

Hidden in Plain Sight

Report of survey findings

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Executive summary

1. Following the publication of guidance arising from a resolution ('Rights for Carers') at the 2015 University and College Union (UCU) Congress, UCU carried out a survey among its members to explore the issues facing people who are in paid employment, but who also have unpaid caring responsibilities for a family member or friend.
2. The survey contained 26 questions (both open and closed) and was administered to UCU members using Survey Monkey between 12 March and 13 April 2018.
3. The findings of this survey provide a snapshot of the experiences of unpaid carers among UCU members. However, given the self-selecting nature of the sample, it is important to bear in mind that the findings should not be taken as representative of the experiences of carers within the wider membership of UCU. Those who took part in this survey are likely to be carers with the most challenging or difficult experiences, as these individuals will be keen for UCU to know about their experiences and to take action to address the issues they raise.

About the respondents (Chapter 2)

4. The analysis was based on 1,676 responses. More than two-thirds (68%) of respondents were female; three-quarters (74%) were aged 45 or over; three-quarters (78%) worked in higher education; and two-thirds (66%) were in full-time employment.
5. Most of the respondents taking part in the survey (83%) were carers. Carers were more likely than non-carers to be female and over 45. Carers were also more likely to be in part-time employment (25% of carers worked part-time, compared with 18% of non-carers).
6. Slightly less than half of the carers in this sample (46%) had been a carer for less than five years. Over a quarter (28%) had been a carer for more than 10 years. Around two-fifths of carers (41%) said that the person they cared for had some type of physical health condition (including a life-limiting condition such as kidney failure or lung disease, or a terminal illness). Nearly a third (30%) said the person they cared for had a mental health condition (including a learning disability). Over a quarter (28%) said the person they cared for had both a physical and a mental health condition. Respondents who were caring for someone with a mental health condition were more likely to have longer careers as unpaid carers than those caring for someone with a physical health condition.

Combining caring with work responsibilities (Chapter 3)

7. Two out of five carers in this sample (39%) reported that they had **not** told their employer about their caring responsibilities. The three main reasons given for not informing their employer related to (i) their expectations or fears about their employer's response; (ii) their lack of knowledge / information about who to inform and what help might be available to them; and (iii) their own choice to keep the information private. Reasons mentioned less often had to do with (iv) the way their organisation defined the role of carer; (v) the nature of their relationship with the person they cared for; and (vi) the stigma they felt regarding the mental health needs of the person they cared for.
8. It was relatively uncommon for survey respondents to say that they had informed someone at work (usually a line manager or colleagues) about their caring responsibilities, and that they

received a supportive response. In such cases, carers usually said they had **not** informed (or were wary of informing) their Human Resources Department.

Issues faced by carers at work

9. While some carers reported that the issues they faced as work were relatively minor in nature, others were clearly trying to juggle what were essentially two full-time jobs. The issues faced by this group included: (i) the need to take time off (sometimes at short notice); (ii) unrealistic expectations from people at work; (iii) a lack of support or flexibility from employers; (iv) difficulties managing their time; (v) an inability to take part in conferences, meetings, etc. outside of normal working hours; (vi) an inability to relocate for better work; and (vii) financial worries.

10. A subset of the respondents in this sample reported that they were carers for a family member living overseas. This group raised all of these same issues but, in many cases, these were exacerbated by (i) a refusal by their employer to acknowledge their caring responsibilities, (ii) the substantial time and cost of having to travel abroad frequently, and (iii) the need to pay for healthcare for a relative living in another country.

Positive experiences of being supported at work

11. Although carers generally focused in their comments on the struggles they faced at work, some also reported more positive experiences of being well-supported by a sympathetic line manager or colleagues. Carers often saw their colleagues, in particular, as supportive, with three-quarters (75%) of carers answering 'yes' to the question, 'Are your colleagues supportive of your caring needs?' It was less common for people to say that they felt supported by their manager – or by 'the senior management' of the organisation.

12. Where respondents found support from colleagues and / or managers for their situation, it was clear this was appreciated, made them feel valued, and gave them the flexibility they needed to be able to cope with often very challenging caring responsibilities.

Mixed views about feeling included at work

13. Alongside the relatively positive perceptions carers had about the support they received from colleagues, views were mixed in relation to perceptions of feeling supported and included at work more generally. Only half of carers (50%) said they felt 'supported and included' at work. Some thought that, because they were casual workers or working part-time, they were excluded from opportunities at work. Others thought they were seen as 'not being committed enough' to their work, and as a result, were marginalised and passed over for promotion.

Impacts of caring (Chapter 4)

14. Carers were asked, 'What impact does caring have on you and your working life?' Some carers had only occasional or light family caring responsibilities and so reported relatively minor impacts – for example, the need to attend occasional hospital appointments, or periodically visit an elderly parent at the weekend. However, others reported significant and severe impacts, as described below.

Personal impacts – social, mental, physical, financial

15. Carers repeatedly said they felt stressed, exhausted, drained, isolated, lonely, helpless, angry, frustrated, hopeless and overwhelmed. People reported suffering from insomnia, disrupted sleep, difficulties concentrating, memory lapses, tearfulness, depression and anxiety. Carers often said

they had not been able to have a proper holiday for many years because they had to use their annual leave to care for a family member. Relationships with friends and colleagues were affected because people had no time for socialising. Some also commented that the severe strain they were under had led to their own ill-health, or exacerbated an existing long-term health condition.

Work-related impacts

16. Carers also discussed the impacts of caring on their ability to (i) participate in academic life, (ii) manage their workload, (iii) progress in their career and, (iv) in some cases, earn an income that they could live on. Research activity was reported to be the aspect of work most likely to suffer. Carers said they struggled to find the time and energy needed to apply for grants and / or manage research projects. Some said they found it impossible to concentrate, write, or develop new ideas when they were exhausted, stressed and distracted. This affected their ability to publish – which in turn affected their prospects for promotion. Others reported being expected to take on less attractive administrative or teaching duties, with heavy marking responsibilities and fewer opportunities for advancement.

Impacts of caring on career opportunities

17. Nearly two-thirds of carers (63%) said that their caring responsibilities had a negative impact on their career opportunities. This view was expressed both by those who worked part-time and by those who worked full-time – although carers who worked part-time often reported that the mere fact of working part-time meant that they could not progress in their career.

18. Carers often said they chose to turn down opportunities for promotion or offers of additional teaching hours because they knew they would not be able to commit the time to the job, or they were too stressed or exhausted to take on new challenges. However, it was also common for carers to say that they had been passed over for promotion – in some cases even when they were more experienced than the candidate who got the job – because they were not seen as committed enough. This had ramifications for their earning potential and left some struggling to make ends meet or worrying about the future.

Institutional policies and employee assistance schemes (Chapter 5)

19. There were low levels of awareness among the respondents to this survey (both carers and non-carers) about their organisational policies and support schemes for carers. Three-quarters of respondents did not know (i) if their college / university had a policy covering carers, (ii) if it had an employee assistance scheme or (iii) if their institution provided support to student carers.

20. In addition, among those who **did know** that their college / university had a policy covering carers, almost half (46%) said they did **not** know if the policy was effective. Moreover, carers were more likely than non-carers to say that the policy was **not effective**.

Use of employee assistance schemes

21. Carers were asked if they had been referred to their institution's employee assistance scheme, and if their employer provided them with support via its employee assistance scheme. Interestingly, slightly fewer carers said they had been referred to their organisation's employee assistance scheme than were receiving support from it: 45 said they had been referred compared to 56 who said they were receiving support. These figures equate to just 4% of the more than 1,200 carers who answered these questions.

Making change (Chapter 6)

22. Carers were asked: 'What can your employer do to support you in your caring role?' The top three actions desired by this sample of carers were: (i) to allow flexible working practices (80%); (ii) to provide paid carers' leave or a carers' allowance (66%); and (iii) to develop a carers' policy (59%). Around half of carers (49%) thought that there should be staff training within their organisation to understand the needs of carers, and 47% thought that support in the form of a career break or sabbatical would be helpful to them. Around a third of carers (32%) wanted their employer's support for signposting or having a private place to make phone calls when at work (31%).

23. Carers also frequently highlighted a need for improvements in (i) the behaviour of managers (including the need for training of managers), (ii) timetabling of teaching duties, (iii) implementation of flexible working policies. In addition, some wanted their university or college to provide specific services (including counselling, carer's support services, financial advice, etc.) or informal support in the form of a carers' network. Some also suggested very small, practical changes, such as having access to a parking permit or being able to participate in meetings online.

24. Alongside the changes which could be made by their employers, some carers also suggested that change was needed within the culture of higher / further education. Respondents called for greater compassion and care from their employer, and a culture which acknowledges that people have lives outside of work. It was also common for carers to make suggestions that related to higher-level issues requiring action across the further education / higher education sectors (rather than by a single employer). These suggestions often related to employment terms and conditions (including unpaid leave and career break arrangements), recruitment and career development practices, or financial matters.

25. When asked to identify the improvements that would **most** support work-life balance for working carers, the changes topping the list were: flexible working practices (including the option to work from home), more realistic workloads, adjustments to teaching timetables, and cultural and attitudinal changes.

Other comments (Chapter 7)

26. At the end of the survey, respondents were invited to provide any other comments. Two new issues were raised relating to (i) the disparity between policies for parents, and those for unpaid carers and (ii) the challenges of dealing with health and social care services on behalf of a loved-one.

Discussion (Chapter 8)

27. The findings of this survey indicate a widespread lack of support for unpaid carers within colleges and universities. However, this picture was not uniform since some carers reported feeling well supported – by their colleagues, by their line manager and by their organisation. At the same time, there were inconsistencies reported in relation to (i) how institutions define 'carers', (ii) how individual line managers responded to requests for support, and (iii) how flexible working is delivered in practice.

28. It is not clear why such variations exist. However, what **is** clear is that those with more positive experiences of being supported by their employers reported being able to cope better with their responsibilities – at work, as well as outside work.

Annex 1: Survey questionnaire

According to Carers UK, 3 million people are juggling work and un-paid care to a family member or friend. This equates to 1 in 9 people in the workplace. With very little support from employers and a lack of awareness of the issues facing working carers, creates a culture of workers who are 'Hidden in Plain Sight'.

UCU is keen to know what the key issues are facing members who deliver unpaid caring whilst working. Your responses will help support our work in providing guidance and advice to help carers manage caring responsibilities alongside your working commitments.

All responses are treated in strict confidence. Respondents will not be named however, we will use your comments to illustrate the issues you face at work.

Definition of a carer: A carer is anyone who cares, unpaid, for a friend or family member who due to illness, disability, a mental health problem or an addiction cannot cope without their support.

Instructions: Please tick or state where indicated

Page 1: About You

1. Name

2. Age – please indicate

18-24			45-54	
15-34			55+	
35-44			Prefer not to say	

3. Gender

Male	
Female	
Other – please state preferred term	

4. Sector please indicate

Further education	
Higher education	

5. UCU nation/region

Northern Ireland		South East	
Scotland		South West	
Wales		North West	
East Midlands		Northern	
Eastern and Home Counties		West Midlands	
London		Yorkshire & Humberside	
South			

6. How would you describe your current employment status?

Full-time	
Part-time	
Casualised	
Other – please state	

Page 2:

7. Are you a carer?

Yes	
No	

8. How long have you been a carer?

0-5 years	
5-10 years	
10-15 years	
15+ years	

9. What best describes the conditions of the person you care for?

Physical health	
Mental health issues and conditions	
Learning disabilities	
Terminal illness	
Life-limiting conditions e.g. kidney failure, lung disease etc.	

10. Is your employer aware of your caring responsibilities?

Yes	
No	

11. If NO, why have you not informed your employer?

12. What are the main issues you face at work as an unpaid carer?

13. Are your colleagues supportive of your caring needs?

Yes	
No	

14. As a carer, do you feel supported and included at work?

Yes	
No	

15. What impact does caring have on you and your working life? Please state

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Page 3: Policy /Institutional

16. Does your college/university have a policy covering carers?

Yes	
No	
Don't know	

17. If YES, which of the following does it have?

Carers' policy	
Flexible working policy	
Family friendly policy	
Other – please state	

18. Is the policy effective?

Yes	
No	
Don't know	

19. Have your career opportunities been diminished due to your caring responsibilities?

Yes	
No	
If Yes, how? Please state	

20. Do you have an employee assistance scheme?

Yes	
No	
Don't know	

21. Have you been referred to the employee assistance scheme?

Yes	
No	

22. Does your employer provide you with support via its employee assistance scheme?

Yes	
No	

23. Does your college / university provide support for student carers?

Yes	
No	
Don't know	

Page 4: Change

24. What can your employer do to support you in your caring role? Please indicate from the list

Carers' policy	
Signposting	
Flexible working practice	
Paid carers leave / allowance	
Career break / sabbatical	
Somewhere private to make calls	
Training to understand the needs of carers for all staff	
Other – please state	

25. What three improvements would most support work life balance for working carers?

26. Please feel free to add anything else here about your experiences of being a working carer.

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Thank you for completing this questionnaire. Please return to Sharon Russell (srussell@ucu.org.uk) or via post to UCU, Equality and Participation, Carlow Street, London, NW1 7LH