The Impact of Caring on Carers' Education

Carer Support Network of SA Discussion Paper

Carer peak bodies and service providers have long held and raised concerns about the impact of caring on Carer's education and the life-long impact on employment and earning potential, particularly when the caring role commences at a young care. The release of the *Young Carers and their engagement with education: 'No space in my brain to learn'* study in 2019, commissioned by Carers Australia and conducted by researchers from the Australian Centre for Child Protection (UniSA) and the School of Primary and Allied Health (Monash University), highlighted the experiences of Young Carers relationship with education. The National Carer Survey and National Carer Wellbeing Survey, continue to provide data of the Carers access to ongoing education.

This discussion paper identifies the experiences of Young Carers and Carers seeking to return and/or transition to post-secondary education and the challenges and barriers they experience.

Carers SA and our industry partners through the *Carer Support Network of SA* are in a unique position to make a meaningful difference, through our shared knowledge and insight by amplifying the collective voice and lived experience of Carers and the impact of caring on their education and by advocating for system change and supports that that recognise and respond to Carers their education needs.

Key Strategies and Action Plans identify the specific needs of Carers in relation to increased access and participation in education as pivotal in supporting Carers to achieve financial security.

National Carer Strategy 2024-2034[1] & Action Plan 2024-2027[2]

The National Carer Strategy and Action Plan for the first three years has highlighted Carer access to education and training as a key driver for achieving financial security. The National Carer Strategy identifies the need for Cares to have access to flexible and adaptable learning options through carer-friendly education and training to support personal and professional development goals. Carers may need support to enhance their capacity to enter or re-enter the workforce or return to education. Likewise, school-aged carers need support to meaningfully engage, sustain and complete education. Carers often experience challenges to receiving support and recognition from workplaces and education and training institutions, which can significantly impact their ability to balance caregiving responsibilities with work or study. Employers and education and training institutions may not fully understand the unique needs and challenges faced by carers.

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[1] National Carer Strategy | Australian Government Department of Health, Disability and Ageing
[2] National Carer Strategy Action Plan 2024–2027 | Australian Government Department of Health, Disability and Ageing

The Strategy has identified actions to take a multifaceted approach to support carers to achieve financial security that

- support carers to overcome barriers to participating in paid employment or education and training systems
- encourage and support workplaces and education and training institutions to better accommodate carers.
- support workplaces and education and training systems to be more inclusive and flexible for carer participation, through improved awareness and recognition of carers. We will work with relevant government agencies to improve recognition of carers in the workforce and education and training systems and value the skills and knowledge they bring from their lived experience.

National Carer Survey 2024[3]

The National Carer Survey found that particular groups of Young Carers that report having greater difficulties in attending school and studying at home and poorer wellbeing [4] including:

- Young Carers who were identified as the main Carer and female Carers reported lower school attendance than their male counterparts.
- Young Carers caring for multiple relatives with multiple care needs reported poorer educational engagement, lower wellbeing and had cared for longer periods than their peers.
- Young Carers required to care for more than 20 hours a week had lower educational engagement than those who provided care for 10 hours or less on a weekly basis.
- Female Young Carers providing care for a parent, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Young Carers and Young Carers in single parent households encountered significant challenges engaging with education.
- Young Carers with their own disabilities had poor educational engagement and wellbeing. Qualitative analysis showed that having a mental health issue also affected Young Carers' motivations for schooling, their ability to spend time with friends and their overall sense of wellbeing and belonging.
- >68% of carers reported low satisfaction with their ability to do further education or training.
- >50% of carers reported their ability to progress their studies/education was getting worse.

Youth Action Plan 2024-2027[5]

The SA Department of Human Services Youth Action Plan recognises Young Carers as a key priority group. It recognises that of the 294 443 young people in South Australia aged 12 to 25, what make up 17% of the State's population, approximately 30 000 (10%) of them are Young Carers. The Youth Action Plan recognises that while Young Carers contributions often go unrecognised, these young carers possess the resilience and strength to navigate complex situations. By offering support, resources, and opportunities, we can empower young carers to maintain their physical, emotional, and psychological wellbeing, enhance their educational

[3] National Carer Survey | Carers NSW

[4] Moore, T., Bourke-Taylor, H., Greenland, N., McDougall, S., Bromfield, L., Robinson, L, & Brown, T., (2019). Young Carers and their engagement with education: 'No space in my brain to learn'. Adelaide, SA: University of South Australia. A report commissioned by Carers Australia

[5] Youth Action Plan 2024–2027 | DHS

experiences, foster social connections, and pursue fulfilling post-school pathways, enabling them to reach their full potential.

It actions identify supporting schools to give students a say in how to strengthen safety and enhance a sense of belonging at their school. Priorities for young people Increase skills to be able to help each other, foster meaningful quality relationships, and increase education on healthy relationships and consent, especially relating to awareness of the psychological and legal aspects of violence and abuse. Increase awareness and education to develop a more welcoming and inclusive society, particularly in relation to bullying prevention.

Discussion 1: Young Carers

This discussion outlines the key issues Young Carers face in accessing and sustaining active participation in education. It should be read in conjunction with *Carers Experience of Opportunities to Return to Education* to underpin a discussion with regard the strategies Carer organisations may take to raise awareness of these issues and opportunities to work with the education sector to support Carers better access to education to improve their opportunities for skilled employment and enduring financial security.

The demands of caring can limit opportunities to participate and succeed in education. Young carers in Year 9, for example, record significantly lower performance in reading and numeracy than their peers.[6] Carers are more likely than non-carers to have discontinued high school before completing Year 12 and are less likely to have attained a higher education degree at bachelor level or above.[7]

Schools can play a critical role in supporting Young Carers to engage and remain engaged in education through early identification and early intervention. When Young Carers are identified, acknowledged and supported, they can achieve and participate more actively at school and in their community. This is critical in ensuring that Young Carers have every opportunity to thrive at school and beyond. Supporting Young Carers will not only improve outcomes for these students, but can also help to improve school attendance, engagement and attainment levels.[8]

Invisibility, stigma, bullying and isolation

Many Young Carers do not disclose their role at school, either because they do not recognise themselves and/or identify as Carers or fear stigma and bullying. Young Carers are often unlikely to view their caring tasks as unusual, as it is normalised within the family. This lack of self-identification and disclosure of their caring role leads to Young Carers often being invisible and undermines school systems timely interventions and implementation of flexible learning modalities, connecting Young Carers to student supports and impacts Young Carers social engagement and peer inclusion resulting in increased experiences of isolation and at greater risk of bullying.

[6] Warren, D. & Edwards, B. (2016). Young carers. LSAC Annual Statistical Report.
[7] Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). Disability, ageing and carers, Australia: summary of findings, 2018b
[8] Victorian Government School Operations and Support for Young Carers

Studies highlight that Young Carers often experience disconnection from the education environment including from their student peers. Schools that create safe ways to disclose caring responsibilities, such as a trusted staff contact or a normalised question at enrolment, see better inclusion outcomes. In Victoria, for example, schools are encouraged to screen for caring roles and link students with external supports. In rural areas, however, fear of being singled out can contribute to Young Carers non-disclosure of their caring role.

Many Young Carers chose to not identify themselves as such, due to fear of bullying or intervention, or a lack of awareness that supports may be available for Young Carers.[9] South Australian research also indicates that Young Carers may also fear instruction/ investigation into their family circumstances by authorities which contributes to their non-disclosure.[10] Alternatively, many Young Carers are unable to access supports due to not identifying as a Young Carer, or not being identified by those around them, including by their schools. Young Carers also commonly report not having a trusted adult in their life who they believe would be able to guide them to any support services available.[11]

In some CALD communities the concept of a young carer is "completely unfamiliar" where helping family is simply expected and care is embedded in family duty, not a separate role. Many CALD Carers report strong cultural expectations that family care takes place within the household, without involving outsiders which may not feel culturally safe. Disclosing a caring role can feel like admitting that the family is not coping or is failing its responsibilities or betraying family privacy or dishonouring parents or elders. For Young Carers, this can produce guilt and anxiety that if they tell a teacher, GP or support worker about their caring responsibilities. Further stigma and shame around mental illness, disability and substance may further impact Young Carers concerns about disclosing their role. In circumstances where Young Carers may be expected to disclose their burdens, fear or risk in front of their parents, they may not feel they can speak freely for fear of shaming their family.

Young Carers are often constrained to the home for many hours each week, severely impacting academic and social engagements often resulting in academic disadvantage, social isolation, and the development of anxiety and depression.

Young Carers are less likely to complete or do well in secondary school compared with students without caring responsibilities. An important correlation exists between positive engagement at school and successful school outcomes.

In practice, identification of Young Carers in education settings depends on school-level policies to improve inclusion and support flexible learning that meets their access needs. Such policies include those that raise awareness of the unique role and stressors Young Carers experience, normalise early identification through actively screening for Young Carers and establishing a single point of contact to support Young Carers.

Time Poor and Role Stress

[9] Alfonzo, L.F., Singh, A., Disney, G. *et al.* The mental health impact of school bullying among Young Carers in Australia: a causal mediation analysis. 2023
[10] Hamilton, M., Redmond, G. Are Young Carers Less Engaged in School than non-Carers? Evidence from a Representative Australian Study. 2020
[11] Siskowski, C. (2006). Young caregivers: Effect of family health situations on school performance. The Journal of School Nursing, 22(3), 163–169.

Young Carers are time poor and experience significant psychosocial stress related to their caring role. They often shoulder daily care tasks including but not limited to personal care, medication supervision, household management, social and emotional support. Where they support attending medical appointments etc they are often not able to attend normal school hours. Their caring responsibilities often lead to less time and energy for learning, including homework and assignments outside of class, frequent lateness, early departures, or absences from school and reduced ability to participate fully in class and keep up with learning.
Young Carers have varying degrees of engagement in school or post high school education. An analysis of applications for the Young Carer bursary program[12] found that 22 percent of Young Carers, were unable to attend school at least once per week due to caring responsibilities. This equates to about 40 of the 180 school days students usually attend each year. A further 39 percent were unable to attend school once, twice or three times each month due to caring responsibilities, equating to between 10 and 30 school days per year.

Allocating time to school attendance and study time are also impacted by the uncertainty and unpredictability of the caring role. For many Young Carers, their caring role is unpredictable due to the nature of the care recipient's fluctuating health. For others, the behaviour of the care recipient may be unpredictable either due to behavioural factors relating to disability, mental health issues or unpredictability associated with substance use.[13]

Research shows[14] Young Carers face a range of psychosocial stressors that can significantly impact their long-term wellbeing. These stressors include the emotional burden of their caring role, the nee to balance caregiving with personal responsibilities such as school attendance and schoolwork and the challenges of managing the health and needs of family members. Young Carers often experience stress, anxiety and depressions due to the demands of their caring role and the competing demands of their own life. As they often do not have their own peer support networks, as discussed previously, this further exacerbates their risk of burnout and social isolation.

Research shows that these pressures directly affect academic achievement, over and above any background disadvantage. The biggest impacts appear in attendance, engagement, and achievement, which are the key markers the school system tracks. Flexible approaches, such as adjusted deadlines or alternatives to detention for lateness, are often described as very helpful.

Policy and legislation touch this problem unevenly. In Australia, the Carer Recognition Act 2010 sets principles and reporting duties for Commonwealth agencies and associated providers, however it does not create enforceable attendance flexibilities in schools. States provide varying operational guidance to schools, for example Victoria's Young Carers policy and NSW implementation guidance for the state Carers Act. The result is variable practice within and across systems.

Cognitive Load and Wellbeing

Caring can take a toll on concentration and wellbeing. Disrupted sleep, constant worry, and the emotional weight of responsibility reduce mental focus. A lack of sleep and constant feelings of

[12] Moore, T., Bourke-Taylor, H., Greenland, N., McDougall, S., Bromfield, L., Robinson, L, & Brown, T., (2019). Young Carers and their engagement with education: 'No space in my brain to learn'. Adelaide, SA: University of South Australia. A report commissioned by Carers Australia
[13]Owen Walker, Richard Moulding & Jonathan Mason (2024) The experience of Young Carers in Australia: a qualitative systematic review and meta-ethnographic synthesis, Australian Journal of Psychology, 76:1
[14] ibid

stress and anxiety related to and resulting from their caring responsibilities were issues for many Young Carers who reported that they were sometimes too exhausted to get to school.[15]

The cognitive load Young Carers have for their education and learning is impacted by the physical load of their caring role, which leaves Young Carers feeling physically tired, exhausted, and often underprepared and running late for school and the emotional load of caregiving, with Young Carers carrying a burden of worry, guilt, and increased cognitive load related to the responsibility of caring. This cognitive pre-occupation is also a contributing factor to difficulty to concentrate and engage with schoolwork. Stress and anxiety for example, are well known for restricting the cognitive processing capacity and thereby interfering with learning.[16]

At school, Young Carers often report challenges concentrating and may be further distracted at school as they are anxious about their family members at home. All of this adds to Young Carers being physically exhausted and find difficulty concentrating both at school and at home when trying to study and complete schoolwork.[17]

Many Young Carers feel different to their peers and having a sense of missing out on their childhood due to the care requirements. Many believe that they are the only Young Carer in their social network, which leads to a sense of isolation. The barriers for social connection are numerous. Young Carers often describe themselves as different to their peers and therefore feel unable to connect with them meaningfully. This is often driven by a sense of increased maturity and independence compared to their peers. Additionally, they are often reluctant to engage with their peers for fear of being misunderstood, judged, and bullied for their differences. Due to the diverse requirements of their caring role, many Young Carers are also unable to engage in social activities after school and on weekends, as they are required at home.[18]

Research connects high levels of caring with poorer mental health, which then feeds into lower classroom engagement and withdrawal from challenging subjects. Even if attendance looks fine on paper, learning can suffer.

Helpful strategies include clear and predictable communication with families, opportunities for short restorative breaks during the school day, and assessment schedules that avoid peak care times. Coaching, counselling, and wellbeing programs have shown positive effects, giving Young Carers the mental space they need to engage in learning.

Financial Distress

These experiences are exacerbated by another relatively common factor in caring families, financial difficulties. This may be due to a range of factors, including the care recipient's treatment and support costs, and the frequent inability for the parents to work full time as they were either the care recipient or shared in the caring role. Families were often single parent families, which often meant the Young Carer is employed in a part-time job to support the family.[19]

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[15]Owen Walker, Richard Moulding & Jonathan Mason (2024) The experience of Young Carers in Australia: a qualitative systematic review and meta-ethnographic synthesis, Australian Journal of Psychology, 76:1

[16] Warhurst, A.; Bayless, S.; Maynard, E. Teachers' Perceptions of Supporting Young Carers in Schools: Identifying Support Needs and the Importance of Home–School Relationships. Int. J. Environ. Res. Public Health 2022, 19, 10755.

[17]Owen Walker, Richard Moulding & Jonathan Mason (2024) The experience of Young Carers in Australia: a qualitative systematic review and meta-ethnographic synthesis, Australian Journal of Psychology, 76:1

[18] ibid

[19]Owen Walker, Richard Moulding & Jonathan Mason (2024) The experience of Young Carers in Australia: a qualitative systematic review and meta-ethnographic synthesis, Australian Journal of Psychology, 76:1

Young Carers are more likely to come from households under financial stress. This creates extra barriers to education, such as difficulty paying for transport, internet, or devices, the need to work part-time cutting into study time, gaps in digital access.

Further, this financial stress also impacts Young Carers participation and inclusion with peers through school activities. Young Carers may be less likely to attend school excursions and camps and their social engagement may be further restricted by their caring responsibilities, lack of funds to pay for social outings and their need to work part time. Many Young Carers are able to engage with peers through support groups or camps, and all who did spoke highly of the benefits of social support.[20]

The need to link Young Carers to supports clearly addresses a broad range of issues. Linking to Young Carers to Government bursaries and Young Carer services and supports such as peer groups and camps social, peer and financial supports. Practices and processes in the education system of early identification and referral is vital.

Fragmented Systems and Uneven Support

In Australia, Carers are recognised in law and policy, but education-specific rights and supports are inconsistent. The Carer Recognition Act sets principles, but it does not require schools to offer flexible attendance or assessment arrangements. States and territories have their own approaches, which leads to uneven practices across the country.

By contrast, in England there are clear legal obligations on local authorities and schools to identify Young Carers, assess their needs, and provide support. This consistency helps prevent Young Carers from slipping through the cracks). Since 2014, UK guidelines and legislation is consolidated and families have an explicit, holistic entitlement for needs' assessments, with a greater protection and recognition of the needs of Young Carers.[21]

UK schools are involved in the identification of students who have caring responsibilities, offering referrals, providing sources of support, and engaging families in safeguarding and pastoral care. The students who begin caring at younger ages, during primary school, are most often identified by their teachers or support staff. The support that the schools offer differs widely and may include dedicated safeguarding leads with special responsibilities for Young Carers, lunchtime clubs, awareness raising, and counselling services.

The UK Carers' Trust and The Children's Society jointly developed a set of principles, *"Young Carers in schools toolkit"*, aimed at providing resources and guidance and sharing good practice amongst the schools in England and Wales. These initiatives have driven better awareness, recognition and support over the past decade; however, school staff continue to express the need for more support and resources.

Listening to the voices of the Young Carers themselves, it is also clear that better support for attending school and school flexibility is felt to be supportive and helpful. Run jointly by the Carers' Trust and The Children's Society the Young Carers in Schools (YCis) Program[22] provides a

[20] Ibid
[21] Warhurst, A.; Bayless, S.; Maynard, E. Teachers' Perceptions of Supporting Young Carers in Schools: Identifying Support Needs and the Importance of Home–School Relationships. Int. J. Environ. Res. Public Health 2022, 19, 10755.
[22] UK Joint Carers Trust and The Children's Society *Young Carers in Schools Program* Young Carers in Schools

free initiative that makes it as easy as possible for schools to support Young Carers and awards good practice.

Discussion 2: Carers Returning to Education

Adult Carers returning to education and Young Carers transitioning to vocational or tertiary education to increase their opportunities for employment and financial security are already disadvantaged. Support for Carers in post-secondary education is limited and inconsistent and few education providers had targeted support measures in place for this Students Carers.[23] The overall lack of numbers of Carers does not act as incentive to implement such measures but lack of understanding on the unique needs of Carers adds to the ability of Carers to access post-secondary education.

The major barriers in the education system that impact Carers access relate to inflexible delivery of courses that impact Carers ability to attend, course fees and rules, lack of data about student carers to inform policy, legislative gaps that fail to underpin change and lack of support systems for carers to access education.

Policy invisibility and lack of data

Despite the large number of carers, their distinctive characteristics, and their educational challenges, little research has been conducted on Carer access to, and achievement within Australian tertiary education or vocational education post-secondary school. Only a small number of studies have focussed on the experiences of student carers in Australian higher education. There has been little policy attention given to Carers in the Australian higher education sector. Whilst there is more Australian research on Young Carers in secondary school, Student Carers in the higher education sector have been under-researched and under-supported. In part this is due to the fact that the higher education equity framework does not identify Student Carers as an equity group.[24]

Carers are not recognised as a named equity group in national higher education equity reporting and funding settings. Evidence shows institutional support for Student Carers is limited and inconsistent, national data on access and outcomes are not routinely collected, and many carers do not disclose their status because they are never asked or see no benefit. Without visibility, services and funding do not follow. Without reliable data, the size and nature of the student carer population remain undetermined and there is no empirical evidence of access, success, or outcomes for this group. It would be beneficial to be able to systematically identify Carers at application or enrolment.[25]

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[23] Andrewartha, L. & Harvey, A. (2021). *Supporting carers to succeed in Australian higher education. Report for the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education*, Curtin University. Melbourne: Centre for Higher Education Equity and Diversity Research, La Trobe University.

[24] Harvey, A., Andrewartha, L., Edwards, D., Clarke, J., & Reyes, K. (2017). Student equity and employability in higher education. Report for the Australian Government Department of Education and Training. Melbourne: Centre for Higher Education Equity and Diversity Research, La Trobe University.

[25] Andrewartha, L. & Harvey, A. (2021). *Supporting carers to succeed in Australian higher education. Report for the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education*, Curtin University. Melbourne: Centre for Higher Education Equity and Diversity Research, La Trobe University

Non-disclosure of Carer status

Around 25% of Student Carers enrolled at university never disclosed their Carer status to anyone at university. This trend leaves many student carers invisible and makes it more difficult to provide appropriate and timely support where required. Among the most common reasons for not disclosing Carer status were never being asked and seeing no benefit to disclosure. It is likely some carers also feared being stigmatised and/or defined by their caring role. These findings highlight the importance of increasing awareness and understanding of Carers within the university community.[26]

Carers are often reluctant to disclose their caring status for fear of being stigmatised as inferior or incompetent students and not wanting it to be their defining role. The most common reasons for not disclosing carer status were not viewing it as relevant, never being asked, and seeing no benefit to disclosure. UK research referred to the 'hidden lives' of Student Carers and found reasons for non-disclosure included trying to hide difficulties, feeling guilt and not wanting to blame the person with care needs, or not wanting to burden others.[27]

Raising the awareness of Carers in their caring roles but also in education settings is vital to reducing this sense of stigma and recognising the need for capturing Student Carer data and so Carers see a reason to identify themselves and feel comfortable doing so and ensuring that Student Carers have access to targeted support they need.

Inflexible delivery

As caring is unpredictable and often intensive, traditional education systems that require fixed class attendance-based delivery traditional study periods and timetables, and fixed assignment and assessment times and protocols mean education is frequently inaccessible to Student Carers.[28]

Whilst Carers may be eligible for support systems including respite options for the person they care for, they are not designed to accommodate fixed education course programs. Carer Gateway provides planned and emergency respite, coaching and information, and it acknowledges the challenge of studying while caring. It is not tailored however to accommodate the rhythms of semesters, exams or block placements. Without dependable, study-timed respite and navigation help, carers carry the coordination burden alone.

Carer Recognition

One study[29] found that most institutions catered to Student Carers through special access schemes, run by state-based tertiary admissions centres. All tertiary admissions centres made provision for Carers indirectly through broad categories such as '*students with excessive family responsibilities'* or equivalent. More specifically, the Universities Admissions Centre (UAC), which is mainly applicable to institutions in New South Wales and the Australian Capital

[26] ibid
[27] ibid
[28] Australian Centre for Student Equity and Success Supporting carers to succeed in Australian higher education - ACSES
[29] Andrewartha, L. & Harvey, A. (2021). *Supporting carers to succeed in Australian higher education. Report for the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education*, Curtin University. Melbourne: Centre for Higher Education Equity and Diversity Research, La Trobe University

Territory, included mention of '*excessive responsibility for care of children/other family members*' in its Educational Access Scheme.

The technical and further education sector in New South Wales (TAFE NSW), introduced the Carer to Career program in 2019, which allows carers across the state to have their personal experiences recognised as progress towards vocational qualifications.[30] increase at certain times.

The UK has progressed much further than Australia in explicitly identifying and supporting Student Carers. The University and Colleges Admissions Service include a question to identify Student Carers within course applications. Available programs and strategies for Student Carers range from targeted outreach activities to peer groups and the allocation of scholarships and bursaries. Some universities also manage the Carer Passport scheme, which provides a record identifying Student Carers, triggers an individualised assessment of circumstances and learning needs, and connects Carers to a range of internal and external support programs in a coordinated manner.[31]

Recognition of Prior Learning

Carers have key attributes developed in their caring role and experience that include empathy and compassion, resilience, advocacy, commitment to family, community, and society. The diverse skills and experience possessed by Carers include a wide range of general skills, such as time management, interpersonal and communication skills, day-to-day caring skills, a wide range of increasingly complex health care skills including specific knowledge and expertise relating to health systems, disability, and other conditions and significant life skills. Such attributes and skills are in high demand in higher education and employment. However, there remains a lack of recognition of these 'informal' prior learning and a focus on previous study or work experience skills.

Financial Distress

Recent policy changes help but remain a partial fix. From 20 March 2025, the Carer Payment rules moved from a rigid 25-hours-per-week cap to a 100 hours per 4 weeks work limit and critically removed education and volunteering from the participation limit. This significantly reduced the risk that education and study hours would directly penalise income support. Whilst this change is welcome, Student Carers who are also working still face are still impacted when caring responsibilities fluctuate and increase at certain times.

Many Carers are unable to meet course costs let alone the additional hidden costs of study such as lost earnings on placement, travel, parking, cost of devices and connectivity and lost opportunity for paid work. Further, where courses require placements or 'internships' these are often full time and unpaid. It is unlikely that Student Carers are able to accommodate the time or the personal cost of completing courses that require them. Whilst 'placemen poverty' is not unique to Student Carers, that are often additionally disadvantaged.[32]

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[30] TAFE NSW (2020). Carer to Career. Retrieved from https://visit.tafensw.edu.au/carer-to-career

[31] Andrewartha, L. & Harvey, A. (2021). *Supporting carers to succeed in Australian higher education. Report for the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education*, Curtin University. Melbourne: Centre for Higher Education Equity and Diversity Research, La Trobe University

[32] Beks, H., Walsh, S., Clayden, S. *et al. Financial implications of unpaid clinical placements for allied health, dentistry, medical, and nursing students in Australia: a scoping review with recommendations for policy, research, and practice*. *BMC Health Serv Res* 24, 1407 2024

In July 2025 the Commonwealth Prac payment (CPP) was introduced to assist eligible students with costs related to mandatory placements in education courses such as teaching, nursing and social work. Means tested, eligible students receive $319 per week on placement to directly address placement poverty.

A range of vocational courses are provided free or subsidised depending on the course and the course provider. Sourcing this information however can be confusing. Course delivery is more likely to offer flexible delivery modes including in person attendance online and virtual classrooms or a blend of these.

Microcredentials are short courses that allow a person to learn new professional skills very quickly, at a TAFE or university level. They're an alternative learning option for those who don't have the time or money to enrol in a longer qualification. All microcredentials receive a certificate of completion. They can be delivered online, in person or as a hybrid between the two, though online options tend to be more popular for their flexibility. Some microcredentials are offered as standalone courses. Others, like the microcredentials available through Open Universities Australia are single subjects that a person can enrol in without committing to enrolling in the full course. All microcredentials will receive a certificate of completion at the end that you can add to your resume.

Courses may still attract a fee, though usually cheaper than full courses, cost may still vary from around $500 to $3 500. This is still a considerable cost for Carers who may already be experiencing financial distress. University short courses may be covered by government HELP funding, allowing students to opt to only repay the course fee when they are earning an income. There are also many free open university courses such as OpenLearn[33] available ranging across diverse subjects. These courses offer a statement of participation on completion. Courses are offered in flexible online, self-paced learning.

Legislation gaps for the higher education sector

Neither legislation nor sector standards require carer-specific adjustments, so flexibility depends on local goodwill and uneven processes. In practice, Carers rely on discretionary policies that vary by institution.

- The *Carer Recognition Act 2010*[34] acknowledges carers and sets recognition principles, but it expressly creates no legally enforceable rights, and its obligations fall mainly on Commonwealth agencies and funded providers, not universities.
- The *South Australia Carers Recognition Act 2005*[35] places obligations on specified public sector and funded organisations to reflect the Carers Charter, however universities are not clearly bound in the way disability obligations bind education providers. Nor has this been introduced in the current review.
- The *NSW Anti-Discrimination Act* 1977[36] makes it unlawful to discriminate against a person in education or employment on the grounds of family responsibilities or carers' responsibilities.

[33] OpenLearn Free short courses from the Open University | OpenLearn - Open University
[34] Carer Recognition Act 2010 Carer Recognition Act 2010 - Federal Register of Legislation
[35] South Australian Carers Recognition Act 2005 Carers Recognition Act 2005
[36] NSW Anti-Discrimination Act 1977 Anti-Discrimination Act 1977 No 48 - NSW Legislation

- The *Higher Education Standards Framework 2021*[37] requires providers to support diverse student needs, but it does not explicitly name carers as a cohort requiring defined reasonable adjustments.

There is an urgent need to recognise the unique needs of and increase the visibility of Student Carers and assist all tiers of the post-secondary education systems to identify and support Carers with systems to pre-entry identification, recognition of priori learning through caring experience, targeted resources and flexible learning arrangements.

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