**The Common Good Podcast**

***Christina Kelly – Service for Student Carers***

**Hello and welcome to the Common Good Podcast, the podcast that showcases the very best of Glasgow Caledonian University and how the institution, its staff and its research benefits people and communities, both at home and overseas.**

**My name is Craig Telfer and I’m very happy to be joined by Christina Kelly, a Student Wellbeing Advisor, to talk about the help and support GCU offers student carers.**

**Christina – brilliant to have you on today’s show, thank you for joining me!**

**I suppose the best place to start is with a big question**

**What do we mean by student carers?**

Thanks Craig – I’m really happy to be here today.

So, at GCU we use the Carers Trust definition of carer, so that’s that:

*A carer is anyone who cares, unpaid, for a friend or family member who due to illness, disability, a mental health problem or an addiction cannot cope without their support.*

There’s no such thing as typical carer. Unpaid care can be physical, emotional or social – there is no fixed manifestation of the caring role.

The student carers I meet in my role all have their own unique situations; some might be parents of children with disabilities or long term health conditions; others might be caring for a parent, partner, friend or relative. Often they are looking after people with quite complex needs who require support around the clock – sometimes through the night and often at short notice. It’s not a Mon-Fri 9-5 role.

Anyone can become a carer at any time. Some students might become carers during the time they are at university, e.g. if someone close to them becomes unwell – this could be at a crucial time such as going into their final year.

But often it is the experience people gain from their caring role that inspires them to come to university – I meet a lot of student carers who have come onto programmes like nursing and social work, and it’s often because of their own experiences navigating the Health & Social Care System. I think having people with this kind of life experience on these programmes is really valuable; they bring knowledge and transferable skills, and a whole lot of empathy.

They tend to really value the opportunity to be at university; often carers will put the needs of the person they care for before themselves, so it becomes a huge part of a person’s identity. Being at university is viewed as something they are doing for themselves; it can feel like respite for them, and for some it helps them feel a sense of identity that isn’t all about their caring role.

**Brilliant, that’s an excellent definition Christina, that’s absolutely fantastic.**

**How many people in Scotland are student carers? Do we have numbers for that?**

Yeah, well it’s difficult to say so just to put it into context, a lot of people don’t recognise themselves as carers; they just see themselves as helping out at home, and think it’s something everybody does, so the actual figures are likely to be a lot higher than reported. An additional difficulty with the figures for student carers is that UCAS doesn’t currently gather this data from applicants.

Having said that, Carers Trust [Scotland] estimates there are around 30-35k student carers in Scotland. If we were to look at carers in the general population in Scotland, we think it’s around 800,000: so maybe 1 in 8 of the working population, and it seems that those figures are increasing during COVID.

**You mentioned some of the challenges at the start that student carers might face. Can you expand on that further, Christina, what are some of the difficulties and the barriers they might come across that stops them having a quote unquote “normal experience” at university?**

Student carers are quite often completing studies alongside other priorities and responsibilities. These can fluctuate from day to day and from week to week so it’s not always easy to plan around. They’re often feeling quite stressed or tired; they’re attending various appointments; they might not be able to leave the house if the person they are looking after has become unwell or they’ve been up through the night.

So this all has an impact on things like attendance, or when they *are* at university they can often feel quite anxious; they might be preoccupied or worried about the person they are caring for. So all of this has an impact on their learning as well as their social interactions.

Finances is a big one… so, there’s little time for them to engage in paid work alongside their studies and their caring role, and as full-time students they’re not eligible for Carers’ Allowance.

They’re often quite isolated; they find it difficult to make time for themselves and for their studies. And when they *are* studying, I think it can be quite disrupted time, so it’s hard to find the headspace to really concentrate on a task. And then there’s the difficulty of managing the boundaries around the caring role and the student role, and I think that’s even more so now that people are learning remotely and they’ve not got the physical space to create that boundary.

**Yeah. Are there any myths or misconceptions that people might have towards student carers?**

Yeah, so I think sometimes the word carer has different meanings, which can be quite confusing. So just to kind of clarify that, what we *don’t* mean when we talk about carers in this context are things like:

* People who are contracted to provide a health and social care service, whether that be in a paid role or a voluntary role;
* Someone who is a parent: So, unless your child has a long term health condition, an illness or a disability, you wouldn’t fall into this category;
* Or maybe someone who is just carrying out the day to day tasks for someone who *is* capable of carrying out those tasks independently, we also wouldn’t consider them a carer.

Another area of confusion is around care-experienced people. When we talk about care-experience as opposed to carers, we are referring to people who have been/or perhaps still are, being cared for themselves.

This might be in a residential care setting, it might be that they are with

foster carers, or it could be more kind of informal arrangements like being looked after with friends or relatives who have stepped in to look after a child or young person at a time when a parent is unable to do so.

So there can be overlap with these groups; for example, we could have someone who was looked after for a period of time when a parent was too unwell to care for them. That person could now be a carer for that parent or maybe younger siblings if the parent has ongoing difficulties.

Where students fall into both categories, a carer and care-experienced, they can access support for both.

**It sounds like there can be quite a lot of grey areas then between how we define what a carer is**

I think there can be overlap between these things – nobody is ever just one label and that’s what they are, you quite often find people have had a history they’ve often done one thing and are moving on and doing another, so that’s quite common. Often we have carers who have a disability themselves and are also looking after someone, so there’s quite often these intersections that we have to think about.

**Are student carers likely to be stigmatised by their peers or their classmates?**

I think there can be stigma around caring, which is something that I’ve never fully understood. There’s a good statistic, where carers save the Scottish economy £10.3 billion each year; that figure is close to the cost of providing a second NHS in Scotland. Despite that, I often hear student carers worry about being a burden, or feeling that they are less deserving of support than others.

I think from the perspective of student carers, they can find it really difficult to make friends; partly because they don’t have the time to get involved in university social life, and partly because their life experiences can be so different to those around them that they just find it hard to relate to people. Often they feel they can’t move away from home, so that’s another opportunity to make friends that they miss out on.

I think in university as well, there is a lot of focus on group work in how students are assessed, so that’s really difficult for some groups of students like carers, who have a lot going on in their lives and they might find it easier to set their own pace rather than meet the expectations of the group. So I think maybe things like more flexibility around how students are assessed could be more inclusive of the needs of diverse groups of students.

**That’s very interesting Christina, and that leads me on very nicely to my next question: Could you tell me about the kind of support GCU offers student carers**

* Carers are included in our contextualised admissions policy, although I’m not entirely sure how widely known that is.
* Once students are here, I think having one point of contact makes life a bit simpler for them
* I can offer practical and emotional support as well as signposting them to other services both within the university and externally.
* I encourage student carers to set up a Student Carer Plan, so this is something that we can share with their department so that their department is aware of their circumstances. And we can then negotiate some flexibility that will help the student to balance their caring role with their studies.
* Examples of flexibility might be around things like start times and finish times, or we might look at requesting a placement that is a bit closer to home so the student can get home quickly in an emergency.

**I know the university is a Going Higher for Student Carers Award recipient**

**What does this mean?**

**How did the university win the award?**

That was a scheme introduced by Carers Trust Scotland. They carried out some research into the experiences of student carers and they found for example that student carers were 4x more likely to drop out of university than students without caring responsibilities. They also found a big impact on student carers’ physical health and mental health. So they decided to create this scheme to put a bit of support in place and try to redress that a bit. So the purpose of

The purpose of the scheme was to raise awareness of student carers and highlight the challenges that negatively impact on their ability to reach their full potential.

We were among the first universities in Scotland to work towards this award. I think it fitted really well the Common Good ethos and our existing commitments to widening participation.

We worked closely with Carers Trust Scotland, who guided us through the process. It was really well structured around themes of identifying and supporting student carers. We had to provide evidence of the work we were doing, both with current students and with prospective students in our Outreach activities.

Although we have the award, this is something we have to maintain through our ongoing commitment to supporting student carers.

**You mentioned Carers Trust Scotland, Christina. How important is it that we work alongside this organisation to provide the best level of support for our students?**

I think Carers Trust Scotland have been a fantastic support; so they’ve given us a lot of the understanding we currently have of the experiences of student carers and the sorts of things that will help them. They’re always on hand to give us advice if there’s anything we’re not sure about and they’ve provided training for our staff.

They’ve got all their network partners have come in and worked with us. They’ve done things like have pop-up stands on campus to help raise visibility of carers and the supports they can access.

We’ve also had North Lanarkshire Carers Together they are a Carers Trust partner and they’re really keen to engage with the health school, so we’ve got students who are training to become healthcare professionals and it’s really important for those students to be carer-aware because of the role they will have in the future supporting patients and carers when they go out into practice.

We’ve also got a really good relationship with East End Community Carers who are also a partner of Carers Trust. They’ve been facilitating mindfulness sessions for student carers. They were initially on campus but they’ve since moved online. That was also a really good support. So they provide a range of things that I’ve found really helpful.

**That sounds excellent – it’s good to know that the university does have so many mechanisms in place to help student carers, that it’s written into GCU policy and that we’re working with charities like Carers Trust Scotland. How many student carers do we have at the university – do you have a number?**

Again, it’s quite difficult to answer because of how the data is gathered, but we think around 300 students disclosed that they were carers on their registration forms, and around 50-60 have come forward to ask for support in the last year.

That figure has been increasing each year as knowledge of the Going Higher Award increases and awareness of the support increases as well.

**What kind of factors would stop someone that marked down as a carer, what would stop them from coming forward and asking for support; are there any barriers that would be in place?**

I guess not all carers identify as carers, but I suppose if you’re saying if they’ve ticked the box, it might be that they recognise they are a carer but they maybe don’t need our support.

It might be that their course already offers some flexibility or they might have other supports around them to help them manage that.

Some students aren’t really aware of the support. We try and be proactive; we promote it on social media, we have stalls at Freshers’ Week and other events. We email out the students who’ve ticked that box, but this doesn’t reach everyone; students can miss emails, especially when they are so busy.

Some student carers just don’t feel they’ve got the time to engage with support – that’s something I hear a lot when I try and signpost students to external supports or to events on campus.

**Your job must be quite satisfying Christina, if you’ve worked with someone who’s come in at first year and has approached you for support and seeing them on their journey throughout university and seeing them graduate and make a success of themselves; that must be quite satisfying.**

Yeah… I couldn’t do my role without the support of colleagues from across the university. I’ve heard some really fantastic feedback about some of the personal tutors who’ve helped student carers, so that’s always really good to hear. It’s not something that everyone is that confident with though, so I’m involved in other projects to help raise awareness of student carers and help people see what kind of things they can do to support them.

For example, I’m working with Carers Trust Scotland at the moment and we’re developing an online module that will be available through the Open University. That’s looking at carer awareness, and staff and students will be able to access that once we’ve completed it.

I’m also looking for student carers to contribute stories that we can include on our web pages. That actually came from a suggestion that a student carer gave me – so we always listen to student carers; we’re always happy to have their input. I think that’ll really bring to life some of the experiences they’re having and hopefully help people to see how they can help.

**Is there more can be done to help student carers?**

**Do you think we’re doing enough at the university or even going one step further, at local governmental level to support them?**

I think there’s always more we can be thinking about. I think from the much higher up level, I would really like to see Carers Allowance extended to full-time students. I think the idea that because they are a full-time student, they’re not a full-time carer anymore doesn’t make a whole lot of sense; they’ve still got that responsibility, but they’re just suddenly trying to juggle a whole lot more.

I would like to see a tick box introduced on the UCAS application. So we have that now for CE students so that they can disclose and it means that pre-entry supports can be put in place to ease that transition.

At GCU, I’d like to see the supports more widely promoted, so maybe lecture slides now and then letting students know about the supports. Maybe in the wider student comms activities.

Also, I mentioned about students influencing what we do. We’ve got yearly evaluations and also students can just let us know as we progress what kind of things they would like to see.

It’s a nationwide survey that’s going to be gathering the views of student carers and the staff members supporting them. It will feed into a final report that will help the Carers Trust evaluate the work of the Going Higher project and help shape future policy and practice across the sector. I would encourage anybody, whether it’s a student carer or a staff member involved in their support to have their voices heard in that survey – I think that will be a really interesting piece of research.

**As well as all the good work we do for student carers, GCU has been**

**recognised as a Carer Positive Employer by Carers Scotland to offer support services to staff who are in a similar situation. Can you tell us a bit about that, Christina?**

Yes, that’s something I’m really pleased about. That was something announced in Caledonian Connected during Carers Week in June. Adrian Lui, our Equality & Diversity Adviser has been leading on this work alongside some input from… we’ve been in a small group with myself and a couple of staff carers. The Carer Positive Scheme is supported by another organisation called Carers Scotland.

That’s just about recognising carers in the workplace and having consistent support across an organisation. Their stats tell us that 3 in 5 of us will become a carer at some point in our lifetime, so I think it’s in everyone’s interests for employers to be supportive of this.

Of course, yeah.

**Are there any upcoming projects you and your team are going to be taking part in, in the future?**

I think I mentioned the module, and the stories – that’s in the forefront of my mind in terms of carers.

I’m also based in the Student Wellbeing Service. That includes the Disability Team, the counselling team and the mental health advisers. They’re doing a lot of good work as well. Recently the university has been recognised by the National Autistic Society; we’ve recently got autism accreditation and we’re the first university to ever achieve this, so that’s a really big achievement, and we’ll be continuing that work.

They do a lot of work around pre-entry workshops with students and ongoing group-based supports. They also offer guidance and training to staff around accessibility and inclusive practice, so all that stuff I think is really useful to people to come and get involved with.

**Definitely, it sounds like, I think even if you imagine 15 years ago a lot of these services might not have been in place, not just at university, but generally so it’s good to know we have mechanisms and supports in place to help a more diverse range of students in our campus.**

Yeah, I think so. I think GCU has always been really good at that kind of thing – welcoming students from diverse backgrounds. I’m glad we’re recognising the needs of more groups and the intersections between them and we are able to offer support.

**Another project that you’re working on is with your Mental health project officer – can you tell me about some of the stuff they’re working on?**

Our Mental health project officer has been really helpful with our online communications through things like keeping our webpages up to date and doing a lot of stuff on social media for us. We’ve got a weekly newsletter that both staff and students can sign up to and she’s also kind of put a lot of stuff on our web pages together to create a kind of online wellbeing module. So I think all that stuff is particularly important just now when we’re off-campus and the service isn’t quite so visible. It’s good that all our online materials are really accessible.

**Christina – thank you very much for talking to me, I really enjoyed that!**

**I’d also like to thank everyone for listening to today’s episode and I hope you’ll join us again soon when we’ll be talking to another member of staff from Glasgow Caledonian University. In the meantime, please subscribe to this podcast via Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or wherever you’re listening to us from (and make sure you give us a five-star rating). Until then, I’ve been Craig Telfer and this has been the Common Good Podcast.**