

Fostering a sense of belonging for higher education staff and students with caring responsibilities: what works?

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1. Overview

An original research and art-based collaboration between Marie-Pierre Moreau, Professor of Education at Anglia Ruskin University, Cambridge, UK, and Sally Campbell Galman, an independent cartoonist and a Professor at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, US. This project is supported by Advance HE, as part of the Good Practice Awards programme.

2. The story

Carers are a group of particular significance to society, as they contribute precious time and energy to other people's needs and, simply put, enable society to operate. Yet they are largely rendered invisible and misrecognised. This is particularly the case in academia where the figure of the 'bachelor boy' has long prevailed. Through the use of comics and other art forms (see for example, Moreau and Bernard, 2018), we want to challenge the status quo and turn academia in a place of belonging for students and staff with caring responsibilities.

Using the arts as a mode of dissemination does more than enhance accessibility and engage diverse publics with research topics and stories, the arts in general, and comics specifically, enable readers to simultaneously consider the parts and the whole. The contiguous images and words that characterise comic art allow readers to be challenged by individual carers' stories while also considering the larger sociocultural context. In using this medium, we are hoping to stimulate interests and reach out to a broad range of policy-makers, practitioners and individuals which may not, in other circumstances, have engaged with this issue. In particular, we hope to raise awareness of carers and of the diversity and intersectionalities of their experiences, and to encourage the development of practices and policies which foster carers' sense of belonging.

The illustrated comic vignettes and companion booklet will be launched at an end of project event hosted by Anglia Ruskin University and at a similar event, hosted by the University of Massachusetts in 2020-21, Covid-19 permitting. They are also [available online](#) in open access for all to use, with appropriate recognition of the authors.

Researching carers in academia has never been more timely. First, those with caring responsibilities now represent a significant presence in academia (NUS, 2013; UCU, 2017). The age distribution of the higher education (HE) workforce means that staff are likely to have caring responsibilities, whether they are the parents of young children or have more complex caring responsibilities. In the UK HE sector, the statistical feminisation of the workforce (HESA, 2016) is likely to increase the proportion of those with caring responsibilities, as care work remains largely constructed as 'women's work' (Atkinson, 2017).

Second, extant research shows that those with caring responsibilities often struggle with a broad range of issues. Carers have to navigate the conflicting demands of academia and the family (Wainwright and Marandet, 2006). Students and those in the most precarious forms of employment, are at high risk of financial strain and often have high levels of debt, linked to the costs of care provision in the UK and, in the case of students, tuition fees (Hinton-Smith, 2012; NUS, 2009). Carers often experience feelings of social isolation, of 'not belonging', as well as a range of emotional and health problems. These affective and emotional components of carers' experiences are often overseen by policies (Brooks, 2014; Moreau and Kerner, 2013; NUS, 2009).

Third, the issues experienced by carers in HE are likely to persist or even worsen in societal contexts where austerity policies have led to significant cuts to social care budgets (Carers UK, 2013). Carers are increasingly expected to remain in paid work, with a number of reports identifying the retention or re-entry of carers in the workplace as a priority. Growing expectations of geographical mobility and long working hours have also exacerbated the demands of academic and care work (Henderson and Moreau, 2020).

Last but not least, Covid-19, which came uninvited over the course of this project, has suddenly thrown light on the care arrangements which had been rendered invisible by carefree academic and societal norms. This newly acquired visibility is a critical moment that needs grasping if we are to embrace the idea of the 'care-full' university.

3. The authors:

Marie-Pierre Moreau is Professor in Education and Education Research Lead at Anglia Ruskin University, Cambridge. Her research is concerned with the formation of identities and inequalities in education and at work. In 2008-09, still a PhD student, she had a eureka moment when taking her daughter, Nina, to her campus nursery. Since then, she has been researching the lives of carers in academia and has no intention to stop anytime soon.

Sally Campbell Galman is Professor of Child and Family Studies at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst College of Education. An anthropologist of childhood, working artist and arts-based researcher, her work focuses on young children and gender in schools and communities. You can keep up with her at sallycampbellgalman.com

To hear more about this project, please contact marie-pierre.moreau@aru.ac.uk or go to theresearchwitch.wordpress.com.

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