Extending Opportunities for Carers


The Open University Wales

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1. Introduction: Outline of Project

The Access to Education for Carers Project was initially designed to be a 12 month long project ending in September 2011. Kindly funded by The Waterloo Foundation\(^1\), the project sought to engage Welsh carers of all ages in learning opportunities, specifically aiming to raise the aspirations and opportunities for carers to study higher education so that they can enhance their knowledge, skills and confidence. After the success of the initial year, and with on-going support from The Waterloo Foundation, the project ran until December 2013.

This report seeks to evaluate the success of the project, identify critical success factors for higher education institutions working with carers, and lessons for future project work. This report and its recommendations are intended to be useful for all institutions working with students who are carers, carers’ organisations and other stakeholders.

In the beginning...

This innovative project enabled the Open University in Wales to build on its existing widening access programme, largely focused on those living in high deprivation areas, and extend it to benefit carers. The Open University’s unique flexible distance learning methods are well suited to carers, who often have to study at unconventional times to fit in with their caring roles.

The main outcomes of the project in the first year were to:

- Engage directly with 64 carers across Wales, mostly through Openings\(^2\) courses offering 15 credits as an introduction to higher education study.
- Build a database of carers’ organisations and contacts in Wales, through which to reach carers directly.
- Help to influence wider discussion about carers’ needs throughout the higher education sector.
- Further test engagement methods and establish a model that is transferable across different widening access groups.

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\(^1\) The Waterloo Foundation (TWF) is an independent grant-making Foundation. The Foundation is most interested in projects that help globally, with particular focus on the disparity of opportunities, wealth and the unsustainable use of the world’s natural resources. However, they also have a particular focus on Wales.

\(^2\) Openings Courses are the Open University’s main Access curriculum offer in Wales, due to finish in 2014. From October 2014, a new suite of Access curriculum modules will be available across the UK, offering 30 credits at Level 0.
The Access to Education for Carers project had 5 main strands to it:

- **Development of information specifically aimed at carers.** The Open University in Wales developed specific marketing materials, a webpage and a carers’ information booklet with endorsement from the 3 main umbrella carers’ organisations in Wales; Carers Wales, Crossroads Wales, and the Princess Royal Trust for Carers. This helped to address carers directly and provide answers in the booklet to many of the questions they would have about study.

- **Working through carers groups.** Information was disseminated regularly via carers’ groups and networks across Wales and articles were placed in newsletters, e-bulletins and other online platforms.

- **Close partnership with key carers’ groups** to complement their informal learning programmes and provide enhanced support through taster sessions and face to face study clubs.

- **A bursary programme** to help towards the cost of course fees for carers who were not eligible for other financial support. A substantial number of students were just over the income threshold for financial support and the bursary funding enabled them to access the courses for a fraction of the price.

- **Sharing best practice** to help influence the way higher education institutions respond to and supports students who are carers.

After the success of the first year of the project, The Waterloo Foundation kindly provided the funding for a further 2 years to fully embed the work within the widening access programme in Wales.

### 2. Methodology

The principal aim of this report is to evaluate the effectiveness and impact of the Access to Education for Carers project, and to add to the body of knowledge and understanding regarding carers and their needs as students.
Reason for the evaluation:

- Carers are a priority group for many institutions, particularly those engaged in widening access.

- Need to evaluate project work to ensure lessons learned about how to engage and support carers in future.

- Position project (and lessons) within the broader context of changes to Welsh higher education, and the experiences of carers (particularly in the current economic circumstances).

The evaluation employed a range of qualitative and quantitative methods throughout this project, including:

Literature Review

A literature review has been conducted to gain a broad understanding of the context in which carers access education opportunities and the support which they require. The literature review included both desk based review of all relevant literature including journals, articles, current known data and analysis of the policy context in which the project operates including forthcoming challenges. It can be found in Section 3.

Qualitative Research

Qualitative research was undertaken to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of carers. In particular we undertook:

- Interviews: Telephone interviews with 13 carers from across Wales. Key themes were identified from these interviews, and detailed case studies prepared (these are available in Annex A).

Quantitative Analysis

- A survey of project participants was distributed and completed by 31 carers from across Wales. The findings from this survey are complimented by additional and separate research being undertaken by the Open University in Wales in conjunction with the NUS Wales into part time students in Wales. Analysis from both surveys is included in Section 4.

- Data review: This evaluation also reviewed all project data relating to participants including number of enquiries, retention, and successful completion (including partial completion) and total participants.
3. Background & Context

The Open University’s (OU) Widening Access and Success Strategy 2012-15 identifies the ‘caring’ community as one of its five priority groups in need of additional support to enable access to and success in higher education. The OU defines carers as ‘someone of any age who provides unpaid support to family or friends who could not manage without this help’ (The Open University, 2012). This definition is shared with the Carers Trust (2012) and made more explicit by the National Union of Students (NUS) in identifying carer learners as students of any age who provide unpaid support to family or friends who could not manage without this help’ (National Union of Students, 2013).

Carers make up to 10% of the population of the UK (approximately 6.5 million) and it is estimated that carers make up between 3 and 6% of the UK student population. In Wales there are 350,000+ adults, young people and children who care (Wales Carers Alliance, 2011). There is, however, no definitive figure, partly has a result of institutions not recording which of their students are carers and carers perhaps not being aware that they are carers (1/6 people who responded to the Carers Week survey (Carers Week, 2013) took over five years to recognise themselves as a carer) or not knowing that there may be extra support available to them if their carer status is declared. The survey also reports ‘the longer you take to identify yourself as a carer the more likely it is that you are missing out on support, advice and information that can help you with your caring role’. The OU has recently begun to record the carer status of its students. This however raises issues regarding the ‘stigma’ that carers may perceive as being attached to their ‘carer’ status and as such may be even more reluctant to disclose it.

The UK Government has committed to support more flexible opportunities for lifelong learning by carers and to introduce measures such as greater flexibility of provision or home-based learning. The Introduction of the Equality Act in 2010 forced Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to consider the needs of all those with protected characteristics (Hussain, 2011) – carers being one of them. In England, the Government is set to publish new legislation for a framework for delivery of care and support services, in Scotland there are moves to bring the delivery of health and social care together and in Wales, Assembly Members are considering legislation to make significant changes to how support services are delivered. The Carers Strategies (Wales) measure 2010 ‘places a duty on the NHS and Local Authorities in Wales to work jointly to prepare, publish and implement a strategy for carers’.

However the NUS suggest that demand has not yet met need and local authorities need to do more to fulfil their duty of care to carers. Financial hardship is a key determinant in many individuals’ decision to enter further or higher education. However, there are several issues that are unique to carers:

- Individuals can become carers suddenly or their caring role builds gradually over time, without the carers recognising the changes that have taken place.

- Individuals may have been in secure, well-paid employment prior to becoming a carer.

- The loss of two incomes as a result of becoming cared-for and a carer increases the financial burden.
44% of those surveyed (State of Caring, 2013) declared that they have been in debt as a result of caring. Excessive costs, inflexibility and unreliability of alternative care also rules out the possibility of seeking employment or studying.

Financial hardship is, however, only the tip of the iceberg, and if financial barriers to access were removed, carer learners are faced with further obstacles that may contribute to them either not continuing or not achieving in their course. 56% of carer learners who contributed to the NUS research stated that they had seriously considered leaving their course (compared to 39% of non-carers), despite them being highly motivated and dedicated. Hussain, et al (2011) reinforce this and report that in a study of carers and non-carers of radiography and radiotherapy students, carers generally had less absence than non-carers. Furthermore, only 36% of carer students felt that they were able to balance study with other aspects of their life, as opposed to 56% of non-carers. It appears then that commitment to studying is not a primary determinant of carers not engaging in education.

Despite, the availability of some financial assistance there is still a suggestion that caring reduces the likelihood of a carer becoming a student. ‘Unpredictability’ of those that are cared-for is perhaps a deciding factor in a carers’ decision to embark on further/higher education. One respondent to the NUS survey cited negative experiences of school as a result of being a carer as a barrier to embarking on further or higher education. Unpredictability relates to the changing needs of those that are cared-for, including changes in routines, which can happen on a daily basis. Wainwright, (2010) recommends encouraging staff to be more flexible and accommodating to meet the needs of carers who may be faced with such unpredictability.

The NUS survey also identifies carers as having lower well-being than the student population as a whole and have an increased likelihood of suffering from mental health difficulties. Although the research by Hussain et al, (2011) does not support this view, fears by carers that their health may mean that they cannot commit to study could be another deciding factor in whether to consider studying. This may also contribute to carer learners lacking the self-confidence to embark on further and higher education and an increased self-doubt when engaging with others on their course. As Canning (2010) reports carer learners questioned ‘Am I good enough? Will I be able to keep up? What if everyone knows more than me? What if I can’t do the assignments? Will I be supported?’.

This review of the literature has identified some of the key issues that carer learners may face in relation to embarking on further or higher education. The evaluation that follows seeks to explore these issues further by speaking directly with carer learners on their experiences of studying with the OU in Wales.
4. Key Findings: Analysis and Recommendations

This evaluation is based on a wide range of project data together with questionnaire responses from 31 carers and detailed telephone interviews with 13 carers; as well as feedback from on-going partnership work with Carer support organisations across the sector. 171 carers directly engaged with the project in some way. Of those 171:

- 22% had previous experience of HE and 78% had no previous HE experience. These figures mirror those in recent research undertaken by the Open University in Wales in conjunction with NUS Wales. Of 1498 students surveyed across Wales, 149 identified themselves as having caring responsibilities, and of those, 22.8% had previous experience of HE.

- Only 8% had entry qualifications, equivalent to 2 A levels or more to enter traditional university.

- Of those registered on courses 87% were women and 12% were men.

- 16% of respondents also identified themselves as having a disability.

- 34% were eligible for financial assistance.

- 62% claimed a carer’s bursary towards the cost of their courses.

- 47% of participants registered on courses following the project.

4.1 Carers lives

Of the carers who went on to register for an Open University course 87% were women and 12% men. The age range of the carers who replied to questionnaires and took part in the telephone interviews varied from those in their twenties to eighties with the highest number of those questioned being in their forties, fifties then thirties; and the majority were women.

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3 In 2013 the OU in Wales and NUS Wales began a two stage research project to investigate the profile and experiences of students in Wales studying part time. The first stage of this research, completed in December 2013 was a survey of 1418 students. The second stage of the interview, which includes focus groups, will be completed in 2014, and will include a focus on students with caring responsibilities.

4 In Wales financial support is available for students who are on income based benefits or a low household income if they don’t already have an equivalent qualification level. The funding structure for part time higher education in Wales is due to change from Sept 2014.
The caring commitments, of those surveyed, also ranged from, taking care of an ill or disabled child, parent, partner or close friend; with the majority (61%) caring for a child.

In terms of employment status 54% of those who completed questionnaires were not in paid employment, 22% were working full time, 12% were working part time, 6% were involved in voluntary work and 6% were retired.

When asked what factors assisted them in staying on the course over half answered; ‘being able to study at a time that suited me’.

In addition, many of the carers who took part in the telephone interviews spoke about how busy and stressful their lives were. One such person who cares for her 26 year old son, with a multiple of health issues said:

“It [Distance Learning] was…much easier for me cos being a carer things just happen. I couldn’t commit myself to a timetable of being in a university building… this is much better for me.”

Explaining about the pressure of balancing her caring commitments with studying, another student spoke about how the additional support she received from her tutor and the Open University in Wales’ Student Service team helped her to finish the course when she was at the point of giving up. She is a full time carer for her autistic son and her other son has also just been diagnosed with learning difficulties she said:

“I enjoyed it, for myself …but…then …I’d be rushing around hospital appointments, clinics with my children…So sometimes I did find it hard so when I set myself time to do it [study] there was always something getting in the way for me…they [student Service team] really helped me along and they understood the pressures I was under…. Sally [the tutor] kept in contact with me via email and phone calls.. So, I managed to do it… I’m chuffed with myself.”

Furthermore talking about the personal experiences, as carers, several interviewees also spoke about their motivation for study relating to potential future employment in the care sector.

“…because my dad has the illnesses….I’ve interacted a lot with his social worker and I see how much work she’s got to do, for a start, cos she’s piled down with work because there isn’t that many social workers. And I see that the help that they give, I mean, we’d be banging our heads against the wall if it wasn’t for her. It’s just helped us so much with everything we need. And that’s the sort of job that I would like to be doing is helping people that way.”

Carer student who cares full time for elderly parents, including father with dementia.

**Issues**

- Carers’ lives are unpredictable, busy and at times very stressful.

**Recommendation**

- Education providers need to provide flexible provision for carers to engage with, both in terms of mode of study and on course support.
4.2 Previous educational experiences

The research found that 22% of the 171 carers engaged had already had previous experience of higher education. Of the 78% who had not studied at higher education level before, 70% of these didn’t have entry qualifications of 2 A levels or more to study at a traditional university.

In terms of previous qualifications and past study the carers surveyed had a range of experiences:

When asked what their highest qualification was before starting with the Open University; 25% had achieved GCSE level qualifications, 25% had done A Level or level 3 study, 22% had an NVQ level 1 or 2 qualification, 6% had a BTEC Diploma, 13% had a degree, 6% had done post graduate study and 3% had an Open College Network qualification.

There was also a range of responses to when interviewees had last studied; of those questioned 41% had studied in the last 3 years, 22% over the last 5 years, 22% over the last 10 years and 16% of respondents had not done any study since leaving school.

In addition when asked where they last undertook any form of study; the majority of respondents 41% said at a further education college, 29% at an adult education or community centre, 16% at their work place, 12% at university, 6% at school and 3% studied from home.

One of the carers who took part in the telephone interviews explained how she had left school when she was sixteen, with few qualifications, feeling she hadn’t achieved her potential and signed up for an OU course. Speaking about her previous educational experiences she said:

…I left school when I was sixteen… I did CSEs, I wasn’t in the class for doing O levels which annoyed me really because I think I could have done with the opportunity… a lot of the time the kids were messing about and that was all too much for me…..You know, we did have good lessons…but I just felt I was in the wrong place…..I suffered with a condition like petit mal, which is a type of epilepsy, and because of this I was behind in my education…. I’d feel like I was sleeping, you know, where I just sort of woke up later on in life. I did English just after I left school…..and I got a B grade….. I’ve always been interested in the idea of doing the Open University and I didn’t know how it was structured really….But then… I was involved with the Carers Pathway Project which is run in Newport. And the person there, bless her, got in touch so that she could find out what I needed to do."

Another interviewee, who cares for her Autistic daughter, said she also heard about the Open University through her local carers group:

"I was… doing a course with them [carers group]; a sort of, it’s called ‘Life Skills Course’ which was a bit of a misnomer really, it’s a course to encourage people who have been in a caring role for a long time and perhaps want to get back to a work environment and I mentioned I had started learning Welsh with the on-line Welsh Course. Then she suggested the OU so that’s how it all came about… I hadn’t thought about, you know, being a carer, having ties it’s difficult to find courses, you know some like, most classes are in the evening when it’s not really feasible..."
4.3 Impact of OU Study

To date 81 carers have registered for an Open University course through the Carers’ Project, 66 have completed their courses, and 32 carers have registered for a qualification.

When asked what difference studying with the Open University had made; 51% of the carers, who completed questionnaires, said they intended to embark on further study; 41% felt they had gained new skills; 39% felt more confident; 29% felt happier; and 19% felt it had made a positive impact on the role as a carer.

Feedback from the carers who took part in the telephone interviews also reinforced these experiences:

“I feel more confident and it’s a bit, if only for myself I’ve achieved something, I’ve wanted to do something, I’ve always put myself down feeling that I would never be able to continue or do a university course, for me I’ve gained confidence, that I believe in myself that I can achieve stuff.”

Student who cares for her autistic child.

“...I’ve always had all these doubts, you know. Like I said to my tutor at the time.. 'I’ve actually completed something' Just to complete something cos I’ve started so many courses and not finished and so I was quite pleased with myself...that I could do it and not to have any doubts. Cos you do doubt yourself don’t you...when you take on things.”

Student carer who completed an Openings Access course and progressed to the Arts Degree programme.
Extending Opportunities for Carers

I mean I’d known about the Open University for years but I’ve never actually tried doing any courses. And it just interested me cos they said, you know, it was for carers and I read it in this book so I thought I’ll send an email and see what they say and if I can do it.

…I’ve got really good feedback through this course… and it’s given me more confidence … I liked this experience, the coursework that was given was brilliant and I was given brilliant guidance….I’ve been drifting for ages…But, as I said, the things that I’ve seen, the experiences I’ve been through… I’m going to grab hold of the reins again now and start looking into it.

Carer who successfully completed the Openings access course and is now registered for a Health and Social Care qualification.

Issues

Learning has a big impact on confidence and well-being and opens new opportunities for carers. Short taster courses can be an excellent way into learning for carers.

Widening access should be about improving confidence and competence to study, and not just about the level of study.

Recommendations:

• Institutions should consider ways of progressing students from informal to formal learning and emphasise the importance of introductory courses at higher education level to build confidence.

4.4 Clear communication for carers

As part of this project an information booklet for carers was produced with details about study at the Open University, the sorts of courses available and why this mode of study could be of particular interest to carers. The booklet entitled “Flexible study options for carers” was endorsed by the 3 main carers’ charities in Wales; Carers Wales, Crossroads Care, The Princess Royal Trust for Carers (now merged with Crossroads Care and known as Carers Trust Wales).

The booklet was then distributed far and wide through a database of 105 carers groups and organisations across Wales. Feedback from this evaluation has found that before the project, although lots of the carers had heard about the Open University, many had the perception that it wasn’t for them.

…”I mean I’d known about the Open University for years but I’ve never actually tried doing any courses. And it just interested me cos they said, you know, it was for carers and I read it in this book so I thought I’ll send an email and see what they say and if I can do it.”
The findings of this project also highlight a need to ensure clear and consistent communications to carers once they are studying courses especially information about how they can progress once they are coming to the end of their introductory modules.

Most of the carers interviewed as part of this evaluation had received follow up information from the Open University about progression to the next course. One carer described how she had taken a gap between her first and second module as both her parents were very ill, but she found the communications from the OU in between her modules helpful.

“...It wasn’t a weekly thing saying hi, it was more of a ‘you were with us before...and these courses would be a good follow on for you next time if you are still interested’. That was nice...”

However this evaluation found some inconsistencies especially where carers had done the on line short courses. There was some confusion about how they could progress with their learning and the registration and funding arrangements. Because carers have hectic and busy lives and are often under a lot of stress, it would be helpful to have some clear information, guidance and support through the progression process or this could prove to be another unnecessary barrier for carers.

“I really need to apply to do the degree course and get that going. And I’ve got to do the finance as well and it’s just daunting really. I think I’m meant to be doing it all online and I don’t really fancy it...”

Carer who successfully completed Understanding the Arts Openings course.

“I always think I’m too old to do a degree but I’m probably not. But I just don’t, I don’t know where to go next, I’ll be honest with you...”

Carer who successfully completed the short course Understanding Autism.

Issues

Carers take notice of communications directed at them and through their trusted organisations. Due to busy and stressful lives, carers who are studying will benefit from on-going support and communications to help them progress. Short courses can be a useful route into higher education but it is important to clearly communicate the progression pathways to carers.

Recommendations:

• Education providers need to produce information and marketing materials specifically addressing the needs and interests of carers.

• At the point of course registration, providers should note if students are carers and offer additional support and information as needed through their programme of study.

• Interventions including projects like this should be evaluated on a regular basis to ensure the needs of carers are being addressed.
4.5 Mode of study & curriculum offer

Overwhelmingly the research found that the flexibility of the Open University’s part time, distance learning study particularly suited the busy and hectic lives of carers. 93% of questionnaire respondents stated that the flexible nature of the course materials and/or the ability to study at a time that suited were factors that assisted them in staying on the course. Respondents could tick multiple boxes and 45% also rated the additional support and encouragement they received from Open University staff and their local carers’ organisations as helping.

"it [the study] was mostly at home and you know I need to be at home as much as possible, it was brilliant."
Carer full time for elderly parents.

"being a carer things just happen. I couldn't commit myself to a timetable of being in a university building sort of thing, this is much better for me."
Carer for disabled son.

"for carers it's an ideal scenario through on line learning, because you can do it [study] as and when it suits you."
Carer who passed Croeso beginners’ Welsh course with distinction.

The majority of the carers involved in the project took an Openings access module for their first course. These were specifically promoted through the project because they are a gentle introduction to higher education, they have one to one tutorial support and are designed to build confidence in the learners. The modules, studied over 20 weeks, have different subject areas to choose from, Psychology, Arts, Children, Maths, Law, Management, Society, Health, Environment and Sport. As part of the Carers’ Project, the team in Wales also ran a number of additional face to face group tutorial sessions at local carers centres to offer additional support and encourage peer networks. All introductory level OU modules are written for adult learners and encourage them to reflect and draw on the wealth of life experience they have.

"At the beginning I was like “Oh my God what have I got myself in to. But when I started reading the book, reading all the materials provided and then it was just so interesting and I could relate to it in my everyday life in that I could see like when they were talking about mental health and all that as well in the beginning I could relate to like my dad and all that. And, you know, it was just really interesting."
Some carers felt there were real benefits in disclosing their caring responsibilities to their tutor;

“you don’t feel like you are making excuses, you just tell them sorry my son’s ill … I wouldn’t be able to take this tutorial …. All right then, I’ll rearrange for later on. I’m not actually making an excuse I just tell them and they understand.”

carer of teenage son with autism

Open University study didn’t suit everyone and two of the carers who took the short online courses without tutor support commented on how isolated they felt;

“I didn’t appreciate how lonely I would be in as much as sometimes if you struggled. I know there were the forums but I felt intimidated by the forums…I just didn’t appreciate how much I really needed somebody there to chivvy me up or just to ask a question sometimes.”

Issues

Carers need to be able to study flexibly in their own time, but also have the opportunity to network and link with other students. Distance learning can be isolating for some especially on courses with limited tutor and peer networking. Different carers will want different things from their studies, it is challenging to know how best to support them.

Recommendations:

- Institutions should identify which of its student body are carers in the same way, for example, that disabled students are identified, so they can offer appropriate support and guidance.

- Support for carers needs to be integrated across the curriculum not just for the first access modules.

- Institutions need to clarify what additional support they can offer carers and make this clear to their students who are carers.

- There needs to be more staff training especially targeted at student support staff and tutors around the needs of carers.
4.6 Bursary funding & support

An important element to the Carers’ Project has been the additional bursary funding available to carers. Under the Welsh Government and Open University funding criteria, most students who are on income based benefits or a low household income are eligible for financial support and free courses if they haven’t already got a degree. 35% of the carers who studied through this project were eligible for financial support and free courses. 63% of the carers who studied claimed bursary funding. Several commented in the interviews that they wouldn’t have studied without this support because they couldn’t have justified spending the money on themselves.

Despite the financial support arrangements and bursary funding there was still some confusion amongst carers who responded to the questionnaires. Of those who responded who didn’t take up study, 22% stated one of their reasons as being worried about the costs of study.

“It was a help getting a bursary, there is so much to sort out for [cared for]….. so I need to save as much as I can.”

“I couldn’t warrant the expense really.”

“It’s just, I think it’s just price that puts me off really. I’ve looked at it several times you see.”
Issues

Carers are unlikely to prioritise money for their own learning, as their families and cared for come first. The project bursary funding has now finished, the changing funding arrangements for part time higher education in Wales from Autumn 2014 could prove another barrier to carers who are likely to be reluctant to take out loans to fund courses for themselves.

Recommendations:

- Institutions should communicate clearly to carers the costs of study and the financial support that’s available for carers.

- Learning providers should consider applying for discrete funds to support ongoing bursary arrangements to encourage carers to take up learning opportunities.

4.7 Partnership working

Explicit in all of the findings from this evaluation is the importance of partnership working. The success of the work with carers has largely been down to the successful partnerships established with the network of fantastic carers’ centres and organisations across Wales. These organisations provide a local lifeline to carers and a range of services including access to learning opportunities through community based courses. This project simply wouldn’t have reached the carers that it did without building a strong relationship with this established network across Wales. The carers’ organisations were the trusted intermediaries.

74% of our questionnaire respondents said they heard about the Open University through their local carers’ organisation or other local organisation.

You know, because I was at almost breaking point, I mean I didn’t have a nervous breakdown but I wasn’t far off from it which was how I came about [carers organisation] and then I’d done all those little, sort of little courses with [carers organisation] and The Open University was another option that was very new and I think a brilliant option for carers, yes, without question.

One of our carers partners
Yes I’m doing this forty week ECDL and I’m also doing, I started a creative writing course last week which is a ten week course cos I’ve always wanted to write my own books. But I never had the, you know, understanding or the gumption or the time to do it. So if there’s a course available then I’ll go and have a look, you know.

But that’s another thing that [carers organisation] have done for me. They’ve introduced Computers for Beginners so I’ve been on that course and I’m now doing the ECDL.

Over the course of the project the partnership has extended to 105 carers’ contacts across Wales, organisations which link with and support carers in one way or another. Through this network information has been disseminated about the project, newsletter articles supplied and distributed information booklets for carers. In addition the project has worked more closely with 8 carers’ centres, offering more direct support in the form of taster sessions and study clubs. Two conference events were organised, one held jointly with the Carers Trust Wales, attended by over 55 practitioners, to bring to focus the education and training needs of carers.

The critical success factor of this project has been the huge value of working through partners, and ensuring the organisations have information about the Open University and what it can offer for carers. The individual staff within these organisations have strong relationships with the carers they work with, they know where they are in their learning journeys and are in the best position to help sign post and recommend the next steps when the carers are ready to progress. They have acted as trusted intermediaries, opening up opportunities to carers’ where educational providers alone may well have failed.

Issues

Partnership with trusted organisations in the voluntary and community sector is key to engaging with individual carers and small carers’ groups.

In the current challenging financial climate for the voluntary and community sector particularly, it is important to note that the capacity for these organisations to be able to disseminate information and run the local services is at risk and with this the range of wider projects and initiatives that rely heavily on community networks. Partnership and relationship building takes time and staffing on both sides and is an essential element of our widening access work across Wales.

Recommendations:

• It is important for larger institutions to support the work of smaller local groups.

• Larger distance learning institutions like the Open University in Wales need capacity at a local level to build and maintain relationships.
5. Summary & Conclusions

Key issues that have emerged in this research

- Carers’ lives are unpredictable, busy and at times very stressful.

- Students who are carers come from all walks of life and have a range of previous educational experience. Institutions should not make assumptions about carers’ previous educational qualifications or the level at which they start their education.

- Learning has a big impact on confidence and wellbeing and opens new opportunities for carers. Short taster courses can be an excellent way into learning for carers.

- Widening access should be about improving confidence and competence to study, and not just about the level of study.

- Carers take notice of communications directed at them and through their trusted organisations.

- Carers need to be able to study flexibly in their own time, but also have the opportunity to network and link with other students.

- Partnership with trusted organisations in the voluntary and community sector is key to engaging with individual carers and small carers’ groups.

- Partnership and relationship building takes time and staffing on both sides and is an essential element of the widening access work across Wales.
Key recommendations:

- Education providers need to provide flexible provision for carers to engage with, both in terms of mode of study and on course support.

- Education providers need to work in partnership with carers’ organisations to build on progression opportunities from and to community and adult education, further education and higher education to ensure carers are offered opportunities to study that are most appropriate to them.

- Institutions should consider ways of progressing students from informal to formal learning and emphasise the importance of introductory courses at higher education level to build confidence.

- Education providers need to produce information and marketing materials specifically addressing the needs and interests of carers.

- At the point of course registration, providers should note if students are carers and offer additional support and information as needed through their programme of study.

- Interventions including projects like this should be evaluated on a regular basis to ensure the needs of carers are being addressed.

- Support for carers needs to be integrated across the curriculum not just for the first access modules.

- Institutions need to clarify what additional support they can offer carers and make this clear to their students who are carers.

- There needs to be more staff training especially targeted at student support staff and tutors around the needs of carers.

- Institutions should communicate clearly to carers the costs of study and the financial support that’s available for carers.

- Learning providers should consider applying for discrete funds to support on-going bursary arrangements to encourage carers to take up learning opportunities.

And finally...

The Access to Education for Carer’s project would not have been possible without the support of a host of friends, colleagues and partners who have worked with the Open University in Wales to provide opportunities for carers.

Special thanks to all those that have supported this project particularly:

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7. Annex A: Case Studies

Case study 1 - GM

Age: 52
Gender: Female
Course funded by: Claimed financial support due to low income
Cares for: Her son who has multiple health issues
Previous education: Educated to GCSE level and undertook some adult education classes
OU study: Openings Making Sense of the Arts, Y180
Progression with the OU: Interested in the Arts Degree programme - registered for AA100 The Arts Past and Present

Background:

GM cares for her 26 year old son who has a multiple of health issues. She left school when she was sixteen, with a few GSCEs, feeling she hadn’t achieved her potential – She suffered from epilepsy from an early age and much of her education was disrupted. After leaving school she studied for an English ‘O’ level and over the years has also undertaken some language and psychology adult education classes. She heard about the Open University after attending a course put on by her carers’ centre and with some advice from the course leader and the OU in Wales’ student Service team signed up for an Openings Access course. She successfully completed and passed the course in February 2013 and has registered for AA100 with the intention of completing an Arts degree programme with the OU.

Talking about her experience on the course she said:

“…much easier for me cos being a carer things just happen. I couldn’t commit myself to a timetable of being in a university building… this is much better for me.”

Further explaining about starting with an Openings course as her introduction she added:

“…I’ve always had all these doubts, you know. Like I said to my tutor at the time.. “I’ve actually completed something” Just to complete something cos I’ve started so many courses and not finished and so I was quite pleased with myself…that I could do it and not to have any doubts. Cos you do doubt yourself don’t you? When you take on things.”
Case study 2 - DB

Age: 40
Gender: Female
Cares for: Full time carer for both parents but in particular her father who has dementia and needs round the clock care
Previous educational: Adult and further education
OU study: Openings Access course Understanding Psychology
Course funded by: Project bursary
Progression with the OU: Progressed to OU Health & Social Care programme K101, An Introduction to Health and Social Care 2013

Background:

DB lived abroad with her parents when she was young then left school without gaining any qualifications. However since finishing her formal education she did return to do a number of adult and further education courses; such as, women returning to the workforce, customer care, ECDL computer and English for business. In addition, while working as a paid carer she completed an NVQ (level two) in Health & Social Care. After returning to the UK she worked as a carer for several years but when her parents moved in due to their declining health she found it impossible to continue working and properly look after all their needs.

She heard about the OU through a local carers’ support group newsletter and contacted the carers’ organisation to find out more. Speaking about her initial experience after signing up for the course, she said:

“...At the beginning I was like “Oh my God what have I got myself into...But.... then reading the book, reading all the materials provided... it was just so interesting and I could relate... it in my everyday life.....my dad and all that. And...a few things I wasn’t aware of as well. “

While studying on the Openings course DB also attended enhanced face to face study group sessions; which were arranged and funded by the OU in Wales, through the project, in partnership with the local carers’ support group. Explaining about her involvement in these sessions she said:

“...Yes. I had Fiona [telephone support Tutor], she was brilliant....[but] I found it strange talking to somebody over the phone rather than be in a classroom because this was the first time doing something like that. I mean the telephone is good in one way...you’ve got the one to one for however long....But then it’s very good listening to other people’s opinions... Like I’d never written an essay before so she [study skills Tutor] showed us how to write an essay and everything so it was just brilliant. “

Since successfully completing her Openings Psychology access course DB is now registered for a Health and Social Care qualification with the OU. Speaking about her experience to date she says;

“...I’ve got really good feedback through this course [Openings course]... and it’s given me more confidence ..... I liked this experience, the coursework that was given was brilliant and I was given brilliant guidance....I’ve been drifting for ages...But, as I said, the things that I’ve seen, the experiences I’ve been through... I’m going to grab hold of the reins again now and start looking into it.”
Case study 3 - RD

Age: 33  
Gender: Female  
Cares for: Son who is autistic and has severe speech and learning difficulties  
Previous Study: Range of adult and further education courses  
OU study: Openings Access module - Understanding Health (finished March 13)  
Course funded by: Claimed financial support due to low income

Background:

RD is a full time carer for her son who is autistic with severe speech and learning difficulties and another son who has just been diagnosed with learning difficulties. She left school when she was sixteen then went to college to do a Beauty & Hairdressing course. Since then she has returned to learning several times to undertake a range of adult education courses; such as ‘A’ level art, history, geography and English.

She heard about the OU after attending an open day event in her local area and was given advice on the range of study pathways and financial support available. Then as she was interested in following a career in Midwifery or Occupational therapy she decided to sign up for the introductory ‘Understanding Health’ Openings Access course.

Talking about her original motivation for signing up for the course she said:

"I had been wanting to do a University course but I always put myself down thinking I wasn’t bright enough…. it’s taken a lot of courage….we were at a Fair last year and there were magazines at the Fair and I liked the sound of doing an Open University Course at home."

After registering for the course this student did find it difficult balancing her caring commitments with studying. She said:

"... I enjoyed it, for myself ...but...then ...I’d be rushing around hospital appointments, Clinics my children...So sometimes I did find it hard so when I set myself time to do it there was always something getting in the way for me...

However she further explained how the additional support she received from her tutor and the OU in Wales’ Student Service team helped her to finish the course when she was at the point of giving up:

"...they [student Service team] really helped me along and they understood the pressures I was under Sally [the Tutor] kept in contact with me via email and phone calls.. So, I managed to do it [final essay]... I’m chuffed with myself."
Case study 4 - AB

Age: 52  
Gender: Female  
Cares for: Son and elderly mother  
Course funded by: Claimed financial support due to low income  
Previous education: Community courses at level 2 or below  
OU study: Openings Access course; Understanding Psychology March 2011  
Progression with the OU: Autism course Nov 2011, but didn’t complete, went into work.  
Progression to employment: Yes

Background

AB is a carer for her son (22) who has autism and her elderly mother. She is a single parent and had attended many community courses, including Welsh, IT and digital photography with her local carers’ organisation before she heard about the Open University.

She attended a special information day about the Open University held at her local carers’ group and from this signed up for the OU Openings Access course; Understanding Psychology.

She also attended a regular local study group for carers that was run by the OU in the carers’ centre.

Following her Openings Psychology course, AB enrolled on the Understanding Autism course, but she didn’t complete this as she got a full time job in the care sector and didn’t have the time to study.

She feels that studying with the OU helped her confidence and self esteem and helped her progress.

“It wasn’t wasted, even if I only did one module it just gives you so much self-esteem, you’re not stupid and you could actually do some homework and you could go away and enjoy it ..”

“it was a brilliant little part of my life because it just took me to another level and made you think …I’m still on my little journey really and the Open University is definitely a part of that.”
Case study 5 - TG

Age: 48
Gender: Female
Cares for: 14 year old son who has autism and ADHD
Previous Education: Community courses through carers’ organisation including numeracy and literacy
OU study: Openings Access course; Understanding the Arts Y180 June 2011
Course funded by: Carers Project bursary
Progression with the OU: Progressed to Welsh History April 2013 in April 2013 and has registered for the Open degree programme.

Background

TG is a single parent and cares for her 14 year old son who has Autism and ADHD, she also cared for her elderly parents who both died last year. TG went into the hotel and catering sector after leaving school. She doesn’t currently work but is hoping to pick up part time work as her son gets older. Having left school with few qualifications, she has, over the last few years, taken up community courses through her local carers’ organisation.

Her long term plan is to build her qualifications in the arts and history areas with a view to working in this sector in the future.

“what I wanted to do after my divorce was get myself up to a level with up to date basic qualifications and a baseline for a specialist qualification so that I can chose something that would be both interesting to me but workable around my hours with [my son].”

TG heard about the Open University through her local Carers organisation and attended a taster session. She signed up for an Openings Access course, Making Sense of the Arts, has since progressed to her second module in Welsh History and is working towards an Open degree.

“The feeling of not being on my own, other people doing the same as me. A lot of the time as a carer you are made to feel left out and you’re past it .. you get to feel useless but when I went and applied there were other carers and parents in the same boat as me.”
Case study 6 - MM

Age: 53
Gender: Female
Cares for: Profoundly disabled daughter
Previous education: level 3
OU study: 15 credit Understanding Autism course Nov 2011
Course funded by: Carers Project bursary
Progression with the OU: No
Progression to other learning: Yes

Background

MM is 53 and cares for her 19 year old daughter who has profound multiple disabilities. She has worked part time for the last 9 years as a teaching assistant with disabled children. Many years ago she had intended to do a business studies degree, when she first started working in finance, but then she met her husband and within a year she had her daughter and then everything changed.

She started volunteering about 13 years ago and this led into employment in the education/care sector. Over the years she has done lots of level 2 and level 3 courses through work and through her local carers’ group, most of these have been funded through various carers’ projects and work based schemes. She is currently doing a level 2 certificate though her work in ‘Supporting Children’s Learning’.

She describes herself as addicted to learning

“I think because I didn’t do particularly well at school I’ve got like an addiction to it [learning] now.”

MM heard about the OU through her local carers’ group. She signed up for a short course Understanding Autism (SK124) 15 credit level 1 and started in November 2011. She received a carers’ bursary towards the cost of the course which she completed and passed. She thought the course was good,

“...It’s very thorough and I find the online services fantastic.”

[but she found the distance learning a bit isolating]

“I was glad when it was finished …I like people, I’m a people person I prefer I think to be with people.”

MM passed her OU course, but hasn’t progressed on to more study with the OU. She states funding as the main barrier to her progressing towards a degree.

“I couldn’t warrant the expense really.”

But she’s also not sure about how she would progress.

“I always think I’m too old to do a degree but I’m probably not. But I just don’t, I don’t know where to go next, I’ll be honest with you.”