Exploring the factors influencing young adult carer students' engagement with targeted support in higher education

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Abstract

Young adult carers (YACs) face significant barriers to both access and retention in higher education. Accurate data on the number of YACs is unavailable, due in part, to students staying 'hidden' because of perceived stigma and/or lack of recognition of the label 'YAC'. This paper focusses on the premise that universities fail to reach many YACs and explores what factors impact engagement or lack thereof with targeted support. It seeks to understand what factors influence students' interaction with targeted support and whether this aligns with universities' approach to promoting services and their reliance on students having awareness and self-agency to seek them. Research was conducted at a metropolitan, medium-sized UK university using a mixed-methods, explanatory, sequential design, consisting of a survey and four semi-structured interviews. Interpretative, phenomenological analysis produced four dominant themes: identity, mental health, processes, and student experience and support. The findings indicate that self-identity plays a pivotal role in how the YAC student and the university interact with each other in relation to support. The salient identity is likely to be 'student' unless specific support is required, therefore for universities to identify YAC students, processes will need to be adapted to find the student rather than the student being expected to seek out support. To achieve this, a holistic, horizontal support model across the student lifecycle is recommended. Universities should aim to champion YACs to promote acceptance and understanding, use student-friendly language when promoting services to avoid alienation, and offer flexible administrative processes to ensure an improved experience for YACs at university.

Keywords: young adult carers; targeted support; self-identity; widening participation; access; participation.

Introduction

> So, I think that definitely should be something that they take into account that this is
> like a real hindrance to some people and on their studies and it kind of shows that
> they don't recognise it [caring] as a responsibility, so that's really unfortunate and
> not something that I would be proud of if I were . . . uni. (Participant 3)

Many young people provide unpaid care for a family member or friend. The Carers Trust (2015) refers to 'young carers' (YC) as children and young people under the age of 18 who provide regular care to someone with an illness or disability, mental health condition or an addiction. 'Young adult carer' (YAC) refers to the 18-25 age group of carer (Becker and Becker, 2008). The National Union of Students (NUS) 2013 report estimated that carers make up approximately three to six percent of the student population. Prior to the onset of Covid-19, the number of carers in the UK was estimated to be around 9.1 million: that figure is now said to be closer to 13.6 million (Carers UK, 2020) and the number of YACs in higher education (HE) is likely to be considerably higher. It is therefore essential that universities acknowledge that they have a duty to develop strategies to identify and support a student group which is likely to continue to grow in the coming years.

This research study reviewed a UK medium-sized metropolitan university's targeted programme of financial, pastoral and educational support for YACs. It investigated why many of the students known to the programme were seeking support at various stages in the student lifecycle, often too late to access the benefits of the scheme (as observed by the researcher when employed by the subject university). Students accessing the programme late reported the considerable inconvenience and, at times, emotional distress this caused, prompting the research to explore whether the methods used to engage with designated target groups are failing the YAC student.' Targeted support for YACs has been in operation at this university since 2014 and, in recent years, to profile-raise, reach more students and improve awareness amongst staff, it markets the support as part of a branded programme within the university's central student services. Students can see the offer on the website, however, there are no explicit instructions on how and crucially when to apply to the scheme. In addition, the programme is entirely reliant on self- and/or staff referral to access the support.

Literature review

There is still a considerable lack of awareness, policy and resources to support YCs (Day, 2015; Becker & Becker, 2008) despite this being an issue that affects young people world-wide. Transitioning to adulthood presents additional challenges to YCs. Becker and Sempik (2019) found that YACs continue to provide similar care as YCs, however, their role develops into one with greater 'adult' responsibilities such as running the household and caring for younger siblings. Crucially, they also often take on greater emotional support of the person(s) they provide care for. Day adds the strain of the 'push and pull' (2019,p.1598) of having to grow up faster than their peers, developing resilience to cope and not seeking help, but also the perceived stigma of being a carer which prevents students' disclosing and/or seeking support until crisis point.

YACs face considerable barriers to both access to and attainment in HE. Not all carers choose to disclose their status. For many, there is a rejection of the term 'YAC', either consciously because they do not recognise or accept that label, or unconsciously whereby the terminology is unfamiliar to them. Commencing in 2022, the University and Colleges Admission Service (UCAS) now includes a question for YACs regarding their carer status on applications for 2023 entry. Applicants can also access guidance on compiling personal statements that reflect their life-skills as well as highlight their circumstances to prospective universities. While this is a welcome development, previous research by the Carers Trust (2014) found that 45% of surveyed YACs who did declare their caring status to their university still encountered a lack of support, reporting a lack of allocated staff to help them. Reliance on the UCAS form is also problematic due to the differing ways YACs self-identify: they may opt out of disclosing because they wish to keep their status 'hidden' or not recognise the YAC label. YACs may also be inclined to withhold the information for fear it may negatively impact their application. In addition, while English Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are not required by the Office for Students (OfS) to report on targeted support for YACs, there is no incentive to implement such support.

Thomas (2020, p.6) asserts that HEIs often create 'pockets of excellence', with specialist practitioners such as widening access teams working across the student lifecycle instead of an institution-wide inclusive approach that can benefit all students. Thomas (2020)

advocates a 'horizontal' alignment of support which focusses on students' livedexperiences from a personal and social wellbeing perspective as well as their academic life. This is more effective than a 'vertical' (from pre-entry to employment or further study) alignment of support across the student lifecycle. Maccabe (2021, p.21) supports a holistic approach which requires 'individual agency' to ensure all staff and not just specialist teams understand their students and the challenges they face, so that they may adapt their work to meet the needs of their students. Without a planned, targeted and joined-up approach to support, HEIs will find it challenging to identify, engage and support YACs, resulting in the student having to proactively seek out the support themselves. This presents challenges for HE providers looking to support a student group which is, as Kettell (2018) reports, four times more likely to drop out of HE than their peers. Like their YC counterparts, time poverty is the principal barrier in HE for YACs. A study commissioned by the NUS in 2013 found YAC students struggle with missed lectures, disrupted and irregular routines, fatigue, as well as the constant battle to meet assignment deadlines (National Union of Students, 2013). Only one-third of YAC students surveyed felt they could balance their studies and home-life, whilst as many as 60% considered dropping out of university all together.

Kettell contends YAC students struggle with 'split loyalties' (2018, p.100) whilst striving to be a good carer. This places them under immense pressure and is compounded by the lack of understanding by staff and inflexibility of HEIs' 'one-size-fits all' approach to policy and regulation which disadvantages YACs. Other significant barriers identified were financial stress, impact on mental health and wellbeing, insomnia, and lower life-satisfaction, referred to by Haugland, Hysing and Sivertsen as the 'burden of care' (2020, p.11). Stevens and Brimblecombe's study (2021) found 41% of YACs had symptoms of anxiety and depression and reported stress caused by their caring role. Sempik and Becker's report (2013, cited in Joseph et al, 2019) found that 38% of those still at school said they had some form of mental health problem, rising to 45% for YAC HE students. A study conducted by the Mental Health Foundation (2018) reported university drop-out rates among students with mental health issues increased by 210% between 2010 and 2015. This is concerning for an under-represented group such as YACs in HE, considering poor mental health is increasingly referred to as a reason for interrupting studies.

For many YACs, caring will have begun at a young age, and they view themselves as simply someone who 'helps out' at home rather than being in an exceptional situation. The NUS (2013) study illustrates that there is often a lack of awareness of the term 'YAC', however, this is sometimes compounded by a belief by those that do recognise the term that they do not qualify as such because they are not a professional carer or only provide a certain number of hours care per week. For other YACs their understanding of the label of 'carer' is established when they engage with support services. This is illustrated by a participant in a study by Smyth, Blaxland, and Cass (2011). For those that identify with the label of 'carer' it is not necessarily a term that sits comfortably, with many associating it with stigma which may have arisen from negative experiences as a YC, whereby they may have been 'silenced' because they feared being stigmatised or separated from their families if their situation was revealed to support services (Rose and Cohen, 2010, cited in Barry, 2011).

Questions of identity, principally how a YAC chooses to interpret and engage and/or disengage with the socially constructed term 'YAC' (Joseph et al, 2019) is a recurring theme in the literature. However, it is less evident to what extent YAC students' self-identification influences how and when they choose to engage with university, and crucially, support. Social identity theory explores how an individual's concept of 'self' is based on the social category in which they are placed or feel they belong. In turn, how the membership of this category and/or group then prescribes one's attitudes and behaviour towards those viewed as similar to the group, referred to as the 'in-group' or 'us' and those perceived as different, or the 'out-group' or 'them' (Leaper, 2011).

Hogg,Terry and White (1995) discuss the two socio-cognitive processes that occur when explaining social identity. The first is categorisation, whereby one is assigned to a particular social group as they are perceived to have taken on the defining characteristics of that group and therefore relinquish their individual self, being viewed as part of a collective. The second process is self-enhancement, the desire to perceive the self positively which influences behaviour as either consciously or unconsciously one starts to take on the group's identity in order to belong. Lewis contends that the YAC label and other descriptors such as YC are terms created and used by social care professionals and academics, which have created a 'virtual identity' (2018, p.59) for young people, one that

is at odds with their own sense of self or 'social identity' and the identity that is most associated with being a 'normal' young person.

Individuals will assume many role identities throughout their lifetime which, depending on the context will take on differing values and one or more will become the salient role. The salient role-identity will lead to certain social and interpersonal expectations by others (Callero,1985) and in the context of the YAC in a university setting this will be crucial in determining how they choose to interact with support services and how the services will be able to identify and interact with them. Role salience is likely to alter over time and pressures on any one identity may lead to other role identities being affected and lead to 'role conflict' (Montgomery and Kosloski, 2013, p.141) as one identity becomes dominant leading to changes in the less salient roles.

Covid-19 has had a significant impact on HE and in particular on student engagement. With regards to carers, referred to by Martin (2021) as the 'invisible front-line workers', the pandemic shone a spotlight on the issues they have historically faced, as well as highlighting the additional challenges that have arisen because of the virus, for example, the fear of catching Covid-19 and/or infecting the person they care for (Lorenz-Dant and Comas-Herrera, 2021). Food poverty has been highlighted as an issue disproportionately impacting carers during Covid-19, who are twice as likely to rely on foodbanks than those without caring responsibilities and 12.4% of carers aged 17-30 had experienced hunger (Carers Trust, 2020). For YAC students, dealing with these concerns was undertaken while simultaneously navigating considerable changes within HE as universities swiftly moved to teaching and learning online.

While the move to online teaching removed barriers such as time poverty and disrupted routines faced by YACs, Wazinski et al. (2020) found that students gained flexibility but lost the opportunity to remove themselves from their caring environment leaving them without the opportunity to clear their mind for study. They add that the impact on YAC students' wellbeing has been significant, having lost the time spent at university which was viewed as respite from the caring role and the opportunity to be a 'normal' student.

Therefore, this study aimed to gain an understanding of the factors influencing YAC students' interaction with targeted support in the subject university, the barriers preventing

them from accessing the support in a timely fashion, and what universities could do differently to improve the access to support.

Methods

Research was carried out using a mixed-methods, explanatory, sequential design, consisting of an online survey and four semi-structured interviews conducted via Microsoft Teams due to Covid-19 restrictions. The survey was crucial to the success of this research study and as such the decision was taken to disseminate the survey to the entire cohort of the subject university's students (19,975 according to university data in 2020/2021). This was undertaken, in part to ensure a heterogeneous sample and, in anticipation of the challenges in recruiting the desired target audience, to ensure maximum exposure to the survey. The eligibility criteria for taking the survey was described broadly and deliberately avoided use of the term 'YAC' to encourage participation.

Questions posed were qualitative and quantitative and focussed on awareness and perception of the label 'YAC' and the targeted support on offer, experiences of being a student and carer during Covid-19 and rating the subject university's support for YACs. The survey was anonymous to mitigate for the constraints of reaching a 'hidden' student group that fear stigmatisation (Trau, Härtel and Härtel, , 2013). The total number of completed surveys received was 14. A further 21 incomplete surveys were received and of those incomplete surveys some data was provided regarding awareness of support which is detailed in the results.

The survey was followed-up with semi-structured interviews allowing participants the opportunity to expand on their survey responses. The two sequences of the study were connected at the quantitative data collection stage. The results from the survey were used to inform the themes covered in the interviews. Survey respondents were categorised by their answer regarding their involvement with the targeted support, for example, already registered, declined to register, or unaware of the programme. Those participants who indicated a willingness to attend an interview were contacted. Four interviews were conducted, with one student who was being supported by the programme and three who were not, thus enabling a rich dataset, comparing the opposing experiences.

This research study referred to Kettell's 2018 method (based on Smith et al's 2009 model) of interpretative, phenomenological analysis (IPA). This entailed reviewing the transcript to develop themes and using a manual numeric coding system to record their frequency (Kettell, 2018). Ethical approval was obtained.

There were 35 respondents in total, 14 of whom completed the survey in full. Although the sample size was small (and not necessarily reflective of all institutions) the students that chose to participate were predominantly either unregistered for and/or unaware of the targeted support programme at the time of taking the survey. As such this can be considered a successful undertaking for this research study, as it reached YAC students not registered onto (and therefore previously unknown to) the targeted programme of support. 16 participants responded to a question relating to awareness of the university targeted support. Eight respondents declared they had heard of it, however, only two respondents responded positively to the question as to whether they had registered. Of the participants who had not registered, five reported that they believed they were ineligible to join so opted not to pursue any further, thus supporting the theory that the university is failing to reach YACs.

Four of the 35 survey respondents who provided a complete survey agreed to be interviewed. All interviews were conducted on Microsoft Teams. Participants were advised to undertake the interview in a private space and all opted to keep their cameras switched on. Each interview lasted between 40 and 70 minutes and every participant was advised of avenues for post-interview support if the interview had been triggering. Due to the small sample size and to maintain anonymity each participant was allocated a numerical descriptor (Grinyer, 2002).

The four participants' demographics were as follows:

Participant	Gender	Study level	Study year	Person(s) cared for	Length of time as carer	Hours spent per week		
						Caring	Study	Personal
1	Male	UG	4 (studies concluded)	Mother	10 years	28	30	21

2	Male	UG	1	Mother	10+ years	40	40	20
3	Female	UG	3 (studies concluded)	2 twin siblings	5 years	70	9	0
4	Female	UG	1	Father	10+ years	30	12	8

Results and discussion

The data collected in this research study revealed four main themes which influenced student YACs' engagement with targeted support and their perceived barriers to accessing such support. These influences and barriers are outlined below. The study took place in the summer of 2021, therefore conversation naturally segued into the impact of Covid-19. This was a prevailing theme throughout each interview and as such was referenced throughout the findings, interlinking the four themes.

Identity

Each of the four interview participants recognised that their individual responsibilities did meet the criteria of YAC, however, the extent to which they were able to accept being labelled as such varied considerably. In a university context, no participants chose to readily identify as a YAC and wished to keep their carer and student identities separate, only disclosing their status when the situation required it. The dominant justification from all participants stemmed from the perceived stigma of being a carer and the desire to be seen as a 'normal' student.

Participant 3 was the most fervently opposed to the label, consciously pushing back against it and repeatedly referred to herself as the 'big sister' first and foremost, reserving her acceptance of the YAC identity for situations where she felt a formal disclosure was required. She also held a strong belief that if she were to acknowledge her YAC status and the challenges this can present, it could potentially have a negative impact on her grades, referring to this as being perceived as having a 'bad attitude':

> ... And I don't want to risk that kind of thing, especially when your grades are literally in your lecturer's hands…(Participant 3)

This research study sought to explore the links between perception of self-identity with regards to the YAC label and how this influences engagement with the university's targeted support services. The question of identity is a complex one as illustrated in the interviews, with each participant describing different lived-experiences and views on their YAC identity. However, 'stigma' was a dominant theme throughout and, as reflected in Becker and Becker's (2008) and Day's (2019) research, each participant had initially opted to remain 'hidden' from the university's support services until crisis point. This is further substantiated by the extensive and emotive detail, provided by the survey respondents about their caring duties and the challenges they face, suggesting the anonymity of the survey empowered them to speak freely. These findings support Rose and Cohen (2010, cited in Barry, 2011) who argue YC's are 'silenced' by their fears of stigma and discrimination and the findings appear to indicate that this mindset follows the YC into adulthood and influences how they view and interact with services. Further research is required to explore the extent to which this influence prevails across YACs in other institutions.

> I mean having this attached to me, I don't want people to have a different view of me because of that title, it might be good it might be bad, it will definitely have an impact on their decision that they will make… (Participant 1)

> I mean no one really wants to be, you know, just that one label…yeah I don't wanna [with regards to being a YAC] always to be hanging over my head because it's not really the nicest thing to think about… (Participant 2)

This research study corroborates Smyth, Blaxland and Cass' (2011) premise that many YACs are assigned the label of carer rather than self-identify as such, and that even if YACs were comfortable with the term, they only wished to refer to it at university, when disclosure was required.

This research did point towards a student group who were presenting themselves as in control of the situation and 'putting on a brave face' as this is what they felt was expected of them to succeed. Lewis (2018) and Becker and Becker (2008) proposed YACs wish to reject the 'virtual identity' (Lewis, 2018, p.63) bestowed upon them by the university and pursue a 'normal' identity of student. However, the findings have shown that this is only partially accurate for the participants in the present study. YACs may choose to adopt the student as the salient role-identity allowing them to have respite from their caring role and pursue the same 'normal' student life as their peers. However, the present research has shown this is not a sustainable option and as Callero (1985) acknowledged, the expectation to behave in the way the salient-role identity demands will eventually give way to the demands and pressures of the carer-identity leading to the 'role conflict' identified by Montgomery and Kosloski (2013). This research paper therefore highlights the importance of universities proactively identifying YAC students to ensure they are aware of the targeted support available to them from the onset.

Space

In the context of this research, 'space' refers to both the physical environment as well as time and emotional 'headspace'. The concept of needing one's own space draws on the themes of self-identity and the inability to 'escape' the role of carer, particularly in the light of Covid-19, was prevalent throughout all interviews. Despite all agreeing there was more time to carry out tasks relating to caring, all participants struggled with being unable to 'switch off' from their carer role due to little or no opportunity for respite. All had missed the physicality of the university space, where they could relinquish their responsibilities for a finite period, regain privacy for studying, as well as revert to the role of 'student' once more. This research study found that Covid-19 placed students under additional pressure to be a good carer and student, as identified by Kettell (2018).

When asked about the impact of Covid-19, 15 out of a total of 17 respondents agreed that the pandemic made caring more demanding, yet 13 of those same respondents also found it easier to manage their caring duties alongside their other responsibilities due to the the move to remote teaching and learning. However, the personal cost to their own wellbeing resonated throughout all responses noting the inability to 'escape', isolation, and the increased responsibility of living through the pandemic.

> I think being at home during the lockdown has made me feel like I am trapped, and I
> have not got any time or separate my home life from other things. Even going to
> university and taking the time to travel was refreshing and gave me a chance to
> breathe. Sometimes situations at home are intense and it feels like there's no
> escape. (Comment from a survey participant)

When asked about the division of hours-per-week for caring, study and personal time
respondents reported spending significantly more time on caring, with one participant
stating they cared for 70 hours per week with no personal time at all. The pressure of
caring while studying was clearly felt by all respondents. 50% considered leaving their
studies. Of the 13 respondents who answered a question around mental health, 9
considered suspending and 12 agreed or strongly agreed their mental health had suffered
because of managing their caring responsibilities and studies.

It can be argued that the impact of Covid-19 on learning and teaching and the subsequent
move to remote study removed the option of 'normal' student-life for the participants and
with it any potential for 'student' to become the salient identity. The combined roles of
carer, sibling and child were dominating each participant's life with student identity taking a
minor role that slotted into the time available to them after caring responsibilities were
completed. Therefore, the implication is that YACs perceive this identity as fluid, and its
salience will be determined by the student, and it is the university's responsibility to ensure
they present their services in an appropriate way to attract rather than confuse or alienate
students with unclear messaging, inflexible terms and unfamiliar labels such as YAC.

Mental health

> So, it's a bit tough. Yeah, this stuff? Um, but then having to go into uni put on like a
> brave face and act as though things at home are perfect, so you just so you can
> continue your studies. That's also tough. (Participant 3)

All participants discussed the toll on their mental health resulting from the combined
pressures of caring, the impact of Covid-19 and managing their studies. They all at some

point contemplated suspending their studies and all had reconsidered doing so mostly due to their own tenacity to succeed rather than by accessing any support:

> …Well, I've got this far. I might as well just yeah, I can do it myself… (Participant 3)

The resilience and determination of all the students was clear and as such supports Pakenham et al's (2006) argument that caring leads to inner strength and persistence. However, the participants did not consider their resilience as a positive outcome from having caring responsibilities and they did not view their YAC experiences in a positive light. Instead, their motivation to continue studying when at crisis point was borne out of the pressure to succeed and 'provide' for their loved ones.

This research study found the participants had not chosen to study subjects commonly associated with caring. This was unexpected, as the subject university's targeted programme of support had an above average number of registered YAC students studying Health and Social Sciences compared to the other subjects. These findings differ from Sempik and Becker's (2014) study whereby one third of respondents were enrolled onto courses classified as 'caring' such as social care (p.12). These findings reinforce Thomas (2020) who advocates the importance of seeking to understand a student's lived experiences from a personal and social wellbeing perspective as well as their academic life, instead of expecting them to assimilate to the institution's processes.

Processes

Navigating university processes and procedures was widely considered to be an ineffective, frustrating and/or negative experience for all participants. All agreed accessing information and support was easier on-campus when they could approach a staff member. The targeted support programme failed to engage any of the participants at the time it was intended to.

Perception of self-identity influenced all participants' understanding and engagement or lack thereof with the programme and the university's use of formal inaccessible language was another barrier for students:

…It's more inviting if it's less formal, like a lot of students have a lot going on already with application forms and like acceptance and stuff like that, so it's already a lot of foreign terminology that's thrown into our faces. Yeah, just saying if something a bit more familiar comes through then it's like a breath of fresh air. (Participant 3)

All participants agreed they felt overwhelmed with an influx of emails which resulted in the 'relevant' messages going unnoticed. They all believed the university has a propensity to prioritise disseminating content deemed of importance from an operational standpoint, such as careers events, expecting students to proactively research and connect with support services. This approach reinforces the university's independent study agenda, which is in stark contrast to the participants who all expressed a need for a more 'personal touch'.

Processes relating to financial support caused considerable frustration. One of the effects of missing crucial information was a missed opportunity to apply for a YAC bursary which was offered with strict (and deemed inflexible) terms and conditions. The offer is restricted to undergraduate first year students and requires students to provide evidence of their caring status and share household income by a specific cut-off date. Failure to do so not only will disqualify them from the bursary, but renders them ineligible for subsequent years.

I think the more important thing is keeping that window open because it's, you know, almost makes it exclusive to be able to get support and that just defeats all purpose of support. It should be accessible to everyone who needs it. (Participant 3)

The language used for marketing had a significant impact on the students' perception of support in relation to the support programme. This was an anticipated finding of the research study and reinforces the argument that there is a disconnect between institution and student regarding the provision and access of support. Contrary to Scutter et al.'s (2011) observation that universities deploy 'basic terminology', all interviewees were initially unaware of the programme.

Applying for extenuating circumstances (ECs) is arguably an inevitable part of university life for YACs, yet this was viewed as complicated, inflexible, and incompatible with caring. The main criticisms were the inability to apply more than once for the same assignment, not acknowledging the impact of caring on studying as a legitimate reason to request ECs and the slow response from their Schools, resulting in anxiety as to whether the request would be granted in time. The onset of Covid-19 led to an amended and less rigid EC policy being implemented to support students impacted by the virus. The new policy enabled participant 4 to keep her YAC identity relatively 'hidden' when applying for extensions which, due to perceived stigma, she felt was important for her to do. This research has highlighted that taking a more pragmatic approach to granting ECs would be welcomed by YACs.

> I feel like I'm just, it's just how they view someone, and I think the only reason that it's been a lot easier to be able to get some extensions is because of the pandemic itself. Like I feel like if it wasn't for that they would want a deeper answer or more detailed on so as to why… (Participant 4)

Student experience and support

Ineffective processes and procedures experienced by students already struggling with conflicted identities and disenfranchisement from a conventional student life, will inevitably lead to a negative impact on student experience. The prevailing feedback from the two female participants was one of feeling uncared for by the university, particularly by participant 3 who provided several examples of how she felt the university services had 'failed' her with their lack of empathy.

> …So and it shouldn't have to get to that. It shouldn't have to get to me being like completely transparent and reliving the traumas before you say that you wanna, you know throw me a line. So it should just be enough for a student to say. I have these responsibilities. You know I shouldn't have to spell out to what extent… it should be enough for an institution to be able to say we're going to support you. (Participant 3)

The role of the personal tutor (PT) played a pivotal role for all participants' experience of support at the university, whether this was due to the student reaching out to them at

crisis-point or because the PT had identified concerns and proactively engaged with their tutee. However, while this support was appreciated, there was also an awareness and frustration that the PT's role is impotent, in that they can only listen to the student and signpost, which was viewed by all participants as not leading to any tangible outcomes for the student. In addition, participant 4's stigma over caring led her to believe that she must 'convince' her PT that she is genuine when needing support for her studies. The research study highlighted the student's perception of the 'powerlessness' of the PT, however this view was restricted to their ability to facilitate tangible support. In the context of the teacher-student power dynamic they were still seen as a somewhat omnipotent presence. This corroborates Thomas' view that specialist support such as that provided by widening access teams create 'pockets of excellence' (2020, p.6) and therefore the support programme is in effect working in a silo, relying almost solely on marketing and networking to reach its target audience.

Recommendations to improve engagement and remove barriers to engagement with targeted support

To facilitate student YAC engagement with targeted support, and to overcome perceived barriers to accessing such support, the following evidence-based recommendations are suggested:

Proactively identify YACs

This research study found that the question of self-identity plays a pivotal role in how the YAC student and university interact with each other in relation to support, confirming that if and/or when a student chooses to recognise themselves as a YAC is a fluid decision, likely to be based on when the pressures of study and caring commitments collide, resulting in crisis point. When the students' two separate worlds are running smoothly, they opt for the salient role-identity of student which is viewed as an 'escape' and a chance to be like their peers. This escape became impossible due to the pandemic, resulting in the salient role-identity switching to that of carer.

The findings indicate that the salient role-identity of YAC will ebb and flow depending on the students' circumstances. Therefore, relying on the student to conform with prescriptive

processes for registering, applying for bursaries and for ECs is an ineffective method, which fails to sufficiently acknowledge YACs' unique circumstances and their inability to comply with a 'one size fits all' system. Consequently, students are missing out on vital support. The onus is therefore on universities to 'find' the YAC student.

This can be achieved in two ways; first by promoting the programme of targeted support throughout the university to ensure all staff are aware and can assume collective responsibility in identifying YACs. The second recommendation to 'find' the student relates to marketing and communication. The current marketing tools have often failed to reach the target audience, due to use of university vernacular and lack of 'plain English' leading to students wrongly assuming they are either ineligible or not recognising themselves as the intended recipient of the message. To remedy this the university to revert to communication that is unambiguous, avoids use of unfamiliar terms such as 'YAC' and is also frequent enough to ensure the information reaches the intended audience.

Highlight mental health provision

The research study highlighted that YAC students are likely to experience poor mental health at university but are reluctant to seek help unless at crisis point, due in part to their lack of awareness of the support available to them. Maximising opportunities to identify YACs earlier will help alleviate this issue, however, the subject university should also look to highlight their offer of priority access to the mental health service which is provided as part of the targeted support programme and encourage YACs to register at the outset of their studies. Student-facing staff should be trained in mental health first aid and able to proactively signpost students exhibiting signs of poor mental health to the appropriate services, ideally pre-empting a situation where the student has reached crisis point.

Processes

Students expressed frustration by processes they felt were inflexible and unsupportive. Time poverty is a principal barrier in HE for YACs who can often face unexpected and/or protracted caring duties. Therefore, improving the EC process to allow for multiple requests for the same assignment and introducing a simpler process to follow, would alleviate some of the pressure felt when caring duties impact on studies. Another

frustration was having to repeatedly explain circumstances to negotiate support which was time consuming and in some case triggering. This could be avoided by having a 'disclose once' system, whereby the YACs' circumstances are attached to their records and disseminated (with student's consent) to the appropriate stakeholders. This would not only free-up time but also improve mental wellbeing due to the stigma YACs feel about their situation and the perceived threat of being penalised with poorer grades if they disclose.

Another failing was accessing the YAC bursary due to inflexible rules and lack of awareness of its existence, leading to many YACs missing out on crucial financial support. To ensure all eligible students access the bursary, the university needs to remove the barriers to apply by allowing access throughout the student lifecycle and marketing the scheme widely and in advance of the students starting at university, for example, at open days and in university prospectuses.

Student experience and support

The participants' assessment of their student experience and the university support was mixed. There was positive feedback from the student who had benefitted from the targeted support, which reinforces the importance of the programme. However, the findings also highlighted that, to a certain extent, the programme was working in a silo and its effectiveness limited, and in some cases hindered, due to the lack of a holistic approach taken by the subject university and the administrative bureaucracy impeding access to much-needed bursaries. To improve this, the university needs to shift its position on expecting YACs to proactively seek and engage with support. A more effective model is an agenda of individual staff-agency (Maccabe, 2021) whereby all student-facing staff understand their students' lived-experience and needs. Adopting this approach would significantly improve the experience of YACs at this university. Student-facing staff such as PTs should receive training to help them recognise a student may have undisclosed caring responsibilities, such as requesting multiple extensions or showing signs of fatigue and/or stress. To break the stigma of caring, the university could present as a 'university for YACs'. This could take the form of a series of commitments to YACs, like that of the corporate parent model used for care-experienced students and could then be highlighted at offer days, in university marketing materials and events as appropriate.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this research study has shown that even if they are aware of its existence, YAC students will not necessarily engage with targeted support unless they need help. Universities must take steps to recognise their responsibility towards YACs and accept the significant barriers they face in accessing and remaining in HE. This will require a proactive, holistic, and joined-up approach which no longer relies on individual agency from this student group.

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