of specific student carer communities are recommended for further study.

## Summary findings

### Application

For student carers, the challenges of studying alongside caring responsibilities can begin before they reach a college or university campus.

1. Of 137 respondents, 49% student carers said they gave their caring role a great amount of thought when they were applying to college or university.
2. 72% of care support workers said that carers worried about the person they cared for during the application stage for college and university.
3. Carers often prefer the location of their college or university to be close to the person(s) they care for.
4. Moving out and away from caring responsibilities can be very difficult for student carers

### Studying

Studying alongside caring responsibilities has specific challenges for carers.

1. 47% of 136 student carer respondents said attending class was challenging.
2. 87% of 137 student carers said that concentration on assignments and work at home was challenging.
3. 35% of 136 student carer respondents said that handing in coursework on time was very challenging, or somewhat challenging.
4. 74% of 137 student carers said that joining college and university clubs and societies was very challenging.
5. Of 136 student carer respondents, only 2% said that concentrating in class was not challenging at all, while 61% said that it was challenging.
6. Placement can be challenging, as student carers do not pick the location which can sometimes be a long commute away from the person they care for.
7. Of 136 student carers, 75% said that finances and budgeting were challenging.
8. Participants felt that finance was unfair for student carers, as they have no specific funding allowances and they are unable to claim Carer's Allowance should they be studying for 21 hours or more.
9. 84% of 136 student carers found keeping good mental health while studying, to be a challenge.



## Support

### Challenges for student carers

1. Student carers can find it very hard to ask for support, and at times “feel like a failure” if they need assistance.
2. Student carers do not want their caring role to be seen as an excuse for support. They want to be understood and believed.

### What works for student carers

1. Knowing exactly where to go, and who to ask at college and university for support makes accessing assistance easier for student carers.
2. Practical measures such as extensions on coursework were helpful for student carers, as well as having someone to talk to who understands their circumstances.
3. Flexible support that takes into consideration the time pressure for student carers is favourable.

### Challenges for college and university staff

1. It can be difficult to identify student carers early for support, meaning that many present at crisis point where there is little recourse for action.
2. Not all staff have an equal understanding of carers’ issues. Some decisions for example assignment extensions, are the responsibility of academic staff, rather than the support staff who have the knowledge about student carers.
3. The workload of some staff supporting student carers is saturated.
4. Student carers are not a priority group in the same way that other groups, such as care experienced students, are. This restricts some colleges and universities from allocating time and resource to student carers due to legislative priorities and mandates.

### About Carers Trust Scotland

Carers Trust Scotland is part of Carers Trust, a major charity for, with and about carers. We work to improve support, services and recognition for anyone living with the challenges of caring, **unpaid**, for a family member or friend who is ill, frail, disabled or has mental health or addiction problems.

With locally based Network Partners we are able to support carers in the community with information, advice, emotional support, hands on practical help and access to much needed breaks. We offer specialist services for carers of people of all ages and conditions and a range of individually tailored support and group activities.

Although the terminology and legislation referred to in this document applies to Scotland the experiences, challenges and recommendations are applicable across the whole of the UK.



# SECTION 1

# APPLICATION TO COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY FOR CARERS

**“ I knew that if I thought too much about my caring responsibilities, I would never have tried.”**

**STUDENT CARER**

**Applying to college and university can be an exciting yet daunting experience for carers. For many, it is something that they have looked forward to, and they have worked hard to give themselves the option of further study. However, unlike students who are not carers, carers have their caring responsibilities and the person(s) they care for to consider when they choose to pursue further and higher education.**

**“ The decision to study would not have been taken lightly.”**

**STUDENT CARER**

Of 137 student carers, 49% said they gave their caring role a great amount of thought when they were applying to college or university. 32% said they gave it a lot of thought. Only 2% of respondents said they thought about their caring role a little, or not at all. For student carers, their considerations about going to college or university include the needs of the person(s) they cared for.

This was reflected among care support workers, who often provide assistance to carers during their application stage. 72% said that carers worried about the person they cared for during their application stage. 63% felt that the application process was challenging for carers. One care support worker explained: “The application process is all about time”.

Finding the time and space to make applications can be difficult for carers, particularly for those who live with the person(s) they care for. Care support workers shared that carers can find it difficult to write positively about themselves in their personal statements, and can be overwhelmed with self-doubt. Due to caring responsibilities, carers might not have the time for extra-curricular activities or hobbies, that other candidates do. Care support workers shared that this can add to carers' lack of self-confidence when they are applying to further and higher education.

Care support workers explained that carers can often have feelings of guilt when applying to college or university. Taking time to prioritise themselves, rather than the person(s) they care for, can be a new and difficult experience for carers. Carers do not want their family or person(s) they care for to feel abandoned, so thinking about their own futures and aspirations can be a challenge. This was explained by one student carer: "I've essentially left them. I think I had a real sense of having abandoned people."

Care support workers shared that carers feel guilty about leaving the person(s) they care for a whole day and worry that this might put too much pressure on other family members. Applying to college and university is the beginning of a journey for students. For student carers, this journey is not just about taking into consideration their own aspirations; but considering how their choices will impact the person(s) they care for and other people around them.

## 1.1 Course choice and location

Some participants felt that the transferable skills carers gain through caring could influence their course choice. Some felt that courses such as nursing, could be seen as a "natural career path" for carers. Familiarity with certain agencies such as healthcare, social work or carer centres may encourage some carers to study health and social care subjects. However, this was not the case for all, and care support workers shared that they encouraged carers to think about their wider interests and skills when applying for college and university.

**“It’s really great for young carers to consider all careers. What you’re good at, what you’re interested in. I think that’s something that we should work to help encourage.”**

**CARE SUPPORT WORKER**

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For some carers, the location of the college or university was more important than the course. Many student carers did not want to be far away from the person(s) they care for and took into consideration travel distance when they were applying to study.

**“I had to choose a university close by that would mean travelling wasn’t an issue.”**

### **STUDENT CARER**

Carers shared that their caring role can be unpredictable and that they could be needed at any time. As a result, student carers wanted to be within easy travel distance of the person(s) they care for. For this reason, many had limited the distance they would travel for their studies.

Carers also felt that being far away from the person(s) they cared for would cause them to worry. Instead of being able to focus on their studies, they would be preoccupied with how quickly they could get back if needed.

## 1.2 Moving out

For many students, going to college or university can mean moving out of the family home and into student accommodation. For some student carers, moving out was not an option, described by one care support worker as a “no go”. For some student carers, this was because no financial support for accommodation was available to them, making it an unaffordable option. Being unable to move out might limit the area in which carers can apply to college and university. One university staff member explained, carers “... should be able to take up opportunities that aren’t on your doorstep”.

Without financial support, moving away is particularly difficult.

Others were unable to move out as there would be no one else to take over the caring role. Some carers felt guilty about moving out as they did not want to leave their caring responsibilities to someone else.

**“I knew my sister wouldn’t move out but I didn’t want to put my work onto her.”**

**STUDENT CARER**

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Other carers decided that moving out would not be a good option for them because they would be worried about the person(s) they care for.

**“In potentially moving out for university, the thought that would have run through my mind would have been how quickly can I get back if I need to?”**

**STUDENT CARER**

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Some carers felt that the best decision for them was to live at home, close to or with the person(s) they cared for so that they could be around to care when needed.

Other student carers did decide to move out, and away from the person(s) they cared for. Not all student carers realised at first, that moving out did not necessarily mean an end to their caring role.

**“I think I thought that because I was moving away from home that wasn’t part of me anymore.”**

**STUDENT CARER**

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Student carers might maintain caring roles from a distance, for example by regularly returning to undertake caring responsibilities, or providing emotional support remotely over the phone. Student carers shared that moving out, while maintaining a caring role was difficult.

**“To do a caring role from a distance was not an enjoyable experience.”**

**STUDENT CARER**

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Student carers shared being consumed with worry about what might be happening with the person(s) they cared for and often having to make trips home to undertake caring responsibilities. While some student carers gained more time to themselves when they moved out, for some it was accompanied with feelings of guilt that they should be helping with the person(s) they care for.

### **1.3 Distance learning**

For some student carers, the option to undertake distance learning courses provided them with the flexibility they needed to build their studies around the demands of their caring role. Distance learners felt happy that there was this option, as they wanted to continue with their studies. As one student carer reflected on their choice to study remotely after leaving a brick university: “I was really glad there was that option, I didn’t want to give up on university.”

Some distance learning student carers felt they had more ability to balance their responsibilities, as they could build their timetables around the demands of their caring role. They shared that the flexibility to schedule and prioritise their workload was key in allowing them time to look after both themselves and those they care for. However, as others highlighted, not having face-to-face contact with anyone could feel isolating for student carers.

### **1.4 Disclosure of caring role**

Carers applying to college and university have to think about whether to share their caring status with the institution. Colleges and universities offer different ways for carers to declare themselves. Some participants were able to select a carer tick box on their application, while others included details of their caring role in their personal statement.

Student carers who felt comfortable to say that they were a carer, noted that disclosing caring responsibilities was positive. They felt it would allow colleges and universities to put support in place; and to understand that if they needed for example a coursework extension, it could be because of their caring role.



However, some student carers also stated that they could understand why some carers might not disclose their caring role. Not all carers are comfortable with a label and may prefer to keep their caring role private. Carers and care support workers shared that a poor experience of support at school, might impact the decision that student carers take to disclose their caring role to their college or university. Being judged, unsupported or facing stigma at school, could make student carers feel that sharing their caring role will not necessarily entitle them to support.

In particular, college and university staff and care support workers shared that some carers look upon college and university as a chance for a new beginning. For these carers, they might choose not to disclose their caring status as they view it as a past label that they do not want to bring into a new chapter. Stigma and fear of judgement is still a feature for many carers, who may choose not to disclose their caring role.



## SECTION 2

# STUDYING AT COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY

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**“It’s hard but we’re very motivated and determined.”**  
**STUDENT CARER**

**When student carers begin their studies at college and university, they face the challenge of balancing studies with caring responsibilities. This balancing act raises specific difficulties that are not faced by their peers. While there are themes common to the student carer experience, it is important to remember that student carers are not a homogenous group.**

Family structure, geographical location, age, income, amount of time spent caring and intensity of the caring role are some of the factors that influence how a carer experiences college and university. As such, student carers should be recognised as individuals who all have different life circumstances, experiences, and expectations from their studies.

However, what is very clearly shared among student carers is that they want to succeed in their studies. Like their peers who are not carers, student carers have decided that further study is a valuable part of their lives and are motivated to achieve and succeed in their education.

**“... you want to better yourself and do care deeply about passing the course but also you need additional time as life is hard as a carer.”**

**STUDENT CARER**

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Throughout a student carer’s journey, caring responsibilities are not static. The amount and type of care being provided can and does change. As one carer said: “What you do to care, changes”. Carers also illustrated that the amount of time they are spending caring does not necessarily give a clear picture of how it is impacting on them mentally and emotionally.



**“... the time spent caring is not equivalent to the mental load that it places on you and that the amount of time can fluctuate at any time.”**

**STUDENT CARER**

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While all carers have their own perspectives and circumstances, there are clear themes that unite student carers and give them a shared experience.

## **2.1. Time/balance**

**“You don’t have the same free time as other students ...”**

**STUDENT CARER**

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**“Biggest barrier I would say is time.”**

**CARE SUPPORT WORKER**

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**“They’ve got no time to even rest.”**

**STAFF MEMBER**

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Across all student carers, care support workers and college and university staff participants in the research, time was identified as a challenge for student carers. Balancing time to attend class, to study, and to socialise alongside caring responsibilities is difficult for student carers.

### **2.1.1 Attending class**

**“I missed some classes and missed work due to the fact my dad had hospital appointments ... which resulted in my work lacking.”**

**STUDENT CARER**

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College and university staff shared that the class timetable can cause major challenges for student carers. Classes might be scheduled for a time that is very difficult for a carer to attend, for example because of a routine appointment for the person(s) they care for.

**“I need to wait for my son’s school transport before setting off for university so early lectures or late ones 9-10 or 4-6 create problems for me.”**

**STUDENT CARER**

College and university staff explained that timetables are often released very close to the beginning of term, leaving little time for carers to make alternative arrangements for the person(s) they care for or to have their timetable changed. Issues with timetabling can make for a stressful start of the term for student carers.



Of 136 student carers,

**47%**

**said attending class was challenging.**

Other student carers illustrated how “regular, unpredictable disruptions” during class can cause them to miss some of their learning time. Some participants shared that their class time is interrupted by phone calls regarding their caring responsibilities, which they have to leave class to take. For some carers, providing emotional support over the phone is part of their caring role. Other carers needed to take calls regarding important appointments for the person(s) they care for.

In some instances, carers had to leave a class altogether, because something had unexpectedly come up with the person(s) they care for.

**“Sometimes, you may have to leave during a lecture because of caring duties.”**

**STUDENT CARER**

Unexpected incidents involving the person(s) being cared for, for example a fall, an addiction relapse or declining mental health, make caring roles unpredictable. It is not always possible to plan around caring responsibilities, as carers can be needed at any time. Leaving class early or being unable to attend at all, does not just disrupt learning, but has also impacted some carers attendance records. For some, unauthorised absences caused them to lose money from their bursaries or threatened their place on the course.

There are circumstances where student carers plan to miss class, because of their caring role.

**“... sometimes it is difficult for a student to always attend classes due to having responsibilities for someone else.”**

**STUDENT CARER**

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Carers reported missing class to accompany the person(s) they care for to medical appointments. The time and location of appointments meant an overnight stay for some carers, particularly those traveling from rural areas. Carers of people who have specific illnesses or conditions requiring specialist treatment also shared having to travel out with their local area, so missing class and study time.

Missing class is sometimes an unavoidable feature of student carers' lives, however it can cause stress and worry.

**“I feel guilty about falling behind work and worry I will never be able to catch up on missed work.”**

**STUDENT CARER**

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### 2.1.2 Studying

**“You don't get the opportunity to do the studying you need to.”**

**STUDENT CARER**

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As well as attending classes, finding additional time to study alongside caring responsibilities can be a real challenge for student carers.

**“Doing extra studying and outside research in a research heavy course is very difficult as time is demanding in a carer role.”**

**STUDENT CARER**

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Staying on campus, to use college or university facilities is not always an option for students who need to return home to caring responsibilities. Timetabling could mean that a student must be on campus, away from the person(s) they care for, for the whole day.

**“I know people say stay behind and go to the library. But sometimes you can't because you've been away from home since 9am ... You need to get home and get stuff done.”**

## **STUDENT CARER**

Similarly, staying on campus to take part in group work can be difficult for student carers. Of 136 sampled respondents, 49% said that taking part in group work for the course was challenging; while 27% said it was not challenging, but not easy. Staying behind to meet with groups, or completing work to the group's timetable, can be stressful for student carers who need to consider their time in relation to their caring responsibilities.

For carers who live with the person(s) they care for, studying at home is difficult too. For these students, being at home is not necessarily the free time that it might be for other students. When student carers are at home, they are often fulfilling caring responsibilities: “I often have to go straight home and resume caring.”

Their plans to study might be unexpectedly disrupted, because they need to support the person(s) they care for. This can make it very difficult to follow a study plan or complete work that is set last minute. For carers with additional responsibilities, such as childcare, studying at home can have added difficulties, as one carer explained: “It can be challenging to study and complete assessments at home due to your caring role and multiple children to care for.”



**Of 137 sampled student carers,**

**87%**

**said that concentration on assignments and work at home was challenging.**

For some student carers, studying at home was not an option at all, as they would be interrupted by their caring responsibilities. These students face the challenge of working their study time around the institution's opening hours:

**“Studying at home when you live with the person you care for is extremely difficult. Because of this I do all studying in college which means I have less time due to college opening times and availability of specialist care.”**

Not being able to study at home restricts the flexibility that student carers have in their studying timetables.

**“Studying at home is near impossible so everything needs to be done within a certain time frame.”**

Scheduling time for independent study and completing coursework is not straightforward for student carers. Their time is under pressure from their caring role, in addition to other responsibilities they have at home. Finding a suitable space to study, that works with their schedule, either at home, or on campus is also a challenge for student carers.

Barriers to studying, combined with the unpredictability of the caring role, impacts carers' ability to meet deadlines. Of 136 carers, 35% said that handing in coursework on time was very challenging, or somewhat challenging.

**“It'll be hard to make some days and hand work in on time.”**  
**STUDENT CARER**

Student carers shared going to great lengths to ensure that they met course deadlines: “I have completed assessments in hospital rooms and pulled many an all-nighter after arranging carers just to get work in on time.”

Finding a suitable time and place to study can be a challenge for student carers. This combined with unpredictable caring roles makes it difficult to meet deadlines.

### **2.1.3 Socialising**

**“They can't live the student life as much as their peers.”**  
**COLLEGE STAFF MEMBER**

For many students, college and university is a chance to meet new people both on their course and through joining clubs and societies. This aspect of college and university life was described as challenging by student carers, care support workers, and college and university staff.

**“... quite often meetings, extra-curricular events etc are held at times which are impossible for someone with caring responsibilities to attend. University can also be a very isolating experience for student carers.”**

**STUDENT CARER**

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Of 137 sampled student carers,

**74%**

said joining clubs and societies was challenging.

Student carers do not always have the freedom that those without caring responsibilities have.

**“Time is not always our own and things can crop up at any point in time.”**

**STUDENT CARER**

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Time that is not always yours to plan can make it difficult to take part in social events and experiences. This can feel particularly disappointing because of the build-up that surrounds starting college and university, particularly with events such as Freshers Week.

**“Uni is made to sound like the biggest ‘party’ and there is a pressure to make it the best time of your life. For some people it was, but for people with caring responsibilities it is difficult to participate in these sorts of social events.”**

**STUDENT CARER**

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Being unable to attend social events can make it more difficult to make friends. 57% of 137 student carers sampled said making friends was challenging, contributing to both real and perceived isolation.

**“When we started lectures everyone seemed to know each other. That obviously has an impact on your mental health – makes you feel so isolated.”**

**STUDENT CARER**

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Not being able to make friends and integrate into wider college and university life can make student carers feel very alone. This is often compounded by them having very different life experiences and home circumstances to many of their peers. Carers shared that their peers often do not understand caring responsibilities, and it can be difficult for their classmates to relate to them.

**“I found it hard to connect with classmates who didn’t understand why I was so worried all the time.”**

**STUDENT CARER**

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Another shared that caring responsibilities: "... can often lead to us being more isolated from our peers as they simply cannot empathise with the often traumatic situations we have come from."

Ultimately, not having time to take part in clubs and societies can impact on carers' ability to make friends and feel part of the wider college or university community. This can influence how carers feel about continuing their studies, as well as making them feel isolated.

**“It makes you not want to go - why am I even here when I don't have any friends?”**

**STUDENT CARER**

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## 2.2 Concentration

**“Just because my head is in a coursework book doesn't mean I don't worry about him.”**

**STUDENT CARER**

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Caring responsibilities do not stop when class time starts. These responsibilities bring stressors that can be very distracting for student carers and disrupt their concentration on their work: "... caring takes a huge emotional toll on us and we may not be able to focus well."

Stress and worry about caring are emotionally and mentally draining for carers, and has a direct and negative impact on their focus and attention during class.

**“[Caring] has a knock on effect, that is not easy to anticipate it is mentally draining, and really does affect our concentration and attention levels.”**

**STUDENT CARER**

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Of 136 sampled respondents

**61%**

said that concentrating in class was challenging; with only

**2%**

saying it was not challenging at all.

**“You never know when you’re going to get a call and they need you urgently. You never know if you’re going to get a call from one of their carers saying they’ve fallen or there’s been an incident. You’re constantly on edge ...”**

**STUDENT CARER**

Being worried and on edge impacts concentration during class. Of 135 respondents, 41% said that they were preoccupied with worry about the person they cared for during class time, on a daily basis; 24% said it happened between one and three days in a week; and only 7% said it did not happen at all in a week. Worry can spill into personal study time: “When working in the library and I get a missed call, or an email message, I’m aware that this could be the start of another episode ...”

Worry can make it difficult for carers to fully engage either in class time or in personal study. Being preoccupied with anxiety could negatively impact their studies.

**“... there are other things on your mind that make it difficult to take things in no matter how many times you read something.”**

**STUDENT CARER**

Feeling unable to fully concentrate can make carers worry about their coursework. In this way, caring responsibilities compound stress about their studies: "... every time I get stressed about something, my head goes to [for the person I care for]."

As a result, there is a layering effect, where carers can be worried about both the person they care for, and their studies. Fully concentrating on their work when preoccupied with worry is a real challenge for student carers and one which can impede their learning.

## 2.3 Placement

Some courses, for example nursing, require students to undertake work placements. However, students do not always have a choice in the location of the placement which can cause difficulties for student carers. Student carers often choose a college or university that is within reasonable travel distance to the person they care for; but their placement can often be in a location that is further away.

Student carers shared that placement organisers are not always notified of their caring responsibilities, and so may not be understanding of their circumstances. Some participants had their caring role doubted by placement staff and so found it difficult to negotiate reasonable adjustments around their caring responsibilities.

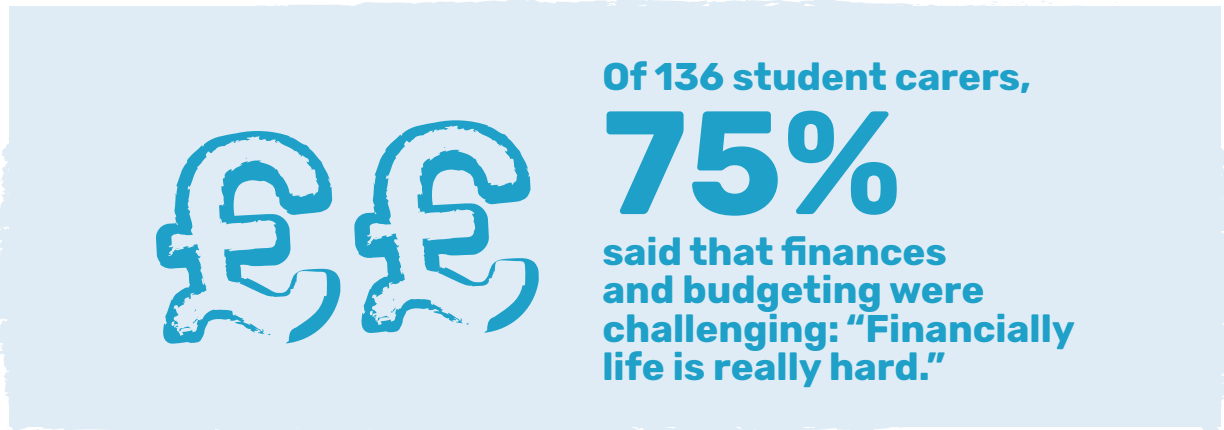
**“There should be more flexibility respect and support provided by both university and work placements’ staff and university should ensure students are treated fairly.”**

**STUDENT CARER**

When placement organisers were not made aware of students’ caring responsibilities, carers had to come forward themselves. For some carers, they found declaring their caring responsibilities difficult, and at times upsetting. One carer asked that college and university staff: "... protect our rights and learning time ... whilst on placement rather than allowing for the work placement staff to physically and mentally drain the students who have hard life enough caring for disabled at home."

## 2.4 Finances

This research found that finance was considered as a major challenge for student carers.



The decision to attend college or university comes with a financial impact for carers in receipt of Carer's Allowance, as they are legally no longer able to claim the benefit if they are studying for 21 hours a week or more. Research participants felt this was a real disadvantage for student carers. Since many student carers continue to care for the 35 hours that would qualify them for Carer's Allowance, participants felt that being disqualified on account of studying for 21 hours or more was particularly unjust.

**“Studying full time and not being able to claim Carer's Allowance is unfair, as the 35 hours a week is still spent caring.”**  
**STUDENT CARER**

Carers shared that having access to additional money, such as Carer's Allowance, while studying would make their situation more manageable.

**“I feel like money helps everything.”**  
**STUDENT CARER**

One clear advantage to additional support would be that carers would not have to balance caring, studying and working. One carer explained that this balancing act is: "... like leading a triple life and it's not practical mentally, emotionally or physically."

While some carers could not work due to their caring role, others had no option financially than to take up employment. To be able to meet their caring and studying commitments alongside working, some student carers had taken on nightshift roles. These strenuous shifts could leave them exhausted, stressed and time poor, making it difficult to reach their full potential in their studies. Working while caring often compounds the difficulties student carers have in finding time to study, and puts pressure on their mental wellbeing. In turn, some student carers found their academic performance impacted. Student carers can access Student Award Agency Scotland (SAAS) student loans, however the Dependant’s Grant provided by SAAS was considered to have narrow eligibility criteria and was difficult for both staff and students to navigate.

Research participants reflected that care experienced students have far more recourse to financial support than student carers. While they were keen to stress that care experienced students were deserving of financial support, participants felt that carers should also have financial entitlement due to their ongoing responsibilities: “... they deserve all the things they are given, but at the same time, we kind of also deserve things.”

Participants also felt that the fact that there are other student groups who receive financial support, added to the unfairness that there is limited additional support for student carers. Access to funds for student carers would support them in their choice to study, rather than make it financially difficult for them. Student carers shared that having financial support would be “one less worry” and would enable them to engage more fully with their studies.



Additional funding such as discretionary funds and bursaries are available at some colleges and universities. However, the money available is often in small amounts, and sometimes is awarded on a one-time basis following an application. This type of funding is not always a long-term financial option for carers, and the award sum is often less than they would be entitled to from Carer's Allowance. Care support workers and college and university staff shared that carers often struggled to provide documentation evidencing their caring role. This could mean delay to the bursary being awarded, during which time, student carers would have no source of income. In some cases, carers were unable to provide enough evidence.

Where student carers had been able to access bursaries, they discussed the difficulty of the bursary being awarded based on attendance. If they had to leave a class, or had unauthorised absences, this would decrease the amount of money they were awarded: "... those payments which were my sole source of income were stopped. This made my financial situation dire and I ended up getting into a lot of debt in order to survive."

Furthermore, while a bursary was a lifeline for some carers, it was often the only source of income which still made it very difficult to manage financially.

**“I only had my bursary to live on. This put me under financial difficulty.”**

**STUDENT CARER**



Sometimes student carers have the additional financial pressure of paying for external paid carers to help support the person(s) they care for. They may require paid carers in order to be able to attend class, or for some extra time to study and complete work.

**“Specialist childcare for a disabled child is hard to find and expensive to use ... This makes attending college difficult.”**

**STUDENT CARER**



Carers with children, might not be able to rely on their partner or other family members for childcare, and so have to pay external care providers in order to have some time to study. Paying for carers is an additional cost that other students do not have to meet to study.

Coping with financial challenges is stressful for carers and has a direct impact on other aspects of life at college and university. Not having enough money to travel to campus for example, leads to students missing out on class, and so falling behind on learning and coursework. Class absences can jeopardise their place on the course, and the amount of bursary they receive. Additional financial support is considered hugely important in improving the student carer experience.

**“The student carer success rate at university and college would dramatically increase if there was financial support - odds on!”**

**STUDENT CARER**

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## 2.5 All in the balance

**“It can be all consuming, utterly exhausting and leaves you isolated and overwhelmed.”**

**STUDENT CARER**

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The balancing act between studies and caring can be extremely challenging, deeply exhausting, and highly stressful for student carers.

**“It is a mental and physical strain attempting to juggle multiple elements, sometimes the guilt of getting the balance between home and academic life is too much, as it’s unachievable to from time to time.”**

Student carers, care support workers and college and university staff all shared that the intense pressure that carers are under can negatively impact their mental health. The research demonstrates that 84% of 136 student carers said that keeping good mental health was challenging. Support from college and university is needed for the times that maintaining studies alongside a caring role becomes difficult.

**“In order to achieve success we have a lot to balance. There are times where it’s not easy to balance this and need the university to step in and give support.”**

**STUDENT CARERS**

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Across Scotland’s colleges and universities there are various options and combinations of support available for student carers, aiming to assist them to balance their studies and their caring role.

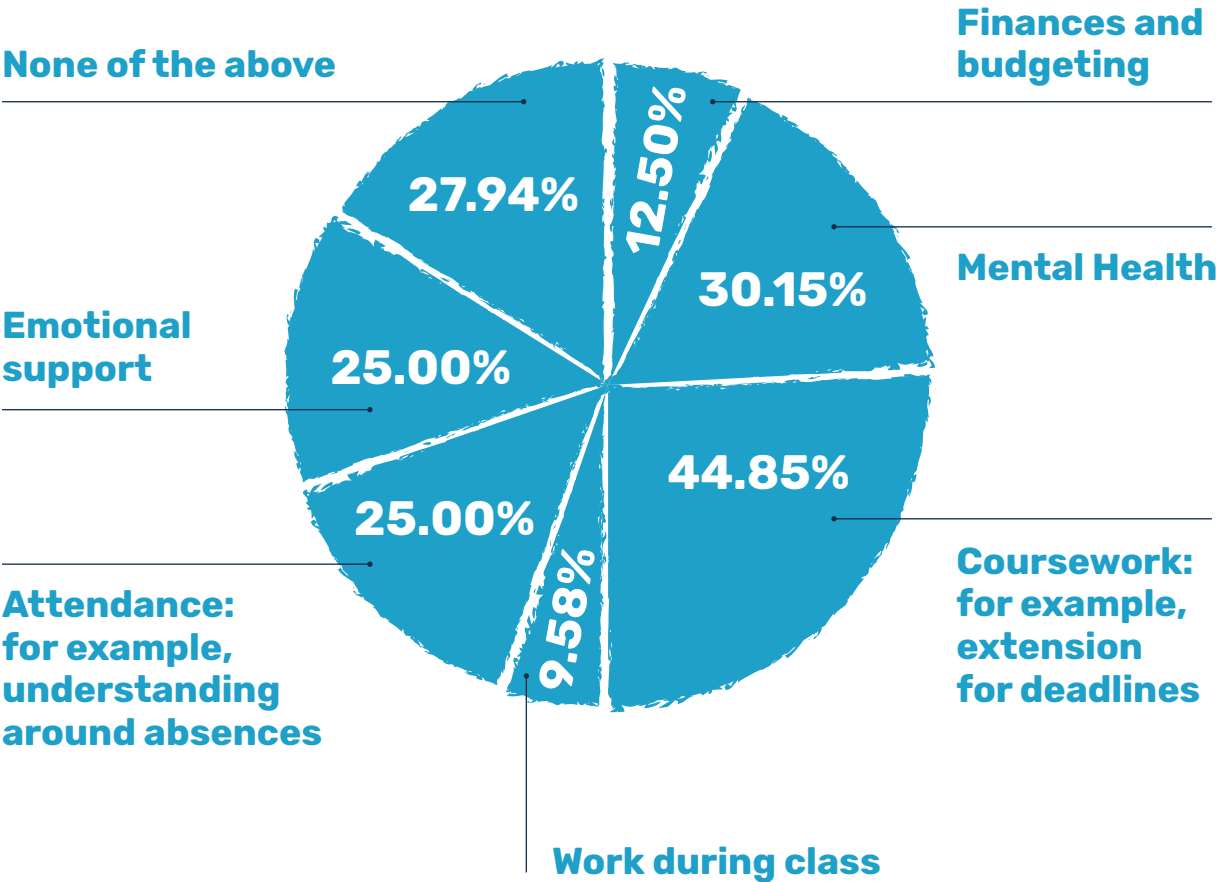


# SECTION 3

## SUPPORT FOR STUDENT CARERS

Chart 2 shows the support that student carers are receiving at college and/or university.

Do you now, or in the past, receive support at college or university for any of the following options?



Total respondents: 136

### 3.1 Finding support

Colleges and universities identify student carers in different ways. In some cases, there is an option to declare at application stage and others provide an opportunity at enrolment. For carers who disclosed their caring role, colleges and universities may get in contact to let them know what support is available. However, many carers shared experiences where no one had contacted them: "... even though it was a question on the application form, no-one has actually asked me about my caring role. No-one has contacted me about it."

This leaves carers feeling neglected, and that declaring their caring role is pointless. Student carers shared feeling unimportant to colleges and universities if no one had contacted them.

**“I personally feel that it is more of a tick box exercise and information that is passed on to the appropriate people is left in a box and forgotten about.”**

#### **STUDENT CARER**

Some respondents also shared frustrations that information they shared about their caring role had not been communicated to all academic staff they were working with:

"Something that does nip me – I feel like they should communicate that [caring role] with your placements ..."

For some carers, this meant they had to repeat their often difficult circumstances again to different people and left them feeling that their initial disclosure of caring was overlooked.

If they were not contacted, some student carers looked for information independently. However, finding information about available support was not always easy: "We weren't told about student support – you had to dig to find anything."

Student carers shared they could feel overwhelmed and unsure of where to go to find support, particularly if they are starting college or university for the first time. It was not always clear to student carers where they should go on campus, or what office they should contact. In some cases, carers shared they did not know that there was any student carer specific support on offer at all: "... make it explicit that there is support available. I went a number of years not realising that I could access support."

Other student carers had disappointing responses when they reached out.

**“I got in touch with a dedicated email at uni to declare I was a carer and never had any response.”**

**STUDENT CARER**

No follow up to their disclosure of their caring role, or difficulty in accessing support once they had come forward, was disappointing for student carers. It could discourage them from accessing support in the future. Student carers explained that this experience could “break their trust in the system” and make it difficult for them to reach out again.

### 3.2 Asking for support

**“I find it hard to ask for help, sometimes feel like a failure asking for help.”**

**STUDENT CARER**

Student carers found accepting support that was offered to them much easier than reaching out to support services themselves. Student carers, care support workers and college and university staff shared various reasons that student carers can find it hard to reach out.

**“... sometimes it’s hard to ask for help and you can sometimes feel like a failure if you can’t cope.”**

**STUDENT CARER**

Some student carers did not see themselves as deserving of support from college or university. Student carers explained that they did not always feel they could ask for support, because they perceived that their situation was not as bad as other people’s. Feeling that “everyone has something” as one carer described it, can act as a barrier to carers reaching out for support.

This was reflected by care support workers, who shared that student carers can find it difficult to reach out for support as: “The nature of a carer is to get on with it.”

Carers are used to prioritising and caring for others. Care support workers explained that this can lead to carers forgetting to ask for or feeling uncomfortable asking for support for themselves. Other carers shared feelings that it is not worthwhile asking for support, as they did not feel anything could be done to help them. One carer explained that “... the workload is the workload”

and so felt that asking for support would be pointless, as they would have to get through their coursework somehow. Caring roles are unpredictable, and sometimes support is needed unexpectedly. One respondent expressed that this can be stressful because: "... I feel it is unfair or not acceptable to ask for support close to a deadline ... At these points I often feel like I have nowhere to turn and to ask for help late on is unacceptable."

For student carers, thinking about themselves can be difficult, and might act as a barrier to proactively seeking support.

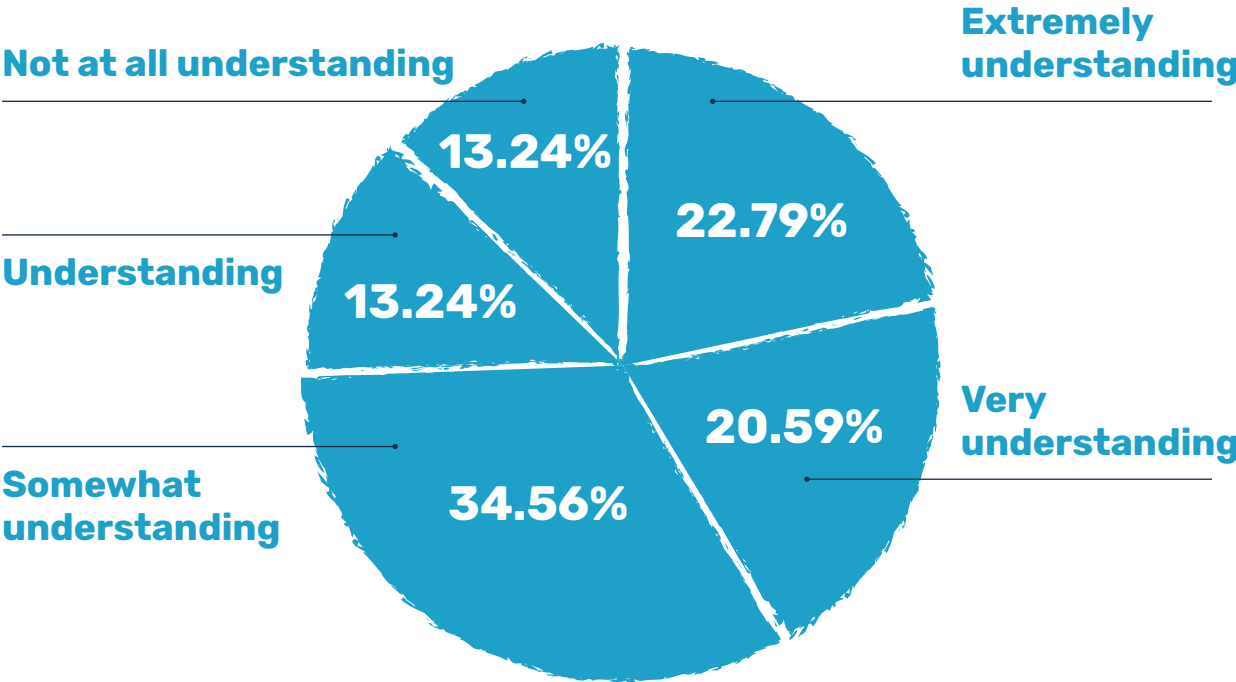
### 3.3 Being understood

**“No we don’t use it as an easy excuse I really was up all night when I say I was.”**

**STUDENT CARER**

**Chart 3** shows the level of understanding student carers experienced at college and/or university.

#### How understanding are college and/or university staff of your circumstances as a student carer?



**Total respondents: 136**



The level of understanding that student carers experience from staff at college varies. Students explained occasions when they had shared information about their caring role with staff at college and university, for example as an explanation for missing class or needing extra time for an assignment, but this had not been accepted as an explanation. Carers were upset that they were being perceived as lazy or trying to get out of work, particularly by education practitioners that they would expect to trust them.

**“I’m no skiving ... they automatically think when you’re off that you’re skiving.”**

**STUDENT CARER**

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Being believed when expressing difficulties with their caring role can be particularly challenging for student carers when their grades are good, or when they present as happy and capable.

**“... if someone breaks their leg you can see that. You can’t see all these things going on in my head.”**

**STUDENT CARER**

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Student carers felt unseen and misunderstood in these instances. Appearing to cope with the pressures of studying and caring could result in their difficulties not being taken seriously. The damage of not being believed is that it can make carers feel reluctant to reach out in future for the support they need to flourish and succeed.

Care support workers explained that student carers sometimes turn to them for support outside college and university, particularly when they have found a lack of understanding or had their caring role doubted. Care support workers shared that being doubted can be very upsetting for student carers. They recalled that student carers turn to them in these moments because they: "... just want someone who knows what they are talking about."

Participants shared that student carers circumstances are sometimes misunderstood as a one-off event, rather than an ongoing caring role, that can fluctuate greatly over hours, days, weeks, months and years.

**“There may be times where things are OK and then times that are extremely challenging. This is why flexibility and understanding is really important.”**

**STUDENT CARER**

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Student carers shared that some staff did not understand that caring isn't something that carers have necessarily chosen or can easily opt in and out of. Not all staff understand what the challenges are for carers, and some student carers felt that staff were surprised that they had student carers in the college or university at all.

Being understood by staff is incredibly important to student carers. A real or perceived lack of understanding of carers' issues can act as a barrier to student carers coming forward for support.

# SECTION 4

## WHAT WORKS FOR STUDENT CARERS?

**Table 3 shows the types of support student carers might access at college and/or university.**

**How likely would you be to access the following support options at college and/or university?**

**How likely would you be to access the following support options at college and/or university?**

**Answered: 136**

	<b>Extremely likely</b>	<b>Likely</b>	<b>Neither likely or unlikely</b>	<b>Unlikely</b>	<b>Very unlikely</b>	<b>I would access this kind of support somewhere else</b>	<b>I don't want to access support at my college/university</b>
Regular student carer groups at college/university to meet others in the same situation as me	9.56%	32.35%	18.38%	19.12%	12.50%	4.41%	3.68%
An extension on coursework submission	41.18%	33.09%	11.76%	10.29%	2.21%	0.00%	1.47%
Additional time during exams	31.62%	28.68%	16.18%	13.24%	7.35%	0.00%	2.94%
A named contact that I can chat to regularly	30.15%	40.44%	15.44%	7.35%	4.41%	1.47%	0.74%
Online forums to keep updated with developments for student carers	24.26%	39.71%	15.44%	10.29%	8.09%	2.21%	0.00%
Financial support	42.22%	30.37%	8.15%	9.63%	7.41%	1.48%	0.74%
A support plan created specifically for me	40.00%	28.89%	13.33%	8.89%	7.41%	0.74%	0.74%
Support/guidance to transition into work	34.56%	28.68%	16.18%	6.62%	8.82%	2.21%	2.94%



## 4.1 Knowing where to go

Being clear on where to find support was extremely helpful for student carers. College and university staff felt that carers did not always know where to go for support.

**“I know that not all students are aware of the supports and perhaps don’t think to look for it as they don’t expect there to be any help.”**

**STAFF MEMBER**



While information about support available for student carers is available on college and university websites, one staff member said: “... finding out is hard as a lot of students do not use the website for this kind of information. It is usually by talks/presentations from Student Services or by teaching staff referring them through for support.”

Student carers shared that it is much easier to engage with support when it is proactively offered to them. The college or university reaching out to student carers, made them feel that their circumstances were being taken seriously, and encouraged them to engage.

**“They didn’t wait for me to look into it. They called me, and that was so much more useful than having to dig in a website to find what you need.”**

**STUDENT CARER**



Worrying about what will happen if for example, coursework cannot be completed for the given deadline, can be very distracting for carers. Once they knew that there was support available, this student carer said: “It did take a weight off my mind.”

## 4.2 Someone to talk to

**“I struggled with finding people in the same situation as me would be nice to have a chat now and again with someone who understands.”**

**STUDENT CARER**



Someone understanding to talk to is highly valued by many student carers. Student carers shared times where academic and support staff went out of their way to support them. One carer recalls that after noticing a pattern of lateness, their lecturer: "... got some time. She sat down with me, she spoke to me. And she said to me 'Do you know there's something to support carers?'"

Being seen and asked about their situation was hugely important in feeling recognised for the student carers in this research. Just as a lack of understanding can be upsetting for student carers, for some being met with compassion and empathy went a long way. One carer reflected that they thought academic staff should: "... have a caring and supportive nature."

Understanding from both academic and support staff validated student carers' experiences and made them feel that they were supported. One carer explained that their personal tutor was supportive by: "Just caring, having an interest in me. Like, wanting me to do well. Like, listening."

On its own, understanding is empowering for student carers. As one carer said: "... understanding and support and reassurance from lecturers on coursework does go a long way."

However, it is also linked to practical support. Student carers perceived staff that were understanding, as more likely to offer them support such as deadline extensions. It was these understanding staff members that carers were most likely to approach.

**“If you miss something and you communicate that to them, it's more than likely to be fine.”**

**STUDENT CARER**

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Many student carers also shared that they would like the opportunity to meet with others in the same position as them, to have the chance to speak with people who share their experiences.

**“But definitely just having someone to talk to about my worries, as I am not always at home ... there is a continual feeling of worry and guilt I carry every day I am not caring ...”**

**STUDENT CARER**

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Meeting specifically with other student carers was not important for all however, especially those who accessed peer support elsewhere.

Some carers required professional mental health support through college and university counselling services. Counselling services were often a lifeline for carers, who were stressed out and overburdened with their studying and caring responsibilities.

**“I would not have made it through that year without the counselling service and my counsellor championing my cause when I was too emotionally drained to ask for help from my course.”**

**STUDENT CARER**

Having someone to talk to, in both a formal and informal setting, was valued by carers.

### 4.3 Practical support

While emotional support and understanding from college and university staff are important for student carers, there are other more practical measures that can be very helpful for student carers. Of 135 student carers, 40% said they would be extremely likely to access a support plan created specifically for them.



The high demand on carers’ time means that extensions on coursework can be particularly useful for student carers. Flexibility around deadlines can give more time when it is really needed. As one carer said: “Anything which builds flexibility into courses and/or assessment would help enormously.”

However, while many students felt that the extension itself was extremely helpful, one carer noted that: “... applying for these was stressful and needed ‘evidence’ ...”

Student carers felt that individualised packages of support would be helpful. Some colleges and university offer these through personalised support plans which detail the carer's circumstances, and the support options they may need to access.

**“I have a learning and placement support plan in place and my tutor is very understanding and encouraging but I have not told them the full impact of my responsibilities because there hasn't been the opportunity or there are other things to discuss like assignments.”**

**STUDENT CARER**



Carers who access this type of support felt it was helpful, and gave them an opportunity to discuss their circumstances, and any changes throughout the year. In some cases, the support plan was completed by someone who was also a personal point of contact for the student carer. Having someone acting as an intermediary between college and university academic staff eased the pressure on student carers, particularly when they did not feel able to discuss their circumstances directly with academic staff.

Carers also shared that flexibility around their timetable and attendance was very helpful. Caring responsibilities might peak and make it difficult to attend class. For student carers, it was very helpful to be able to rearrange timetables or reach an understanding that sometimes attendance might be lower than expected.

# SECTION 5

## CHALLENGES FOR COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY STAFF IN SUPPORTING STUDENT CARERS

Table 4 shows what would enable college and/or university staff to better support student carers.

**What would enable you to better support student carers in your role?**

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
<b>Training on carers and carers' issues</b>	8.00%	56.00%	28.00%	8.00%	0.00%
<b>Increased capacity</b>	26.92%	46.15%	23.08%	3.85%	0.00%
<b>More information on where to signpost student carers</b>	19.23%	50.00%	23.08%	7.69%	0.00%
<b>Greater information on what college/universities have internally to support student carers</b>	23.08%	30.77%	26.92%	19.23%	0.00%
<b>A working relationship with the carer centre local to the college/university</b>	19.23%	42.31%	26.92%	0.00%	11.54%
<b>Knowing who student carers are</b>	46.15%	42.31%	7.69%	0.00%	3.85%

## 5.1 Knowing student carers

**“The sooner we know the better for the student.”**

**STAFF MEMBER**

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A major challenge for college and university staff is knowing who within the student population is a carer. 88% of college and university staff felt that knowing who student carers are would enable them to better support them.

**“We have great support but the main issue for me is that we don’t always see the student carers who need this support.”**

**STAFF MEMBER**

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Identifying student carers may be a challenge because there is no uniform way for them to disclose. This is particularly true at university where there is no tick box option to disclose caring currently on pre-entry. Unless carers disclose in their personal statements, they might not have another chance to disclose until the enrolment stage, which is typically only a few weeks before the start of term. As staff pointed out, this can sometimes mean it is well into the term before they have the information on the student carers that they need in order to reach out.

To overcome these challenges, and identify student carers early, some colleges and universities work closely with schools in the local area.

**“We work with schools to ask them to advise us if a young carer is coming onto a course to enable us to have the right support in place for the student at the beginning of their course.”**

**STAFF MEMBER**

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Working with schools familiarises carers with the campus and processes at college and university, making it easier for carers to find and access support. College and university staff were keen to strengthen their ties with local schools and see the transition period from school to further or higher education as being a key time to identify student carers for support.

Similarly, some colleges and universities work closely with carer centres and services in their area. This is another way for colleges and university staff to know who student carers are, as well as being connected with an organisation that they can refer student carers to, where appropriate.



**“We have also recently formed connections with local carers centres and this has been incredibly helpful.”**

**STAFF MEMBER**

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Some college and universities invite their local carer centres to events such as open days and Freshers Week, both to signpost carers to support in the local area and within the college and university.

While working with local carer centres and schools is important, not all students live in the local area, or indeed begin their studies straight from school. Being able to declare caring responsibilities on application is extremely important in capturing these students and ensuring they have access to support. College and university staff expressed that they want to know and support student carers and voiced their wish for student carers to come forward.

**“Whilst it is a new stage in your education ... you’ve still got these other responsibilities, and we want to help you.”**

**STAFF MEMBER**

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Staff shared that knowing early who student carers are is hugely beneficial to arranging support: “In an ideal world, if they can speak to us at the point of application then we can have things in place for them as soon as they get here.”

Being able to put support measures in place for student carers at the beginning of their college and university journeys can prevent student carers reaching crisis point when there might be little support options on offer.

Staff can liaise directly with subject departments and let them know about a student’s caring responsibilities. Staff felt that generally, academic staff and departments would support student carers, provided they know about the issues: “The departments will do everything they can in terms of flexibility.”

However, while most colleges and universities reach out with an email to all students who declare themselves as carers, carers do not always take up the support available. One staff member shared their thoughts: “... although we are proactive and contact carers not all respond if they think they are OK at the time we reach out to them.”

College and university staff shared that student carers often become known to them when the student has reached crisis point. At crisis point there is sometimes little that can be done to change a student’s situation, for example if their attendance has been so low that they are disqualified from the course.

**“Organising a 3 day extension for a student carer because their caring responsibility means they cannot meet a deadline is fairly straightforward. Helping someone who is at a crisis point can be more difficult.”**

**STAFF MEMBER**

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For other courses, such as practical courses, catching up on work can be extremely difficult. The earlier that college and university staff know who student carers are, the more they can do to support them. College and university staff want to know what they can do to encourage student carers to reach out for support.

**“But universities must do more to support students (with admissions policies, on-course support) by making it ‘safe’ for carers to reach out and connect. Information and accessing support needs to be normalised – without stigma.”**

**STAFF MEMBER**

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They see a place for staff in promoting the support available, and encouraging students to take up the offer: “We’re human. We’re here to support. That’s the critical point.”



## 5.2 An all staff approach

Staff shared that knowledge and awareness of carers is not equal among all staff members. Many felt that not having a whole staff approach to student carer awareness was a barrier to support. While support staff may have the knowledge about the challenges student carers face, they may not always be responsible for authorising support, for example coursework extensions. A whole staff approach is therefore key to supporting student carers: “The support I am able to offer is very much dependent on how well the academic department engages in accommodating the student’s requests.”

Staff felt that there can be a mindset that supporting student carers is exclusively the role of support staff. However, college and university staff respondents did share that most staff are willing to learn more about carers once they are made aware of them as a student group.

**“You do find that actually most people, when we’ve included it as part of other training they’re very engaged ... Everyone is interested.”**

**STAFF MEMBER**



Training for all staff is particularly important, as staff shared that: “It’s not always these dedicated teams that a student may disclose an issue to.”

As such, all staff have a role to play in identifying and supporting student carers and should be equipped with the training and knowledge to be able to do so. College and university staff shared that strong working links between departments was particularly helpful in identifying student carers, who did not disclose directly to the support services. Good working relationships mean that carers can be seamlessly referred to the relevant support services within college or university.

In some institutions, student carers are given a personal contact. The job title and role responsibilities are varied across institutions, but broadly they are a contact for student carers to speak to directly. In some cases they monitor the performance and attendance of student carers for red flags that signal support is needed. However, there are issues around the workload of these staff members. College and university staff shared that these staff members can have multiple students to support – sometimes hundreds – facing various challenges. Their workloads are often at capacity, as one staff member said: “I just couldn’t fathom where we’d get time to do more.”

These staff may also be emotionally supporting student carers, but may not always have support themselves.

**“... the aspect of this role that is often forgotten about is the emotional support that we provide and the impact of this. Often we do not have training in this area but we can be the first person a carer calls/contacts during a time of high stress whether with their studies or caring responsibilities.”**

**STAFF MEMBER**

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Identifying and supporting student carers should not fall only to designated support staff. Training on student carer issues must be for all staff, to ensure wraparound support for student carers.

### **5.3 Funding focus**

College and university staff shared that some of the support challenges are because student carers are not considered a priority group by the Scottish Government in the same way that other groups such as care experienced students are. As one staff member said: “We need to be able to offer them concrete financial, practical and emotional support which we can’t do to the extent we can with our care experienced cohort.”

It can be challenging for institutions to prioritise the needs of student carers because there is not currently a legislative requirement or set targets relating to carers in college and university. This results in a mixed picture of support across Scotland, with different levels of support in place for student carers. For example, some college and university ‘contextualised admissions policies’ and ‘widening participation strategies’ include carers, and others do not. Practitioners felt that tighter policy and legislation behind student carers would enable practitioners and institutions to offer more consistent and extensive support across the further and higher education sector.

**“Higher education institutions don’t necessarily take notice of things until there is an expectation to do so, and penalties for not delivering.”**

**STAFF MEMBER**

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The lack of financial support for student carers, particularly compared with care experienced students was raised by many college and university staff as a support challenge.

**“... there isn't much financial support for student carers, which is something that would really help with getting more student carers to engage with the support.”**

**STAFF MEMBER**

Giving student carers recourse to financial support would benefit students directly and make college and university a more attainable destination for student carers. Financial support would present colleges and universities with another pillar of support to reach out to student carers.



# SECTION 6

# CONCLUSION, RECOMMENDATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

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## Conclusion

**Overall, 77% of 137 student carers felt that the student carer experience is more challenging than for a student without caring responsibilities. From the application process, through to studying at college and university, student carers in Scotland face many challenges.**

Carers take into consideration the person(s) they care for when choosing where to apply and may even decide a distance learning course is the most flexible option for them.

Leaving home for studies is something that carers can find difficult, both financially, and in terms of the worry that often accompanies leaving the person(s) they care for.

Studying at college or university alongside caring responsibilities is a balancing act for carers and finding time to meet all their commitments can be a challenge. Attending class can be difficult due to timetables clashing with caring responsibilities or needing to leave class early, for example to attend appointments with the person(s) they care for. Finding time to stay on campus to study or to socialise, can be very difficult for carers when they may need to return home to the person(s) they care for.

There is little specific financial support available for student carers, even though they are often caring alongside studying, and actively make choices that mean they can continue to care; for example the location of the college or university. The lack of financial support for student carers compounds many of the barriers they face, for example they may have to take on part-time work which makes the balance between studying and caring even more difficult.

While colleges and universities offer support for student carers, there is a gap between what is available and what is accessed. Finding and asking for support can be difficult for carers, particularly when they are worried that the impact of their caring role on their studies may not be understood by staff. College and university staff highlighted that they are not always aware of student carers until crisis point, limiting in some cases the support they can put in place for them.



Flexible, practical support underpinned by an understanding staff team can help student carers in their studies. Having an all staff approach would improve the understanding of student carers, encouraging student carers to come forward and identify. For colleges and universities, tighter legislation and clear expectations regarding student carers would help them in allocating time and resource to supporting student carers.

Student carers can and do succeed at college and university. However, there are significant challenges, and a lot for them to balance in order to achieve. Support should be put in place for student carers to assist them in their studies.

## Recommendations and suggestions

The following recommendations aim to improve the experiences of student carers at colleges and universities in Scotland. They are made based on the experiences of student carers, and on the experiences of the staff supporting them. The recommendations and suggestions consider the support student carers felt worked for them and the support they would like to see. The recommendations consider the challenges that college and university staff face in supporting student carers, and their experiences of effective support.

Some recommendations and suggestions can be built into existing structures and activities. Undertaking Carers Trust Scotland's Going Further and Going Higher Awards for colleges and universities respectively, will assist institutions in implementing these recommendations and suggestions.

### 1. Disclosure opportunities

Disclosure is an important part of the student carer experience. Knowing who carers are within the student population and identifying them for support helps both student carers and college and university staff.

#### a) Pre-entry

An early intervention approach should be adopted, including an option to declare caring responsibilities on college application forms and on the university UCAS application form. Identifying student carers pre-entry allows college and university staff to effectively use the time before term starts to put support in place. Resources can be used effectively to prevent students from reaching crisis point.

#### b) Multiple opportunities to disclose

In addition to college applications and university UCAS application forms, there should be several opportunities for student carers to declare themselves throughout the academic year. This is important for carers who are not immediately comfortable with disclosing; and for those students who become carers during their studies. In addition to enrolment, colleges and universities should embed disclosure opportunities into other stages and processes appropriate for their internal structures, for example when a student seeks financial support. Student carers should be able to update their caring responsibilities using their online profile on their college or university portal.

## **2. Support for student carers**

Practical and emotional support options should be available for student carers. To ensure that support is used by student carers it must be:

### **a) Visible**

Support options should be made clear to student carers before they start college and university, and throughout their studies, using websites, social media channels and on-campus communications, such as TVs, to publicise the support available for student carers. In-person options, such as carer awareness events, stalls on campus and short information announcements about the service at the beginning of lectures can also be used to increase visibility.

### **b) Proactive**

There are several barriers for student carers in seeking support for themselves, and so colleges and universities should be proactive in reaching out and offering student carers support. Support services should aim to maximise the opportunities for student carers to accept support by contacting them through email and any other communication channels, regularly throughout the year. When student carers disclose, support services should get in touch in a timely manner. Induction days should be offered for prospective student carers, allowing them to familiarise themselves with the campus and student support available. Colleges and universities should consider scholarships for student carers.

### **c) Flexible**

Support options for student carers should be responsive to their changing needs and be flexible, so that carers can build them into their timetable. While individual institutions should consider their specific structure, an example could be carer groups offered at various times throughout the week, and remote support options considered where appropriate.

Individual courses should build in flexibility, for example, recording lectures that will then be made available online would support student carers if they miss any class due to their caring responsibilities. Increasing college and university courses with agile structures and flexible ways of attending and engaging, would make college and university a realistic destination for more carers.

## **3. Personal student carer support plan and named contact**

College and universities should assign student carers a one-to-one contact who can work with carers to create a personal support plan, underpinned by an institution-wide student carer support policy. While each institution should define the support policy and individual plan according to their specific internal structure, it should always be student centred, personalised and flexible. Where possible, the personal support plan should be completed by someone who can be a specific or one-to-one contact for the student carer. Ideally this role would include advocacy for student carers and acting as an intermediary between student carers and academic staff.

#### **4. Training for all staff**

Carer awareness is the responsibility of all staff and must be embedded throughout all staff teams at colleges and universities. Colleges and universities should utilise the Carers Trust Scotland e-modules, and make student carer awareness training mandatory for all staff as part of their continued professional development.

##### **a) Internal referrals**

Staff supporting student carers should pro-actively make links with other departments, highlighting the referral channel for student carers. This ensures that knowledge of student carers is not siloed, and that they are referred to get the support they need.

##### **b) Understanding student carers**

Carers Trust Scotland should continue to work with colleges and universities, raising awareness of carers through teacher training courses; expanding this into other courses where carer awareness is essential, such as social work and nursing.

#### **5. Financial support for student carers**

Currently, carers are financially penalised for choosing to study at college and university. Instead, they should be supported.

##### **a) Carer's Allowance**

Studying does not mean that carers give up their caring role, or even spend less time caring; rather it makes their caring responsibilities more complex, difficult to manage and demanding. To support student carers financially, Carer's Allowance eligibility should be extended to include carers who are studying for 21 hours or more.

##### **b) Bursaries**

There should be a student carer bursary like that of the care experienced student bursary. This would bring parity of esteem between student carers and care experienced students, and make college and university a realistic option for carers. Bursaries which are awarded based on attendance can penalise carers who have to leave or miss class due to caring responsibilities. Where possible, colleges and universities should consider carers' circumstances when deciding the criteria bursaries are awarded on. A clear and timely process should be established at all colleges and universities to allow student carers to challenge any reduction in the amount awarded, due to their caring responsibilities.

##### **c) Accommodation costs**

Student carers should be supported with accommodation costs, modelled on that available for care experienced students. This would assist in removing the barrier of cost to moving out, enabling student carers to pursue their preferred course at their preferred institution.

#### **d) Review of SAAS and other benefits for student carers**

The current way that benefits and SAAS interact is confusing for both student carers and staff. Carers Trust Scotland should work with SAAS, Social Security Scotland and Department for Work and Pensions to find practical realistic measures to streamline the interaction between welfare entitlements and student finance.

### **6. Prioritising carers in Scottish Government policy**

Carers Trust Scotland calls on the Scottish Government to consider the challenges student carers face and review the current policy and legislation to ensure that student carers are supported on a basis equal to that of care experienced students. The inclusion of student carers in widening access policies will enable colleges and universities to better support student carers, by dedicating time and resource to this student group.

### **7. Strong local links and working relationships**

Links between schools, carer centres and services, colleges and universities should be strengthened.

#### **a) Identification and support**

Colleges and universities should work with local schools and carer centres, to ensure information on student carers is shared. The student carer contacts at college and universities should be familiar to local schools and carer centres. This gives school and care support workers the contacts necessary to assist student carers to access support at their institution; and to notify colleges and universities about carers in their student body.

#### **b) Training and support**

Scottish Government, Scotland's Health and Social Care Partnerships, and the National Carers Organisations should consider supporting carer centres to deliver carer awareness training to college and university staff as a next step. These organisations should consider an offer of assistance to carer centres, enabling them to support student carers on campus at their local institutions.

Colleges and universities should work closely with carer centres to ensure the support for student carers is holistic. Carer centres should be invited to attend carer groups and awareness raising events on college and university campuses.

## Areas for further student carer research

The scope of this research was to understand the lived experiences of student carers at colleges and universities across Scotland. This research began before Coronavirus and subsequent disruptions to college and university students' studies. Future research should consider the impact that Coronavirus has had on student carers.

This project has highlighted other areas of student carers' lives and experiences recommended for further investigation, but that were out with the scope of this research.

1. Student carer distance learners.
2. Condition specific student carers.
3. Rural student carers.
4. The intersectionality of protected characteristics with the student carer experience.
5. Armed forces student carers.
6. Mature student carers.
7. The course choices of student carers.

## Useful resources

### Carers Trust E-modules

[www.carers.org/college-and-university-work-in-scotland/resources-for-college-and-university-staff-supporting-student-carers](http://www.carers.org/college-and-university-work-in-scotland/resources-for-college-and-university-staff-supporting-student-carers)

Supporting Student Carers at College is a new innovative free digital training module for all college staff across Scotland. It has been developed by Carers Trust Scotland and CDN from funding received by The Scottish Funding Council. The module will help college practitioners to better understand the challenges faced by many student carers, and it provides guidance on how to improve support for these students at college.

Carers Trust Scotland is working in partnership with Open University to create an online learning module for University staff to support them in raising awareness around student carers at university. The module is being shaped by an advisory group of university practitioners and student carers. The module is made up of four sections, aiming to share the experiences of student carers and equip university staff with the knowledge and understanding to support carers throughout their university journey. The module will highlight key legislation and policy which impacts the lives of student carers and explore the pathway towards the Going Higher for Student Carers Award.

### **Going Further for Student Carers: Recognition Award**

The Going Further for Student Carers: Recognition Award aims to make it easier for Scotland's 27 colleges to identify, support and report on student carers, and recognise good practice.

Information and materials to support colleges on their Going Further journey can be found at [www.carers.org/college-and-university-work-in-scotland/resources-for-college-and-university-staff-supporting-student-carers](http://www.carers.org/college-and-university-work-in-scotland/resources-for-college-and-university-staff-supporting-student-carers).

### **Going Higher for Student Carers: Recognition Award**

The Going Higher for Student Carers: Recognition Award aims to make it easier for Scotland's 19 universities to identify, support and report on student carers, and recognise good practice.

Information and materials to support universities on their Going Higher journey can be found at [www.carers.org/college-and-university-work-in-scotland/going-higher-for-student-carers-recognition-award](http://www.carers.org/college-and-university-work-in-scotland/going-higher-for-student-carers-recognition-award).

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