The in/visibilisation of education and care: University staff's perceptions of, experiences with, and reaction to the needs of care-giving students

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To cite this article:
Wanka, A, Lasser, N, & Hess, M 2024, 'The in/visibilisation of education and care: University staff's perceptions of, experiences with, and reaction to the needs of care-giving students', *Access: Critical explorations of equity in higher education*, Vol. 12, Issue 1, pp. 48–60.

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Research of university students who provide care for an older adult is scarce. Previous studies have so far focused on the perspectives and experiences of caregiving students themselves. This paper takes on a perspective of micropolitics and actor-centred institutionalism, and analyses perceptions of, experiences with, and reactions to the needs of caregiving students by university staff in Germany. Two group discussions with university lecturers and administrative staff were carried out and analysed by qualitative content analysis. Findings exhibit two themes: (1) university staff perceptions of and experiences with caregiving students and matters of invisibility, invisibilisation and helplessness; and (2) university staff reactions to caregiving students' needs in terms of distributed responsibility. We discuss these themes as the micropolitics of stabilising power relations within educational institutions, and contrast them with the experiences of caregiving students themselves. Implications for practice and future research are outlined.

Keywords: *caregiving students; hidden lives; invisibilisation; distributed responsibility; group discussions*

Published by the Centre of Excellence for Equity in Higher Education, with the support of the Pathways and Academic Learning Support Centre at the University of Newcastle, Australia, and the Centre for Education Research on Identities and Inequalities at Anglia Ruskin University, UK.

ISSN 2653-245X

Introduction

More and more students are confronted with the challenge of combining multiple obligations, from studying to working and caregiving (Ballantyne, Madden & Todd 2009, Wyatt 2011; Moreau & Robertson, 2019). Following Lynch's (2009) encompassing definition of care and caregivers, this may include care to children, parents, friends, and other people, which may not necessarily be blood relatives, but can be relatives by choice. One group in particular that is expected to grow are caregiving students (Wazinski et al., 2022). Caregiving students are adults who are enrolled as students at a university and at the same time provide care to an adult family member or friend.

Even though representative data is still lacking, studies assume that up to one in six students regularly provide informal assistance, care and nursing activities for an adult, such as a family member, neighbour, or friend (for Germany, compare Mindermann, Schattschneider & Busch 2020). This is due to demographic aging, and as a result the need for care is increasing. The main group of older care recipients are the so-called 'old-old' - those older than 80 - and 'increasing life expectancy will lead to a doubling of the share of the old-old between 2015 and 2040' (Naumann & Hess 2021, p. 358). Surprisingly, caregiving students are still an under-researched group. As Knopf and colleagues (2022) showed in a systematic literature review, caregiving students face multiple challenges when trying to reconcile caregiving and studying. This may not only affect their studies, but also their physical and mental health, and financial situation; it can create split loyalties between the care recipient and the university, and lead to what studies frame as 'hidden lives' (Kettel, 2018). This means that often caregiving students do not tell lecturers, university staff, or peer students about their double life, and thus remain invisible in the context of the university (Moreau & Robertson, 2019). As a result, caregiving students receive less support and understanding, feel more estranged from their alma mater, and perform worse in, or even drop out of, their study programme more often than their fellow students who have no care obligations (Kirton et al. 2012; Haugland, Hysing & Sivertsen 2020; Wazinski et al. 2022).

In contrast to caregiving students, young adult carers - that is, people between the ages of 18 and 25 providing care for an adult person - have received more attention in past decades (Becker & Becker, 2008). However, this research has mostly focused on the perspective of the young adult carers. More recently, a few studies have started focusing on the perspectives of professionals working with these young adult carers, including those working in educational institutions (e.g. Leu, Frech & Jung 2018; Nagl-Cupal et al. 2023). Findings show that most professionals share a low level of awareness of young adult carers but are open and willing to engage with them. Reasons for this lack of awareness are identified in an unclear distribution of responsibilities within and across professions and their organisations. This creates uncertainty for action and difficulties in identifying young adult caregivers, as they often do not identify themselves as such. To summarise, these studies show that institutions are not yet sufficiently prepared to cater for the needs of young adult carers and have no clear strategy to support them. Research on university students with caregiving obligations remains even more limited. The few studies that do exist have so far focused on the perspectives and experiences of caregiving students themselves (for an overview of existing studies, see Knopf et al., 2022). While it is important to make the voices of caregiving students heard, such an individualist perspective runs the risk of outplaying systemic conditions that facilitate or hinder the reconciliation of studying and caregiving.

To explore equity in higher education through the lens of student carers, this paper draws on the conceptual framework of micropolitics (Hoyle, 1982; LeChasseur et al. 2016) and actor-centred institutionalism (Scharpf, 1997; Schreurs, 2023). Micropolitics refers to the practices of exercising power through mundane, everyday techniques and how they influence subjectivities, while micropolitical approaches are concerned with the scope of action, and strategies deployed in the conflict of interest between different actors in organisational settings, and the underlying power relations between these actors. Actor-centred institutionalism similarly assumes that perceptions, experiences, knowledge formations, and thus actions of individual actors are influenced by the structures, orientations, practices, and politics of the institutions at which they work. In the case of this paper, this means, for example, that the university environments in which they work and teach effect university lecturers. Their ideas and also behaviour in their role as lecturers are influenced by their work contexts. This also applies to their expectations of how students should act within the university context, and the same applies to administrative personnel at universities. However, they have some leeway and agency to act and reflect within, and even against, their institutions. They can, for example, be more flexible regarding the strictness of deadlines of assignments as well as of compulsory attendance. However, these strategies rely on individual actions and goodwill of specific people and might change with staff fluctuation.

When we focus on university students who provide care, we can thus argue that the micropolitics of universities as institutions plays a crucial role in shaping the environments in which caregiving students study and provide care. The people who constitute the university, such as lecturers and administrative staff, are key in facilitating the reconciliation of caregiving and studying work (or not). Lecturers might be approached by students who cannot participate in seminars or ask for an extension of deadlines. Administrative staff in student counselling in particular will be faced with caregiving students experiencing a range of challenges including mental and/or physical health issues, financial problems, and struggles with finishing their studies.

In this study, we address this gap in the literature and ask two questions:

(1) How do university staff perceive caregiving students and what are their experiences with them?
(2) How do university staff react to the needs of caregiving students and the challenges they are facing?

To approach these questions, we conducted two group discussions with members of university staff in Germany. Based on these findings, the paper makes three main contributions to the literature. Firstly, it sheds light on university staff's perception of, experiences with, and reactions to caregiving students and their needs. Secondly, it thereby helps contrast findings about caregiving students' own experiences with those of staff and thus identifies similarities and differences. Third, it allows us to draw implications for how universities as 'caring organisations' can support increasingly diverse students with multiple obligations.

Data collection and analysis

To approach the questions outlined above, we deployed a qualitative approach and conducted two group discussions with a total of seven participants in May and June 2022. The data collection and analysis was approved by the ethical board of the Goethe University Frankfurt.

Throughout the whole process, strict measures were be upheld to ensure adherence to the ethical guidelines of good scientific conduct, such as principles of informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity throughout the research, while being sensitive and empathic in the interactions with the interviewees. Participants were recruited using a snowball system, and did work at five different universities in Germany. They did not know each other; hence group discussions were not conducted with real-life groups. The group discussions were done online due to restriction of the Covid-19 pandemic using the communication tool Zoom.

While seven participants may seem like a small sample, studies have shown that a small sample can be sufficient for reaching saturation when researching a homogeneous group. Guest, Bunce and Johnson (2006), for example, found that six to 12 interviews and, respectively, two to three focus group discussions (Guest, Namey & McKenna 2016) can be sufficient to discover all themes that would come up in a larger sample as well, and thus reach thematic saturation.

The group discussion participants were a relatively homogenous group as they were all currently employed at a German university in an administrative and/or teaching position. Five participants were female and two were male. The two groups were furthermore homogeneous in the sense that one group was meant to comprise persons with administrative positions and another to comprise persons with teaching positions. However, it turned out that many among the administrative staff had teaching experience and vice versa, which is typical for German universities. German higher education is organised at the state level and, hence, rather fragmented. It is further characterised by a high selectivity as the probability of entering tertiary education is strongly linked to the parents' socio-economic background (OECD, 2018). Furthermore, students in Germany spend on average six years at university, which is comparably long, and thus tend to be older than their peers in other countries (Luthra & Flashman, 2017).

The discussions followed the same interview guide and content structure that was divided into four broad sections. We started the data collection with a short introduction of the topic of demographic change, increasing care needs, and the reconciliation of care and studying. We pointed out our previous work on the topic and clarified the purpose of the group discussions before informing participants about protection of their data and rights as participants in the project. After participants consented to the recording, we asked broadly whether they had yet had any experiences with caregiving students, and if so, how these experiences had unfolded. We thereby followed a broad definition of care as 'the set of activities by which we act to organise our world, so that we can live in it the best way possible' (Tronto, 2009, p. 14) and its multifaceted dimensions, and let our interview partners find definitions of care for themselves.

We then asked about how they imagined a typical caregiving student to be, letting them guess how many students provide care for an adult at their institution, what kind of care activities they thought were conducted by students, and how much time students spent on caregiving. Following this general discussion about images, stereotypes and beliefs around caregiving students, we asked which challenges this group might face, particularly with regards to the reconciliation of caregiving and studying, and what consequences this might have for student caregivers' present and future lives in the short-, medium- and long-term. In a third section of questions, we presented them with a vignette that differed between the respective group discussions with administrative personnel and teaching staff: Via PowerPoint we displayed the question: 'How would you respond if someone brought grandma or grandpa to class?'. We wanted to know from the teaching staff how they would handle this situation if they encountered caring students in a course they were teaching, and from the administrative staff,

how they would handle caring students approaching them. We asked how far they would accommodate the needs of caregiving students and where they would place limits on supporting them, also considering equality regarding students without care obligations. We then inquired about how they thought caregiving students could be supported, what offers already existed at their institution, and what would be needed, as well as whether they themselves thought they were in a position to provide such support. We concluded with a final round asking what participants would take from the group discussion.

Group discussions were recorded via Zoom and fully transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were analysed drawing on qualitative content analysis according to Graneheim and Lundman (2004). All three authors read the text several times, remaining as open-minded as possible, and openly coded passages. The authors then came together to compare their codes, identify overlaps, and discuss differences in coding. Thereafter, several codes of multiple authors were condensed into broader themes (e.g. challenges in the reconciliation of studying and caregiving, or in/visibility and responsibility). Then, authors conducted another round of coding with the broader themes in mind as 'sensitising concepts', that is, ideas and assumptions that inform data collection and analysis, without providing a definitive, clear-cut hypothesis or definition (Bowen, 2020). This coding was then followed by joint discussions around meta- and sub-codes, and the broader themes initially identified were structured and refined with sub-categories and the relations between them. This inductive process resulted in two main themes that are discussed below.

Findings

The analysis of the group-discussion transcripts exhibits two themes that cut across both groups: (1) University staff perceptions of, and experiences with, caregiving students: invisibility, invisibilisation, and helplessness; and (2) university staff reactions to caregiving students' needs regarding lack of caring university structures.

University staff perceptions of caregiving students: invisibility, invisibilisation, and helplessness

Given that an estimated 10% of university students have caregiving tasks and the various challenges they are facing, the most striking finding from our research is their apparent invisibility to university staff. As one of the participants put it:

> *'... a group that remains very invisible to me ...'* (P1A, administrative staff)

Members of university staff indicated that there is little to no knowledge about or contact with caregiving students among themselves or their colleagues. Often the caregiving is then framed as a 'private problem' that is separate from studying and thus the university is not recognised as a relevant actor in the caregiving process. One lecturer recalls a student whose father passed away during university term. Those who wanted to help did not know what to do, as there are hardly any standardised procedures, and most of the support provided is a result of individual negotiations.

Even if support offers such as counselling services exist, they often target other groups - like students with disabilities - or target mainly employees, not students:

> *'Then just us as a family service, [caring relatives], which we also explicitly ... list. But as I said, ... target group [are] employees'* (P2A, administrative staff)

This situation creates a feeling of helplessness on the part of university staff:

> *'... But yes, I feel similarly helpless as P2L, I remember one student ... we suffered a lot with this student ... and really felt so powerless because we couldn't actually do anything at the moment.'* (P1L, group discussion with lecturers)

To counteract this helplessness it is important, as one participant frames it, to admit that university staff are also overwhelmed by the situation of caregiving students and feel under pressure to offer a solution to every problem that university structures might not account for. This leads to a distribution and individualisation of responsibility on both sides, for both students and staff.

University staff reactions to caregiving students' needs: Distributed responsibility and lack of caring university structures

As outlined, university staff hardly ever knowingly interact with students with caregiving responsibilities. When they are informed about such caregiving, they often do not know what to do, how to support the students, and whether they are responsible for their problems at all. One participating lecturer asked himself how they would react if confronted with the issue:

> *'... what do we actually do then? How do we react to it? How do we deal with it?'* (P5L, group discussion with lecturers)

The helplessness of university staff and the uncertainty of who is responsible for supporting caregiving students raises the question among university staff of how universities as organisations and institutions do and should address the needs of caregiving students. Discussion group participants were aware that it is not supposed to be their individual responsibility to support caregiving students, especially on top of everything else they have to do. Finding a solution that gives the affected student a chance to keep up while also being fair to other students, and additionally managing their own workloads in notoriously understaffed working environments, proves to be challenging for university staff themselves:

> *'Because that's part of everyday work and somehow there is always a time limit, a load limit reached very quickly. ... [There's] always this feeling of, "Ah, that's something on top, I have to do that now, too ... and universities have to regulate so much more than ten years ago" ... so I think ... I at least had to reflect and to say, "Yes, that's okay, that's structural", because that's what happens, right? We all have to do much, much more than we have time for. And still to say now, "Okay ...that's not the person's fault". And to try to really outsource that and to bring it back to a structural level and also to discuss it on a meta-level.'* (P1A, group discussion with administrative staff)

Instead, they understand that university support structures are urgently needed but are not yet existent. When seeking help from universities, they often find no support structures and no clear regulation on how to deal with caregiving students. Such regulations, however, would be needed to really develop the vision of a caring university:

> *'What, in my view, universities ... still need in order to maybe [have] simply an understanding of what, for example, a family-friendly university still means. That it doesn't mean that we can point out where the changing table*

> *is or what offers there are for young mothers and fathers, but that it may have another dimension. To take care of the elderly, for example, right?'* (P3L, group discussion with lecturers)

Depending on their own respective positions and professional roles as administrative staff or lecturers, participants identified different niches through which to support caregiving students, though all of them were on the level of individual negotiation instead of structural reform. For example, one lecturer describes how structural demands actually make it more difficult for them to accommodate caregiving students' needs:

> '*... and there I have to say, the exam has to be passed, the term paper and so on, that all has to be done and we can only just say there is a deadline-extension for the paper or [the person] can postpone an exam. Some also get a writing extension in the exam, but to still have to answer the questions correctly and so on and we can't do much at all at the moment.'* (P2L, group discussion with lecturers)

Often such services are also highly dependent on the engagement of individual persons. Once these people as drivers of services are no longer available (e.g. because they go on leave or leave the university altogether), these offers come to an end:

> *'... that we also cover the area of care, caring relatives, and indeed also offer counselling, which is not taking place at the moment because I am employed as a [substitute] and have not taken over this area and the person I represent, however, normally advises*.' (P2A, group discussion with administrative staff)

Instead of demanding structural reform, many participants therefore resorted to more informal measures, such as awareness-raising:

> *'... and I think these are not such formal, such tangible things which we just said ... "we extend deadlines", and so on, but simply to say, lecturers know about it, and also study program coordination, and so on. Where can you go, where can you refer students, and what can I do with it ...?'* (P5L, group discussion with lecturers)

Discussion

Based on two focus groups with administrative personnel and people holding teaching positions, we explored university staff perceptions of, experiences with, and reactions towards caregiving students. We found that the university staff have limited - if any - knowledge about caregiving students. The latter are perceived as an invisible group within universities - a finding that resonates with accounts of marginalisation, silencing, and misrecognition of certain forms of care in academia. If university staff do have experiences with caregiving students, they report uncertainty about whether they are, in fact, responsible for caregiving students' problems, and experience helplessness in terms of how to deal with the caregiving students' concerns.

Viewing these results through a micropolitical lens, we can understand invisibilisation and the distribution of responsibility as two practices that produce power relations within the institutional contexts of universities. If caregiving students are not visible to university staff,

they do not challenge institutional structures or problematise the archetype of the young, full-time student without care obligations. If no one is clearly responsible for them, their matters of concern are lost in between the institutional structures and mechanisms. Hence, micropolitics in universities aim at maintaining this status through practices of invisibilisation and the distribution of responsibility.
The focus group analysis indicates that invisibility is created through several practices, one of which became particularly relevant in the discussions: the active maintenance of a division between an 'educational life' and a 'private life', performed both on the side of the university staff and on that of the caregiving students. On the one hand, caregiving students put a lot of effort into not bringing their caring positions to the attention of university staff for fear of being treated differently or stigmatised, and also because university staff are not perceived as relevant actors in the 'private problem' of reconciling studies and care work (Kettel 2018; Wazinski et al. 2022). The group discussions also showed that only a few university lecturers and administrative staff actively try to make caregiving visible in their area of responsibility (e.g. through asking about care responsibilities in class or in counselling). Moreover, caregiving students, even if not explicitly excluded, are at least not mentioned in most offers targeted at caregiving relatives and employees. Hence, everything that concerns the daily lives of caregiving students is hidden by structural barriers on the university side, and these hurdles prevent university staff from supporting caring students in their compatibility issues, leading to the 'hidden lives' of the caregiving students (Kettel, 2018; Moreau & Robertson, 2019; Wazinski et al., 2022). Underlying these practices of invisibilisation are life course norms, or chrononormativity (Freeman 2010). This term refers to the fact that societies produce and reproduce certain norms and ideas concerning what age or phase of one's lifetime activities are supposed to occur. The phase of being a student is linked with the expectations of living fairly free of obligations and certainly not being a caregiver. Thus, '[…] in deviating from normative expectations, caregiving students feel ashamed about their situation and try to conceal it from fellow students or university staff' (Wazinski et al. 2022, p. 228).

This finding could lead to the conclusion that awareness raising as a means of visibilisation would be key to improving the situation of caregiving students. However, the micropolitics of invisibilisation are very effective because they are combined with practices of distribution of responsibility that set in after the veil of invisibility is removed. When directly confronted with the sheer number of caregiving students, as well as the challenges they are facing, administrative personnel and lecturers do acknowledge the problem and want to support them in their studies. Yet no one is formally, or feels subjectively, responsible for doing so and no one knows how to provide proper support. There is no clear institutional process with standardised steps that lecturers or administrative staff in universities can take when a student opens up to them about their challenges in reconciling studies and care. Hence, there is a common call for the university as an educational institution to create such processes and assign clear responsibilities to provide such help to caregiving students (e.g. counselling services that lecturers can point their caregiving students towards when they approach them). The dominance of informal arrangements, instead of formalised processes, must also be understood in the context of the chrononormative-orientated figure of the 'bachelor boy' within education institutions (Edwards 1993): This orientation entails that even when academic cultures and legislation change to facilitate the reconciliation of caregiving and studying, such endeavours are rather viewed as a generous 'add-on' instead of 'usualising' and normalising care in academia (Moreau 2016).

These findings are mostly in line with previous research that has focused on the perspective of caregiving students (see for overview Knopf et al. 2022). Caregiving students report that, in

most cases, university staff do not know about their caregiving obligations and that they live a 'hidden life' (Alsop, Gonzalez-Arnal & Kilkey 2008). They also experience university staff's helplessness and uncertainty in how to support them (Haugland, Hysing & Sivertsen 2020). It seems to be different with fellow students who are less inhibited in addressing the issue. This raises the question of which individuals they may recognise in their private situation and in a university context. As described, caregiving students do 'violate' certain chrononorms and hence often want to hide their double burden of studying and caregiving. This would call for support structures at the university level that allow for potentially anonymous consulting services not involving lecturers. However, caregiving students also say that not only the university as an institution should be responsible for supporting them, but that they 'wish for awareness by lecturers and administrative staff about the challenges of reconciling studying and caregiving' (Wazinski et al. 2022, p. 227). This stands in contrast to what the lecturers and administrative staff reported in the group discussions conducted in the study at hand. They see the support of the caregiving students as the responsibility of the university (i.e. on the organisational level). Reasons for this push of responsibility to the 'higher level are the lack of knowledge in how to help the caregiving students as well as concerns about being unfair towards students with no care obligations if they consider the caregiving students' needs. They wish for clear rules from universities in how to deal with the caregiving students.

Conclusion

This study makes three contributions to the literature: (1) it is the first study to explore university staff knowledge of, and experiences with and towards caregiving students, expanding on previous research that mainly focused on caregiving students as research subjects; (2) it contrasts the university staff perspective with that of caregiving students, allowing us to identify overlaps as well as discrepancies between the two; and (3) it draws implications on how caregiving students can be supported from the perspective of university staff.

When interpreting the results of this study, one must acknowledge several limitations. First, the participants of the focus groups are a small and rather select group, as potential people who already have certain knowledge about caregiving students and thus had higher motivation to participate in the focus groups. Therefore, we may have overestimated the knowledge of university staff about caregiving students. Second, the participants in the focus groups only provide the perspective of university staff and not that of fellow students either with or without care obligations. Third, the results are limited to the German context, and one must be careful when generalising the results for other countries.

Implications for future research can be drawn from these limitations. The study at hand should be replicated with a higher number of participants and groups, as well as with students with no care obligations, to explore their perceptions, experiences, and reactions towards caregiving students. Students with no care obligations are probably the group caregiving students have the most contact with, and hence their perspective should be researched. A further group of interest to interview is university deans, presidents, and others in managerial positions. The study at hand should also be replicated in other countries to test which of the findings can be generalised and which are unique for Germany. Finally, large-scale quantitative surveys in several universities, potentially in several countries, should be conducted with lecturers on their knowledge and attitudes towards caregiving students to explore differences between lecturers' socio-demographic characteristics, as well as faculties and types of universities.

Implications for university management and staff

In addition to the implications for future research, one can also derive recommendations on how universities can support caregiving students.

First, universities must acknowledge that caregiving students exist and realise their needs and challenges. The acknowledgement of caregiving students must happen on all university levels from central management, across faculty management and lecturers, and to the students without care obligations.

Second, universities should raise awareness of caregiving students among all members of the university. Again, this includes the whole university community: presidents, deans, professors, lecturers, administrative staff, and fellow students. Given the diffuse and unclear responsibilities regarding who should support caregiving students, we believe that the implementation of measures to raise awareness for, and support of, caregiving students should be the task of central university management and not be 'out-sourced' to faculties or lecturers. Measures of awareness could include a day focused on caregiving students, surveys among students and lecturers on the topic, and informational brochures. Furthermore, the universities should collect data on the caregiving obligations of their students to assess the share of caregiving students among their student bodies.

Third, existing offers of support and services (e.g. counselling for university staff with care obligations) should be made available to caregiving students. In addition, compulsory attendance as well as students' assignments deadlines could be more flexible for caregiving students. Again, the measures should be implemented by the general university management thus making them available to all students and not only those of engaged lecturers.

Finally, caregiving students often face financial problems as they have limited time to take a student job in addition to their studies and care activities (Knopf et al. 2022). This problem could be mitigated by care-equity scholarships.

As stated, all these measures should be implemented at the university level, and be communicated to all members of the university, and thus achieve the aim of becoming a caring university as part of a caring society. This would allow for mitigation of the helplessness reported by the lecturers in the discussion group. Furthermore, other groups such as students with children or students with disabilities might benefit from the idea and credo of a caring university.

In addition to universities, other societal stakeholders in the areas of care and education (e.g. politicians, companies, public servants, physicians) must acknowledge that caregiving students exist and try to implement measures that increase the possibility of reconciling caregiving and studying.

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