

Aiming High

A young carers' research programme

The aim of the project was to understand how young carers are affected by their caring role when attending or considering higher education. It also sought to find out specifically what their ambitions are, how much advice they get from family and school, and whether concerns about finance factor into their decisions about higher education.



METHODOLOGY

Pre-research

In preparation for the project, discussions were held locally with three young adult carers aged 16 to 18. These consultations directly informed the questionnaire which was subsequently developed. Some of the barriers they identified included:

- managing independent study while juggling a caring role
- the physical and emotional toll resulting from balancing care and educational responsibilities
- the feelings of guilt associated with leaving home and the cared-for person behind.

The young adult carers suggested they would be more likely to choose to study locally, if at all, because of fear of what would happen to their disabled relative in their absence. If they did leave home to study, they said they'd be more likely to worry about home while away, and travel back and forth from university more regularly, increasing their stress levels as a result.

Research

This research project involved a brief assessment, semi-structured qualitative interviews and a focus group with young carers. The interviews and assessments were conducted with 20 young carers aged 13 to 20; 13 were female and seven were male.

The qualitative interviews featured a semi-structured interview guide, allowing participants the space to bring up issues and perspectives as desired. The brief assessment asked basic demographic questions and included two specific

PROJECT SUMMARY



Context

Research conducted by Carers Trust found that 29% of young carers drop out of degree courses, which is four times higher than average (Alexander, 2014). Additionally, young carers can often temper their own ambitions. In a quantitative, large-scale study of 295 young carers aged 14 to 25, 84% said they intended to go to college or university, but 24% thought that they wouldn't be able to afford to attend (Sempik and Becker, 2014). Furthermore, families with a young carer have on average £5,000 less income per year than other families (Hounsell, 2013).

Duration

January to June 2019

Partners

Carers Centre for Brighton and Hove,
University of Sussex

Funding source

NCOP – now Uni Connect

instruments which have been used internationally in the context of young carers – the Multidimensional Assessment of Caring Activities (MACA) and the Positive and Negative Outcomes of Caring (PANOC – in addition to questions on family composition (including age and gender), education (for example, institution attended, educational level) and caring role (for example, who they care for, the condition of the person cared for).

The focus group provided an opportunity for the young carers to share their views on accessing higher education in an open, safe setting. It also enabled them to respond to initial findings from the interviews and explore the type of support they would appreciate in the presence of a University of Sussex representative.

The Carers Centre and University of Sussex staff collated and analysed the responses received following the assessment, interview and focus group phases of the study. They were able to identify key, emerging themes and cross-reference responses across a number of areas such as assessment score, who care is provided for (for example, a parent or sibling) and ward of residence.

IMPACT

The University of Sussex Widening Participation team have sought to increase their guidance and support for targeted learners with young carer responsibilities. The support and initiatives currently available set out against the Aiming High report's key findings (subject to the current operational issues caused by Covid-19) can be read by clicking [here](#).

The Carers Centre schools worker will incorporate findings into their ongoing teacher training offer (in academic year 2018-19, these training sessions were accessed by 131 teachers and support staff). They will also incorporate findings into our ongoing school pupil awareness-raising assemblies and PHSE sessions (in academic year 2018-19, these sessions were attended by 3300 pupils).

KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

At a young age, the young carers involved in this research have recognised that higher education is a stepping stone to achieving their career aspirations and can be a marker of the transition into young adulthood. For them, the notion that higher education should (or could) be their next step in life may reflect class expectations, encouragement from teachers, parental/familial expectations and wider societal influences. They will not make decisions regarding HE in isolation, rather their family, and to a lesser extent, their teachers, serve a critical role in their decision-making process.

The majority of young carers' interviews sampled in this research show that the impact on the family unit is at the forefront of their minds as they consider higher education. Furthermore, the actual decision to attend university is seen as a family decision. However, family discussions may tend to centre on the young carers' choice of study, rather than the possibly more sensitive topics of care coordination, guilt, younger siblings taking on caring duties etc.

Barriers to accessing HE also emerged as a significant theme with the young carers sampled in this research. Lack of money is the primary barrier, followed by geographical barriers. The financial barriers are very clear to the young carers; for many, the first thought associated with university is the financial aspect.



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Secondly, young carers were also had to consider whether they could move away from home to attend university. Geography was intertwined with the issues of care: "Who will care if they leave?" Guilt and lack of support for the care recipient were identified as significant reasons why young carers felt that they couldn't move away from home.

There is a need for more specific information for young carers accessing higher education. This information must be clearly signposted on college and university websites, and in informational leaflets. The intense responsibilities shouldered by young carers often mean they are a "time-poor". Therefore, explicit, clearly worded information on the support available to young carers at HE institutions must be available, so that a young carer doesn't have to engage in a lengthy, time-consuming search for resources on formal support.

Schools, colleges, and universities must begin to provide practical advice early. The research shows that young carers begin thinking about their future aspirations at a young age, and they should be supported with accurate information on attending university that is appropriate to their age level.

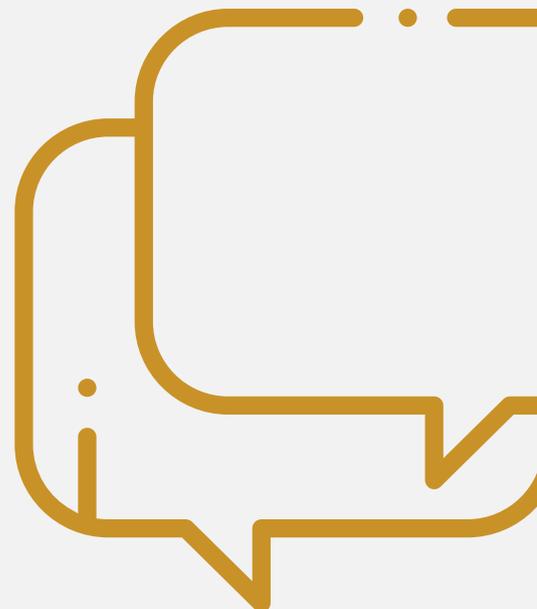
Schools and colleges should actively promote opportunities for scholarships. For example, the University of Sussex has a first-generation scholars' scheme that prioritises vulnerable groups including young carers.

Young carers need a safe person to talk to about their feelings and the decision-making process on attending higher education. Ideally, this person must be well-informed about support available for young carers as well as not being part of the family unit.

Young carers need financial assistance and campus tours, as they have a focus on the practicalities of attending university. Universities should be encouraged to fund transport costs for those young carers needing to make frequent trips back home to care for their family members.

Young carers' support services should actively work with university 'widening participation' teams. This can help to increase awareness amongst key staff and potentially provide group campus visits and experiences specifically for young carers.

As the research indicates that financial barriers remain a significant influence on young carers' aspirations to attend university, there should be a policy change to the Carers Allowance to allow greater numbers of young carers to receive this financial benefit.



TALKING POINTS

Owing to the small sample size, the findings contained in this report are not generalisable or representative of the entire population of young carers. Nevertheless, this research stands as the first-ever mixed methods research study conducted on Brighton and Hove young carers with a specific focus on HE aspirations and access. The findings, therefore, provide rich and unique observations on the barriers facing a local group of young carers in transition to adulthood and raise a number of significant issues for future study.

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