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UNDERSTANDING THE EXPERIENCES OF STUDENT CARERS

Gender Engagement Group Project Report



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Foreword

This report brings into focus a group of students whose experiences are too often overlooked within higher education: students who study while also carrying significant caring responsibilities. These responsibilities may include parenting, supporting children with additional needs, caring for relatives, partners or siblings, or providing unpaid care to someone who could not manage without that support. For these students, academic participation is shaped not only by curriculum, assessment and supervision, but also by the daily realities of care, time, finance, family life and institutional flexibility.

Developed in collaboration with the University of Warwick’s Gender Engagement Group, this project provides an important evidence base for understanding the scale, characteristics and lived experiences of student carers at Warwick. Drawing on anonymised enrolment data from more than 30,000 students, focus groups with student carers, and a review of institutional and national policy, the report demonstrates that caring responsibilities are not peripheral to student success. They are central to questions of access, belonging, progression, retention and completion.

The findings show that student carers are a diverse and significant part of the Warwick community. They also reveal that caring responsibilities are unevenly distributed and experienced. This has particular implications for postgraduate researchers, female students, international students, mature students, students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, and those navigating inflexible programme structures.



At the same time, this report does not present student carers only through a lens of difficulty or deficit. It also recognises the strengths, insight and resilience that student carers bring to the University. Their experiences enrich academic communities, inform research and professional practice, and challenge institutions to think more carefully about what inclusive participation really requires.



The recommendations set out in this report are practical, proportionate and firmly grounded in the evidence gathered. They invite Warwick to move beyond ad hoc support and towards a more coherent, visible and care-aware institutional framework. This includes clearer communication, better signposting, targeted financial support, flexible academic practices, recognition mechanisms such as a Carer’s Passport, and stronger policy engagement on issues that extend beyond the University’s direct control.

Acknowledgements

We are especially grateful to the students who contributed to this project and shared their experiences so openly. We recognise the trust involved in speaking about caring responsibilities, financial pressures, family life, wellbeing and academic participation. Your accounts have shaped the evidence, analysis and recommendations in this report. We hope that we have represented your experiences with care and respect, and that this work contributes to greater recognition, visibility and support for student carers at Warwick.

We would like to thank the Enhancing Research Culture Fund and Research England for funding this project. We are grateful to the Gender Engagement Group, especially to the Chair Jane Coleman and former Chair Joanna Collingwood, for keeping the issue of postgraduate student caring as a live issue on the Group's agenda and contributing their insights and experience throughout the process.

We are particularly thankful to Alex Gray in Student Records, for overseeing the substantial and crucial work required to enable the capture of caring responsibilities through student enrolment. His perseverance, patience and commitment have made this important work possible and will help shape change for future generations of Warwick students.

Special thanks are due to key stakeholders in the University of Warwick who engaged in early conversations about the shape and scope of this project: Marion Patel and Nicola Watts (Warwick Award Team); Anil Awesti and Nalita James (WIHEA Mature Student Experience Learning Circle); Jess O'Brien (Market Research and Insight) and Sasha Butler (Marketing and Communications).

History Undergraduates Harry McNeile and Hope Robinson designed this report. Their work demonstrates the creativity, insight and value of humanities students.

The project leads would like to extend a final thanks to Cagla Karatepe, who was the driving force behind this project. Patient, persistent and dedicated, this project would not have happened or exist in its current form without her hard work and belief. She exemplifies the experience, insights and unique skills that postgraduate student carers bring to the University of Warwick.

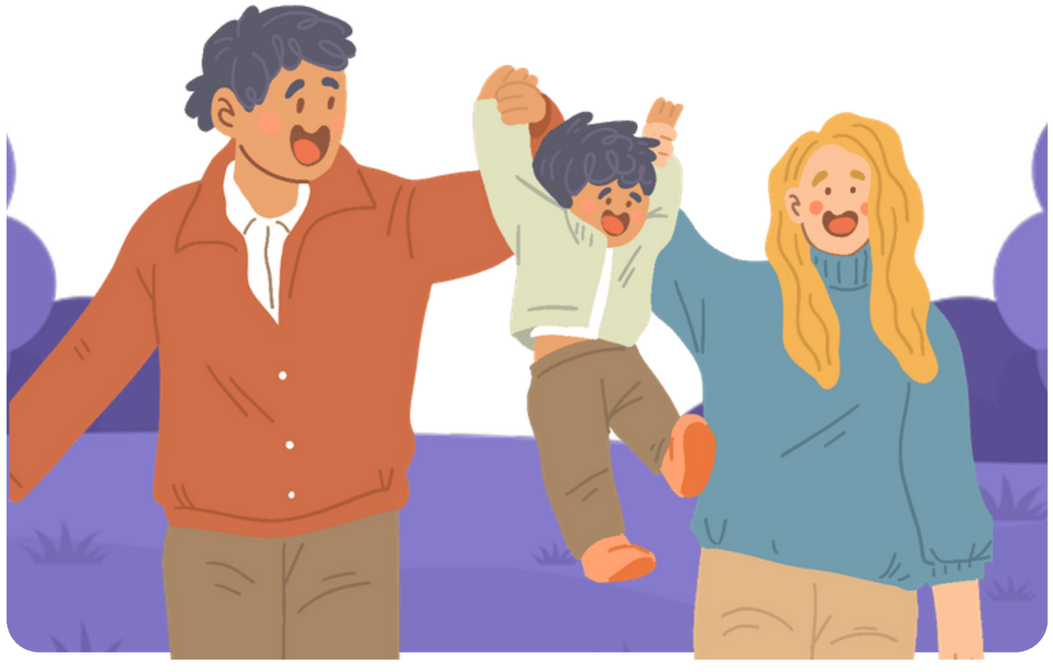
Together, these contributions have made the project possible and have strengthened its aim of making student carers more visible, better understood and more fully supported across the University.

Introduction

Student carers in higher education: moving beyond the 'careless student'

Student carers experience higher education differently from their peers (Runacres et al., 2026, 1119-20). Recent scholarship on widening participation and student equity has increasingly challenged the assumption of the "ideal student", as unencumbered by external responsibilities, highlighting instead that a significant proportion of students undertake substantial unpaid care alongside their studies. Despite this, student carers remain statistically under-recognised within higher education, with estimates suggesting that they represent 3–6% of the UK student population (NUS, 2013, 3). Many young adult carers report considerable difficulty balancing academic demands with their caring roles (Carers Trust, 2023, 12). This work underscores the need to move beyond deficit framings towards a more inclusive understanding of students as embedded within complex networks of care.

Institutional norms frequently assume that students' private lives should not interfere with academic engagement, effectively marginalising those with care responsibilities and reinforcing existing inequalities (Sotiropolou, 2022, 24). Positioned at the intersection of higher education and unpaid care labour, student carers must navigate both academic expectations and significant familial or relational responsibilities. However, their experiences remain underrepresented in institutional data and policy design, creating structural invisibilities that can affect access, progression, and completion.



Student carers and parents are often described as an 'invisible' group within higher education, with their needs insufficiently recognised and supported, partly due to limited institutional data (Rawlinson, 2026, 325-6), which has constrained understanding of their experiences and inhibited the development of targeted interventions.

Broadly defined, student carers are those providing ongoing unpaid care to individuals who could not manage without them due to illness, disability, mental health conditions, addiction, or other care needs. Their responsibilities are diverse, ranging from **routine childcare** and **looking after siblings** to more intensive forms of caregiving, including **personal care**, **administering medication**, **financial support**, or practical help, such as **cleaning and preparing meals** (Carers Trust, 2015, 7); Runacres, Herron, & Cust, 2026, 1111-1112).



Balancing study and care creates a distinct and often more challenging student journey. Across the literature, four key issues consistently emerge.

First, substantial impacts on their physical and mental health, including stress, fatigue, and reduced well-being. Second, reduced academic performance affected by time constraints, difficulty attending classes, and challenges meeting deadlines. Third, financial pressures, frequently balancing study with employment and, in some cases, contributing to household income. Finally, they must navigate a complex tension between their roles as students and carers, in which the demands of one frequently conflict with those of the other (Runacres et al., 2025, 1111-1128). These challenges highlight the inadequacy of ad hoc support and the need for formal, institution-wide provision (Runacres et al., 2025, 1112).

In practice, these inequalities are reinforced by financial insecurity and inadequate childcare support. High childcare costs in the UK—estimated at over **£14,000 per year** for full-time 50 hours/week nursery provision—can exceed or closely match student income from maintenance loans or PhD stipends, making sustained participation in full time higher education unviable for many student parents (Bowen-Viner, 2023). At the same time, childcare support policies often prioritise paid employment, requiring minimum working hours that student carers cannot meet, (i.e. at least 16 hours per week for 30 hours free childcare for working parents), effectively forcing them to balance study, work, and care simultaneously or risk delaying or abandoning their studies altogether (Bowen-Viner, 2023; House of Commons Library, 2026).

As a result, student carers are positioned within a system that recognises care only in relation to employment, rather than education. These structural misalignments disproportionately affect certain groups, particularly women, where care responsibilities continue to fall unevenly (Lynch, 2022, 10-11). Female students are therefore more likely to navigate compounded academic and caregiving pressures (cf. Rawlinson, 2026; Runacres et al., 2026), resulting in structural disadvantage.



Childcare provision remains fragmented and difficult to navigate, characterised by multiple funding schemes and discretionary access, which can deter uptake, particularly among disadvantaged students (Jones, 2002, 6). These challenges are especially acute for postgraduate researchers (PGRs), who often fall outside existing support categories. As both students and researchers, they are frequently ineligible for both student and employment-based provision, a gap described by Howard (2022) as the **"PhD Parenting Penalty"** (See also Davis, Fairchild, Purdue, & Jenkinson, 2024). This leaves them facing disproportionate financial, academic, and professional disadvantages within an already challenging research environment and sector.



Why this matters: the leaky pipeline in higher education?

The presence of caring responsibilities within the student population has significant implications for retention and equality of opportunity in higher education. Research on the **"leaky pipeline"** in academia highlights how biases and structural inequalities limit progression into higher paid roles for women and those from underrepresented backgrounds, while also leading them to exit academia at faster rates than their male counterparts (Harris, Mate-Sanchez-Val, & Ruiz Marín, 2025, 4441-2).

These inequalities appear particularly acute for students with caring responsibilities, who are significantly more likely to withdraw from or disengage with their studies than their peers without the same responsibilities (Kettel, 2020, 100; Runacres, Herron , & Cust, 2025, 1112). This suggests that caring responsibilities remain insufficiently recognised within institutional support structures, with interventions often arriving too late to mitigate their impact effectively (NUS, 2013, 15-6).



Project Goals



This project contributes empirical and qualitative evidence on how caring responsibilities shape student experiences within a UK university context, focusing on the student carer population at the University of Warwick. Rather than treating childcare and caring responsibilities as peripheral issues, it positions them as central to questions of access, equity, and participation within higher education.

The project set out to address four core aims:

1. Identify the scale, characteristics, and needs of student carers at the University of Warwick.
2. Examine the challenges and opportunities that student carers bring to their academic studies.
3. Investigate the specific experiences of postgraduate researchers with caring responsibilities, a group systematically excluded from existing support structures.
4. Establish a coordinated approach and set of recommendations to address some of the most pressing challenges student carers face.

To achieve these aims, the project involved three complementary approaches to develop a comprehensive institutional understanding:

Large-scale Survey

A large-scale survey involving quantitative analysis of over 30,000 anonymised student enrolment records to identify demographic patterns, modes of study, and areas where targeted support is most needed.



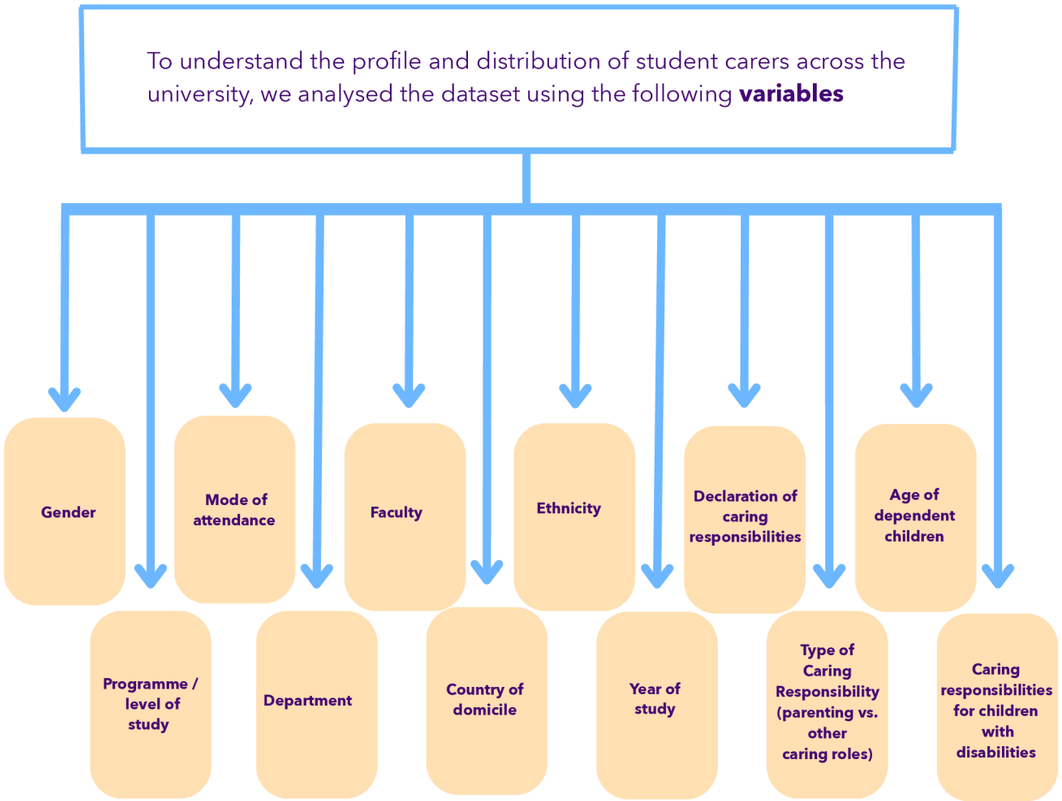
Qualitative Data

Qualitative data collected through seven online focus groups involving a total of 25 undergraduate (UG), postgraduate taught (PGT), and postgraduate research (PGR) student carers. Participants came from a variety of age groups and academic disciplines and had different types of caring roles, enabling a nuanced understanding of how caring responsibilities intersect with different stages of the student lifecycle.

University Policies

An analysis of university policies and wider national provision for students with parental or caring responsibilities.

Findings of the Survey



These measures enabled analysis of both the prevalence of caring responsibilities and the distribution of carers at the University of Warwick across key demographic and academic characteristics.

The data used in this report was collected during the enrolment process at the start of the 2025-2026 academic year, following a full Data Protection Impact Assessment (DPIA) to ensure compliance with institutional and legal data protection requirements. The final dataset included records for 36,305 students.

All analyses were conducted using the R statistical package, enabling systematic exploration of demographic patterns and subgroup comparisons within the student carer population.

Across the University of Warwick, students who declared caring responsibilities represent **4.16%** of the total student population (**1,510** student carers in total).

This indicates a meaningful minority whose academic experiences are shaped by care work.

Parenting is the dominant form of care within this group, with two thirds of student carers identifying as parents (**1,039** students; **2.86%** of the total student population).

This makes parenting the primary driver of caring responsibilities across the student body.

Non-parental caring is also substantial: **471** students (**1.30%**) provide care for someone other than a child, such as partners, siblings, or older relatives.

This highlights a broader spectrum of caregiving roles that often remain invisible in institutional data.

The gendered nature of care

Although both male and female students are present in almost equal numbers in the overall student population, female students are substantially over-represented among carers (see Figure 1 below).

Female students make up around 49% of all students but over 60% of all carers and are therefore about 1.6 times more likely to report caring responsibilities than male students (5.19% vs 3.18%). The difference is not only practically large (5.19% vs 3.18%) but also statistically highly significant. This indicates that caring is a strongly gendered burden within the student body.

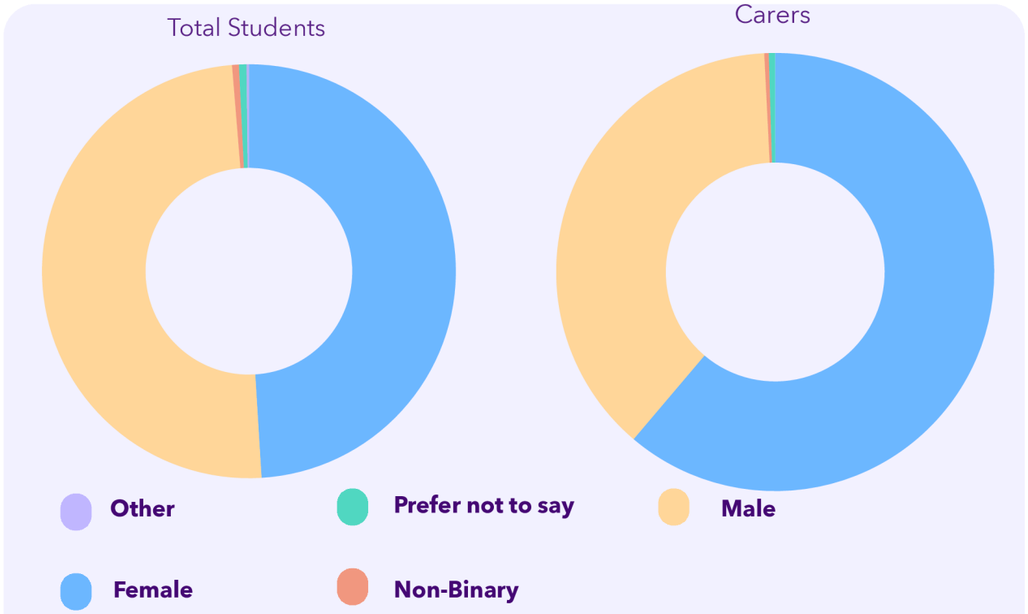


Figure 1. Gender Distribution of Student Carers



Ethnicity characteristics of the student carer population

Analysis of caring responsibilities across ethnic groups reveals substantial variation within the overall carer community (4.16%). Several groups show disproportionately high rates of caring:

- **Arab** (**12.68%**), **Black Caribbean** (**12.27%**), and **Black African** (**7.15%**) students report caring responsibilities at rates two to three times higher than the institutional average.
- **White Irish** (**9.68%**) and **Black Other** (**9.38%**) students also exhibit elevated prevalence, suggesting that caring responsibilities may be more concentrated in specific communities.
- **White British** students (**6.01%**) sit slightly above the institutional average, indicating moderate but not disproportionate caring responsibilities.
- In contrast, **Asian Chinese** students report the lowest rate (**0.97%**), which may reflect cultural norms around disclosure, differing interpretations of the question, or genuinely lower prevalence.

Overall, the distribution of carers is highly heterogeneous, indicating that ethnicity is a significant axis along which caring responsibilities vary.

Female students consistently report higher carer rates than male students, particularly among Black African (**15.76% vs 7.95%**), Mixed Asian (**9.15% vs 2.25%**), and White/Black Caribbean (**15.15% vs 7.79%**) populations. These patterns suggest that caring responsibilities intersect with both gender and ethnicity in complex ways and highlight the need for targeted support strategies that account for demographic variation.

Carers by home country

Home students constitute the clear majority of the university's student carers.

Of the 1,510 students who reported a caring responsibility, **1,185** are home students (from England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland), representing **78.48%** of all carers. When viewed as a proportion of the entire home-student population, this corresponds to **3.26%.**

International students account for a smaller but still notable share of the carer population. A total of **324** international students reported caring responsibilities, making up **21.46%** of all student carers. Within the international student population as a whole, this represents **0.89%.**

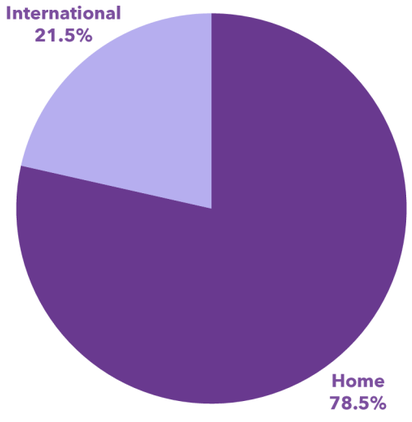


Figure 2. Distribution of home students and international students within the carer community

Within the international student population, several larger national cohorts show consistently visible levels of caring responsibility.

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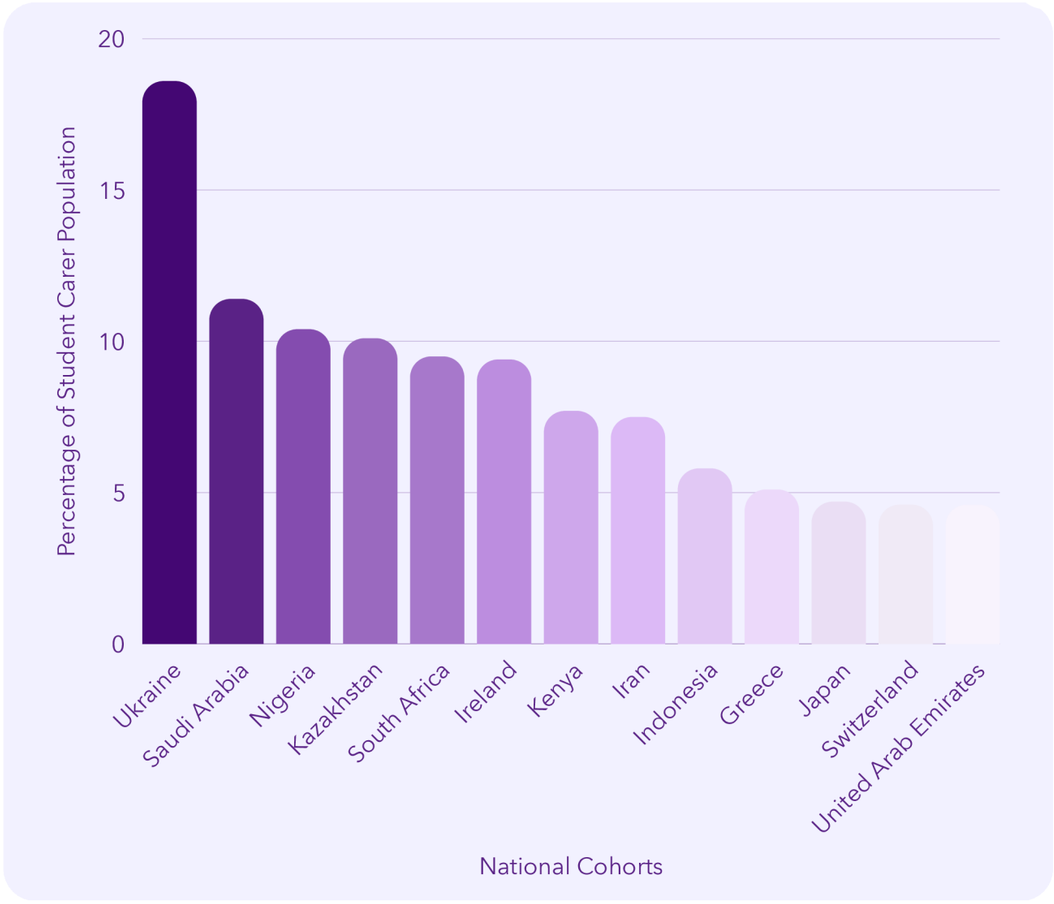
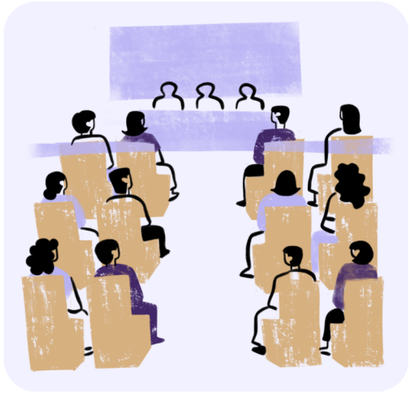


Figure 3. Percentages of student carer population within international cohorts

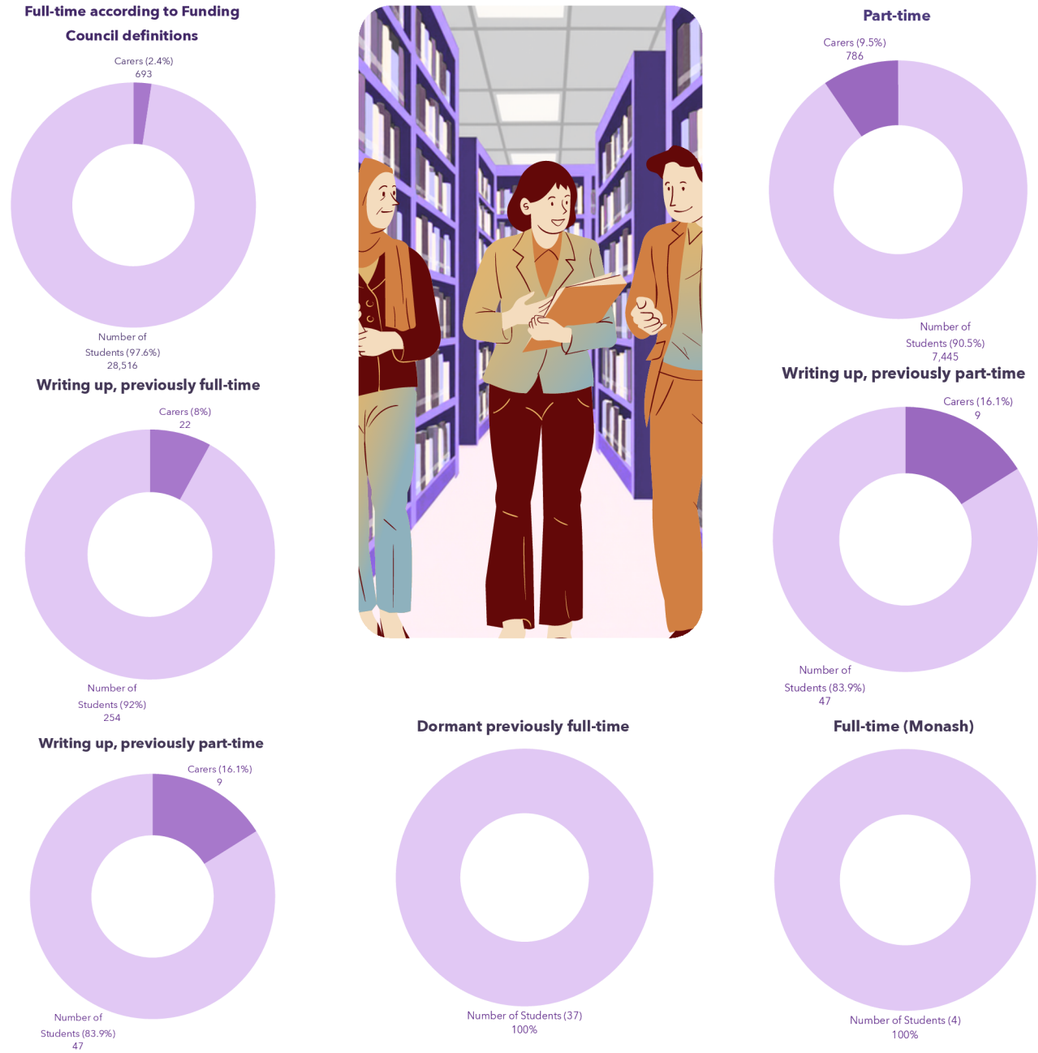
Students by mode of attendance



To understand the different structural barriers student carers faced, we analysed the student carer population by mode of attendance, assessing whether they were more likely to be registered as full-time, part-time or in the writing up phases of their degrees. We also examined how gender affected mode of attendance.

Number and Percentage of Student Carers at the University of Warwick by Mode of Attendance

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Although part-time students make up a much smaller proportion of the overall student population (7445 part-time students), they account for a disproportionately large share of student carers.

Specifically, **10.56%** of all part-time students are carers, which is more than four times the rate among full-time students. This strongly suggests that students with caring responsibilities are more likely to choose part-time study in order to balance academic and caregiving demands.

Among all modes of attendance, students who are writing-up, having previously been registered as part-time, have the highest carer rate at **19.15%**. Although numerically small (9 out of 47 students), the concentration of carers is striking. This indicates that students with caring responsibilities may take longer to complete their degrees due to competing caregiving and academic pressures.

Mode of attendance and gender



As part of the analysis, we examined how caring responsibilities vary by both gender and mode of attendance. The patterns are clear and statistically robust: gender and mode of attendance are statistically associated (p < .0001).

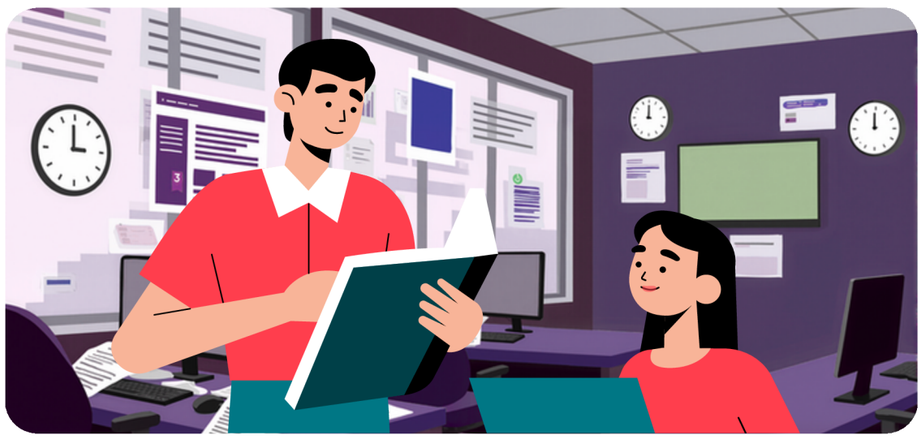
Among full-time students, female students are more than twice as likely to report caring responsibilities compared to male students (**3.31% vs 1.58%**). This gender gap persists in the part-time population, although the overall prevalence of caring responsibilities is substantially higher for both groups (**11.73% for females and 9.40% for males**).

Postgraduate female students in the writing-up phase report caring responsibilities at more than twice the rate of their male counterparts. This pattern is evident across both modes of attendance: among full-time writing-up students, **12.73%** of female students report a caring role compared with **5.97%** of male students, while in the part-time writing-up cohort the disparity widens further, with **33.3%** of female students reporting caring responsibilities versus **12.9%** of male students.

This pattern suggests that caregiving may have a tangible impact on the pace and structure of academic progression. Rather than indicating individual delay, this disparity points to the cumulative effect of care work across the degree lifecycle.

Where are Warwick's student carers?

To understand how caring responsibilities are distributed across the University of Warwick, we examined student carer representation by department, faculty, and level of study. This allowed us to identify where student carers are most visible within the academic structure of the institution, and where their presence may be less immediately apparent.



Number of student carers across levels of study

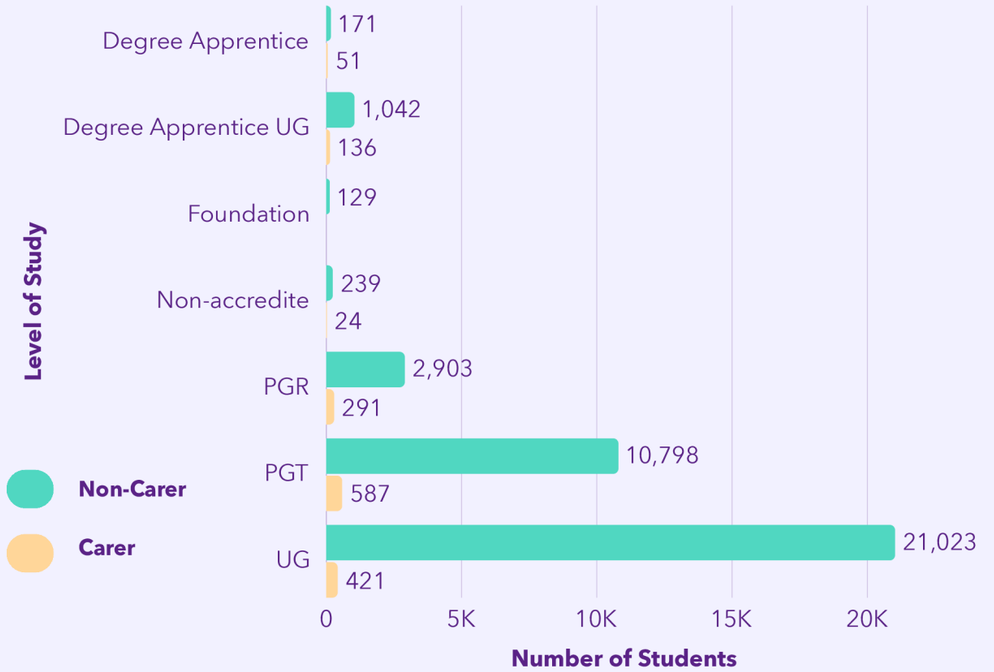


Figure 4. Number of student carers across levels of study

When broken down by level of study, the distribution of carers shows notable variation.

Degree Apprentice PGT students have the highest proportion of carers (**29.8%**), followed by **Degree Apprentice UG students** (**13.0%**).

PGR and Non-accredited students also display elevated proportions, both around **10%**, which is substantially higher than the institutional average. In contrast, **UG students** have the lowest proportion of carers (**2.0%**).



The distribution of student carers across faculties shows clear variation in both scale and proportional representation.

The largest number of carers is in the **Social Sciences**, where 933 students (**6.87%**) report a caring role, followed by the **Science, Engineering and Medicine (SEM)** faculty, which includes 470 carers (**2.66%**) across a total population of 17,693 students.

In the **Faculty of Arts**, 92 students (**2.12%**) report caring responsibilities, indicating a smaller but still significant presence. A notably high proportion of carers appears within **Interdisciplinary and Cross-Faculty** programmes (**14.44%**), despite the small size of this group, suggesting that flexible or non-traditional academic pathways may attract or better accommodate students with caring responsibilities.

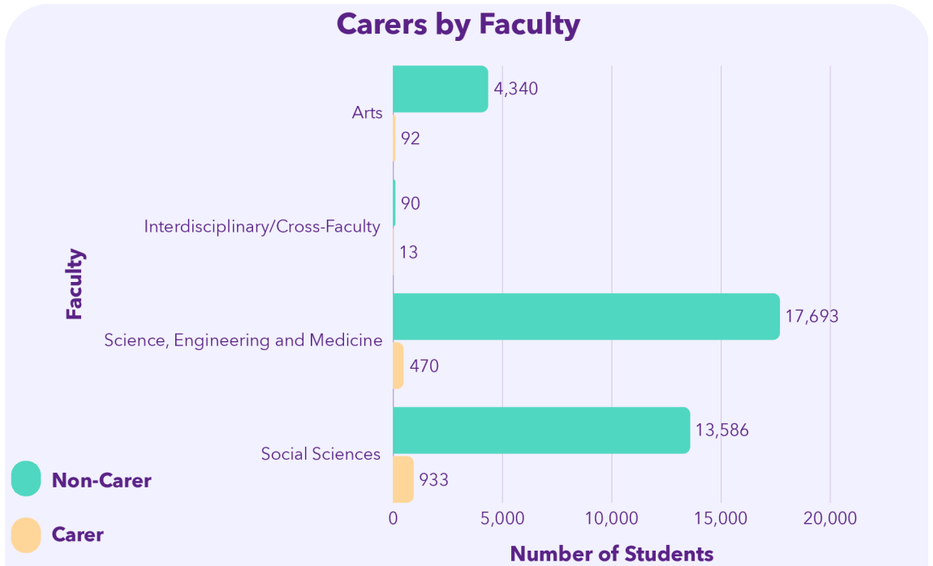


Figure 5. Number of Carers within Faculties

Carers across Departments

The distribution of student carers varies widely across departments, both in absolute numbers and in proportional terms.

Larger departments naturally host higher numbers of carers: **Warwick Business School** has the highest figure, with 301 carers, representing **5.32%** of its 5,663 students, followed by **Warwick Medical School**, with 212 carers (**4.65%**), and WMG reports 107 carers (**3.40%**). Other sizeable departments include Psychology (**3.24%**) and **Politics and International Studies** (**3.02%**), along with **History and Law**, each with around **2.4–2.5%** of their students reporting caring responsibilities.

Several departments stand out for having exceptionally high concentrations of carers, particularly within the School of Education, Lifelong Learning (SELCS), and related programmes.

The Centre for Lifelong Learning (CLL) reports 351 carers, representing **43.66%** of its 804 students – the highest proportion across the university. Similarly, the **Academic Development Centre** shows 17 carers among 37 students (**45.95%**), and the **Institute for Employment Research** (**40%**) shows very high shares, though based on small student cohorts. Within this cluster, the **Centre for Teacher Education**, with 76 students (**17.55%**) and **Education Studies**, with 51 carers (**15.27%**) report high proportions, while **Applied Linguistics** records **6.67%** (18 carers among its 270 students). These patterns suggest that programmes attracting mature, part-time, or professionally oriented learners have a higher visibility of student carers.

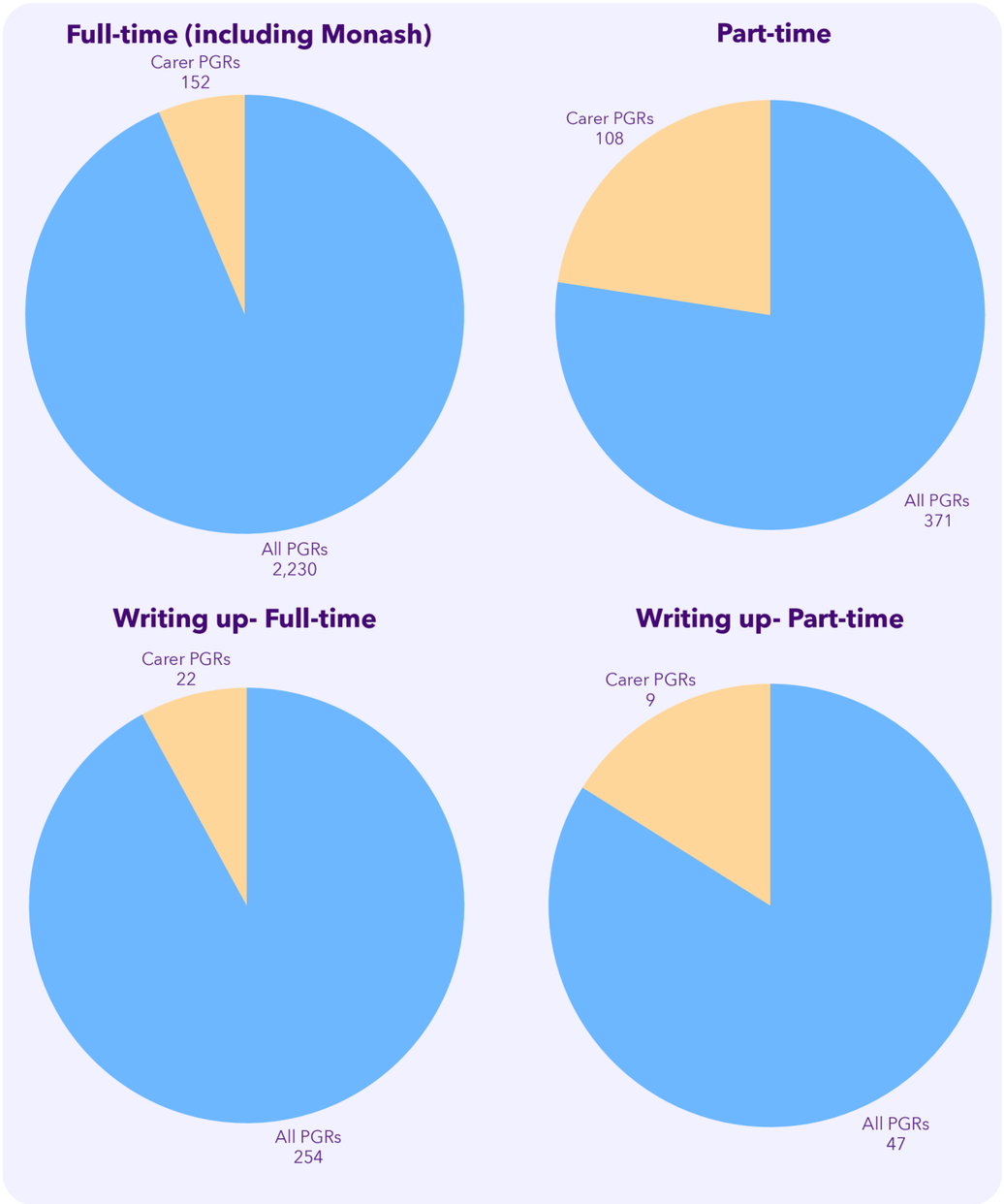
Overall, the data indicate that programme design and delivery shape the accessibility of higher education for students with caring responsibilities.

We also examined the distribution of carers across years of study within each department, which reveals suggestive patterns. In several laboratory-intensive and rigidly timetabled STEM programmes, the proportion of carers appears to decline in later years. For example, Mathematics shows a decline from 8 carers in Year 1 to 1 in Year 4, while Statistics and Computer Science show early declines before stabilising. Although not evidence of attrition without longitudinal progression data, these patterns may point to early-stage pressures in programmes with compulsory laboratory hours, fixed timetables, and intensive assessment.

In contrast, more flexible, modular or part-time programmes—particularly in SELCS—show stable carer representation across years. The Centre for Lifelong Learning, for instance, maintains high numbers, with **105** carers in Year 1, 115 in Year 2, and retaining a high proportion into Year 3, with similar stability in Applied Linguistics. These patterns suggest that flexibility in programme design may support continuation for student carers, although longitudinal data on progression and completion are needed to confirm this.

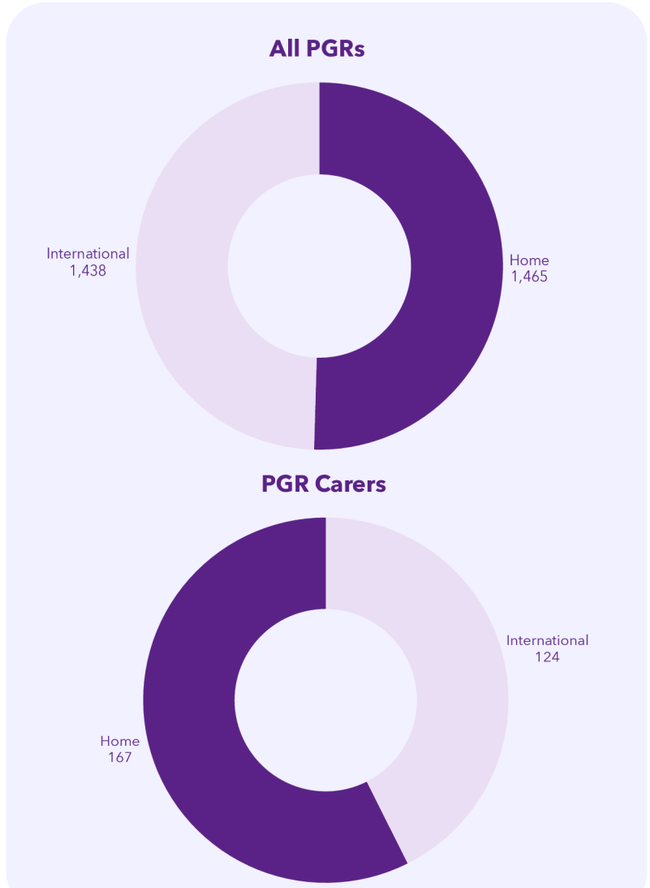


Among Warwick's **2,903** PGR students, **291** report caring responsibilities – around one in ten – indicating that carers form a substantial and distinct part of the postgraduate research community.



Out of 2,230 full-time PGRs, 152 are carers (**6.82%**), whereas among the 371 part-time PGRs, 108 have caring responsibilities, representing a striking **29.11%**. Caring responsibilities are also notable among writing-up students: 22 of the 254 full-time writing-up students are carers (**8.66%**), and 9 of the 47 part-time writing-up students (**19.15%**). Together, these patterns show that caring responsibilities are disproportionately concentrated among part-time and writing-up PGRs, highlighting how caregiving often shapes study-mode choices and the structural pressures this group faces.

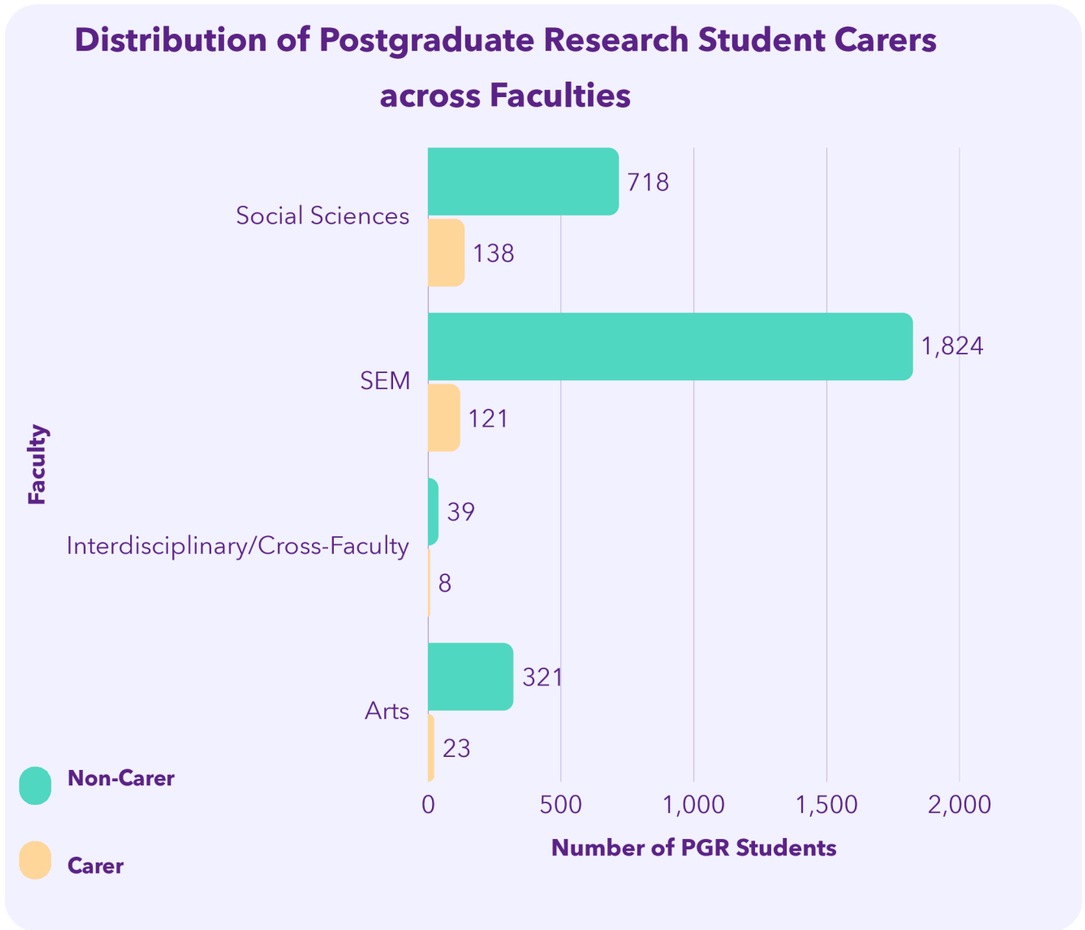
The proportion is highest among students who are temporarily withdrawn (TWD), with 11 of 97 students identifying as carers (**11.34%**). This distribution suggests that caring responsibilities may intersect with periods of disrupted study or reduce academic continuity, particularly for those who temporarily step out of registration.



Among the 2,903 postgraduate students at Warwick, 1,438 are home students, and 1,465 are international students. Caring responsibilities are present across both groups, but with notable differences in prevalence: 167 home postgraduate researchers are carers (**11.62%**), compared with 124 international PGRs (**8.47%**).

This means that home PGRs are proportionally more likely to have caring responsibilities, reflecting the greater likelihood of UK-based students balancing study with local family commitments, while still highlighting that a substantial number of international PGRs also navigate caregiving alongside their research.

Figures 4 and 5: Number and distribution of all PGRs and Carer PGRs across Home and International Student Groups



Among PGR carers, caring responsibilities are unevenly distributed across faculties, both proportionally and in absolute terms.

In **Social Sciences**, 138 of 718 PGR students are carers (**19.2%**), meaning that almost one in five postgraduate researchers has caring responsibilities. **Interdisciplinary and cross-faculty** PGRs show a similarly high concentration, with 8 of 39 students (**20.5%**) identifying as carers.

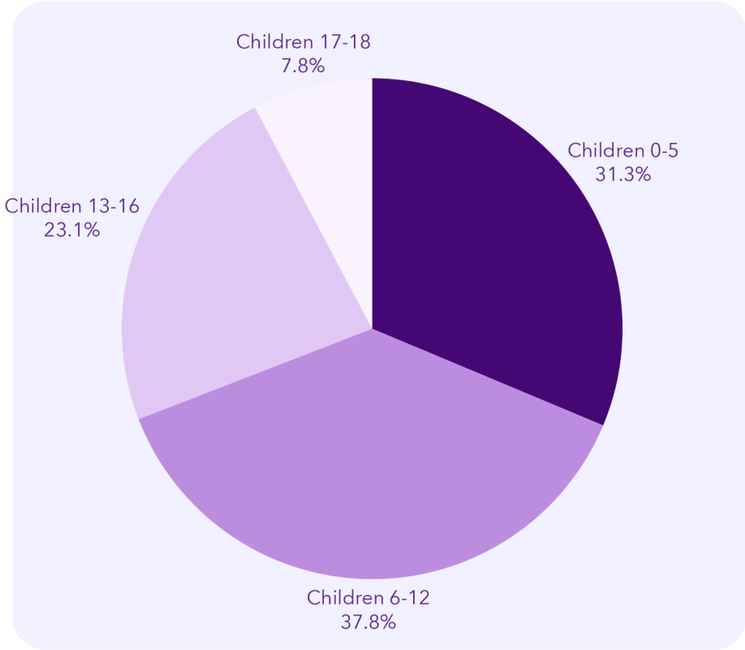
In contrast, **Science, Engineering and Medicine (SEM)** has a lower proportion of carers (**6.63%**), but due to its large population (1,824 PGR students), it still includes 121 carers, making it a major site of caregiving in absolute terms.

Arts shows a smaller but still meaningful share, with 23 of 321 PGRs identified as carers (**7.17%**). Overall, carers are present across all faculties, with particularly high concentrations in Social Sciences and interdisciplinary research, alongside a substantial–though less visible–carer population within SEM.

At departmental level, caring responsibilities cluster in specific academic areas. **Warwick Business School** reports the highest number of PGR carers (54 out of 208), meaning **over a quarter balance research with caregiving**. **Warwick Medical School** also shows a substantial carer presence, with 38 carers (**17.7%**), reflecting the pressures of clinically oriented or health-related fields.

Several Social Sciences and interdisciplinary departments display high proportions, including **Education Studies** (**30.8%**) and **Applied Linguistics** (**17.6%**). Within SEM, the proportions are lower, but the absolute numbers are significant. Large departments such as **WMG** (21 carers), **Psychology** (15), **Life Sciences** (14), **Engineering** (13), and **Chemistry** (11) collectively account for a substantial share of carers within the faculty.

Age of Dependants

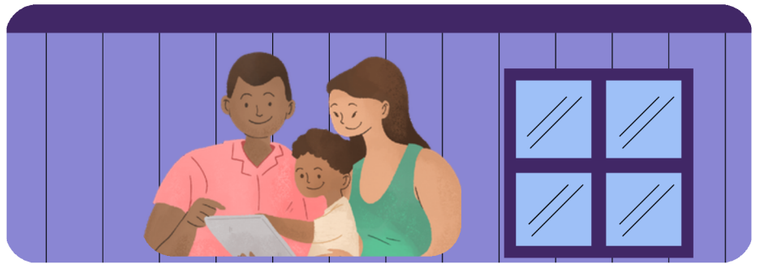


The distribution shows a clear concentration of carers with younger children, particularly those aged 6–12 (**37.8%**) and 0–5 (**31.3%**). Numbers decline sharply for those carers reporting children aged 13–16 and 17–18. This likely reflects not actual demographic patterns but how dependency is understood, with parents of older teenagers less likely to identify them as requiring day-to-day care. As a result, caregiving for older adolescents may be underreported, while the dataset more accurately captures the intensive demands of early and middle childhood.

- **29.67%** of student parents care for children under 5
- **35.83%** for those aged 6-12
- **21.92%** for ages 13-16
- **7.35% for ages 17-18**.

This indicates that most student parents are navigating early-stage and school-age parenting, associated with high daily demands and limited flexibility, with clear implications for scheduling and support provision.

These patterns vary across departments. The School of Education and Lifelong Learning (SELCS) has the largest concentration of student parents: the **Centre for Lifelong Learning** includes 84 students with children under 5, 169 with children aged 6–12, 136 with children aged 13–16, and 54 with children aged 17–18, making it the largest hub of student parents of all ages across the university. **The Centre for Teacher Education** similarly shows consistently high numbers across all age groups (32 parents of under-5s and 30 parents of children aged 6–12), reflecting the mature-learner and part-time profile of its students.

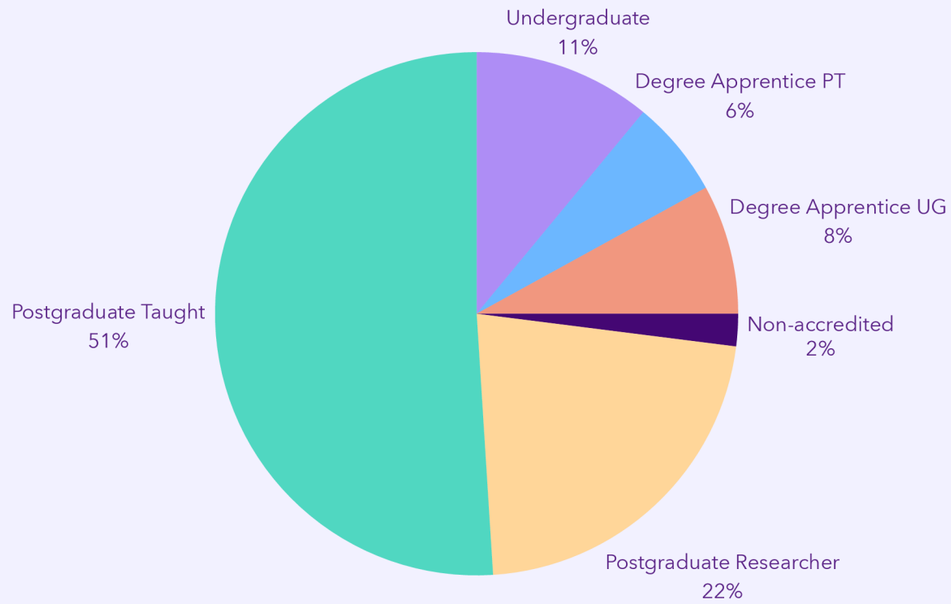


Large departments such as **Warwick Business School** and **Warwick Medical School** also show substantial numbers of student parents, particularly with younger and school-aged children, reflecting the scale and professional orientation of these programmes.

Mid-sized departments, including **Psychology, Politics and International Studies, Engineering, and Life Sciences**, show moderate but consistent representation of student parents. For example, Psychology includes 6 parents of under-5s and 6 parents of children aged 6–12, while Life Sciences includes 7 and 6, respectively. Even smaller departments, such as **Philosophy, History of Art, and Theatre and Performance Studies**, include parents across multiple age groups, demonstrating that caring responsibilities are present throughout the university regardless of disciplinary size or focus.



Student Carers with Dependant Children Aged 0-5



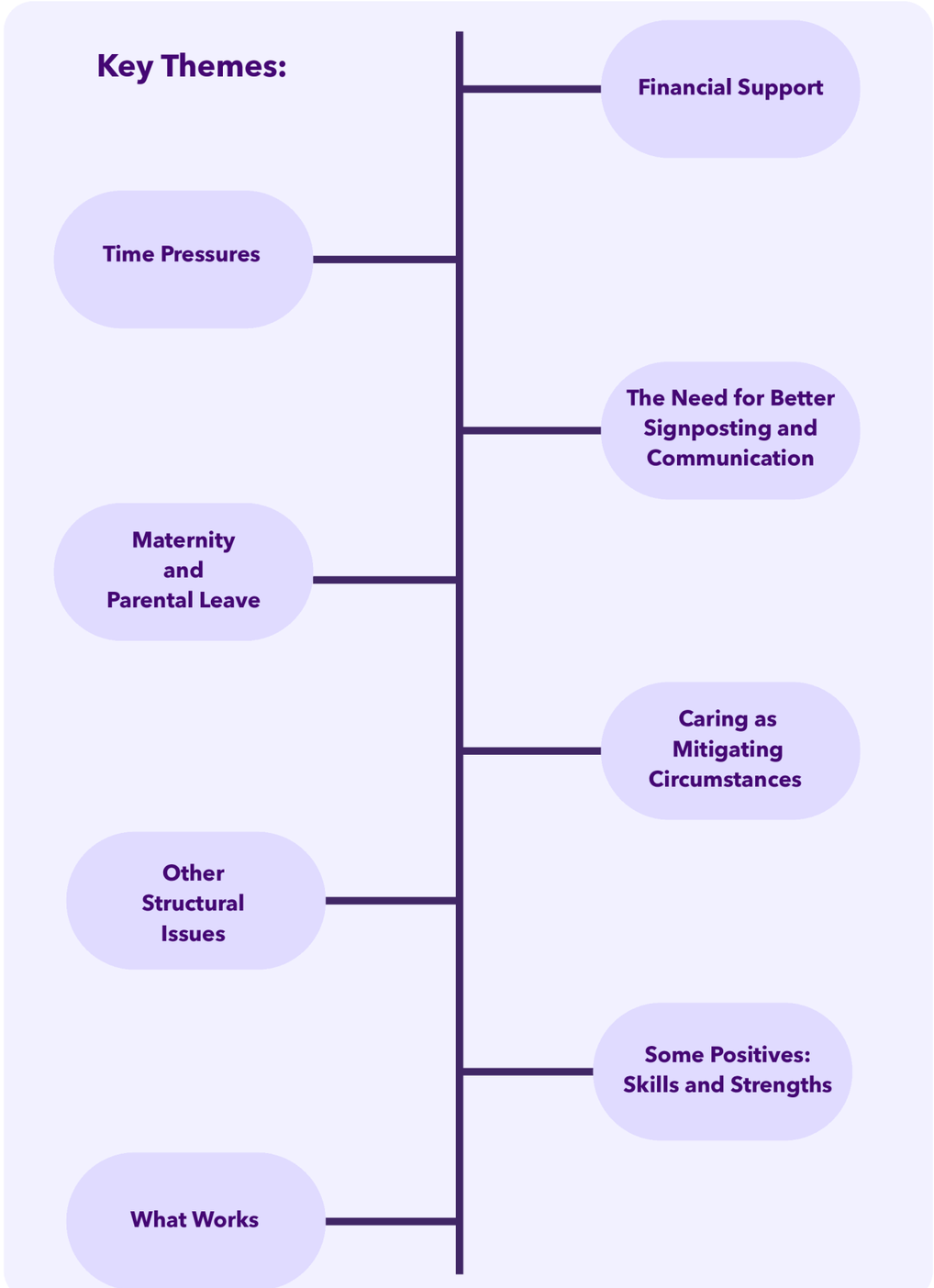
Eligibility for Government Childcare Support for Under-5s

Analysis of student carers with children aged under five reveals a significant gap in eligibility for government childcare support.

At least **73%** of Warwick student carers in this group are ineligible for childcare grants, primarily because the majority are enrolled in postgraduate taught (**51%**) or postgraduate research (**22%**) programmes, which fall outside the scope of student finance eligibility.

Government childcare grants are restricted to students undertaking a first degree, foundation degree, or level 4–5 course, excluding most postgraduate taught and postgraduate research students. Consequently, only a small proportion of carers – those in undergraduate (**11%**) or degree apprenticeship routes (**8%** UG, **6%** PGT) – qualify for support.

This pattern underscores a structural inequity: the highest concentration of student carers with young children is among postgraduate students, yet these students are least likely to receive government assistance. The finding highlights the need for institutional childcare provision and targeted financial support mechanisms for postgraduate carers.



A total of 25 participants (17 female, 8 male) took part in seven online focus groups. We opted for online focus groups to ensure greater flexibility for participants with caring responsibilities. Participants comprised 9 UGs, 6 PGTs, and 10 PGRs. A wide age range was represented, including mature students enrolled on undergraduate programmes.

The findings from the focus groups highlight a complex and often under-recognised picture of student caring responsibilities within the research community. A key distinction that wasn't always clearly reflected in the data is that many participants are not primary carers but instead hold secondary caring responsibilities. These include caring for terminally ill or mentally ill relatives, siblings with additional needs, or shared parenting arrangements, including cases of separated parents who are co-parenting with former partners. Across all accounts, the most significant challenges identified were time constraints and financial pressures, which are closely interconnected.

Theme one: The Biggest Barrier- Financial Support

Financial precarity emerged as the most significant and persistent barrier for student carers.

Despite the diversity of caring arrangements, participants consistently reported limited access to financial support mechanisms, including childcare support and welfare benefits such as Universal Credit, often due to ineligibility linked to student status. Notably, none of the participants reported awareness of dedicated funding streams for student carers, indicating a significant gap in institutional communication and outreach.

Although Warwick offers a Hardship Fund, participants described its scope as narrow and insufficient for the sustained financial pressures associated with caring responsibilities.

> "Although I'm a part-time student, I'm not eligible for most grants. When I started my master's, I looked for funding – not even related to my daughter, just something to help cover the remaining costs of the qualification – but I didn't qualify for anything."

> "There is an element of [Student Finance] that you can request for childcare… But because I'm not [my daughter's] primary carer, I'm not entitled to that funding… So effectively, I'm having to pay for that childcare myself."

For many student-parents – particularly those who are single parents or share custody – eligibility rules around "primary carer" status created additional barriers.

Even when childcare was essential for attending university, students found themselves excluded from support.



International student-parents faced the most acute challenges. Without access to government benefits and often without family networks in the UK, they described operating within extremely constrained financial and temporal margins. Visa restrictions further limited their ability to switch to part-time study or extend their degree.

To manage financial disadvantage, many carers took on part-time work alongside their studies and caring responsibilities. This created a compounding time-pressure effect, forcing students into difficult trade-offs between income, academic engagement, and caregiving. For some student-parents, these trade-offs were especially stark. Participants described moments where they had to choose between spending money they did not have or compromising their academic participation.

"In terms of my PhD, the main restriction comes from my visa. If you need to remain in the UK on a student visa, you cannot switch to part-time study. I analysed every possible option before giving birth, but when I contacted the immigration team, they confirmed that as an international student, I am not allowed to continue a PhD on a part-time basis. That was the end of the conversation – the policy simply doesn't allow it."

"I ended up turning up half an hour late… That was the balance I'm having to manage between spending money to make the problem go away and getting my daughter out of bed earlier so she can be child-minded."

Theme Two: Time Pressures

A further structural challenge relates to programme flexibility and modes of study.

While some participants expressed a preference for part-time study, this option was not always available within their departments or programmes (notably in disciplines such as Medicine and Mathematics). However, part-time study was not universally preferred, as many participants prioritised timely completion of their degrees despite the pressures of caring responsibilities.

Several participants described choosing part-time study purely for financial reasons, only to discover unexpected costs.

"I am part time and that was purely for financial reasons because it's too expensive to do it in one year, particularly because I commute and so to spread it out means that it's cheaper because otherwise I'd have to drive back and forth a lot more in the same week. … I get a government tuition loan to pay for my course that pays for most of it. And if you do part time, your second year is more expensive. Didn't know that until I paid my fees recently. And I was like, why is it?"

At the same time, part-time study was not universally preferred.

Some participants emphasised that extending the duration of their degree would intensify financial strain or delay career progression, making full-time study the only viable path despite the pressures of caring responsibilities.

Structural rigidity in teaching delivery was also highlighted as a barrier, especially fixed lecture and seminar times, with some participants noting that even arriving shortly after scheduled class times could result in exclusion from sessions in certain programmes. This inflexibility was identified as particularly challenging for student carers with fixed childcare or care-related constraints.

For others, part-time study would have been beneficial but was simply not an option within their programme structure.



"I have personally consi… going part-time… but the scholarship would also be halved. It wasn't doable… And I wouldn't pass [benefits eligibility] because of my immigrant status. So, I can only do full-time."

One participant explained how strict session timings left little room for the unpredictability of care:

"I was late for one [class] yesterday, and [the tutor] was fine about it, but certainly some of our sessions are very much this is the time it starts. If you're not there, [within] a 5-minute window at the start … you're [forced] to miss a session. You've got to try and find a way of recovering it at some point.
[This is different] for people who have... fewer other responsibilities."

"So, part-time isn't an option on my course [Medicine], or yes, that might be something I would consider."

"My department [Maths] doesn't allow part-time, so no matter how it gets for me, like mathematics only allows full-time study."



These rigid structures also meant that carers frequently missed academic and social opportunities that are central to belonging, progression, and wellbeing. One postgraduate student said:

"I've got to fit it around my job and my parents. So, I just end up missing loads of stuff [and] I find it really hard to have a life in Warwick. I very much feel the default they have in mind is someone in their early 20s who's resident in Warwick and doesn't have other responsibilities that they're juggling. And I find that just really frustrating because I miss so much good stuff. You know, it basically means all I make it up for are supervisions."

Theme Three: The Need for Better Signposting and Communication

A third major issue identified across the focus groups was the lack of clear, accessible, and proactive communication regarding available support.

Participants frequently described having to "search things out" independently, often discovering key resources, such as the university nursery, hardship funds, or policy information on leave and extensions, only by chance. This absence of centralised signposting left many carers uncertain about where to turn for guidance on childcare, maternity and parental leave, visa implications, or financial support.

One participant noted that even essential services were not communicated to them:

"No one told me about the nursery… I just searched it out myself."

Others emphasised that while resources technically existed, they were not visible or easy to locate:

"Resources do exist, but it's not being displayed a lot. With the hardship fund, I had to search through the internet a lot."

Communication challenges extended beyond financial and childcare information.

Participants also highlighted the lack of advance notice for academic events, workshops, and departmental activities —an issue that disproportionately affects carers who must coordinate around fixed childcare schedules or other responsibilities.

They further described the emotional and practical strain caused by unpredictable scheduling and university term time not always aligning with the school holidays.



For part-time PGRs, the lack of advance notice further intensified this sense of exclusion. The scheduling of social events and activities outside core hours, particularly those intended to facilitate contact with other members of their cohort, was also a source of frustration.

Taken together, these accounts point to a need for clearer, earlier, and more consistent communication, as well as a centralised point where student carers can easily access information about childcare, wellbeing, financial support, and academic processes.

"There seems to be an understanding that you only need anything between two weeks and a couple of days' notice. If you are a carer or you have a life outside university, that is incredibly frustrating."

"Sometimes you don't know which way to go… If I've said to my daughter we're going out that day, it doesn't seem right to turn around and say actually you're not important. If they just gave us an email at the beginning of the year with the dates … I wouldn't book things. I'd wait. Because I know there's something important I need to go to."

"A part time PhD is notoriously kind of isolating and staying motivated for seven years is really hard. You have to be part of the group, … but I just don't get to do anything because it's not advertised. If, at the start of term, they could publish the whole schedule or [programme of events] or they could commit to core hours, doing things between 10 and 4, for example, not having evening events.
And... just communicating better what's coming up. I just find it really frustrating."

Theme Four: Maternity and Parental Leave – Challenges for International Students

A further area where student carers experienced significant difficulty was maternity and parental leave, particularly among international students whose visa conditions sharply restrict their options.

While Warwick's policies allow for periods of maternity leave, these provisions are constrained by immigration rules that limit the amount of time a student can be away from study without jeopardising their visa status. As a result, international student-parents often face choices that are neither realistic nor humane.



One participant described having to take only a single month of leave—using her annual holiday entitlement—despite giving birth and experiencing a prolonged hospital stay:

"I just took one month of maternity leave… I took it from my holiday leave. Otherwise, you would get nine months, but I couldn't. I returned after one month. It was very hard."

Although her supervisors encouraged her to take proper maternity leave, doing so would have required her to leave the UK entirely:

"My supervisors said I could take leave, but I would need to leave the country. My husband is dependent on my visa, so it would affect everyone. We would need to apply again… it's a lot of expense. So, we didn't want to move to that option."

Instead, she relied on temporary family support and returned to her PhD far earlier than medically or emotionally ideal. She also highlighted the misconception that using annual leave for childbirth constitutes a "holiday":

"It's not a holiday. I was in the hospital for one and a half weeks… you're learning and unlearning everything with a newborn. It was very difficult to cope."

This student's account illustrates the structural bind faced by international student-parents:

- taking proper maternity leave risks visa non-compliance;
- leaving the UK is financially and logistically prohibitive;
- returning to study immediately after birth is physically and emotionally unsustainable.

While Warwick cannot change national immigration policy, the participant's experience underscores the need for clearer guidance, earlier conversations, and more proactive support for international students navigating pregnancy and early parenthood.

Even small institutional interventions, such as tailored visa advice, advance planning, and explicit recognition of these constraints, could significantly reduce the burden on students in similar situations.



Theme Five: Caring as Mitigating Circumstances

Participants also discussed how caring responsibilities intersect with mitigating circumstances (MC) processes.

Many welcomed the recent changes at Warwick – particularly the introduction of self-certification – which they felt better reflected the realities of balancing study with care.

However, they also highlighted areas where institutional structures continue to assume uninterrupted availability, creating additional pressures during assessment periods and academic breaks.

One student described how the timing of assessments and the previous lack of self-certification created significant challenges:

"In first year… I wasn't eligible to get extensions, which I think was a bit of a struggle. But this year they changed the system and we are able to self-certify. That has helped… I can't concentrate as much if my brother isn't also at school at the same time."

These accounts suggest that while Warwick's Mitigating Circumstances processes have become more flexible, assessment scheduling and academic calendars still assume an "ideal student" without significant responsibilities during breaks.

Participants noted that while several universities explicitly recognise caring responsibilities as mitigating circumstances in admissions, this is not the case at Warwick, meaning they are not taken into account when contextualising prior attainment or determining entry requirements.

Although they ultimately exceeded the required grades, the experience left a lasting impression. Their account highlights a broader concern: the absence of a clear, consistent, and transparent approach to recognising caring responsibilities in admissions.

They also noted that assignment deadlines clustered at the start of term effectively forced them to complete most of the work during holiday periods—precisely when their caring responsibilities were most intense:

"A lot of my assignments are due in the first or second week of term… but the holidays are when I go home and take up a lot of my caring responsibility."

A student described how caring for their brother was acknowledged by four of the five universities they applied to – resulting in reduced grade requirements – yet Warwick did not make any adjustment:

"I sent proof that I was a young carer… and out of the five universities I applied to, Warwick was the only one that didn't lower my entrance grades. Others gave one or two grade reductions… I felt they didn't really care or understand different situations."



Theme Six: Other Structural Issues

Beyond the academic and administrative challenges discussed earlier, participants also described a broader sense of isolation—a feeling of being unseen within systems that were not designed with carers in mind.

This sense of invisibility was reinforced by a range of structural issues that, while seemingly minor in isolation, collectively signalled that their circumstances were not anticipated or accommodated.



These experiences sit alongside earlier accounts of missing academic and social opportunities due to structures built around an "ideal" student with no external responsibilities.

For many carers, the cumulative effect was a sense of being peripheral to university life.

One example concerned accommodation policies, particularly fixed year-round rental contracts that do not reflect the realities of student carers who spend extended periods away from campus during academic breaks:

"I have a fixed-term contract until the 1st of September… I can't leave in July or August. I can't go on holiday, and I can't walk away with my son."

Another example highlighted how digital access requirements can unintentionally exclude students experiencing financial hardship. One participant described being unable to access Wellbeing Services because their phone was too old to support the required authentication app:

"I couldn't even access the wellbeing team because you needed a phone for the authenticator app. I only have an old phone, so I couldn't access them."

"The only time I have for university work is the short window when I can sit in a café or on campus before school pick-up. After 2:30pm, my availability simply doesn't exist – not in a metaphorical sense, but literally. Anything scheduled after that time is inaccessible to me unless it's exceptionally important. A seminar at three o'clock is almost impossible for me to attend."

Participants emphasised that even small gestures of recognition or community could counteract this isolation.

This highlights the need for intentional spaces where student carers can meet, share experiences, and feel recognised as part of the university community.

"Just getting carers together and saying, 'We hear you, we see what you're juggling, you're doing a great job'… even just a cup of tea and some biscuits. Some kind of recognition that you're doing a lot."

Theme Seven: Some Positives- Skills and Strengths

Despite these challenges, participants overwhelmingly expressed a willingness to disclose caring responsibilities and welcomed the idea of a structured institutional response, such as a dedicated welcome pack and improved information provision.

Importantly, many participants also framed their caring responsibilities as a source of personal and professional development, describing enhanced resilience, time management skills, and a stronger sense of direction in their academic and career trajectories.



Several participants highlighted how caregiving sharpened their organisation, focus, and sense of purpose.

"You tend to be extremely focused, extremely organised… you're doing this in a really intentional way. It's deeply enriching because you know how predictable and burdensome domestic labour can be."

For some, caring responsibilities directly informed and strengthened their academic research. A student described how their lived experience enhanced their work in the humanities.

"A lot of my research is about families, community, gender, women… having firsthand experience of childbirth, juggling responsibilities, domestic labour– this is extremely helpful. It gives you life skills and experience that are hugely additive."

In STEM fields, caring responsibilities also shaped students' research trajectories in meaningful ways. One participant explained how their caregiving experience informed the design of an assistive technology project.

Others noted that caregiving deepened their empathy and improved their ability to work collaboratively.

"I feel I am empathetic and very understanding of what people are bringing into the workplace because I have firsthand experience of that."

Taken together, these accounts highlight that student carers bring resilience, empathy, time-management expertise, intellectual insight, and a strong sense of purpose to the university. Recognising and valuing these strengths is essential– not only for supporting carers effectively, but for understanding the richness they add to Warwick's academic and social community.

"I'm doing a hardware project for disabled people … the caring process has given me an opportunity to actually feel what help they need. It's really beneficial for my project."

Theme Eight: What Works

Despite the structural challenges identified throughout the study, participants consistently described Warwick's culture as fundamentally supportive.

When communication was clear and contact was established early, departmental and central services were experienced as responsive, compassionate, and effective. The Warwick Award for Carers was appreciated–though many noted it was under-advertised–and PhD-level supervisors were frequently praised for their understanding and flexibility.



Wellbeing Services, in particular, were highlighted as a point of strength. Several students described receiving timely, proactive, and sustained support during periods of acute stress. One student's account illustrates the impact this can have:

"When I realised I needed to speak with a professional about my ... situation, I reached out to the Student Wellbeing Hub. As soon as I sent the message, they contacted me, and for that entire period they called me twice a day. I felt genuinely supported – the level of care and consistent follow-up meant a lot to me."

For this student, the consistency and immediacy of Wellbeing's outreach were crucial. Their experience demonstrates that when support is visible, proactive, and relational, it can make a profound difference to students navigating both academic pressures and caring responsibilities.

At the same time, several participants questioned whether the burden of initiating contact should fall on students – particularly those already stretched thin by care. Their accounts suggest that Warwick's support systems are strongest when they reach out rather than wait to be approached, and when information about available services is communicated clearly and early.

University Policies: Overview and Key Findings

A review of Warwick's existing policies relating to student parents and carers revealed a fragmented and uneven landscape.

While staff policies on maternity, paternity, carers' leave, fertility treatment, neonatal leave, and compassionate leave are comprehensive and easy to locate, equivalent policies for students are either outdated, inconsistent, or entirely absent. Information for students, especially PGRs is dispersed across multiple doctoral college pages, funding-body guidelines, and external grant conditions, while taught students rely on a single maternity policy.

The Students' Union provides general signposting, but no substantive policy framework, and several linked resources are outdated or inactive. Nationally, UKRI's recent review of training grant conditions acknowledged concerns around childcare and carers' support but ultimately declined to introduce meaningful provisions (2025, paras 6.26–6.27).



The review also highlighted substantial gaps in policy maintenance: the primary maternity, maternity support and adoption policy for students has not been updated since 2014, and there is no formal policy at all addressing caring responsibilities. This stands in stark contrast to the comprehensive, regularly updated suite of staff policies covering maternity, paternity, carers' leave, fertility treatment, neonatal leave and compassionate leave.

Eligibility and policies for funded and self-funded PGR students

Category	Funded PGR students- UKRI	Self-funded/Fees only/Unfunded
Eligibility	Up to **52 weeks** (study suspension) depending on the funding council. Must be primary parent (birth parent, primary adopter, or intended parent through surrogacy).	Up to **52 weeks**, but **no paid support** unless they separately qualify for SMP or Maternity Allowance through employment.
When can leave start	Up to **11 weeks** before expected birth (based on MAT B1).	Up to **11 weeks** before expected birth (based on MAT B1).
Paid Maternity Leave	**Total: up to 39 weeks paid**, broken down as: **26 weeks** at full stipend **13 weeks** at reduced SMP or stipend (which is lower)	No paid leave from Warwick. But: • May qualify for **Statutory Maternity Pay (SMP)** if employed. • May qualify for **Maternity Allowance**.
Unpaid Maternity Leave	Final **13 weeks unpaid**.	Entire leave essentially unpaid unless receiving SMP/MA through employer.
Minimum Required Leave	Warwick expects at least **2 weeks** leave after birth (aligned with staff policy).	Warwick expects at least **2 weeks** leave after birth (aligned with staff policy).
Key Notes	Funding is *not employment*, not subject to employment law.	SMP/MA eligibility depends on external employment only.

Eligibility and policies for home vs international students

Category	Home Students	International Students (Visa Holders)
Eligibility	Eligible for up to 52 weeks	Eligible for 52 weeks, but visa compliance applies. Visa **cannot be extended** due to pregnancy/maternity.
When can leave start	Up to **11 weeks** before expected birth (based on MAT B1).	Up to **11 weeks** before expected birth (based on MAT B1).
Paid Maternity Leave	Same as funded/self-funded rules depending on funding status.	Can receive SMP/Maternity Allowance if employed, **not classed as public funds** (per UK rules).
Unpaid Maternity Leave	Entire leave essentially unpaid unless receiving SMP/MA through employer.	Visa conditions may limit unpaid leave; must seek advice.
Minimum Required Leave	Warwick expects at least **2 weeks** leave after birth (aligned with staff policy).	Warwick expects at least **2 weeks** leave after birth (aligned with staff policy) and must maintain visa legality.
Key Notes	Access to NHS benefits and some grants.	Must contact International Office before TWD; TWD impacts visa validity.

A comparison of paternity leave policies further illustrates the divergence between staff and PGR entitlements.

While staff are limited to two weeks of paternity leave, this period is fully paid and protected within an employment framework. In contrast, PGR students are formally entitled to both short (two weeks) and extended (up to 50 weeks) paternity leave; however, this leave is operationalised through suspension of study rather than a protected entitlement.

In practice, access to extended paternity leave is constrained by funding conditions and visa requirements, meaning that many PGR students – particularly international students –may only be able to take a short period of leave, often without equivalent financial or institutional security.

The availability of shared parental leave for staff further highlights the disparity in policy design. While employees at Warwick can access up to 50 weeks of shared parental leave and 37 weeks of shared parental pay, enabling flexibility in how care responsibilities are distributed between parents, no equivalent structured provision exists for PGR students.

Although PGR policies formally allow extended paternity leave, this is neither financially supported nor framed as a shared entitlement, limiting its practical usability. As a result, while staff policies actively support a more equal distribution of childcare, PGR provisions remain comparatively individualised and structurally constrained (see Sources).



Eligibility and policies for funded and self-funded students

Category	Funded PGR Students- UKRI	Self-Funded/Fees Only/Unfuned
Eligibility	Second parent under Warwick definition.	Eligible but **no paid leave** unless employed elsewhere.
Paid Paternity Leave	**2 weeks paid** at full stipend (UKRI policy).	None (unless employed elsewhere).
Unpaid Paternitiy Leave	**Up to 50 weeks unpaid, available only via study suspension under Warwick's Extended Paternity Leave policy.** Must be taken within 12 months of birth; may be taken in up to 3 blocks (min. 4 weeks each).	Same extended leave rules (up to 50 weeks via suspension)
Notes	Must suspend studies for entire paternity period beyond paid weeks.	–



The availability of shared parental leave for staff further highlights the disparity in policy design. While employees at Warwick can access up to 50 weeks of shared parental leave and 37 weeks of shared parental pay, enabling flexibility in how care responsibilities are distributed between parents, no equivalent structured provision exists for PGR students.

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Eligibility and policies for home vs international students

Category	Home Students	International Students
Eligibility	Eligible but **no paid leave** unless employed elsewhere.	Eligible but **no paid leave** unless employed elsewhere and visa considerations.
Paid Paternity Leave	Follows funding status (same as left columns).	Follows funding status; SMP/MA allowed if employed, not classed as public funds.
Unpaid Paternitiy Leave	Same as funding status.	Same rules, **but visa compliance required**; long suspensions may affect visa validity.
Notes	–	Visa absence thresholds must not be exceeded.

Temporary Withdrawal (TWD) Related to pregnancy or parenthood

Category	Home Students	International Students
TWD Eligibility	Up to **2 years** for PhD students.	Visa **cannot be extended**; extended TWD may require leaving the UK or reapplying, with financial implications.
During TWD	Funding paused; restart depends on funder.	Risk of visa cancellation; MUST notify International Office.
Antenatal Appointments	Absences allowed. Partners may also request absence.	Same, but must meet attendance monitoring.

A key structural feature of PGR parental leave at Warwick is that it is largely administered through temporary withdrawal from study rather than as a protected leave entitlement within ongoing study.

This distinction is significant: while staff parental leave allows individuals to remain within their employment relationship, PGR students effectively exit active study during periods of leave. As a result, parental leave is reframed not as a supported phase within academic progression, but as an interruption to it, with implications for funding continuity, academic progress, and visa compliance.

While there are well-established staff policies covering areas such as fertility treatment leave, compassionate leave, and clearly defined neonatal care provisions, there are no directly comparable frameworks for PGR students. Instead, student provision tends to be structured around temporary withdrawal from study. While this may be appropriate in some cases, it also carries significant financial implications for students that are not equally experienced by staff.



Warwick's staff policies conceptualise care as a broad, ongoing responsibility supported through a range of targeted and flexible leave provisions. In contrast, PGR policies frame care more narrowly around parenthood and primarily manage it through temporary withdrawal from study. This results in a system where staff are supported to remain within work while managing care, whereas PGR students are often required to step outside of their studies, with more limited financial, structural, and practical support (see Sources).

It is also important to highlight that maternity and paternity provision within student policies remains limited and inconsistently structured, while broader caring roles are largely unrecognised and undefined. Recognising caring as mitigating circumstances has been a step in the right direction, but more is required at the policy level.

Financial Benefits: National Policy Context

Support for student parents in the UK is shaped by a fragmented mix of welfare policy, devolved childcare provision, and research funder rules, which together create inconsistent and often inadequate support, particularly for postgraduate researchers.

Limited and uneven access to state support

While some forms of support exist, eligibility is highly constrained:

- Undergraduate (UG) student parents can access the Childcare Grant (covering up to ~85% of costs, capped weekly), but this is not available to postgraduate researchers (see Sources).
- Eligibility is also restricted to students who meet residency requirements (e.g. 'home' students), excluding most international students.
- All children aged 3–4 are entitled to 15 hours of free early education, regardless of parental status, with additional hours dependent on work and income conditions.
- Access to Universal Credit is formally available to students only under limited conditions. Full-time students are not usually eligible, although important exceptions exist (including for those with dependent children) (see Sources).
- Child Benefit represents a more comprehensive form of financial support available to individuals responsible for a child, including those who are fostering or adopting. Eligibility for this support is not linked to student status or level of study but instead depends on residency and immigration status (see Sources). As a result, individuals subject to immigration control—including most international students with 'no recourse to public funds' conditions—are typically excluded.
- A Parents' Learning Allowance is available for students with dependent children to help with learning costs, but is only availble to Undergraduate Students in England.



- The UK provides a universal entitlement of 15 hours of free childcare per week for all 3–4 year-olds in England. This form of support is not linked to student or immigration status, making it one of the more widely accessible provisions available to families with young children. However, it is limited to a specific age group and a set number of hours (see Sources).

- In the UK, working parents are eligible for up to 30 hours of free childcare for children aged 23 weeks to 5 years. However, eligibility is restricted to families in which both parents are in paid work and meet minimum earnings thresholds (£203.36 per week for those aged 21 and over; £173.60 for those aged 18–20; and £128 for those under 18 or apprentices). As a result, families with a PhD student carer - even where their studies are fully funded - are excluded from this provision due to their student status, unless they have additional employment.



International students: systemic exclusion from public funds

Many international students in the UK are subject to visa conditions that include a 'no recourse to public funds' (NRPF) restriction. This restriction is reflected in visa conditions themselves, where individuals are typically granted leave to remain with a 'no recourse to public funds' condition (see Sources). This means that they are not eligible to access most forms of state welfare support, including Universal Credit, Child Tax Credit, and the Sure Start Maternity Grant. This reflects the broader structure of the UK welfare system, in which access to public funds is linked to immigration status rather than student status or financial need. However, some international students may still access contributory benefits, such as Statutory Maternity Pay (SMP) and Maternity Allowance, as these are based on employment contributions rather than being classified as public funds.



Institutional discretion and hardship-based support

Because national systems exclude or limit PGRs, the University of Warwick provides:

- Hardship funds for Home Students
- Emergency Loans for Home, International or EU Students
- Ad hoc childcare support schemes
- International Students Emergency Fund
- International Students Childcare Fund

The University of Warwick has expanded its hardship funding provision in recent years, working towards a more accessible and structured offer. In particular, the introduction and development of schemes such as the International Students' Childcare Fund provide targeted financial support for EU and international students with pre-school-aged children. These schemes offer discretionary contributions towards childcare costs and are open to students across different levels of study, including postgraduate researchers.

This represents a positive step in recognising childcare as an ongoing financial pressure for student parents, particularly those who are not eligible for national forms of support.

UKRI policy: recognition without resolution

The UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) review of postgraduate funding conditions clearly recognises the issue of childcare access. During the consultation phase (2023), caring responsibilities and access to childcare were identified as key barriers to participation and equality in postgraduate research (UKRI, A New Deal for Postgraduate Research: Response to the Call for Input, 2023, 9-10, paras 2.5-2.9).

However, in the final Training Grant Conditions review (2025), while UKRI acknowledges these concerns, it explicitly declines to introduce new requirements. It states that it is "not well placed to provide advice to students on the childcare or carer support available to them" and therefore does not adopt the proposed recommendation (UKRI, 2025, paras 6.26–6.27).

In this framing, the issue is partly attributed to a lack of awareness among student parents. However, less emphasis is placed on the structural complexity and fragmentation of childcare provision, which varies across devolved UK systems and institutions, and which may itself contribute to this lack of awareness.

As a result, responsibility for addressing childcare and caring support is effectively devolved to individual universities and local systems, rather than being embedded within national funding conditions.



Recommendations

The combined insights from the focus groups and the wider review of university and national policy frameworks reveal a set of recurring structural issues that shape student carers' experiences.

These findings point to several interconnected themes that require targeted policy intervention to improve recognition, access, equity, and academic participation. The recommendations below are organised around these themes, each reflecting a specific gap identified in the data and paired with a strategic action designed to address it.

Theme One: Lack of Recognition

Across the focus groups, student carers described a broader sense of institutional invisibility rather than explicit exclusion.

While many were able to access extensions and mitigating circumstances through existing processes, they felt that their caring responsibilities were not proactively acknowledged or embedded within university systems. The overarching issue was not uneven academic treatment, but the absence of clear, visible structures that recognise carers' circumstances and reduce the time, financial pressure, and administrative labour they routinely navigate. This theme manifested through several sub-themes, each highlighting a different dimension of this lack of recognition.



1.1 Introduction of a Carer's Passport

Although students can access extensions and mitigating circumstances when needed, focus group discussions suggested that these processes are not yet embedded within a broader, proactive framework that consistently recognises caring responsibilities. Students often described using these mechanisms sparingly, not because they were inaccessible, but because there was no clear, consistent structure signalling that carers have distinct and ongoing needs.

A **Carer's Passport** would provide this formal recognition by creating a standardised record of caring responsibilities that travels with the student across departments and years of study. Rather than replacing existing processes, working in a similar way to reasonable adjustments, it would make them more systematic, transparent, and predictable, ensuring that carers can access appropriate flexibility without relying on ad-hoc arrangements or individual staff discretion.

1.2 Introduction of a network for carers

Discussions around the "ideal student" highlighted that carers often felt out of step with the dominant assumptions of student life. Many described how their routines, responsibilities, and priorities differed significantly from those of their peers, which sometimes left them feeling disconnected rather than explicitly excluded. Several participants expressed a desire for informal spaces where they could meet others "in the same boat," even if only for occasional conversation. This reflects not only a lack of visibility but also the absence of a social infrastructure that acknowledges the diversity of student experiences.



Students' experiences of academic support varied significantly depending on individual staff members' awareness and attitudes towards caring responsibilities. Some tutors were highly supportive, while others dismissed caring duties as personal issues outside the university's remit.

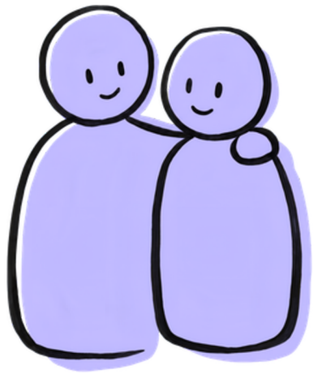
Establishing a **network for carers** could provide this missing point of connection – creating opportunities for peer support, increasing institutional visibility, and offering a gentle, low-pressure way for carers to share experiences and shape policy through a structured feedback loop – at relatively low cost.

> "Sometimes what carers need most is simply to be brought together and told: we see you, we know what you're juggling, and you're doing a great job – even if it's just over a cup of tea and some biscuits."

1.3 Guidlines for supervisors and personal tutors

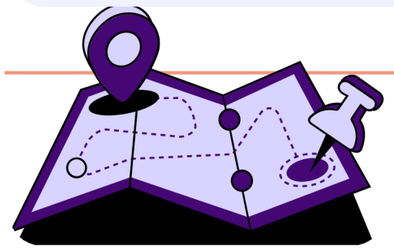
Students' experiences of academic support varied significantly depending on individual staff members' awareness and attitudes toward caring responsibilities. Some tutors were highly supportive, while others dismissed caring duties as personal issues outside the university's remit.

D**eveloping new institutional guidelines for supervisors and personal tutors would provide clear expectations and procedures for supporting carers, ensuring equitable treatment and proactive flexibility across departments.**



Limited recognition points to a broader structural pattern: university processes and expectations often assume a level of flexibility, availability, and digital access that does not reflect the realities of students with caring responsibilities.

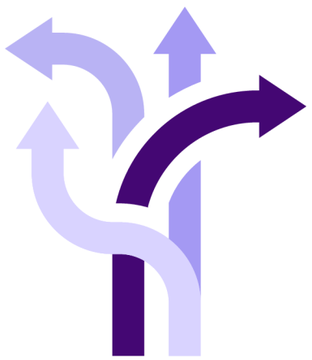
While carers do not necessarily experience direct exclusion, many described navigating systems that were designed around an "ideal student" with fewer external constraints. This mismatch becomes most visible in the rigidity of academic and well-being structures, where standardised timelines, digital-only procedures, and short-notice requirements can unintentionally disadvantage those balancing study with care. The following sub-themes illustrate how these structural assumptions shape carers' day-to-day experiences and where targeted adjustments could make participation more equitable.



2.1 Alternative access routes

Focus group discussions highlighted that some carers struggled to access wellbeing services because the booking system relies heavily on digital tools and device-based authentication. For students using older phones and/or managing financial constraints, this created a practical barrier rather than a lack of willingness to seek support. The issue reflects a broader assumption that all students have equal access to reliable technology–an assumption that does not hold for some carers.

Introducing **alternative access routes, such as non-digital booking options or staff-mediated contact,** would prevent inadvertent exclusion and ensure that well-being support is accessible regardless of a student's financial or technological circumstances.



2.2 Greater Flexibility / Advance Notice System

Carers frequently described the challenge of aligning academic schedules with childcare or other caring responsibilities, particularly when timetables, assessment deadlines, or in-person requirements were communicated at short notice. This rigidity does not stem from intentional exclusion but from structural norms built around an "ideal student" who is fully flexible, locally based, and free from external responsibilities.

For carers, even small adjustments, such as earlier release of timetables, predictable assessment windows, or flexible lecture formats, would significantly reduce logistical strain.

"Because I live far from home, I have to plan everything months in advance – my travel, my deadlines, even my part-time work so I can save enough to visit. The distance means I'm constantly managing my calendar around caring responsibilities, and any short-notice changes make that really difficult."

"Reading weeks aren't really reading weeks for me. I go home to care for my brother – the school run, cooking, medication – so I get far less academic work done than others. Even short weekend trips are four-plus hours each way, so planning around travel and lectures becomes a constant challenge."

A Flexibility / Advance Notice system would embed care-aware planning into academic processes, enabling carers to organise childcare, employment, and study commitments with greater stability.

2.3 Mitigating circumstances in admissions

Several students noted that other universities provide bursaries or targeted financial support for carers, underscoring the unevenness of sector-wide provision and the potential for Warwick to develop a more equitable model.

> "My older brother is studying medicine … at his university, there's a scheme with a means-tested bursary for young carers. And he's able to access funding that way from his university, which I think is quite a great initiative."

Focus group discussions highlighted that some carers' A-Level performance had been shaped by long-term caring responsibilities, yet this is not currently recognised within Warwick's admissions processes. Several students noted that other universities had explicitly taken caring responsibilities into account at entry, which made Warwick's approach feel out of step with sector practice.

Introducing a mechanism for considering **caring responsibilities as a form of mitigating circumstances at the admissions stage** and **deserving of a bursary** would align the university with widening-participation principles and ensure that carers are not disadvantaged by structural inequalities that affect pre-university attainment. This is an area fully within institutional control and represents a meaningful extension of Warwick's existing commitment to fair access.



3.1 Welcome Pack for Student Carers

Focus group discussions highlighted that student carers often encountered support mechanisms only by chance – through peers, chance conversations, or after facing a crisis – rather than through clear, proactive communication from the university.

> "I only found out the Wellbeing Service existed when I was struggling with my dad's illness and a friend suggested it. I wish we were told about it clearly in the first week, rather than having to discover it in the middle of a crisis."

> "I didn't know there was a nursery [on campus] either until just now … [it] is mad that nobody's communicated that."

> "No one told me about the Hardship Fund – I only found it after digging around online. There is communication, but it's so minimal that you end up having to search for everything yourself."

While many forms of assistance do exist, they are dispersed across different webpages, departments, and processes, making them difficult to navigate for students already managing significant time and care pressures. Participants expressed that a more intentional, upfront approach would help them feel recognised and reduce the cognitive load of searching for information.

A Welcome Pack for Student Carers would centralise essential guidance on wellbeing services, accommodation options, childcare pathways and emergency support, academic flexibility and mitigating circumstances, visa considerations, and key departmental contacts. Beyond improving access to information, such a resource would signal institutional acknowledgement of carers from the outset, including visibility of tailored opportunities such as the dedicated route through the Warwick Award and other hardship funds.

3.2 Updates to the University's accommodation pages

Earlier institutional research, including the FECARE (Female Postgraduate Researchers and Early Career Researchers with Caring Responsibilities) project, highlighted that information about campus accommodation suitable for students with children is difficult to locate or inconsistently signposted (FECARE, 2025; Li, Karatepe, Li, Gao, 2026). This lack of visibility can leave carers uncertain about eligibility, availability, and application timelines, often forcing them to rely on informal networks or time-consuming searches.

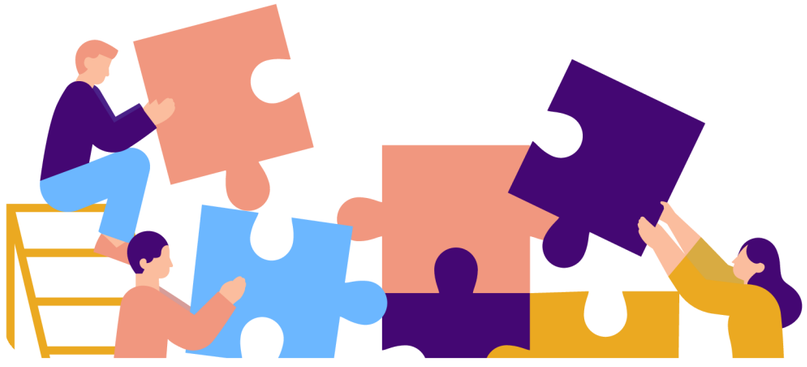


Updating the accommodation webpages to clearly identify family-appropriate housing options would reduce this uncertainty and support carers in planning their living arrangements well in advance. Such clarity would also signal that the university recognises and plans for the needs of students with dependants.

3.3 Updates to Doctoral College guidance pages

Previous work with student carers has shown that navigating UK childcare systems–school admissions, nursery waiting lists, and the university nursery application process–can be particularly challenging for international and postgraduate carers. Much of this information is dispersed across external websites or embedded in local knowledge that new students may not have access to.

Creating clear, centralised guidance on Doctoral College and the Student's Union pages would provide carers with a reliable starting point for understanding childcare pathways and timelines. This would reduce administrative burden and help carers plan their study and family commitments with greater confidence.



While many of the challenges faced by student carers can be addressed through institutional adjustments, focus group discussions also highlighted areas where the university's capacity to act is constrained by broader policy environments.

These include statutory childcare provisions, funding structures, and immigration regulations that shape carers' financial stability and legal security. As a result, some forms of support require not only internal policy development but also external engagement, advocacy, and negotiation at the sector or national level. The following sub-themes illustrate where wider policy alignment is necessary to ensure equitable conditions for student carers.



4.1 Dedicated bursary or childcare fund

"With half-term coming up, the kids will be home for ten days, and I'll be monitoring them almost 24/7. During that period, I can only do a very limited amount of academic work, so I have to finish everything important before it starts."

When my daughter was home for two weeks due to Easter Break, I couldn't work at all. There's no support to cover that time, and I'm not receiving any child benefit either because the application system is so difficult to navigate."

"I'm a PhD student, and my husband's job isn't financially stable, so the nursery fees are simply too high for us. We just can't afford much of it."

Students, especially postgraduates and international carers, described the high cost of childcare as one of the most significant barriers to sustaining their studies. Many fall outside statutory childcare schemes due to visa status, mode of study, or the structure of postgraduate funding, leaving them with limited or no financial support. This gap is not the result of university policy alone but reflects broader national frameworks that do not fully account for the needs of student carers.

Establishing dedicated childcare bursaries or funds, such as a **holiday support scheme**, would help mitigate these structural inequities by providing targeted financial assistance to those excluded from statutory provision. Such a fund would not only support academic continuity but also signal the university's commitment to addressing systemic barriers that disproportionately affect carers.

4.2 Policy-level negotiation on maternity/visa flexibility

International student carers face additional constraints arising from immigration regulations, including limited maternity provisions, strict attendance requirements, and inflexible visa timelines.

Focus group participants noted that these rules often conflict with the realities of pregnancy, childbirth, and long-term caring responsibilities, creating compliance risks and emotional strain. Because these constraints sit largely outside the university's direct control, meaningful change requires policy-level negotiation and sector-wide advocacy.

By **engaging with national bodies and contributing to higher-education policy reform**, the university can help shape more flexible visa and maternity arrangements that protect international carers and align regulatory expectations with lived experience.



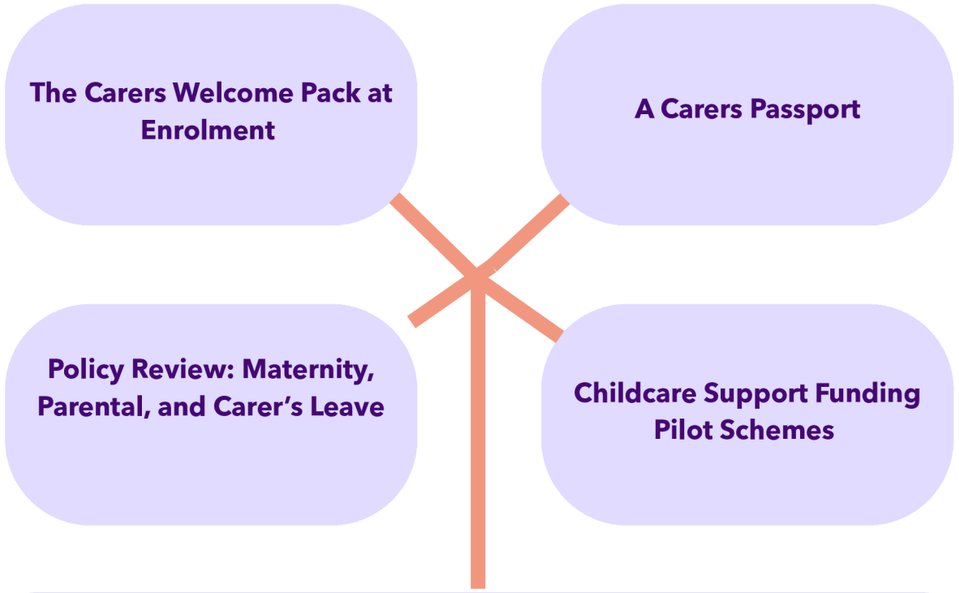
"After giving birth, I spent almost two weeks in the hospital and only had about two and a half weeks left before I had to return to my PhD. It wasn't a holiday – we were learning how to care for a newborn while I was trying to recover. If the university offered proper maternity support, it would make an enormous difference."

Next Steps

1. Implementing Key Recommendations from the Focus Groups and Survey

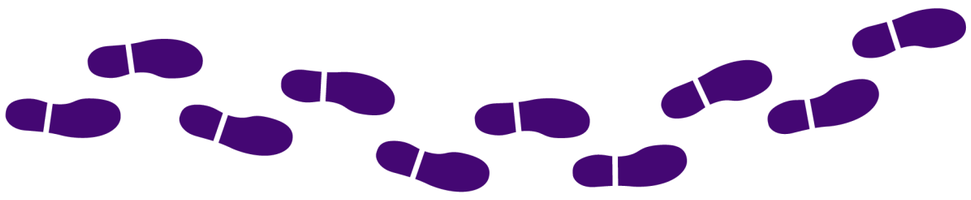
This study highlights the urgent need for Warwick to move from ad-hoc, individualised responses to a coherent, institution-wide framework that recognises and supports student carers. The following steps outline a strategic pathway for institutional change, sector engagement, and long-term sustainability.

Action can be taken to implement the key recommendations highlighted above, including:



Building a Sustainable Carer Community through:

- A Student Carers Network for peer support and advocacy;
- An Annual Carers Forum to review policies and gather feedback;
- Care-aware training for supervisors, tutors, and frontline staff



2. Internal and External Stakeholders and Institutional Alignment

Many of the challenges faced by student carers – including childcare affordability, maternity/parental leave gaps, visa-related rigidity, and access to government childcare and carers support – extend beyond the remit of a single institution. Warwick is well-placed to contribute to **sector-wide reform** by engaging with:

- **Local and national** MPs who have expressed concern about student parents, carers, and the cost of living pressures affecting higher education.
- **The Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI)** to co-produce a policy note on student carers, addressing the current evidence gap.
- **UKRI and alliances with other Russell Group institutions** to benchmark policies, share best practice, and explore collaborative approaches to childcare bursaries, maternity support, and flexible study pathways.

Such partnerships would position Warwick as a sector leader in care-aware policy development.

To embed sustainable change, the University should work closely with **key internal stakeholders**, such as widening participation, dean of students office, wellbeing and disability services, doctoral college and social inclusion / EDI Office, to formally recognise student carers as a priority group and integrate them into outreach, retention, and financial support strategies.

This alignment ensures that support is not dependent on individual staff goodwill but embedded in institutional structures.

3. Strengthening the Evidence Base

The findings point to a significant lack of sector-wide data on student carers. Warwick can address this by:

- Analysing **enrolment records** to identify carers and track demographic patterns.
- Developing **longitudinal datasets** to monitor progression, interruption, withdrawal, and completion rates.
- Conducting **follow-up qualitative interviews** on maternity/parental leave, childcare costs, visa constraints, and time poverty.
- Benchmarking Warwick's policies against other **Russell Group, post-1992, and international institutions**.

A stronger evidence base will support targeted interventions and inform national policy debates.

Conclusion

This report represents both a call to recognise student carers more fully and a practical agenda for action. Its findings challenge us to ensure that care is not treated as an exception to student life, but as part of the diversity of circumstances that higher education must understand, value and support.

The next steps outlined above provide a clear roadmap for Warwick to transition from reactive, fragmented support to a proactive, care-aware institutional framework. Through strategic partnerships, stronger data, targeted policy reform, and meaningful community building, the University can lead the sector in recognising and supporting student carers – not as an afterthought, but as a core part of its commitment to equity and inclusion



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https://warwick.ac.uk/services/academicoffice/studentrecords/atoz/maternity_guidelines_sept_2014_v4.pdf

Policies for Postgraduate Researchers at the University of Warwick:
https://warwick.ac.uk/services/dc/policy/

Wellbeing and Student Support for Carers (students with caring responsibilities) :
https://warwick.ac.uk/services/wss/topics/carers/

Hardship Funding: University of Warwick Student Funding Support:
https://warwick.ac.uk/services/wss/funding/hardshipfunding/

Warwick Award: Students with Caring Responsibilities:
https://warwick.ac.uk/services/skills/warwickaward/help-centre/carers/

Warwick Student Union: Supporting Parents & Carers:
https://www.warwicksu.com/campaigns-communities/communities/supportingparentscarers/

External Support and Guidance

NUS Connect Learning with Care Report: Experiences of Student Carers in the UK:
https://www.nusconnect.org.uk/resources/learning-with-care/download_attachment

Carer Passport: College and Universities Making it Work:
https://www.carerspassports.uk/education/colleges-universities/making-it-work/

Government Support

Childcare Grant: What you'll get :
https://www.gov.uk/childcare-grant/what-youll-get

Universal Credit and students:
https://www.gov.uk/guidance/universal-credit-and-students

Child Benefit: Who can get Child Benefit:
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Help paying for childcare: 15 hours free childcare for 3 and 4-year-olds:
https://www.gov.uk/help-with-childcare-costs/free-childcare-and-education-for-3-to-4-year-olds

Entitlement for free Childcare for Working Parents:
https://www.gov.uk/free-childcare-if-working

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