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**CARERS AND LEARNING:
SOME CURRENT CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES**

By

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Introduction

Thank you for your invitation to this conference and a particular thank you to my old friend Rob Humphreys, Director of the OU in Wales, and to Gayle Hudson for leading on the OU's work with carers in Wales.

In a recent debate on carers in Parliament I paid tribute to the OU for taking the important step of making carers one of your key target groups.

When I spoke at your conference in Milton Keynes last year, my theme was 'Carers for Learning and Learning for Carers'.

And on that occasion I began with the personal experiences of carers in my Constituency of Aberavon and I will do so again today.

‘The Personal is the Political’

My work in Parliament has been heavily influenced by my own personal experiences: my life as a carer and my life as a teacher of adults, and the interaction of these two experiences.

When Rob Humphreys and I worked together two decades ago in the development of the Community University of the Valleys, our task, as radical adult educators, was to break the mould by delivering part time community based higher education. Our target groups then were largely working class women. Unbeknown to us, we were targeting what we now call ‘carers’. These women were often carers with elderly parents, disabled partners or of course children, some with special needs.

They also had other barriers: low income, lack of transport, lack of confidence and sometimes lack of emotional support.

All this will be very familiar to the OU.

For me, and for Rob, and our like minded colleagues, this required policy change, at the local and national level.

Our watchword then as now was ‘the personal is the political’.

The Carers Equal Opportunities Act 2004

Early on in my Parliamentary life, I was lucky to be drawn very high (second) in the Private Members’ Bill Ballot. I had already spoken in my Maiden Speech in 2001 on carers and people with disabilities. I started out my Bill preparation by thinking about barriers encountered by adults wishing to return to study. This was obviously shaped by three decades as an adult education tutor, but it was also shaped by our experiences – Mair and I – as carers for over 16 years as carers for our son Sam who had Down’s Syndrome – and by the experiences of so many constituents – Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council had and still has the highest proportion of carers per head of population of any County Borough in the United Kingdom.

So, the eventually successful Carers Equal Opportunities Act of 2004 was born out of personal experience here in Wales and its starting point was what one Aberavon

carer called 'the right to an ordinary life'. Whilst its main focus was on providing information on work, training, education and leisure, its starting point was adults returning to learning.

Whilst the 2004 Act was an England and Wales Act or a Wales and England Act as I prefer to call it, the achievement of primary legislative powers now means that Wales is able, thankfully, to chart its own journey forward.

But, as we shall see, welfare reform is not devolved and the Welfare Reform Act, much of whose provisions are implemented from next April, may provide many pitfalls and further barriers for carers. For me, this is potentially, and in reality, a very dark cloud on the horizon.

Implementation of the Right of Disabled People to Independent Living

With this concern to the front of our minds, my Joint Committee on Human Rights - a majority of whose members support the present Coalition Government - decided to hold an inquiry into the impact of welfare reform on the right of disabled people to independent living. This obviously has a big effect on the rights of carers.

My Committee found that reforms to benefits and services risk leaving disabled people without the support they need to live independently, and some people fear that the accumulative impact of these changes will force them out of their homes and local communities and into social care. All this inevitably places greater pressure on carers and future carers. Only time will reveal the full scale of the challenge facing them.

In the meantime...

In the meantime, politically we do what we need to do, inside and outside Parliament.

And this includes raising awareness and campaigning to defend and advance the cause of carers. This means being aware of good practice beyond our Welsh borders.

Issues around student carers

Identification of carers

A basic problem underlying the issue of support for carers in education is identification of student carers. Many FE and HE institutions offer some type of support for carers. However support can only be effectively targeted if institutions are aware of their student carers, and identification of carers has proved to be difficult across both sectors.

In 2009 the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) in England published a report on a project to investigate the needs of carers as learners, the report, *Including Carers: Towards a Framework for Meeting the Needs of Carers in Further Education and Adult Learning*¹ set out recommendations for improving the educational experience of carers in further education. The report highlighted the identification of student carers as a particular problem area:

A major issue is the lack of accurate data on the numbers of adult and young carers currently in learning, wanting to access learning, or who are unable to access learning. A recent report (Becker and Becker, 2008) has highlighted that young adult carers aged 16-25 are a particularly hidden group.²

The National Institute for Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) has carried out research on support for young carers in further education. In 2009 NIACE published a report called *Access to Education and Training for Young Adult Carers*,³ the report highlighted the large number of carers in the 18-25 age group and discussed their low participation rate in education and training. This report also raised the difficulties faced by educational institutions with regard to identifying carers:

analysis of census data, undertaken in 2008, identified 229,318 young adult carers aged 18–24 in the UK. The real number is likely to be

¹ Learning and Skills Council *Including Carers: Towards a Framework for Meeting the Needs of Carers in Further Education and Adult Learning* July 2009

² Ibid p25

³ NIACE *Access to Education and Training for Young Adult Carers* Policy Briefing Paper Nicola Aylward December 2009

higher as research shows that many young adults do not realise that they are carers, or do not wish to be identified as carers.

A further report by NIACE in 2011 *Effective learning opportunities for Young Adult Carers*⁴ commented on continuing concerns about the lack of information on young adult carers:

We do not know how many young adult carers there are in full-time and part-time education as there is no system in place to identify and capture data on the numbers of young adult carers in the student population. Carers do not form part of the dataset which colleges must collect for all their learners as laid out in the Individualised Learner Record (ILR)⁵

An Ofsted report in 2009 *Support in further education colleges for learners with caring responsibilities*⁶ outlined the type of the help given by some colleges to student carers. This report also referred to difficulties with identifying carers stating that 'only two colleges were able to provide a reliable estimate of the number of young carers enrolled.'⁷ The report commented that colleges often only became aware of students carers when they ran into difficulties:

Staff in colleges had mixed views about whether learners should be asked about their caring responsibilities on entry, because of concerns over confidentiality. Most of the colleges relied on self-disclosure on entry; few were able to provide an accurate number of their learners who have caring responsibilities. Estimates in general further education colleges, where they were given, varied from around 80% in areas with high levels of deprivation to around 30%.

It was common to find colleges only becoming aware of learners' caring responsibilities when they defaulted on assignment deadlines or their attendance became poor. This was particularly true for young carers. It was rare to find college policies on carers or examples of specific

⁴ NIACE *Effective learning opportunities for Young Adult Carers* 2011

⁵ *Ibid* p8

⁶ Ofsted *Support in further education colleges for learners with caring responsibilities* A survey of good practice 2009

⁷ *Ibid* p17

training for staff on understanding the needs of learners with caring responsibilities.⁸

Private Member's Bill (PMB) on identification of carers

Recently a PMB on the identification of carers was sponsored by Barbara Keeley; the [Social Care \(Local Sufficiency\) and Identification of Carers Bill 2012-13](#) aimed to place a duty on FE and HE bodies to identify students who are carers and to set up systems to support them. The Bill had its [Second Reading](#) on 7 September 2012 and at the end of the session the debate was adjourned until 1 March 2013, this means that the Bill is unlikely to proceed any further but as a sponsor I am working with MPs from all parties to get the new Minister, Norman Lamb, to include the essence of our Bill in the new Social Care Bill.

Improved support for carers

The 2009 NIACE report [Access to Education and Training for Young Adult Carers](#) identified issues that impacted on the participation of young carers in education and training. The report made the following recommendations on the type of support that would improve access and raise educational outcomes for these young people:

How can access to education and training for young adult carers aged 16–25 be improved?

Whilst there is still much work to be done at a national level to improve young adult carers' access to, and participation in, learning, there is also much that learning providers can do to support young adult carers and create more positive experiences and outcomes for them. Evidence from this research project suggests that a range of factors and measures can have a positive impact upon young adult carers' engagement in learning.

These include:

⁸ Ofsted [Support in further education colleges for learners with caring responsibilities](#) A survey of good practice 2009 ,p11

- **flexible provision** – for example, recognition that young adult carers may not be able to achieve high attendance levels, catch-up sessions, and the opportunity to learn at home;
- **relaxed provision** – many young adult carers report negative experiences of school; provision should therefore be relaxed and comfortable and ‘different’ to school;
- **sensitive arrangements** – for example, providing young adult carers with the opportunity to have their mobile phone switched on during lessons;
- **emotional support** – for example, access to a mentor or counsellor, or small group sessions with other carers;
- **holistic support** – for example, access to a transitions worker or a support worker who will develop an understanding of the caring responsibilities of a young adult and how these responsibilities impact upon their life; and
- **effective multi-agency working** – for example, through contact and the sharing of information with other services that support young adults carers, such as Connexions and social services.

Anecdotal evidence from this project suggests that community-based projects and non formal learning programmes are particularly effective in engaging and supporting young adult carers because they:

- provide opportunities for young adult carers to engage in a ‘safe’ and non-threatening environment;
- allow young adult carers to develop their confidence and self-esteem, take small steps of progress and improve their social capital; and
- provide the holistic and emotional support that is often so desperately needed.

Current provisions for student carers in FE and HE

Government support for student carers

Home students in full-time higher education who have an adult who is financially dependent on them may be entitled to extra help in the form of an [Adult Dependants' Grant](#) (ALG). The amount a student receives will depend on the students' income and on the income of the dependants. The maximum grant amount for 2012/13 is £2,642 per year; the ALG does not need to be repaid.

Institutional support for student carers

The 2009 Ofsted report [Support in further education colleges for learners with caring responsibilities](#) surveyed practices to support carers in twelve FE colleges. The survey found excellent examples of support for carers where colleges were aware of their young carers' situations and needs, such as drop in sessions and allocating individual advisors for carers.

In 2011 NIACE published a resource pack⁹ to help managers in colleges develop support systems for young carers; the pack contained case studies showing the type of support provided for carers at two FE colleges, Loughborough College and Worcester College of Technology.¹⁰

Universities

Many higher education institutions have adopted policies to support students who are carers as part of their equality agenda. The University of Glasgow was one of the first UK higher education institutions¹¹ to adopt a [Student Carers Policy](#) in the academic year 2011-12.

Other universities such as the Universities of Leeds¹² and [Bradford](#) have also adopted specific policies for student carers. The University of Leeds guidance

⁹ NIACE Who Cares? Supporting Young Adult Carers to Learn

¹⁰ *Ibid* p12-13

¹¹ "New policy earmarked for student carers" *The Journal* 30 November 2011

¹² University of Leeds website *More support for pregnant students and student parents/carers*, 21 August 2012 at http://www.leeds.ac.uk/forstaff/news/article/3403/more_support_for_pregnant_students_and_student_parents_carers.

document [Policy Document on Support for Students who are Parents or Carers](#) sets out in detail the universities approach to students who have dependants. The carers policies of these universities aim to allow flexibility for student carers and attempt to make sure that students are not disadvantaged by their caring responsibilities, whilst ensuring that any accommodations made for students do not compromise academic standards.

Many universities have support and advice for carers, sometimes provided in conjunction with local groups, a few examples are given below:

- [University of Salford](#) Carers forum
- [University of Manchester](#) Manchester Student Parents and Carers Network
- [University of Bristol](#) Student's Union Carers Network

Even universities which have not yet adopted actual policies on student carers may still provide support for carers and have give information on their websites.

The NUS Women's Campaign is intending to carry out research on the experiences of student carers on HE campuses across the UK.¹³

And finally...The OU and carers

You will be pleased to know that the House of Commons Library, which has researched some of the material in this paper, highlights the best practice of the OU and carers.

The OUs system of flexible distance learning can be particularly suitable for students who are carers. The OU provides information to help student carers on their website at [Studying while you care](#) and in a booklet also called [Studying while you care](#). These information services outline the type of help which is provided by the OU to students including study support and financial support.

The OU in Wales runs a project called [Access to Learning for Carers](#). In March 2012 the project won an award from the Universities Association of Lifelong Learning (UALL). The project has influenced the OU's practice and support for carers across

¹³ NUS blogs Kelly Temple [Do you think its Fair to Care?](#)

the UK and carers are now considered as a widening access priority group for the OU. Carers studying with the OU in Wales may be eligible for a special bursary funding through the Carers Project.

Conclusion

But that is not to say that we should be complacent. There is a dark cloud of welfare reform looming over us and we must be vigilant. We must also learn from other institutions, in the public and voluntary sector from which the best practice emerges.

I have been impressed by an initiative in the North West of England of a partnership between n-compass and the British Institute of Human Rights as part of the Human Rights in the Community Project. Their publication **Your Human Rights: A Pocket Guide for Carers** is being launched in Preston on 30th October. All OU students who are carers, or indeed not carers, should be given the guide.

No doubt also NIACE's new Commission on Family Learning will shed some light on new ways of supporting carers back to learning. I do not say that only because one of the Commissioners is my wife Mair, who was, after all, a carer and the founder of the DOVE women's training workshop which taught Rob Humphreys almost everything he knows about radical adult education!

Hywel Francis

26.10.12

