# Conversations In Social Justice Podcast: Young Carers Transcript

Jess*:*

*Welcome to the conversations in social justice podcast, I’m Jess Dancer the intern for the institute for social justice this year and today we are going to be discussing the experiences of young carers in higher education. This topic is important to me as I experienced having to navigate my university experience alongside the pressures of having to care for a family member. Today we are joined by Ellie, a UCAS representative…*

Ellie*:*

*Thanks Jess, great to join you today, I’m Ellie the fair access program lead at UCAS and I’m really delighted to be here today to talk about our knowledge and insight into young carers in higher education. So, for some context, UCAS is the centralised admissions service for supporting students to apply to UK higher education. In 2023 we introduced several new questions into the application and this was to allow students to share their circumstances from students who receive free school meals, those who might have parenting responsibilities, UK armed force families and of course those with unpaid caring responsibilities as well. The reasons that we introduced these questions was really so students could share their experiences in their application, so that their application could be considered in its context as well and so that universities and higher education providers could think about the student’s experiences, potentially offer contextual offer policies, but also think about the support that students might need in order to thrive in higher education.*

*Since we’ve had these questions in the application, its obviously given us some really rich data as well. It gives us an insight into the number of students sharing that they are a young carer and making the application to higher education. What we’ve seen over the past couple of years is also some really rich insights into those student experiences as well. So, as well as seeing the overall numbers and still seeing that those students who are young carers are underrepresented in higher education, we’ve actually had some additional insights that we’ve got from student surveys, so talking to those students who are young carers who have made their applications. Some of the really interesting things we have found out are, student who have caring responsibilities are more likely than those without caring responsibilities to apply within a thirty-minute drive of their home address. So obviously for some of those students, the car5ing responsibilities continues, and it might be that they don’t necessarily know where to go for additional support but also those students need to continue those responsibilities whilst in higher education – which is really important for universities and colleges to consider when supporting those students. What we also saw in the data which I think is really interesting is that there is a really strong preference for those young carers making those applications to higher education to apply for health, social care and midwifery type courses. Now there is a really interesting thing there as of course there is potentially a really fantastic root there for those students and we know that there are some really brilliant careers out there, but one of the things we are cautious of is potentially those students missing out on other options as they might not have had the same work experience opportunities, because of their caring responsibilities. So, we never want students to sort of limit their choices based on their individual circumstances, but as I say there is also a positive there as there is fantastic careers and subject choices through health, social care, nursing and midwifery as well. One of the other things we do see across the data for young carers is that students that apply and share that they are a young carer, are more likely to share that they have a disability or mental health condition as part of their application. So, again, it’s really important through that data and that insight that universities and colleges are thinking about the support they can offer that student. Not only as a young carer, but also through the disability that they might have or the mental health condition that they might have and we think that support should start much earlier, so really thinking about not just application to higher education, but that transition and also that success whilst on course as well.*

Jess*:*

*Perfect, thank you so much for that context. Just continuing on the theme of student experiences, as a student myself, I have completed an anonymous survey to gain an insight from my peers and a lot of my findings correlate with the findings from UCAS. So, I’m just going to read out a couple of statements from students. One student said, in regard to their educational experience, they’ve had a real lack of confidence when trying to get work completed and a real sense of just giving up. Another student said that their attendance was affected which led to extensions, however, they applied for a caregiving funding which helped them with the cost of travelling to and from home. Again, another student said that they found it hard to focus and maintain energy. So, in regards to support, I asked young carers whether they felt like they’ve received adequate support for coping with their circumstances. The general consensus was quite negative, suggesting that they struggled to find support, however, some said that the university did offer special circumstances which helped with their experience. So, Ellie, could you point us in the direction fort some support for these young carers?*

Ellie*:*

*Yeah, absolutely, and thank you to those students for sharing those experiences as well. Its absolutely something that at UCAS and I know across the sector for universities and colleges, they’re really keen to ensure that students do get that support and feel that they are able to complete their studies to the best of their ability. A couple of the things that we’ve put in place at UCAS that really thinks about the support actually throughout that discovery journey for students and sort of pre- application. One of the things we offer at UCAS is exhibitions. You may have been to one of these yourself when you were considering higher education but this is where you can meet lots of different universities when you are considering your options. One of the things that we have introduced here is actually some specific ‘mission cards’ we’ve called them. It’s a really nice way for students who have a range of different individual needs, of course including young carers, to think about what are the types of questions I should be asking my university before I actually go. So that could be things like, what supports do you have on offer if I need to continue my caring responsibilities whilst I’m at university or college. What this enables is a much earlier conversation to happen. Similarly to us introducing the questions to the application, what can happen to students is that they are not exploring that information until to they get to their university choice. And whilst that is absolutely fine for some students, actually that support can be put in place before they get on course and before they reach a crisis point. So, we think introducing those conversations much earlier is really important.*

Jess*:*

*Yeah definitely. I think one of the key elements that I’ve taken away from this survey was the lack of knowledge of the support that’s out there. So not necessarily that there isn’t support its just knowing where it is and how to find it.*

Ellie*:*

*Absolutely, and I think often its where to have that conversation as well. We know that from our research young carers have had those responsibilities sometimes for a lifetime and so it might be that actually their school or college and the teachers that are supporting them with their university of college application might not actually be aware that they are a young carer themselves. And therefore, they are not actually being told about the support systems that are available, so we really encourage students to open up that conversation as far as they feel comfortable for that they are getting signposted to the right support. We also have a service that we’ve introduced at UCAS which is called the outreach connection service, so this is something that allows universities and colleges who offer pre- application support to be able to signpost the teachers and advisers their opportunities, so that could be mentoring, summer schools academic support, or even things like campus visits so that students know where they can get that support before they’re making their choices. At the moment it is a teacher and advisor facing service, but we are developing that so that students can use that service through the UCAS hub and connect them to that support much sooner, before they’re making their choices for higher education. We have lots of student facing information and advice at UCAS.com, it’s really important for us that we are supporting student to why they would share in their application, why they would tick that box, but also signpost them to the range of support that available out there, not just through universities and colleges, but also those fantastic third-party organisations and charities as well. We’ve worked really closely with the Carers Trust who have done some fantastic advocacy in support in this space and again its really important for us that we are supporting students to understand why its so important to share their caring responsibilities and how it can open up those pathways much sooner to support students to find the right choice for them and hopefully the best success in higher education.*

Jess*:*

*I think as well one of the barriers to young carers receiving and like seeking support is adopting the role of a carer, and accepting that they are a carer – especially if you haven’t been a carer your whole life and you’ve just started this role, kind of understanding that you are a young carer and that you are entitled to additional support is a barrier that you need to overcome. So, I think especially in universities and education that push to understand that there is not a specific criteria to being a young carer and you are entitled to support is really important as well.*

Ellie*:*

*Absolutely. And I think sometimes it’s the terminology, isn’t it?*

Jess*:*

*Definitely.*

Ellie*:*

*As you say, it could be a student who has recently taken on those additional responsibilities as a young carer, but some students who have had those responsibilities for their whole life, they might not resonate with that terminology of being a young carer, for them that is absolutely their life and is part of their everyday responsibilities. So, one of the other things that we really try to do is support other supporters in that student’s life. So, we talk about it in out parent and carer guides, we talk about it in our teacher and advisor guides as well to really understand how best to raise that conversation, how to talk about the caring responsibilities and how to ensure that students can recognise themselves within that terminology and also recognise the benefits in identifying as a young carer. Sharing that at point of application can really support them with the additional support, be that financial support that may be available, additional timer considerations if they’re travelling a lot, but really thinking about the support that is available when they do share and resonate with that terminology.*

Jess*:*

*Yeah definitely. Well, thank you so much for sharing the resources provided by UCAS. I think its really important for platforms like this to discuss these issues and make young carers aware of the help and support that’s out there because it can be a really daunting experience to try and find these things yourself and you feel like you’re meant to know that these support systems exist and that you can get financial support and you know, it can be a daunting experience so I think that discussing it today will have really helped some young carers, hopefully!*

Ellie*:*

*Absolutely. And just to say, I think it is a really important point you made there about the expecting students to know. We quite often say in my line of work ‘you don’t know what you don’t know’ and I think that is really true of students and people making those choices in higher education and one of the things that we really want to do at UCAS is make that personalised journey through the UCAS hub and through the discovery journey into higher education so the more that we can do to bring that information directly to students, the better. And hopefully that will help young carers to be able to recognise themselves, understand the support available to them, look at the resources and tools that are available to them on UCAS and then ultimately make the right decision for them in higher education.*

Jess*:*

*Yeah, hopefully from this episode education institutions can listen and promote these support networks because personally, when I was seeking support, I felt like I couldn’t find anything and especially when you’re studying alongside things it just gets really overwhelming and you just kind of think, is it even worth my effort anymore? But if universities promote these resources and we see more of it online, I think it will save a lot of students from the stress of having to seek support alongside completing their studies and enjoying their overall university experience.*

Ellie*:*

*Absolutely, and I think having students like yourself, Jess, who have been through that experience sharing their personal experiences, being those kind-of role models to younger students is really important as well, so thank you for sharing your experience as well, its really important to hear that.*

Jess*:*

*Thank you.*

*Thank you very much for joining us today, Ellie, that was really insightful and we’ll link some of the resources in the podcast description for any students that need any support within their caring experience in education.*