



Supporting student carers: inclusive learning development in higher education

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Presentation abstract

This presentation explored the implementation and outcomes of the Carers Achieving Resilience in Education (C.A.R.E.) programme at Queen's University Belfast, designed to support student carers within higher education. Created in alignment with the Athena SWAN gender equality initiative, the C.A.R.E. programme specifically addresses the complex academic and personal demands faced by student carers, with particular consideration given to female carers who experience disproportionate challenges.

The presenters critically discussed how tailored, inclusive workshops were structured around themes of self-care, academic and technological skill development, career planning, and community building. Reflections shared by participants revealed strong appreciation for the sense of belonging fostered by the programme, validating the often-hidden experiences of student carers. Delegates highlighted the significant value of creating academic spaces that acknowledge and support students holistically rather than solely as learners.

However, the discussion also acknowledged practical challenges, such as scheduling difficulties and maintaining continued engagement. Recommendations from the programme evaluation advocated embedding structured carer support within institutional policy and curricula, thereby enhancing visibility and recognition of carers across campus.

This reflective analysis invites lecturers and learning development professionals to consider proactive strategies for improving inclusivity and resilience among student carers,

suggesting collaborative, multidisciplinary approaches as essential to meaningful institutional change.

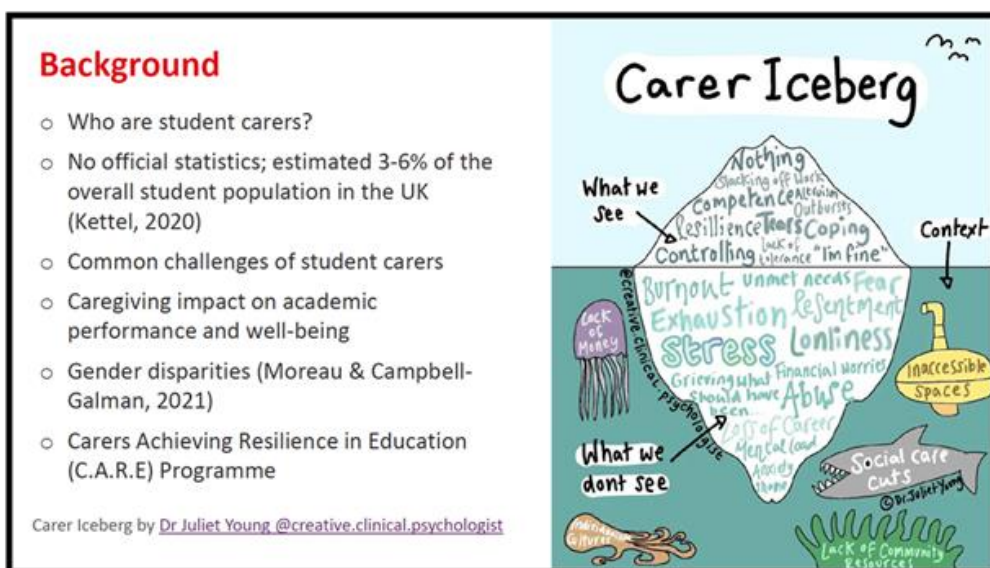
Keywords: C.A.R.E. programme; Athena swan initiative; gender equality; equitable access; carer support networks; self-care strategies.

Community response

The presentation delivered at ALDCon25 began by highlighting an often-overlooked group in higher education: student carers. While there are no formal statistics, estimates suggest that between 3% and 6% of students in the UK care for others alongside their studies (Kettel, 2020). These dual responsibilities have a profound effect on academic performance and emotional wellbeing, particularly for female carers, who often face heightened pressures shaped by gendered expectations (Moreau and Galman, 2021).

To visualise these challenges, the presenters drew on Dr Juliet Young’s (2025) *Carer Iceberg*, a conceptual tool that vividly captures the disproportionate burden carers carry below the surface of academic visibility. It served as a compelling metaphor, illustrating how much of carers’ labour and emotional strain remains unseen by institutions and peers. This framing set the tone for a presentation focused not only on support but also on recognition, inclusion, and transformation.

Figure 1. Presenters’ slide.



In response to these challenges, the Carers Achieving Resilience in Education (C.A.R.E.) programme was established within the Faculty of Medicine, Health and Life Sciences at Queen's University Belfast. Funded through the Athena SWAN initiative, the programme was designed with two central goals: to support student carers in managing both academic and personal responsibilities; and to promote more inclusive, equitable access to higher education (Blair, 2022).

To meet these goals, the presenters Fabiana Fausto McCracken and Marina de Almeida McLoughlin developed a series of structured workshops. These focused on four main areas: building peer support networks; developing academic and technological skills; balancing responsibilities through self-care; and preparing for future career transitions. A student-centred approach informed every aspect of delivery, with hybrid sessions, reflective activities, and anonymised feedback ensuring flexibility and accessibility.

One of the standout sessions, *Balancing responsibilities and self-care*, focused on practical strategies for time management, prioritisation, and emotional wellbeing. Delegates at the conference found this particularly resonant. Community reflections described the session as 'validating', 'supportive', and 'reassuring', a safe space where student carers could meet others with similar lived experiences. One participant remarked that it was comforting to be among peers who 'understand how much I am balancing as a carer'. This sentiment was echoed across community responses, where delegates emphasised how powerful it was to see 'people like ourselves' and to feel recognised by the institution as a whole person, not just a student.

The practical tools offered through the programme added further value. Resources included take-home reflective tasks, thesis mapping templates, and session booklets all aimed at helping students remain organised and resilient across academic demands. Delegates expressed appreciation for these tools and noted their potential to be adopted more widely across institutions.

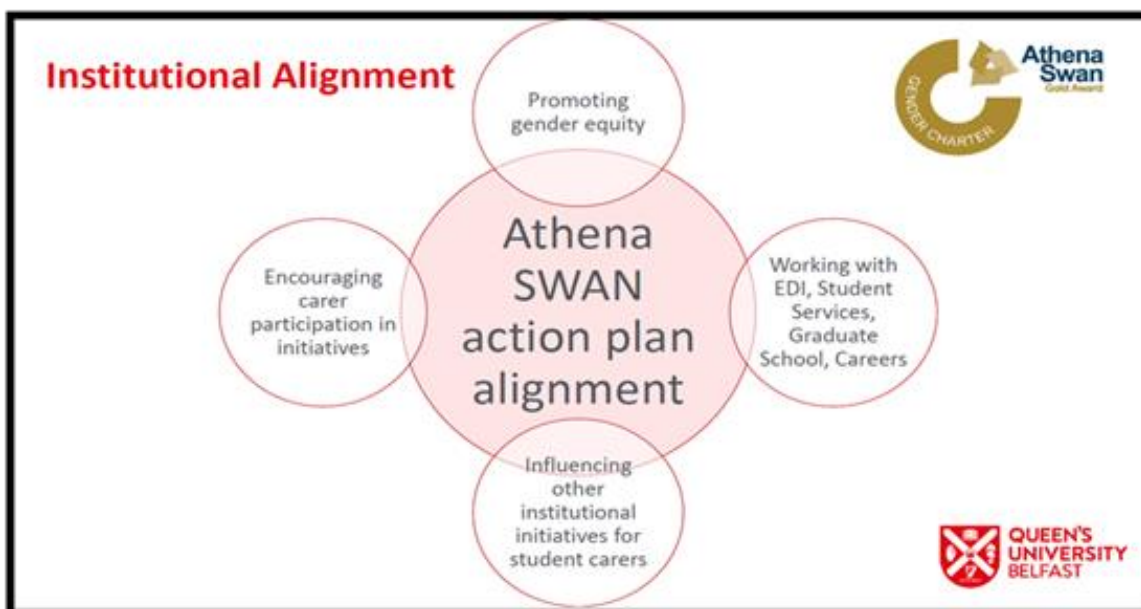
However, the presentation did not shy away from discussing the practical constraints faced during implementation. Scheduling sessions proved difficult due to carers' often unpredictable and limited availability. Maintaining long-term engagement and momentum within the carer community also emerged as a challenge. Despite these limitations,

student feedback was overwhelmingly positive, with several calling for the programme to be extended across other faculties.

This enthusiasm was mirrored in delegate reflections, where the C.A.R.E programme was seen as an exemplar of how learning development can be both inclusive and context-sensitive. The inclusion of a formal recognition route, such as the Future-Ready Award, sparked further discussion. Some delegates wondered whether all student carers would be comfortable with such visibility, especially if they had not disclosed their carer status. Others saw the award as a meaningful motivator and a way to acknowledge hidden labour. These reflections introduced an important ethical nuance around privacy, recognition, and informed choice.

At the institutional level, the C.A.R.E. programme aligned with wider Athena SWAN goals and engaged strategically with Equity, Diversity and Inclusion teams; Careers Services; the Graduate School; and Student Wellbeing. Through this collaborative effort, the initiative began to influence broader institutional practice, with early signs of increased recognition and support for carers within university structures.

Figure 2. Presenters' slide.



As the presentation drew to a close, the presenters offered three clear recommendations: embed carer support into policy and curriculum; raise the visibility of carer resources on campus; and deliver an annual C.A.R.E. workshop series to maintain continuity. These

recommendations were not only practical but also deeply grounded in the lived realities of carers and the lessons learnt from the pilot.

In reflecting on the wider value of this presentation, it is clear that the C.A.R.E programme struck a chord with the academic community. Delegates described it as 'thoughtful', 'admirable', and 'much needed', acknowledging the difficulty of designing support for students who are often 'time-poor' and under-recognised. More importantly, the presentation inspired collective reflection on how institutions might adapt, not only in policy but also in practice, to meet the needs of carers with greater care and attentiveness.

In sum, the C.A.R.E programme offers a powerful model of how learning development can serve as a conduit for inclusion, belonging, and academic resilience. By treating student carers not as an exception but as a vital part of the academic community, the initiative invites a broader conversation about what inclusive higher education can and should look like. It challenges colleagues across the sector to reflect critically on their own practices, and to consider how seemingly small interventions, when grounded in empathy and rigour, can lead to meaningful institutional change.

Next steps and additional questions

A clear institutional next step lies in formalising the integration of carer support within curriculum design, policy frameworks, and campus visibility strategies. While the programme's pilot demonstrated the feasibility and value of these initiatives, they now require embedding into core university processes, such as induction, timetabling, wellbeing referrals, and personal tutoring, so that carer support is not positioned as an optional or peripheral initiative.

Secondly, the recommendation to expand the C.A.R.E. programme across additional faculties must be prioritised. Calls from both student participants and conference delegates suggest a strong appetite for wider access. This scaling must be accompanied by enhanced scheduling flexibility, particularly for asynchronous or rolling formats that accommodate the time constraints typical of student carers.

Another practical step would be the development of a centralised carer support hub, physical or digital, that brings together wellbeing, careers, academic guidance, and peer

networks into a coherent, accessible interface. This would address the observed fragmentation of support services and contribute to greater visibility of resources, a concern explicitly raised in the reflections.

Finally, a yearly C.A.R.E. workshop series, as proposed by the presenters, offers a valuable opportunity not only for continuity but also for evolving content. Each year's series could incorporate emerging topics such as digital accessibility, AI for time-poor learners, or intersectional caregiving identities, ensuring ongoing relevance and responsiveness.

An additional question – the presentation sparked a productive line of inquiry from one delegate: to what extent does formal recognition, such as awards or certificates, support or hinder carers' participation, particularly for those who may wish to keep their caregiving roles private? This raises an important tension between visibility and discretion. While formal awards can enhance a carer's sense of achievement and serve as tangible recognition of effort, they may also inadvertently expose personal circumstances that some students prefer not to disclose.

This leads to a broader question for further exploration: how can institutions design recognition frameworks that are affirming, optional, and inclusive, without requiring disclosure as a condition for support or validation? This question calls on learning developers and institutional leaders alike to engage with issues of dignity, privacy, and agency. Recognition should empower, not obligate; support should be available without precondition. Navigating this balance will be critical in future iterations of the C.A.R.E. programme and in comparable efforts across the sector.

Authors' reflection

We appreciate the comments and questions shared by fellow learning developers on our programme, which helped us to reflect upon different elements of the support provision ed to student carers and the opportunity offered to them to apply for the Future Ready award. Participants would be able to apply for Future Ready credit upon completion of 10 hours, which means they would have attended all four workshops and completed the take-home activities in their portfolio. Having said that, participation was flexible, and students could

select individual workshops, picking and choosing according to their interests and availability. We had a few participants who did not attend all four workshops.

We do not believe that the award would hinder participation, nor that a participant would not want their involvement formally recognised. They could participate and/or complete all four workshops and not apply for the Future Ready Award. Our intention was to offer the option/opportunity, as we know several students at Queen's University Belfast welcome the chance to complete extracurricular development activities as evidence of their employability training.

In addition, the programme was developed in response to a funding call to support gender equality initiatives in the Faculty of Medicine, Health and Life Sciences, as part of its Athena SWAN goals, to increase participation of undergraduate and postgraduate students in gender equality activities, celebrate diversity, and promote inclusion across the four Schools that compose the MHLS Faculty. As a result of the programme, we were invited to collaborate with the Widening Participation Unit and set up a stand in the university's Carers Week Fair, in which students who identified themselves as carers engaged with internal and external support services. As the only Faculty represented in the event, this visibility highlighted our commitment to embedding gender equality and inclusion into the student experience, while strengthening partnerships across the university to support student carers.

Future plans for the programme involve its inclusion in the university's permanent calendar of gender equality events in May, and Carers' Week initiatives in June. Future iterations of the programme hope to offer a mentoring system in which previous participants are matched with current attendees to share their experiences and develop a supportive network. As for further dissemination of the programme, we were delighted to receive requests to share our resources with colleagues at Queen Margaret University of Edinburgh and deliver a workshop to learning developers as part of the AldinHE EDI working group. Our ultimate aim is to make the C.A.R.E. programme accessible to a wide range of student carers and to develop it as a sustainable 'care-centric' (Hook et al., 2022) model of support that empowers students, and influences best practice across the sector.

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