

COMBINING CAREGIVING AND STUDIES

Report of the Alliance project HOGENT-EhB



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Cover photo: Bieke Baete and her father during an interview with Steunpunt Mantelzorg (November 2020)

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GENERAL INTRODUCTION

A lot of students take care of someone close to them. They provide care for a friend, neighbour or family member who needs support because of an illness, disability, mental vulnerability, ageing or an addiction problem. They are informal carers. Student informal carers combine their studies with care tasks, selflessly and often invisibly. Because of this invisibility, recognition and support are lacking.

Many student informal carers perceive their role as meaningful and fulfilling. However, this should not be assumed and student informal carers who do not feel this way should not have to continue to provide care. Sometimes the well-being and health of the student informal carers are affected by the burden of being a carer and by the different roles they must combine. Their carrying capacity is not infinite. Customized support is needed, preferably structurally.

The search for recognition, identification and personalised support is the starting point of an alliance project on student informal carers at Hogeschool Gent (HOGENT) and Erasmus hogeschool Brussel (EhB).

Within the alliance project, online (quantitative) surveys among student informal carers and educational staff were organised.

The survey for student informal carers was designed to gain insight into the students' experienced thresholds and attitudes toward the content and structure of a support policy for student informal carers in higher education. The answers help in answering the question of how an informal care-friendly student policy in higher education can be formed, and how educational institutions can provide information and support to facilitate the combination of studying and informal caring.

Based on the survey for student informal carers, an online survey was conducted for the educating staff. This also involved interviews with study programme counsellors. These interviews were used to determine the ways in which educational staff get in touch with

student informal carers and their attitude towards educational support measures and an informal care-friendly student policy.

In addition to these surveys, awareness campaigns were also created to raise more awareness about the topic of studying and providing informal care.

In this report, you can read more about the results of the online surveys, as well as the content of the awareness campaigns which were organised in both colleges. It shows the student and staff perception of the combination of studying and providing informal care. The report also highlights several elements that can contribute to the support for this group of informal carers and to the development of an informal care-friendly student policy. We hope that this report can provide further incentive to structurally embed support for student informal carers.

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STUDENT INFORMAL CARER SURVEY

A total of 105 student informal carers participated in the online survey: 35 HOGENT students, 47 EhB students, as well as 23 students from other colleges or universities. The data collection of the student survey took place in 2021-2022.

1. IMPACT OF INFORMAL CARE

We asked student informal caregivers how the responsibility and practicality of their role as informal carer affects different life domains such as social relationships, health and well-being, study, and leisure activities. Table 1 shows the results of the perceived influence of the role as informal carer on different life domains.

In terms of social relationships, the majority of respondents indicated that the role of informal carer has a positive to very positive influence on the relationship with the person with a care or support need (60%). For 41.9% of the respondents, the role of informal carer also has a positive to very positive impact on the relationship with their other family and relatives. At the same time, 32.4% experience that the role as informal carer has a negative to very negative impact on these social relationships. For 38.1% and 53.4% of the respondents, respectively, the role of informal carer also has a negative to very negative impact on relationships with friends and other social relations.

In other life domains, we also notice that for a significant number of respondents the role as informal carer has a negative to very negative impact, specifically 35.3% on personal development, 43.8% on health, 42.8% on financial condition and 58.2% on emotional well-being. Four out of ten respondents indicated that the informal care role has a positive to very positive impact on personal development. 35.3% of respondents experience a negative impact of the informal care role.

Looking at the educational domain, 25% of student informal caregivers experiences that the role of informal carer had a negative to very negative influence on the choice of study. For many respondents, the informal care has a negative to very negative influence on educational activities (classes, tasks, internship... 66.7%), exams (61.9%), study progress (55.3%) the number of credits taken (38.1%), and interactions with fellow students (37.5%).

Lastly, the majority of respondents experience that informal care has a negative to very negative impact on their leisure activities (67.6%). Somewhat less than half report a negative impact on their social engagement (48.5%).

Table 1: Influence of Role as Informal Carer on Life Domains

	% (N)				
	Highly negative	Negative	Neither negative nor positive	Positive	Highly positive
Your relationship with the person you take care of	4.8% (5)	16.2% (17)	19% (20)	41.9% (44)	18.1% (19)
Your relationship with family members and relatives	2.9% (3)	29.5% (31)	25.7% (27)	37.1% (39)	4.8% (5)
Your relationship with friends	2.9% (3)	35.2% (37)	42.9% (45)	17.1% (18)	1.9% (2)
Your other social relationships	4.8% (5)	48.6% (51)	33.3% (35)	11.4% (12)	1.9% (2)
Your personal development	6.7% (7)	28.6% (30)	24.8% (26)	35.2% (37)	4.8% (5)
Your health	9.5% (10)	34.3% (36)	47.6% (50)	6.7% (7)	1.9% (2)
Your financial condition	13.3% (14)	29.5% (31)	50.5% (53)	6.7% (7)	0
Your emotional well-being	12.6% (13)	45.6% (47)	23.3% (24)	16.5% (17)	1.9% (2)
Your choice of study programme	6.7% (7)	18.3% (19)	53.8% (56)	13.5% (14)	7.7% (8)
The number of credits you take	6.7% (7)	31.4% (33)	58.1% (61)	3.8% (4)	0
Your classes, tasks, internship, ... for college/university	20% (21)	46.7% (49)	28.6% (30)	2.9% (3)	1.9% (2)
Your interaction with fellow students	10.6% (11)	26.9% (28)	54.8% (57)	6.7% (7)	1% (1)
Your exams	12.4% (13)	49.5% (52)	34.3% (36)	2.9% (3)	1% (1)
Your academic progress	12.4% (13)	42.9% (45)	41.9% (44)	2.9% (3)	0
Your leisure time activities	13.3% (14)	54.3% (57)	24.8% (26)	5.7% (6)	1.9% (2)
Your social commitment such as participation in meetings, activities, initiatives in your neighbourhood, community, society	15.2% (16)	33.3% (35)	44.8% (47)	4.8% (5)	1.9% (2)

2. COMBINATION OF STUDY AND INFORMAL CARE RESPONSIBILITIES

Table 2 shows to what extent student informal carers manage to combine studying and providing informal care. Our survey shows that 50.5% of respondents perceive the combination of studying and taking up informal care tasks as poorly to very poorly. 29.5% can combine studying and providing informal care well to very well.

Table 1: Combination Between Studying and Providing Informal Care

	% (N)
Very poorly	10.5% (11)
Poorly	40.0% (42)
Neither poorly nor well	20.0% (21)
Well	23.8% (25)
Very well	5.7% (6)

Table 3 shows how often student informal carers experience problems with educational activities due to taking up care tasks. For example, 30.5% of the respondents report that they are sometimes late for class and 5.7% often late for class. 13.5% of respondents said they sometimes arrive late at their internship. 32.7% of respondents leave classes sometimes earlier and 12.5% often to very often. 40.4% of respondents skip classes sometimes and 15.4% often to very often. Slightly more than half of the respondents also do not always meet deadlines because of their role as caregiver, 35.2% reported sometimes missing deadlines and 16.2% often to very often. Group work causes difficulties for many respondents. Respectively for 33% sometimes, for 19.4% often and for 4.9% very often. Respondents also reported experiencing concentration difficulties because of the role as caregiver. 32.4% sometimes experience concentration difficulties and 48.6% often to very often.

Table 2: Frequency of Problems Experienced in Educational Activities Due to Taking Up Care Tasks

	% (N)				
	Never	Almost never	Sometimes	Often	Very often
I am late for class	37.1% (39)	26.7% (28)	30.5% (32)	5.7% (6)	0
I am late for my internship	61.5% (64)	24% (25)	13.5% (14)	1% (1)	0
I leave classes earlier	35.6% (37)	19.2% (20)	32.7% (34)	10.6% (11)	1.9% (2)
I skip classes	24% (25)	20.2% (21)	40.4% (42)	11.5% (12)	3.8% (4)
I fail to meet a deadline	32.4% (34)	16.2% (17)	35.2% (37)	13.3% (14)	2.9% (3)
I experience difficulties in group work	20.4% (21)	22.3% (23)	33% (34)	19.4% (20)	4.9% (5)
I find it difficult to concentrate	11.4% (12)	7.6% (8)	32.4% (34)	27.6% (29)	21% (22)

Several student informal carers took the opportunity to report other experiences as well. For example, some respondents reported being distracted during classes because of worries, being tired and not seeing a perspective, and losing motivation for school. One respondent also described having the feeling of not being there enough for the person with a care or support need.

3. TOLD IN THE STUDY PROGRAMME

Chart 1 shows how many student informal carers told someone in the study programme that they are taking up informal care responsibilities. 54.8% of respondents told someone in the study programme and 45.2% told no one.

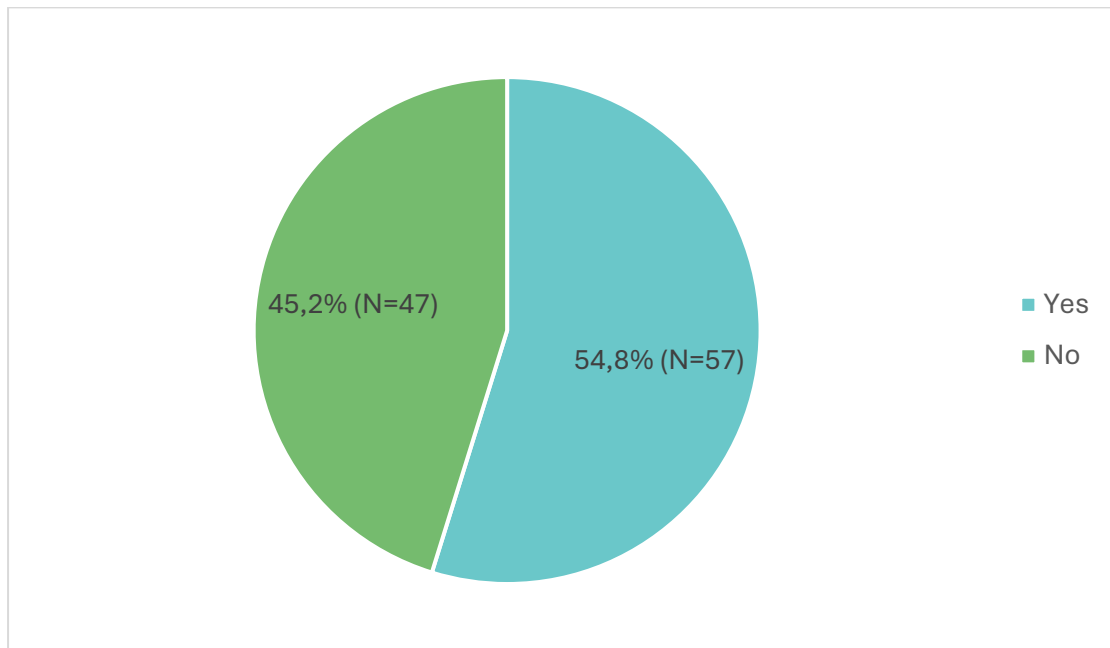


Chart 1: Told in the Study Programme

Table 4 shows the motives of student informal carers who did not inform anyone in the study programme about their role as informal carer. Mostly, respondents do not want to draw attention to that part of their lives (42.5%) and/or don't feel the need to talk about it (36.1%). For 34% of the respondents, there was no opportunity to discuss it yet, and 31.9% said they did not feel like doing so.

Table 3: Motives for Not Informing Anyone in the Study Programme

	% (N)
I do not want to draw attention to that part of my life	42.5% (20)
I do not feel the need to do this	36.1% (17)
There was no opportunity to discuss this yet; but it is possible	34.0% (16)
I do not feel like it	31.9% (15)
I do not wish to share this	27.6% (13)
The issues of the person I take care of are too complex and/or are subject to negative judgement	25.5% (12)
I want to keep my identity as a student separate from my role as informal carer	23.4% (11)

Several respondents took the opportunity to add other motives. One respondent referred explicitly to the COVID-19 pandemic, and another only recently identified him/herself as an informal carer. Other respondents mentioned their concern about drawing pity, the potential incomprehension that the informal care story might evoke or the sensitivity of the topic to discuss at school.

Chart 2 relates to the student informal carers (54.8%) who did inform someone in the education programme about their informal care role and shows who was informed about it. Multiple responses were possible. The majority of these respondents informed fellow students (92.9%). 42.1% of respondents informed educational staff and 19.2% the study programme counsellor. Internship and practice coordinators and student services (STUVO) were ranked last with 15.7% and 10.5%, respectively.

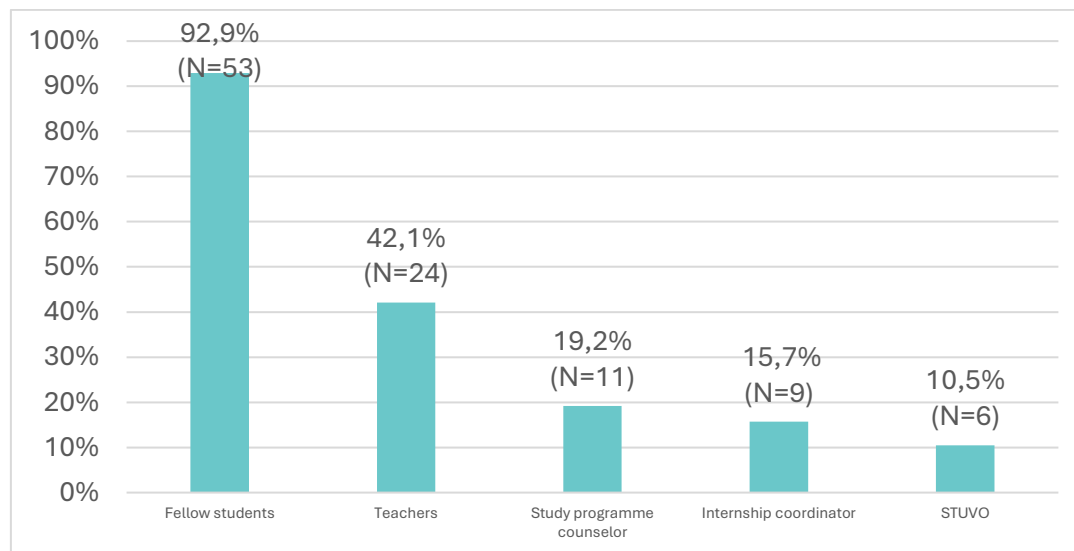


Chart 2: Informed People in the Study Programme About the Role as Informal Carer

We presented all student informal carers with statements gauging their attitudes towards communicating about their role as informal carer and their responsibilities (see table 5).

The majority of respondents indicate not wanting to tell their informal care story every time (65.7%). 41% assumes that the college or university cannot be helpful, and 45.7% believes that fellow students cannot be helpful. Quite a few respondents say they do not expect understanding or recognition from fellow students (26.7%) or educational staff (36.1%). 50% of respondents experience little room to discuss this and 25.7% are concerned about bullying, pity, or exclusionary behaviour.

Approximately half of the respondents reported having had no previous negative experiences with fellow students (50.4%) or educational staff (44.8%) who knew their informal care story. 11.4% have had negative experiences with fellow students who knew their informal care story, and 17.3% have had negative experiences with educational staff in requests for help or support.

Table 4: Attitude Towards Communicating About the Role as Informal Carer and its Responsibilities

	% (N)				
	Completely disagree	Disagree	Neither disagree nor agree	Agree	Completely agree
I do not want to tell my informal care story every time	2.9% (3)	6.7% (7)	24.8% (26)	46.7% (49)	19% (20)
I have had previous negative experiences with fellow students who knew my informal care story	25.7% (27)	24.8% (26)	38.1% (40)	9.5% (10)	1.9% (2)
I have had previous negative experiences with education staff in asking for help or support	22.1% (23)	23.1% (24)	37.5% (39)	11.5% (12)	5.8% (6)
I do not assume that the college/university can be of any use in this	9.5% (10)	16.2% (17)	33.3% (35)	29.5% (31)	11.4% (12)
I do not assume that fellow students can be of any use in this	7.6% (8)	22.9% (24)	23.8% (25)	32.4% (34)	13.3% (14)
I don't expect understanding or recognition from fellow students	11.4% (12)	30.5% (32)	31.4% (33)	20% (21)	6.7% (7)
I don't expect understanding or recognition from educational staff	8.6% (9)	27.6% (29)	27.6% (29)	22.9% (24)	13.3% (14)
I experience little room/opportunity to discuss this	5.7% (6)	15.2% (16)	31.4% (33)	32.4% (34)	15.2% (16)
I am worried about bullying, pity, or exclusionary behaviour	33.3% (35)	21.9% (23)	19% (20)	20% (21)	5.7% (6)

4. AWARENESS-RAISING TOPICS

Using statements, we wanted to gain insight into which topics student informal carers consider important to make others aware of (see table 6).

At the top of the list stands the complexity of combining studies and care tasks (78%). 73.3% of respondents find it important to inform others about the fact that student informal carers take on a lot of tasks and responsibilities. With 70.4%, the impact on educational activities and on exams both ranked third. 60% of respondents want to raise awareness about the impact of informal care on the social and student life, and 57.1% about the fact that student informal carers do not always want to talk about the role as informal carer.

Table 5: Awareness-Raising Topics

	% (N)
Combining studying and providing informal care is complex	78.0% (82)
There are a lot of tasks and responsibilities involved as an informal carer	73.3% (77)
Informal care affects my studies and school such as attendance, appointments, deadlines, internships/visits, etc.	70.4% (74)
Informal care affects the exam period such as concentration, time to study, exam dates and hours, etc.	70.4% (74)
Informal care affects the social and student life	60.0% (63)
Student informal carers do not always want to talk about their role as informal carer	57.1% (60)
Student informal carers often need to be permanently available	52.3% (55)
Informal care has both beautiful and difficult moments combined with studying	47.6% (50)
What informal care can mean and how it differs from volunteering	45.7% (48)

5. EDUCATIONAL AND EXAM SUPPORT MEASURES

We asked student informal carers how educational support could be given. Table 7 provides an overview of the responses on the desired educational support measures.

At the top of the list with 69.5% is recording lessons in case of absence, followed by flexibility regarding mandatory attendance (56.1%) and flexibility towards deadlines (50.4%). The possibility of (part-time) remote learning was indicated by 47.6% of the respondents, and notes of classes in case of absence by 45.7%. For 38% of respondents, the possibility of being available during class via smartphone as well as the possibility of being allowed to leave class earlier or join later are desirable educational support

measures. Other educational support measures include a contact person for mediation towards educational staff (37.1%), support in planning classes and tasks (32.3%), alternatives to group work outside the class hours (32.3%), adjusted hours and days for internships (25.9%), peer support groups at the college/university (22.8%) and being able to use a silent room (21.9%).

Some student informal carers also pointed out the importance of other educational support measures such as more understanding from educational staff, consideration of an individual approach and temporary interruption of educational activities.

Table 6: Desired Educational Support Measures

	% (N)
Class recordings in case of absence	69.5% (73)
Flexibility for classes/activities/excursions with mandatory attendance	56.1% (59)
Flexibility regarding deadlines	50.4% (53)
Possibility for (part-time) remote learning	47.6% (50)
Notes from classes in case of absence	45.7% (48)
Possibility to be available via smartphone during lessons	38.0% (40)
Being permitted to leave class earlier or arrive later	38.0% (40)
Contact person for mediation towards educational staff	37.1% (39)
Support in planning lessons and tasks	32.3% (34)
Alternative to group work outside the class hours	31.4% (33)
Adjusted hours and days for internship	25.9% (27)
Peer support groups at college/university	22.8% (24)
Being able to use a silent room	21.9% (23)
Other desired educational support measures	5.7% (6)

We also presented student informal carers with several support measures related to the exams (Table 8). The most important exam support measures appeared to be the possibility of rescheduling exams within the exam period (44.5%), the possibility of communicating the time of examination in advance for oral exams (41.3%) and the possibility of rescheduling deadlines of exam assignments (33.6%).

Table 7: Desired Exam Support Measures

	% (N)
Possibility to reschedule exams within the exam period	44.5% (41)
Possibility to communicate the hour of the examination in advance for oral exams	41.3% (38)
Possibility to reschedule deadlines of exam assignments	33.6% (31)
Being able to use a silent room	28.2% (26)
Possibility to reschedule exams outside the exam period	25.0% (23)
Being able to keep the smartphone during exams or give it to the supervisor for safekeeping	23.9% (22)

6. IMPORTANCE OF AN INFORMAL CARE STATUTE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Most colleges and universities currently do not have a separate informal care statute. In Ghent, Luca - School of Arts does have a separate statute for student informal carers. Other colleges or universities such as HOGENT have a statute for exceptional individual and/or social circumstances that may include student informal carers.

We asked respondents if they would apply for an informal care statute if it existed. Chart 3 shows how many respondents would apply for an informal care statute. 55.5% of respondents would apply for the statute, 17.1% would not apply for the statute, and 27.2% would maybe apply for the statute.

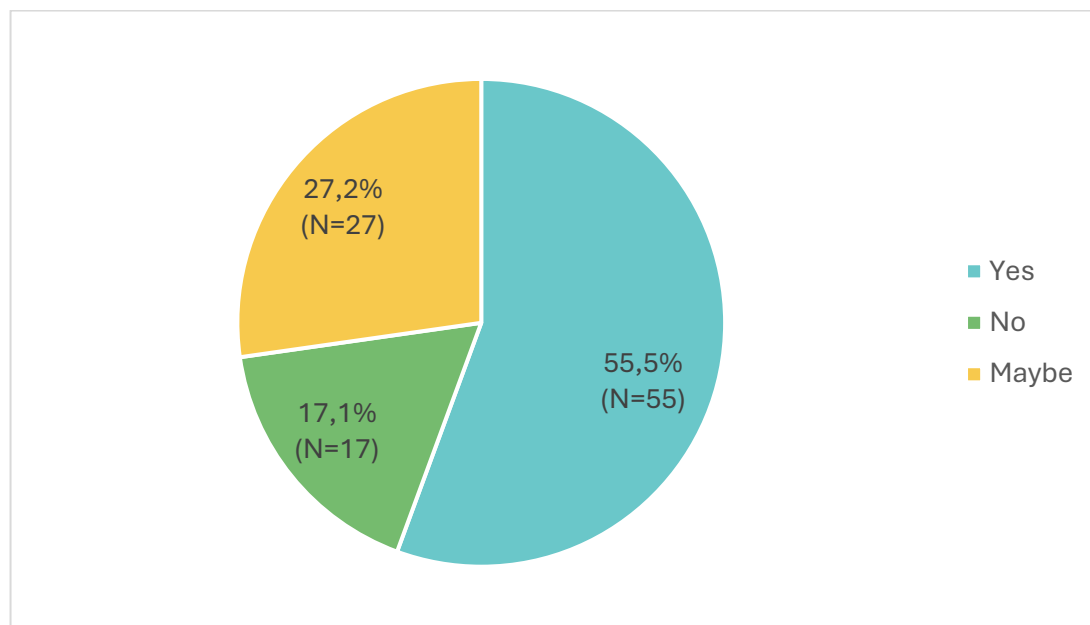


Chart 3: Applications for "Student Informal Carer" Statute

Student informal carers who would apply for the informal care statute motivate their choice with additional help and support as the main reason. They refer to both practical support and the feeling of being understood, recognised, and supported. The respondents hope that by formalising support by means of an informal care statute, fixed arrangements can be made with teachers. The feeling of being able to rely on fixed arrangements during tough times without having to invest in explanation and motivation at the time could provide mental peace and room to breathe. One respondent referred to the positive experience with the statute for exceptional individual and social circumstances, stating the following:

Student informal carers are the top athletes in their families.

However, another respondent reported that the informal care statute should remain discrete and still wants to choose when to use it or not:

I think this could make a big difference. Hopefully, I can still decide for myself at which moments I can use these separate measures and when not. I do not always want to feel like I am getting a special treatment. Support from the school would be a great help, more understanding for sure as well. But I would rather not want my fellow students to know that I am an informal carer, that I can choose to who I tell this and to who I do not. So never being addressed as an informal carer in front of the other students, being treated in a subtle way, ... I would rather not draw too much attention to it.

Student informal carers would not apply for the informal care statute because they thought they would not be eligible because of the (small) size of the care task or taking up care tasks for someone in an institution. Concerns about evoking pity, being accused of misuse or being told that they are not entitled also play a part in motivating them not to apply for the statute. Other respondents stated that they have no need for a separate informal care statute, for example, because they do not want to share anything about the role of informal carer. Another respondent dislikes having to apply every year for the informal care statute and feels that the statute would mainly account for practical matters and less for the mental strain and responsibilities.

Student informal carers who were unsure about applying for the informal care statute indicated that they would apply for it if they found themselves in a difficult situation or if the demand for care increased. For others, the way they would be heard is important, as are the follow-up and the ability to rely on confidentiality.

7. ADDITIONS FROM STUDENT INFORMAL CARERS

We gave student informal carers space to note additions. Several respondents emphasised the complexity and diversity of the role as informal carer and what this means to them. One respondent puts it as follows:

I have personally become very strong because of this situation. Sometimes I find it very difficult with everything in my life, but I am happy that I could choose my favourite study programme and I can continue studying.

The additions also explicitly referred to the importance of offering more prevention and intervention strategies for student informal carers. Respondents reported experiencing many barriers and expect more flexibility from educational institutions and educational staff.

Several respondents referred to the importance of being able to talk about their situation both through peer contact and this survey. Some respondents stated that they were happy with the questionnaire because it made them feel less alone and more visible. They also referred to the mental strain and pressure they experience in combining their studies with informal care tasks.

Some respondents wrote that they did not need support themselves but pointed out the importance of support for other student informal carers.

8. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

To establish an informal care-friendly policy for HOGENT and EhB, we surveyed 105 student informal carers via an anonymous online questionnaire.

We know from previous research (e.g. Bronselaer et al., 2021; Vanthuyne et al., 2015) that one profile for a young informal carer does not exist. Providing informal care involves a highly diverse range of tasks and responsibilities in terms of type, intensity and duration of care. In addition, factors such as the context in which care is provided, finances, experience, perception and carrying capacity also play a significant role. For example, there is a difference between being an informal caregiver for a person with whom the student lives and an informal carer who takes on care tasks for a few weeks a year or who coordinates the care of someone in a residential setting.

A support policy will therefore have to take this diversity into account. We add below some specific topics and observations from the survey:

- There is an undeniable interaction between studying and providing informal care, and student informal carers regularly find this combination difficult. Focusing on the obstacles gives us an idea of what a support policy might look like.
- "Evident expectations" towards students, such as being in class on time, cooperating in group assignments after class hours and respecting deadlines, can sometimes (by necessity) put a lot of pressure on student informal carers.
- If student informal carers inform anyone in the education programme about their role as informal carer at all, they are mainly fellow students. In line with Dockx and Denies (2020), this study shows that informal carers have had few negative experiences with educational staff, but at the same time have relatively little confidence in the support that can be offered within an educational context. This statement is confirmed in a study within Flemish secondary education.
- Based on the research of Bronselaer et al (2021), we know that student informal carers benefit from greater visibility. The main difficulties we encounter in this study around feeling dependent on the interpretation and appreciation of educators and fellow students are in line with this. Opting for an awareness-raising campaign around the combination of studying and providing informal care in HOGENT and EhB addresses this.
- Student informal carers benefit from educational and exam support measures. If an education and exam policy for student informal carers can be developed within the existing structure or if a separate informal carer statute would better meet the needs and expectations still needs further investigation.

SURVEY EDUCATIONAL STAFF

113 educators participated in the online survey: 74 educators from HOGENT and 39 educators from EhB. The data collection was conducted during 2021-2022.

1. INVOLVEMENT IN EDUCATION

We asked teachers which type(s) of education they are involved in (table 9). 77.8% of respondents teach theory classes, 72.5% teach practical classes and 65.4% are involved in internship and/or bachelor/master thesis.

Table 8: Involvement in Type of Education

	% (N)
Theory	77.8% (88)
Practise	72.5% (82)
Laboratory	6.1% (7)
Internship and/or bachelor/master's thesis	65.4% (74)
Other	7.9% (9)

2. EXPERIENCE WITH INFORMAL CARE

79.4% of the respondents had never received a question about the combination of studying and providing informal care before, while 20.5% did already receive a question about this (see table 10).

Table 9: Has Received Questions about the Combination of Studying and Providing Informal Care

	% (N)
No	79.4% (85)
Yes	20.5% (24)

We asked educators who already received questions (N=24) by whom they were addressed (see table 11). For the majority of the respondents, this was done by the student themselves (79%).

Table 10: Addressed by Whom About the Combination of Studying and Providing Informal Care

	% (N)
The student	79.0% (19)
The study programme counsellor	12.5% (3)
The study programme counsellor+ or student counsellor+ ¹	4.1% (1)
The STUVO staff member	4.1% (1)
Head of department	4.1% (1)

We also asked teachers who had already been addressed about the combination of studying and providing informal care what kind of questions they received (table 12). Most of them were asked about attending classes online or recording them in case of absence, as well as flexibility for deadlines of tasks or assignments (41.6%). 33.3% of the respondents were asked about flexibility for mandatory attendance and the possibility of leaving classes earlier or arriving later. 33.3% of the respondents also discussed the concerns about the care situation with the student informal carer.

Table 11: Support Demands from Student Informal Carers

	% (N)
Class recordings in case of absence or being allowed to attend the class online	41.6% (10)
Flexibility regarding deadlines	41.6% (10)
Flexibility for classes/activities/excursions with mandatory attendance	33.3% (8)
Being permitted to leave class earlier or arrive later	33.3% (8)
Worrying about the care situation	33.3% (8)
Possibility to be available via smartphone during lessons	16.6% (4)
Practical questions about the care situation	16.4% (4)
Questions regarding the support offer for informal carers	16.4% (4)
Possibility for (part-time) remote learning	12.5% (3)
Financial questions	12.5% (3)
Alternative to (mandatory) group work	4.1% (1)

¹ A study programme counsellor+ or student counsellor+ supports students with an attested functional disability for individual education and examination measures or counselling adapted to the functional disability.

We asked the educational staff at HOGENT whether they knew any student informal carers who had received the special statute for individual and social circumstances (see table 13). 93.9% of the HOGENT educators said they did not.

Table 12: knowledge of Student Informal Carers Who Have the Special Statute for Individual and Social Circumstances

	% (N)
Yes	6.1% (4)
No	93.9% (62)

3. EDUCATIONAL SUPPORT MEASURES

We asked the educational staff which of the proposed educational support measures they think could be given to student informal carers (table 14).

Regarding lecture-based classes, being able to leave class earlier or arrive later ranks first (53%). In a shared second place with 44.2% are the measures to record or attend classes online and the possibility of (part-time) remote learning. In third place is flexibility regarding deadlines (41.5%). For theory classes, respondents gave the lowest rating to an alternative to (mandatory) group work (26.5%).

Regarding small group-based seminars, being able to leave class earlier or arrive later also ranks first, as well as the flexibility regarding deadlines (38.9%). In second place stands being able to be available via smartphone (38%). In third place with 23.8% is an alternative to (mandatory) group work. The measure which was the least indicated by the respondents for practise classes is recording or attending the class online, with only 10.6%.

During laboratory classes, being able to be available via smartphone ranks first (14.1%), followed by being able to leave class earlier or arrive later and the flexibility regarding deadlines (11.5%). In laboratory classes, the respondents consider recording or attending the class online and the flexibility regarding mandatory attendance to be the least possible (3.5%). Overall, for this type of class, respondents see significantly fewer opportunities to provide adjustments.

For the counselling of the internships and bachelor or master thesis, we find in the top two the possibility to be available via smartphone with 33.6% and the ability to leave class or internship earlier or arrive later with 25.6%. In a shared third place are the recording of classes in case of absence or being allowed to attend classes online, the possibility of (part-time) remote learning, the flexibility regarding deadlines and flexibility for classes/activities/excursions with mandatory attendance. In last place with 15% stands an alternative to (mandatory) group work.

Table 13: Possible Educational Support Measures for Student Informal Carers per Type of Class

	Theory classes	Practise classes	Laboratory	Counselling of internship or bachelor's thesis
	% (N)	% (N)	% (N)	% (N)
Being permitted to leave class earlier or arrive later	53.0% (60)	38.9% (44)	11.5% (13)	25.6% (29)
Class recordings in case of absence or being allowed to attend the class online	44.2% (50)	10.6% (12)	3.5% (4)	24.7% (28)
Possibility for (part-time) remote learning	44.2% (50)	21.2% (24)	6.1% (7)	24.7% (28)
Flexibility regarding deadlines	41.5% (47)	38.9% (44)	11.5% (13)	27.4% (31)
Possibility to be available via smartphone during the class	39.8% (45)	38.0% (43)	14.1% (16)	33.6% (38)
Flexibility for classes/activities/excursions with mandatory attendance	38.9% (44)	21.2% (24)	3.5% (4)	24.7% (28)
Alternative to (mandatory) group work	26.5% (30)	23.8% (27)	7.0% (8)	15.0% (17)

4. EDUCATIONAL SUPPORT POLICIES FOR STUDENT INFORMAL CARERS

We presented the educational staff with possibilities on how support services for student informal carers could be established and how to involve/inform them best (see table 15).

53.0% of the respondents indicated the importance of developing an educational support policy for student informal carers at the education level. The lowest preference with 27.4% is to be informed by the student when the measure is allocated.

Table 14: Creation of an Education Support Policy for Student Informal Carers

	% (N)
At the education programme level	
Head of education programme and study programme counsellors inform the educational staff about the taken support measures	53.0% (60)
Discussing the possible measures at college level for theory classes, practice classes, internships, laboratory, ...	43.3% (49)
To be notified by STUVO or the study programme counsellor	38.9% (44)
To be notified by the student when the student wishes to use the allocated measure, and this before the start of the class	32.7% (37)
To be notified by the student when the measure is allocated	27.4% (31)

Respondents additionally reported that it is important for the educational staff to tailor the educational measures within the study programme to each student as it would not be optimal to assign the same measures in each study programme module. They also pointed out the additional time consumption for educators when individual programmes are allocated.

68.4% of the respondents indicated that they think it is important to be informed when students rely on educational support measures (see table 16).

Table 15: Being Informed When Students Rely on Educational Support Measures

	% (N)
Important	68.4% (52)
Not important	23.7% (18)
Maybe	7.9% (6)

5. IMPORTANCE OF AN INFORMAL CARE STATUTE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

We asked the educational staff whether creating a separate statute for student informal carers would create more opportunities and clarity. We split the answers since HOGENT already has a special statute for individual and social circumstances which could include student informal carers and EhB does not have such a statute.

Table 17 shows the results of the educational staff at HOGENT. 71.4% are in favour of a separate informal care statute. However, when we look at the explanation section, we see a nuanced view. Respondents report knowing little about it and thus finding it difficult to form an opinion. They also express their concern about how all kinds of exceptions will affect teaching and monitoring assignments. Some respondents question the benefits of a general informal care statute and wonder whether explicitly including options for student informal carers in the existing statute could be possible. The respondents in favour of the informal care statute mainly refer to the clarity it would create.

Table 16: Development of a Separate Informal Carers Statute at HOGENT

	% (N)
Yes	71.4% (30)
No	28.6% (12)

Besides the opportunity to state their opinion on the development of an informal care statute, EhB educators were also presented with several types of statutes (table 18). 40% of the respondents opts for a separate informal care statute, 28% expresses no preference in the type of statute and 24% prefers to introduce a statute for special individual and social circumstances. One respondent does not want a statute.

Table 17: Attitude Towards the Development of an Informal Care Statute at EhB

	% (N)
Yes, special statute for individual and social circumstances	24.0% (6)
Yes, informal care statute	40.0% (10)
Yes, but no preference in type of statute	28.0% (7)
No	4.0% (1)
Other	4.0% (1)

6. ADDITIONS FROM EDUCATIONAL STAFF

The educational staff had the opportunity to make comments and additions while they outlined educational measures for student informal carers.

At HOGENT, the respondents are concerned about the feasibility and the possibility, for example, to use additional support or employ staff to keep an overview. They also cited their own workload, both administratively and in terms of support for student informal carers. Respondents are also concerned about the student perspective and refer to the provision of counselling or coaching processes, the importance of open communication, and providing a confidant as educational measures for student informal carers. There is also a concern that students may only be seen as informal carer. Regarding the educational process, respondents note that there should remain a concern for group processes and the participation of student informal carers in group work. The measures should not undermine the educational content; there should remain sufficient opportunities to work with large, heterogeneous groups of students.

At EhB, respondents indicate the importance of a clear internal vision and policy with an open flow of information and the possibility to offer post-graduate trainings on this topic. One respondent reported being in favour of more flexibility but finds that recording classes is often difficult. They would like an efficient technology strategy, e.g. students learning remotely. Again, respondents are concerned about the workload when students would be allocated individual measures. Respondents made suggestions towards installing a buddy system or enabling the network. One respondent notes that also educators sometimes take on a role as informal carer and suggests thinking about support measures for teaching informal carers.

7. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

To establish an informal care-friendly policy at HOGENT and EhB, we not only surveyed the 105 students but also the 113 teachers through an online questionnaire. The educational staff is a crucial link in the success of an informal care-friendly education policy. After all, they will have to apply and monitor the measures in practice. If teachers do not support such a policy, the chances of a successful implementation are low.

Several previous studies confirm this statement (Dockx & Denies, 2020; Vanthuyne et al., 2015).

From the survey, we can derive the following observations:

- It is remarkable that the majority of respondents had never received a question related to the combination of studying and providing informal care before. This confirms the statement that student informal carers stay under the radar and prefer not to talk about the possible difficulties they experience in combining their studies with informal care tasks and responsibilities.
- Among the small group of teachers who had already been approached, it was mainly by the student informal carers themselves. This mostly involved requests for recording a class or attending it online, or for flexibility regarding a deadline.
- The respondents are open to different educational support measures for student informal carers within several types of education, considering the specificity of the type of education.
- Both educational institutions lack a specific (educational) policy towards this target group. Respondents would prefer a policy that is developed within the specific characteristics of the education department, as long as it falls within a shared college-wide policy. The respondents see a role here for the study programme counsellors and for STUVO.
- The respondents are generally in favour of a separate statute with clear criteria and consultable background information. However, they lack insight into the possible content of the statute as well as its possible impact on their work to be able to express their wants wholeheartedly.
- There is justified concern about the feasibility and additional work towards the implementation and follow-up of the various measures. Infrastructure is also needed to, for instance, record classes or look up measures easily.

AWARENESS-RAISING PROJECTS

Besides the surveys, several awareness-raising projects were organised. At HOGENT, for instance, workshops were organised by STUVO in collaboration with Steunpunt Mantelzorg. The workshops were meant for student informal carers and concerned the various aspects that can promote self-care.

In addition, the 'Beautiful Words and Images' campaign was created. Students and staff from both colleges were invited through several channels to submit words and images that symbolised informal care for them. Eight submissions were chosen and made into posters. The posters were displayed at various locations in both colleges. Through a QR code on the poster, people could download a map of the buildings on the campus where the other posters were displayed. People could also take a free A3-size poster from the libraries to display at home or in their dormitories. Two examples of the posters are shown below.



It is not your job!

You are still a child yourself.
You should be playing yourself
and not taking care of your
brother. You are his sister... but
what if just being a sister is not
enough for me?

Femke Jacobs

It is not your job!

You are still a child

You should be playing and not taking care of your brother.

You are his *sister*... but what if just being a sister is not enough for me?

This submission was sent in response to the awareness-raising campaign on '**Informal care-friendly higher education**'. Discover where the other posters are located via a map of HOGENT or EhB via the QR-Code and collect your personal favourite in A3 format in the Library.





The picture of my dad's workplace: this is something positive for me, my parents are divorced, but I can always reach out to my dad when things get too tough with mom. He always listens and comforts me. We have a lot in common, like music, crafts (carpentry), projects....

Emma

This submission was sent in response to the awareness-raising campaign on '**Informal care-friendly higher education**'. Discover where the other posters are located via a map of HOGENT or EhB via the QR-Code and collect your personal favourite in A3 format in the Library.



A third awareness-raising campaign included an online meeting day for the teaching and support staff of HOGENT and EhB as well as external parties. During the online meeting day, an informative session was offered with a general introduction and presentation of the alliance project, an introduction to the topic of studying and providing informal care, followed by a discussion about experiences from a study at HOWEST and the presentation of the first results of the student survey. Afterwards, varied topics were discussed with the participants in digital dialogue rooms.

A fourth campaign focused specifically on the study programme counsellors at HOGENT. Through online interviews, we wanted to find out their experiences with students who asked for support because of their role as informal carer, as well as how the departments and educators reacted to the topic. At the same time, we wanted these conversations to raise their awareness of the large number of student informal carers.

A final awareness campaign was a wrap-up day for students and teachers, during which the results of the surveys were presented. In addition to the part on content, various items were discussed with the participants in dialogue groups and the posters of the 'beautiful words and images' campaign were displayed.

FINAL CONCLUSION

The alliance project shows that the role of informal carer has an impact on the educational domain. This impact is mainly negative. Student informal carers who participated in the study indicated that there is a need for educational and exam support measures. At the same time, there is a consensus among teachers of a willingness to introduce and apply those measures in their teaching activities.

An important aspect here is the double implementation at policy level to achieve an informal care-friendly education policy. At the college level, there needs to be an elaborated vision and policy. At the level of the study programmes, there is a need for concretisation according to the specific needs and possibilities of the study programme. Deciding whether to introduce a separate informal care statute or integrate student informal carers into existing statutes is part of the vision and policymaking process. There are compelling arguments for a separate statute in terms of clarity and emphasising care for this exceptional group of students.

It will be crucial to consider the concerns towards workload and practical support of educational staff. An informal care-friendly education policy will only be effective if it considers the needs and concerns of student informal carers. In particular, care and respect for their story and privacy are important. Their needs involve what we can generally describe as "flexibility" in all facets of their studies.

The current Flemish Informal Care Plan 2022-2024 pays special attention to the group of young informal carers. Of the subsidised projects, one concentrates on the recognition and support of young informal carers in education, specifically in secondary and higher education. The results of this research will further shape the campaigns from the project. The project within the Flemish Informal Care Plan provides a springboard to further concretise the topic in the education policy and education programmes.

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