The experiences of student carers at LSE: transitioning to university, navigating student life, and perceptions of support services

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See this project presented by the researcher: https://youtu.be/sS6olKwv-Jc
Read the full report.
If this project has informed your practice, let us know at lse.changemakers@lse.ac.uk.

Background

The LSE defines student carers as enrolled students who provide unpaid care for a child under the age of 18, or an adult with an illness or disability, mental health condition or an addiction. A systematic review of 6 articles on the experiences of higher education students providing childcare and elder care[1] revealed that caregiving students reported higher levels of physical and mental health problems, including anxiety, depression, insomnia, and difficulties with concentration, than their non-carer peers. They were often more socially isolated, money and time poor, and this affected their academic achievements. Student carers often missed assignment deadlines, had difficulties attending class on time or attending compulsory courses, were more likely to interrupt their studies and to drop-out of university. When deciding to attend university, they often faced inner conflicts when deciding to enrol in university because of guilt and the worry that they may not be able to fulfil their caring responsibilities. Furthermore, research conducted at the LSE Care Policy and Evaluation Centre[2] showed that young people aged 16-25 who provide unpaid care for family members with chronic illnesses, disabilities, and/or mental health problems were more likely to be unemployed, have lower earnings from paid employment, and have poorer mental and physical health compared to young people of the same age who were not carers.

Ensuring student carers are adequately supported is essential to mitigate the negative, short, and long-term impacts of caregiving. Universities are equipped for tackling these inequalities, as they can create internal policies removing barriers in access to education and provide effective support helping carers reconcile their studies and student life with their caregiving responsibilities. LSE's Widening Participation division pioneered the visibility of student carers at the LSE by launching in ST 2021 a dedicated webpage[3] for incoming undergraduate student carers. The webpage encourages student carers to declare their caring status so they may access the right support if and when they need it. It also outlines a list of support services offered by the LSE and the LSESU: childcare, accommodation, financial support, wellbeing and mental health, and academic support, and signposts student carers to Carers Trust and UCAS for external support (etc.). Prior to this webpage, LSE's student carers had little visibility, and therefore, little is known about their student experience at the university. This exploratory study attempts to fill this knowledge gap by asking the following questions:

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[1] Lea Knopf, Karla Wazinski, Anna Wanka & Moritz Hess (2022) Caregiving students: a systematic literature review of an under-researched group. Journal of Further and Higher Education. DOI: 10.1080/0309877X.2021.2008332

[2] Brimblecombe, N., Knapp, M., King, D. *et al.* The high cost of unpaid care by young people:health and economic impacts of providing unpaid care. *BMC Public Health* **20,** 1115 (2020). https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-020-09166-7

[3] https://www.lse.ac.uk/study-at-lse/Undergraduate/widening-participation/About/caring-responsibilities

1. **APPLICATION AND TRANSITION**: How do student carers experience the LSE application process and their transition to the university?
2. **NAVIGATION**: How do student carers of the LSE reconcile their studies/student life with their caring responsibilities?
3. **SUPPORT**: Do student carers use the support services offered by the LSE? If so, which ones? What are their perceptions of the support services offered and what could be done to improve their support?

The findings of this study contribute to improving the experience of student carers of the LSE, and the overall equity, diversity, and inclusion of the university. It fits with Priority 1.3 and 3.3 of the LSE 2030 Strategy ("An inclusive student experience", "Champion equity, diversity, and inclusion" respectively).

Mixed-methods methodology

Semi-structured interviews. 9 semi-structured interviews were conducted with student who self-selected into the study. The interviews lasted on average 50 minutes and were conducted in-person (n=2) and via video-conferencing software (n=7). Participants were thanked for the time they spent partaking in the interview with a £25 voucher. The interview data was anonymised, transcribed, and analysed using thematic analysis. Participants were asked to fill a pre-interview questionnaire asking them demographic and caring situation questions (see **Table 1**).

The interview had 4 parts: 1) the research information sheet was read to the participant and informed consent was sought; 2) participants were asked questions about their application process to the LSE, making them reflect on why they chose the LSE as a place of study, how easy it was for them to apply, and if they sought support at this time; 3) participants were asked about their experience transitioning to the LSE, how they reconciled their studies and student life alongside their caring role, and the challenges they face in doing so; 4) participants were asked whether they had sought support at the LSE during their studies (which type and why/why not), their perception of the support, and their suggestions for improving it.

Secondary quantitative data. The quantitative phase used secondary data collected from Widening Participation and the Financial Support Office, which were matched to enable us to statistically describe the demographics of the sample of undergraduate student carers (n= 61) and their engagement with the FSO. The quantitative data was analysed on Excel. **Table 2** presents the measures collected by the quantitative data.

Data Source	Measures
LSE Widening Participation	• Indicator of caring responsibility ("Do you have any caring responsibilities, for example for a child or another adult?") • Declared themselves to have a caring responsibility: 61 Undergraduate students, 352 Postgraduate taught students, and 11 Postgraduate Research students
LSE Financial Support Office	• Indicator of engagement: a) Of students that did take their place at the LSE, whether they applied for financial support – Undergraduate Scholarship, LSE bursary, and in-course scholarship b) Whether they were successful

Table 2. Indicators measured by the quantitative data.

Recommendations from key findings

The key findings from mixing the quantitative and qualitative data are summarised below, with concordant recommendations. The key findings are further detailed in the Appendix. To fulfil these recommendations, the following inputs are assumed to be needed:

- Time, interest, and willingness to engage from LSE faculty and staff, and LSESU staff
- Time, interest, and willingness to engage from the student body
- Availability of financial resources, facilities, and equipment
- Partnerships and collaborations between LSE Departments, Divisions, and the LSESU
- Partnerships between the LSE and state schools (notably through Widening Participation)
- Partnerships between the LSE and local young carer support charities and national unpaid carer charities (e.g., Carers Trust) (notably through Widening Participation)

Key Findings	Suggested Actions
1. The decision to attend the LSE is often made in consideration of caring responsibilities such as housing (affordability, distance to care-recipient or formal and informal support networks like nurseries, friends, and family), finances (costs of living in London, ability to afford tuition, nurseries, and financially support their family) and the health and wellbeing of the care recipient (e.g., quality nursery for childcare, ability to access healthcare for the care-recipient, ability to get to the care-recipient quickly in the event of an emergency) 2. Student carers feel underrepresented and misunderstood within the student body and may not fully be able to partake in student life. Student carers feel misunderstood by faculty and staff, although this is very Department and person-dependent with some people and departments being more mindful than others.	**1. Financial support that promotes autonomy and choice**: Needs-based financial bursaries for student carers which could be used to support childcare costs, housing costs, transportation costs, cost for study materials, etc.; this would also allow student carers to choose their nursery rather than settle for those imposed with discounts, as childcare is a very personal decision; flag-up of incomplete scholarship and bursary applications prior to deadline to suggest help with application process; suggest external bursaries for extra financial support **2. Build a culture of EDI within the LSE** → **EDI awareness training to be inclusive of the challenges of being a student carer in higher education**, co-created with student carers and professionals who support unpaid carers. Considerations of LSE policy changes on people with caring responsibilities are already included in EDI impact assessments but these are often completed with childcare responsibilities in mind. → **Compulsory EDI awareness training for Academic Mentors, Supervisors, Programme Managers, and Division Heads**. Out of these individuals receiving compulsory EDI training, designate one individual as "EDI Champion" in each Department, Research Centre, and Division (much like the "Mental Health Champions"). These EDI Champions to be points of contact for student carers who are seeking out support and for staff/faculty who are unsure how to support student carers → Other staff/faculty to receive EDI awareness training on a voluntary basis, encouraged by the individuals who have received compulsory training

3. Student carers face imposter syndrome (which is also linked to social class and whether they attended state vs. independent school), heightened stress, and mental health problems due to their caring roles; the wellbeing of their care-recipient and the added responsibilities impact them 4. Time is precious for student carers and their care responsibilities can be sporadic in nature; their academic achievements may be impacted by their caring.	→ **LSESU Sabbatical Officers and Part-Time Officers to receive compulsory EDI awareness training in their role induction**, as student carer representation within the SU is currently lacking and the challenges of being student carers are often intersectional and could relate to any of the student groups represented by these roles **3. Creation of two student carer peer-support groups within the LSESU so they are cross-level of study**: one for students who care for children under the age of 18 (such as the Parents and Carers Staff Network), and one for students who care for an individual with a chronic illness, disability, mental health problem. These peer-support groups to have online and in-person events, with some in the evening and some in the day. **4. The LSE to continue outreach and widening participation activities** to encourage students from all backgrounds to apply to the university for their undergraduate degree. **LSE Widening Participation to work with local charities which support young carers to encourage them to apply**. **5. Student Wellbeing Services Staff to receive compulsory EDI awareness training to understand the intersectional causes of mental health problems, and imposter syndrome faced by student carers**. Student carers declaring themselves should automatically be invited to create an Inclusion Plan especially if caring responsibilities relate to care-recipient's disability or illness. Student Counselling to add "caring responsibilities" as a reason for seeking support in the wellbeing appointment form. **6. Care-recipient proof of medical emergency/need to be sufficient for student carers' applications of exam deferrals, re-sits, assignment extensions, and leave of absence**. Flexibility and understanding must be at the heart of this administrative process, and inclusion plans must be considered in decisions to reduce administrative burden and stress. **7. The LSE to continue to offer hybrid approached to learning as these offer more flexibility for student carers; LSE to provide class schedules as early as possible so student carers can plan their childcare**. **8. LSE LIFE to offer time-management courses which can help teach undergraduate student carers how to juggle their academic and personal life; PhD Academy to continue to offer coaching for time management with more appointments available**.