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Invisible Care, Unequal Trajectories: University Student Caregivers in Italy

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Abstract

This article investigates the experiences of university students who provide informal care to dependent family members in Italy, a population that remains largely overlooked in both sociological research and higher education policy. Drawing on qualitative data from focus groups conducted at the University of Parma (Italy), the study examines how caregiving responsibilities intersect with academic trajectories, shaping students' everyday lives, identities, and future orientations.

The findings show that student caregiving generates cumulative disadvantages that disrupt educational pathways and reconfigure temporal horizons. Participants describe lives marked by uncertainty, fragmentation, and a persistent tension between academic demands and non-negotiable care obligations. These conditions produce not only material constraints—such as delayed milestones and reduced participation—but also emotional burdens, including loneliness, guilt, shame and anxiety.

Rather than being individual challenges, these dynamics are rooted in processes of institutional misrecognition: caregiving is naturalized within the private sphere and remains largely invisible within academic structures. As a result, students tend to internalize their difficulties as personal failure, while their needs remain unaddressed.

While participants mobilize significant personal resources to sustain their studies, reliance on individual resilience risks obscuring the structural nature of these inequalities. By conceptualizing student caregiving as an under-recognized source of inequality, the article contributes to sociological debates on higher education and caregiving, and highlights the need for institutional responses grounded in formal acknowledgment, collective responsibility, and the capacity to recognize and address non-standard needs.

Introduction

Population ageing is reshaping welfare systems and increasing the demand for long-term care and everyday assistance for older adults and people living with chronic illnesses or disabilities. In countries such as Italy, where care provision remains strongly familistic, these needs are largely managed within households, often requiring family members to combine caregiving with work or study commitments. Within this context, some university students take on substantial informal care responsibilities while pursuing higher education. Adopting a qualitative approach based on focus groups conducted with students enrolled at the University of Parma, in the Emilia-Romagna region of Italy, this article explores the experiences of university students who provide care for elderly, chronically ill, or otherwise dependent family members, a population whose challenges in higher education remain largely underexplored, especially in the Italian context. Understanding how caregiving responsibilities intersect with academic life is crucial for designing supportive policies and institutional practices (Brooks, 2011), especially given the expected increase in the number of students engaged in informal caregiving as demographic ageing leads to a rise in the older population both in absolute and relative terms (Harper,

2015; Petrini et al., 2019) and, consequently, in the number of people requiring care (Carrino et al., 2018; Converso, 2015).

The next section of the paper provides a background overview and reviews the existing literature on informal caregiving and student caregivers, with particular attention to the Italian context and higher education. Subsequently, the article describes the methodology adopted for the study. The following section presents the main findings emerging from the focus groups, analysed through thematic analysis. Subsequently, the article discusses these findings in relation to the existing literature and their implications for higher education policies and support practices. The paper concludes by summarizing the main contributions of the study, outlining its limitations, and identifying directions for future research.

1. Background

The term “informal caregiving” refers to individuals who voluntarily, continuously, and without financial compensation provide care and assistance to a loved one or a person with whom they have a close personal relationship who is not self-sufficient (Li & Song, 2021; Paglia, 2021). Demographic aging, rising disability and chronic illness rates, and recent pension reforms extending working life in Western countries have reshaped traditional-family-work dynamics, giving rise to “sandwich generations” caring simultaneously for young children and aging parents (Converso et al., 2020; Saraceno, 2010). At the same time, public resources for community and home-based care have not increased proportionally, leading to growing reliance on informal caregivers (Metzelthin et al., 2017; Papa & Lamura, 2019).

In Italy, informal care is mainly provided within the family and is largely carried out by women (Petrini et al., 2019). Care provision remains strongly embedded in family relationships, reflecting a cultural and institutional model in which informal networks play a central role in responding to vulnerability and dependency (Bramanti & Carradore, 2025). According to ISTAT estimates (2019), in 2018 approximately 12.7 million people in Italy aged 18–64 had care responsibilities, including the care of children and dependent relatives. More than 2.8 million individuals regularly cared for ill, disabled, or older family members, and approximately 646,000 combined the care of dependent relatives with childcare responsibilities. These data suggest that caregiving is often embedded within other life domains and social roles, creating potential challenges in balancing care with work, family, and educational commitments. Studies on caregiving networks in Italy show that care responsibilities are frequently organized through dense family-based support systems, where strong relational ties play a key role, often within a context in which access to broader forms of social support and institutional resources is more limited (Tronca et al., 2025).

While caregiving has been widely studied, much of the literature addressing the nexus between education and caregiving has mainly focused on adolescents or school-aged carers (Becker, 2007; Leu & Becker, 2016; Santini et al., 2020) and on student-parents, whose dual role has been increasingly recognized in higher education studies (Ajayi et al., 2022; Brooks, 2011; Moreau & Kerner, 2013).

Young caregivers (< 18 years) and young adult caregivers (YACs, 18–30 years) face ambivalent consequences: caregiving can foster resilience, empathy, and rapid maturation (D'Amen et al., 2021; Musaio & Belloni, 2023;), but it is also associated with psychological distress, social isolation, educational disadvantage, and reduced opportunities for self-realization (Boccaletti et al., 2016; Converso et al., 2020; Haugland et al., 2020; Schilling, 2015).

Despite these insights, university students informally caring for older or dependent relatives remain a largely invisible group in sociological and higher education research (Kirton et al., 2012; Knopf et al., 2022). When the literature does address the university context, it is mostly concerned with healthcare or nursing students studying to become professional caregivers for older adults (Longhini et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2024), rather than with those who assume caregiving roles informally. As a result, while existing studies highlight conflicts between care responsibilities and education, they rarely focus on this specific population, thereby limiting our understanding of how caregiving shapes higher education experiences and trajectories, as well as what universities do – or fail to do – to support student caregivers. Beyond being a neglected research area, student caregiving also constitutes an under-recognized source of inequality within higher education.

Young adult caregivers often occupy a crucial stage of the life course, typically marked by growing autonomy, identity formation, educational and professional development, and the construction of intimate relationships; the assumption of care responsibilities may therefore significantly interfere with processes of self-realization (Bramanti & Bosoni, 2025). For many young adults, caregiving has a profound impact on everyday life and may entail interruptions or slowdowns in educational and work trajectories, reduced time for leisure activities, and fewer opportunities for social relationships with peers (Bramanti & Bosoni, 2025).

Care responsibilities intersect with family obligations, welfare arrangements, and educational opportunities, thereby contributing to unequal experiences of university life (Armstrong-Carter et al., 2021; Leu & Becker, 2016) and potentially limiting the ways young adult caregivers make choices about their future (Hamilton & Adamson, 2012).

Recent studies have started to address this gap. Wazinski et al. (2022), for instance, investigated caregiving university students in Germany, showing how they often lead "hidden lives", excluded from student life and lacking institutional recognition. These findings suggest that caregiving undertaken while enrolled in higher education entails specific challenges related to the institutional and life-course position of students, highlighting the need for institutional awareness and flexibility. Other studies conducted in the United Kingdom (Kettell, 2018; Kirton, 2012) and in the United States (Tucker et al., 2022) have shown that students who take on caregiving responsibilities often face time pressures, experience a limited sense of belonging within their university, struggle to disclose their caregiving role with peers, lecturers, or university staff and tend to achieve lower academic outcomes (Tucker et al., 2022).

Nevertheless, research remains scarce, and the Italian context is largely absent from this debate. This absence is particularly striking given that Italy has one of the oldest populations in Europe and a welfare regime still strongly grounded in intergenerational solidarity. In such a context, one might expect student caregivers to be recognized in both public debate and academic research; instead, their presence is largely silenced, with significant sociological implications. Furthermore, identifying student caregivers is not straightforward: many individuals do not self-identify as "caregivers," perceiving their role as a natural extension of family ties or close personal relationships rather than as a social category with distinct needs (Chevrier et al., 2022). This lack of self-recognition reinforces their invisibility and complicates efforts to study and support them (Eifert et al., 2015).

Building on these gaps, the present study investigates the experiences and perspectives of university students at the University of Parma [1]. The study aims to inform both future research and the development of policies and support mechanisms tailored to university student caregivers. A reflection on these issues is particularly timely in light of the recent presentation of the Italian Disegno di Legge Caregiver (Caregiver Draft Law), submitted to the Senate in January 2026. The bill, which is currently under discussion in Parliament and has not yet been approved as law, aims to formally recognize the role of family caregivers and to introduce a set of support measures for individuals providing long-term assistance to dependent relatives. Importantly, the proposed legislation also includes specific provisions addressing the situation of students with caregiving responsibilities, promoting greater flexibility in educational pathways and encouraging universities to adopt measures aimed at facilitating the reconciliation between study commitments and care responsibilities (Italian Senate, 2026). By explicitly acknowledging the condition of student caregivers, the draft bill signals an emerging area of attention within educational systems, while also suggesting a broader shift in the Italian debate on long-term care, increasingly oriented toward recognizing the social value of informal caregiving and the need to support caregivers across different life stages.

The University of Parma, where this study was conducted, is located in the Emilia-Romagna region, one of the first Italian regions to formally recognize and support family caregivers through dedicated regional legislation (L.R. 2/2014), recently revised to strengthen support measures and funding mechanisms. In many respects, this regional framework has anticipated the growing attention now emerging at the national level. Within this context, initiatives promoted by the regional agency for the right to higher education (ER.GO), in collaboration with universities, have introduced experimental forms of support specifically targeting student caregivers. While these developments signal an expanding window of opportunity for policy action across both regional and national levels, they also highlight the need for a stronger empirical understanding of student caregivers' lived realities.

In this sense, the present study contributes to grounding these emerging policy efforts in evidence, by exploring how caregiving responsibilities shape students' educational experiences, well-being, and future trajectories. In particular, it asks how student caregivers negotiate the intersection between care and university life; what challenges, coping strategies, and unmet needs characterize their everyday experiences; and to what extent universities and the broader academic community recognize and

respond to these students' specific conditions. More broadly, the study reflects on how higher education institutions might better support student caregivers in ways that reduce inequalities and promote more inclusive educational pathways.

2. Materials and Methods

To address these issues, the study adopts a qualitative research design that involved conducting online focus groups with students enrolled at the University of Parma who, at the time of the focus groups, were engaged in or had previously undertaken informal caregiving during their academic studies.

For the purpose of this research, informal caregiving was understood as the continuous responsibility, assumed outside of the labour market, for coordinating assistance and/or providing daily care to a family member or other loved one in a condition of full or partial dependency, including minor children with disabilities, while excluding minor children without disabilities (Paglia, 2021).

Fieldwork was conducted between May and December 2023. Recruitment activities targeted students enrolled in undergraduate, postgraduate (including professional master's programmes), and PhD programmes at the University of Parma. Multiple channels were used, including university mailing lists, social media, student representatives, and local third-sector organisations outside the university that could potentially be in contact with university students. However, most participants were ultimately recruited through informal networks activated by researchers and by some students involved in the research process. No age restrictions were applied.

Participant recruitment proved challenging, possibly because student caregivers may struggle to self-identify as such and to find time to participate. Ultimately, these efforts resulted in the organisation of two focus groups. Despite the limited number of focus groups conducted, we believe that the research generated findings of considerable interest and analytical relevance. Moreover, the qualitative research literature widely suggests that thematic saturation can often be achieved with a relatively small number of focus groups, particularly in studies involving fairly homogeneous populations and narrowly defined research topics (Guest et al., 2017; Hennink et al., 2022).

The focus groups were conducted online to facilitate participation, and each student attended only one session. Each group included six participants. Table 1 summarizes the main socio-demographic characteristics of the participants.

Focus groups lasted approximately 2.5 hours and were facilitated by a moderator, with support from a co-facilitator. The discussion guide covered four main areas: (I) experiences, perceptions, and needs of student caregivers; (II) internal and external coping resources and unmet needs; (III) desired forms of support from the university community; and (IV) future outlooks. Sessions concluded with a short debriefing aimed at encouraging participants to reflect on and positively reframe their experiences. The study design also sought to create an empowering space, enabling students to recognize their own

resources, share challenges, and foster a sense of belonging to a community attentive to their lived realities.

The study protocol was reviewed and approved by the Board for Non-Medical Research Involving Human Subjects of the University of Parma (approval date: 26/09/2023). Participation was voluntary. Informed consent and data protection information sheets were distributed in advance, and consent forms were signed and returned prior to participation. Participants were assigned anonymized codes to ensure confidentiality.

All sessions were audio- and video-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and complemented by notes on immediate impressions and non-verbal dynamics. Transcripts were analyzed using a manual thematic analysis approach (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

As previously mentioned, conducting the focus groups prior to the presentation of the Disegno di Legge Caregiver provides a baseline understanding of student caregivers' experiences before the implementation of dedicated institutional support measures.

Table 1
Socio-demographic characteristics of the participants

Participant	Focus group	Gender	Age	Student caregiver status[a]	Assisted person
P1	FG1	Male	46	Currently	Parent with Alzheimer
P2	FG1	Female	23	Currently	Parent with mobility limitations
P3	FG1	Female	43	Currently	Parent with chronic disease
P4	FG1	Female	48	Currently	Parent with chronic disease
P5	FG1	Female	30	Currently	Parent with mental disorder; parent with cancer
P6	FG1	Female	32	Currently	Parent with mobility limitations; parent-in-law with mental disorder
P7	FG2	Male	45	More than 5 years ago	Parent with cancer
P8	FG2	Female	45	Currently	Children with disability
P9	FG2	Female	35	More than 5 years ago	Parent with addiction
P10	FG2	Female	46	Currently	Partner with disability
P11	FG2	Female	48	Currently	Parent with Alzheimer
P12	FG2	Male	43	More than 5 years ago	Family member with cancer and mental disorder

Nota a

All participants were university students at the time of the focus group. For some, however, the overlap between caregiving and university studies had occurred in the past, either in a previous degree programme or earlier in their current programme.

3. Results

3.1 Fractures: living between study and care

3.1.1 Stranded Life Plans

In the words of university student caregivers, there is a recurring reference to interrupted, suspended, or stalled forms of projectuality. Regarding the past, narratives emerge of significant renunciations linked to the difficulty of reconciling academic commitments, the care of a non-self-sufficient loved one, and private life.

“I had a girlfriend that I had to leave” (smiles). (P1)

The present is described as marked by constant uncertainty: the unpredictable contingencies related to the person being cared for can undermine any form of planning.

“I wake up and I never know what’s going to happen”. (P3)

Any form of projectuality tends to freeze. Life is lived in a sort of permanent stand-by, postponing future goals to an indefinite tomorrow, in the awareness that non-negotiable constraints prevent their achievement in the immediate present. Faced with constraints of unpredictable duration, projecting oneself into the future becomes almost impossible.

“What I’m missing […] is the ability to imagine myself as a mother. […] Because I’ve been my mother’s parent, […] this makes it difficult for me to project myself into the future, even in relationships, […] because I always say ‘yeah, but what if something happens?’. So I don’t plan anything.” (P2)

3.1.2 Divided selves

The voices of university student caregivers often describe an experience of inner splitting. What emerges is a “here and now” divided between different physical and emotional places—including those of studying and caregiving—in which attention is constantly forced to shift between multiple focal points, under the pressure of a demanding “elsewhere” that is momentarily left unattended.

“Feeling like you’re always, […] always split in two. I really struggle […] to be fully […] focused on what I’m doing”. (P5)

This makes full concentration difficult, hindering academic performance.

“When it’s a written exam, your thoughts are elsewhere”. (P3)

Fragmentation also affects the sense of self: when called upon to take on multiple highly demanding roles at the same time, it becomes difficult to integrate, into a coherent narrative of oneself, the sometimes-divergent expectations that must be met.

“I have two teenage children, I work, I study, I’m a caregiver… but I can’t say who I am”. (P11)

This identity confusion is exacerbated by the limited possibility of engaging in self-reflective processing of one’s lived experience. Constantly oriented toward fulfilling demanding commitments, there is no respite to devote to listening to oneself. As a result, individuals find themselves completely disconnected from their own needs.

“In these conditions you tend […] to lose yourself, right? [I would have needed someone] to help me a bit to reread things and who really understood the situation I was in”. (P4)

3.1.3 Out-of-sync lives

University student caregivers also report often feeling estranged, like alien presences in the world around them. Immersed in temporal flows and existential routines that are out of sync with the norm, they feel they cannot be understood and experience a sense of disconnection from others.

“At 25 you’re thinking about whether to go to Oktoberfest or […] skiing, right? […] Instead, my house was like a circus, […] with treatment plans, doctors, appointments… […] My friends were trying to understand, but […] like someone listening to a language they don’t know”. (P11)

3.2 Negative feelings

3.2.1 The anger of being alone

These different forms of rupture — between the self and one’s own life projects, in the here and now, within oneself and in relation to the surrounding environment — are reflected in the affective sphere, generating negative emotions. Among university student caregivers, a profound sense of loneliness and abandonment emerges, linked to the difficulty of finding empathy in people who do not share similar life experiences. This is a condition that cuts across all dimensions of social life, including the university community.

“Friends and relatives disappear, and so you end up living this […] deep loneliness, which then continues at university as well”. (P11)

There is a constant sense of being alone, of having to cope entirely on one’s own, because very few people are able to understand the extent of the burden one carries on their shoulders and the subsequent need of support.

“There was anger, and on top of that the frustration of having to keep your head down and go on regardless […]. Because in these contexts, in the end, you’re… you find yourself being alone”. (P1)

Individuals feel that their legitimate needs are ignored, for instance by fellow students and university lecturers, and this generates anger and frustration.

“You find yourself up against professors, up against classmates, because classmates who want to go out or go to the gym don’t understand that you’re leaving because maybe you have to go and relieve the care worker. […] That’s loneliness”. (P6)

The feeling of anger also extends to the university as an institution, perceived as indifferent to the needs of this specific category of students and lacking the regulatory tools necessary to guarantee them equal opportunities.

“I was told that since I already had a degree I couldn’t apply for part-time […]. So yeah, anger about that too. […] They absolutely couldn’t understand my situation”. (P11)

3.2.2 Never enough

The lack of social recognition of the material and emotional burden carried by university student caregivers shapes their own self-understanding. These students often struggle to fully appreciate the cumulative disadvantage produced by the overlap of multiple roles and responsibilities. This results in a pervasive sense of shame and inadequacy, particularly in relation to their academic trajectories. Delayed or unmet milestones tend to be interpreted, at least in part, as personal failures, rather than as the understandable outcome of an excessively demanding path—especially in the absence of adequately supportive contexts.

“I have been enrolled for more than six years and I have not graduated yet—this is embarrassing for me”. (P8)

While, on the one hand, student caregivers may feel inadequate in relation to their academic performance, on the other they also experience a strong sense of guilt regarding their caregiving responsibilities, insofar as time devoted to studying is perceived as time taken away from the person they care for.

“I still live with a sense of guilt. […]. I carve out my own time to study, but there is always the worry of somehow feeling selfish”. (P5)

3.2.3 Lingering anxiety

In the background, these negative emotions are accompanied by a persistent sense of anxiety, linked to the uncertainty of an unpredictable future that precludes any form of planning.

“There is a real sense of anxiety and disorientation when it comes to this dimension of the future, and it is not easy to manage”. (P11)

3.3 Resources to Draw On

3.3.1 Purpose and Personal Drive

During the focus groups, participants discussed what enables university student caregivers to remain committed to their studies despite the strain of combining them with demanding caregiving responsibilities. High levels of motivation and strong determination to complete their university studies clearly emerge. Some participants report “holding on” out of a commitment made to others—such as wanting to set an example for their children or to honour a promise made to a loved one who has passed away. For most of the students involved, however, earning a degree primarily represents a non-negotiable goal of personal fulfilment and self-enrichment, as well as means to broaden future work and life opportunities.

“What is our final goal […]? To graduate […]. So, in my opinion, determination and having a clear goal are what keep us going”. (P6)

3.3.2 Discipline and time control

Motivation and determination make it possible to manage the very limited time available with great rigour: through sacrifice, discipline, and strict organisation, students can navigate multiple responsibilities and make the most of every moment free from caregiving duties.

“I live off Excel files where I basically fit everything and everyone in […]. […]. There was no way I could get sick. […] I went […] even with a 40-degree fever, because I couldn’t afford to sacrifice time for myself”. (P6)

3.3.3 Anger as Fuel

Some participants note that the strength to face such an obstacle-filled academic path can stem from the ability to transform negative emotions into constructive energy. As previously highlighted, feeling alone and unsupported generates anger, but this very anger can evolve into a sense of challenge and determination to succeed, despite everything.

“It’s anger, […], it was a fundamental source of energy for […] shifting into a higher gear and saying: I want to finish”. (P12)

3.3.4 Study as a revitalizing Escape

For many, studying also represents a form of escape from the emotional burden associated with caregiving: a space to devote to oneself which, as noted earlier, may be accompanied by feelings of guilt, yet at the same time offers the opportunity to challenge oneself and find satisfaction in one’s progress.

“For me, sometimes studying was also an escape from my situation”. (P2)

3.3.5 Pride and Achievement

Indeed, a strong sense of pride emerges regarding the academic achievements attained. There is an awareness of the exceptional effort involved and of having reached each goal relying solely on one's own willpower, dedication, and abilities. Each success thus becomes a form of compensation for the hardship endured and, above all, a means of redemption from the sense of inadequacy which, as previously observed, is widespread among university student caregivers.

"If I get a top grade with honours, it's mine, it's all mine, and I walk out of there thinking: maybe I'm actually worth something as a person!". (P10)

3.3.6 Meaning and Growth

Another attitude that helps participants withstand the weight of their current situation is the tendency to construct a broader meaning around it, interpreting the difficulties experienced as a path of learning and personal growth.

"Potentials get unlocked that you didn't even know you had. […] Even though […] this path is very exhausting, for me there's always meaning in it". (P1)

3.3.7 Social and Family Support

Beyond personal resources, some university student caregivers emphasise the importance of friendship networks and family support in providing both practical and emotional assistance in managing the combined demands of study and care.

"I was also very lucky […] to find support among colleagues, classmates (…) […] maybe holding hands with a fellow student, you know, admitting that you need help". (P5)

3.4 Lack of recognition and desire for visibility

3.4.1 Invisible and Unrecognized

Participants frequently point to their invisibility, both in society at large and, more specifically, within the university, where they are not recognised as a group of students with specific needs.

"Basically, we don't exist, we're not recognised […]". (P11)

This lack of recognition translates into the absence of regulatory tools, policies, and services capable of ensuring equal opportunities.

"I would really need recognition from the university. […] I'm not saying just give me the degree, but actually trying to meet us halfway. […] Unfortunately, none of this exists". (P8)

3.4.2 The privatization of need

The absence of formal recognition is intertwined with the lack of an institutional culture and a shared sensitivity capable of consolidating consensus around the legitimacy of these students' needs, so that

the activation of support measures is not something to be negotiated or individually claimed, but rather perceived as a collective responsibility. By contrast, the fear that requests for help may be interpreted as undue demands for preferential treatment ultimately discourages university student caregivers from openly expressing their difficulties and seeking support.

“Honestly, at 45 years old, having to go begging professors for help makes me feel ashamed!”. (P11)

As previously noted, feeling not understood can generate intense disappointment. Consequently, individuals may withdraw and keep their difficulties to themselves as a form of self-protection, thus contributing to the invisibility of their problems.

“I don’t talk about it […]. There’s this difficulty in making others understand […] so you don’t want to go through yet another demoralising experience”. (P10)

3.4.3 Blurred self-awareness

As already observed, being embedded in a context that fails to recognise their difficulties prevents university student caregivers from developing a full awareness of their objective disadvantage, leading them to internalise responsibility for academic performances below the average. Feelings of shame and inadequacy related to the frequent postponement of academic milestones tend to further weaken their capacity to make claims, hindering the emergence of fully legitimate needs.

“I don’t tell anyone […] that maybe I studied while doing night-time care, […] the person examining me […] evaluates me as if I had absolutely nothing else to do”. (P10)

Additionally, these students often carry such an intense burden and are immersed in a present so uncertain and unpredictable that they are unable to pause and reflect on their own condition, or to develop a clear awareness of their needs and the type of support required. They move forward in a kind of apnea, navigating day by day, unable to identify concrete forms of support through which they could be assisted. This, too, hinders the possibility of a collective and institutional response.

“It didn’t even occur to me [to ask for help] […]. It was like a vortex. […] I saw it as something that would eventually resolve itself and everything would go back to normal. But it remained just an idea”. (P3)

3.4.4 Recognition as validation

Yet, the desire for a university capable of listening, understanding, and supporting student caregivers emerges clearly in the participants’ words. The few experiences of recognition carry strong symbolic and practical significance, acting as forms of support and encouragement that can counter the sense of isolation these students often feel.

“It really affected me! I mean, to put something like this on the first slide [mentioning student caregivers and their needs] is basically saying, ‘you exist. If I can help, I’m here’”. (P2)

3.4.5 Naming caregivers

Similarly, hearing the caregiver role explicitly mentioned within the university fosters a process of identity awareness, allowing students to recognize themselves as holders of specific needs and rights, as well as of a responsibility that is crucial for society.

“When the University of Parma involved me in an experience on this topic [on student caregivers], I realized that I was a caregiver. I had never defined myself that way, because taking care of my dad […] felt normal”. (P9)

This is particularly significant in a social context where family caregiving is often naturalized and confined to the private sphere. In this framework, the university can play a key role in institutional recognition, contributing to assigning social value to a role that is often taken for granted and subject to widespread shirking of responsibility by the community and institutions.

3.4.6 Claiming Visibility

Moreover, the focus groups revealed participants’ desire to speak up and take action personally, both to make their experiences visible and to help remove barriers encountered in their university journey.

“If we want to break down walls of loneliness, indifference, and lack of inclusion, we need to have a voice, we need to claim spaces”. (P11)

Having spaces for expression within the university is seen as a necessary condition to promote awareness-raising and to encourage a collective response to the needs of student caregivers, highlighting the academic institution’s role as a central actor in driving broader cultural change.

“The university […] has to give us those spaces [spaces for expression], […] because […] if the university […] doesn’t do it, it’s hard for society to become aware of these issues”. (P11)

3.4.7 Finding a Collective Voice

Several participants highlighted how their motivation to take action personally to promote social change was strengthened by participating in the focus group. Sharing experiences with others in similar situations helps them feel recognized and less isolated, confirming the legitimacy of their needs and requests. This process strengthens their confidence in their ability to claim rights and drive change, increasing their motivation to be heard and to make an impact on the system, collectively as well.

“Talking about it with you makes me feel less alone. […] It would be nice if we could all somehow have voice… […] to change the system a bit”. (P6)

3.5 Transforming the University: Requests and Recommendations

3.5.1 Flexibility in Learning

The focus groups bring forward several proposals addressed to the university community, aimed at reducing the disadvantage experienced by student caregivers throughout their academic journey. First and foremost, participants emphasized the need for greater flexibility in the organization and delivery of teaching activities.

Definitely, it's about […] making procedures a bit more flexible. (P2)

Several participants point out that some measures introduced in this direction during the Covid-19 pandemic—such as online teaching, whether synchronous or asynchronous—represented an important form of support for them.

It would be easier if they still recorded lectures online, like they did during Covid". (P3)

According to the participants, removing these options—as has happened in several degree programs—significantly reduces opportunities to fully exercise the right to education for students with specific needs.

"I fought a battle […] to keep at least some online teaching, […] for people like us, right?". (P6)

Mandatory class attendance and required internships are also identified as particularly significant obstacles for student caregivers, who believe that a more flexible approach would be fair in their case.

"And if there's also a required internship, [in our case, as student caregivers] you could see whether it really needs to be completed or if it could be waived". (P11)

Similarly, the possibility of agreeing on additional exam dates with instructors is seen as an important form of support.

"You could work through student committees […] to make […] exam arrangements easier. Being more flexible, for example, in offering an extra exam date…". (P1)

The possibility of attending university on a part-time basis is identified as a measure that should be guaranteed to all student caregivers, without restrictions.

"They denied me the part-time option because I already had a degree, even though I had Law 104. A violation of the law!". (P11)

3.5.2 Dedicated Support Networks

Participants consider the establishment of multidisciplinary services and trained tutors essential, capable of providing guidance and personalized advice on issues ranging from class attendance and exams to administrative and financial matters, as well as personal and family difficulties. Such provisions are seen as key tools to prevent academic struggles and dropout.

“There should be a multidisciplinary, multiprofessional team of […] trained professionals […] so that you can turn to them […] and these people can give you useful advice.” (P11)

3.5.3 Psychological and Peer Support

Alongside this, students highlight that access to competent and timely psychological support represents a crucial measure for sustaining emotional well-being.

“When I hit rock bottom, the only person who provided me with psychological support was a tutor. […] Maybe having a professional […] would have helped me feel less shattered.” (P6)

In this sense, peer support groups can also play a vital role, as they allow students to share experiences and develop greater self-awareness. For this reason, the focus groups conducted were highly appreciated.

“I’m glad—well, actually I’m not glad—that there are other situations like mine! But [I’m glad] that there is […] sharing and, above all, awareness”. (P1)

3.5.4 Formal Recognition Matters

The measures discussed so far are considered by student caregivers to be fundamental not only for supporting their academic performance, but also for promoting their well-being and inclusion within the university community. However, to implement them effectively, two closely interconnected prerequisites emerge: the formal recognition of the university student caregiver as a category requiring specific attention, and awareness-raising activities aimed at creating more informed and inclusive environments.

Regarding the first point, participants highlight that the absence of a legal recognition of the caregiver role at the national level represents a significant barrier. The formal definition and recognition of this role would provide an important foundation, not only to legitimize specific measures within universities, but also to acknowledge the social contribution that these individuals make daily[2].

“There should be a national law that finally defines the caregiver, […] If that existed, then all university regulations […] should recognize this figure”. (P11

3.5.5 Raising Awareness

In parallel, participants stress the importance of awareness-raising initiatives aimed at the entire university community. Such activities are necessary to create environments that are more conscious of the specific challenges faced by student caregivers, fostering empathy and collective action to support those encountering particular difficulties in their academic journey:

“[Inclusion of student caregivers could be promoted by] raising awareness a bit for everyone.” (P6)

4 Discussion

This study contributes to an emerging body of research by rendering visible the largely unacknowledged condition of university student caregivers in the Italian context. By foregrounding their lived experiences, the findings position informal caregiving as a hidden yet structurally significant axis of stratification within higher education. In doing so, the study extends international evidence (Tucker et al., 2022; Wazinski et al., 2022) and enriches sociological debates on educational inequalities, temporality, and institutional recognition.

4.1 Student caregiving as a hidden axis of educational stratification

The analysis shows that caregiving responsibilities generate cumulative disadvantages that intersect with academic systems structured around uninterrupted availability, linear progression, and future-oriented planning. Delayed milestones, reduced participation, and fragmented trajectories are not exceptional events but recurring patterns. Yet these consequences are rarely recognized as structurally produced. Instead, they are often internalized as personal inadequacy.

This dynamic reflects broader processes identified in sociological research on education, where meritocratic narratives tend to obscure the social production of inequality and individualize responsibility for unequal outcomes (Brooks, 2011). Unlike student parenthood—which has gradually achieved some institutional visibility (Moreau & Kerner, 2013)—student caregiving remains largely confined to the private sphere. Its naturalization within family life reinforces its invisibility, individualizes responsibility, and limits the emergence of collective claims. In this sense, caregiving operates as a subtle but powerful mechanism of stratification, shaping unequal educational experiences without being formally acknowledged as such. This finding is consistent with recent literature identifying caregiving students as an under-researched and institutionally overlooked population within higher education, whose specific needs and experiences often remain marginal to both research and policy agendas (Knopf et al., 2022).

4.2 Fractured temporalities and suspended projectuality

A distinctive contribution of this study concerns temporality. Participants describe living in a suspended present, marked by unpredictability and constant readiness. The temporal regime of the university—organized around deadlines, calendars, and long-term planning—clashes with the temporal logic of caregiving, characterized by contingency, urgency, and moral non-negotiability.

This tension produces what may be described as a form of biographical suspension. The issue is not merely delayed graduation, but a contraction of future imaginaries affecting work, relationships, and parenthood. The findings show how structural conditions reshape people's capacity to project themselves into the future. This dynamic appears particularly pronounced for young student caregivers, whose transition to adulthood is shaped by the constraints and responsibilities associated with caregiving (Bramanti & Bosoni, 2025; Converso et al., 2020). Caregiving introduces an additional layer of constraint, given the relational and moral responsibilities associated with caring for dependent family

members (Converso et al., 2020). Compared to other non-traditional students, caregivers face temporal pressures that are less negotiable and more emotionally charged.

4.3 Emotional experiences as socially produced effects of misrecognition

Loneliness, anger, guilt, shame, and anxiety emerge as central emotional dimensions of student caregiving. Importantly, these emotions should not be read as purely individual psychological states, but as socially produced effects of misrecognition. Participants frequently report feeling misunderstood by peers, lecturers, and administrative staff, and describe an institutional environment that does not conceive caregiving as a legitimate and even conceivable student condition. More broadly, the findings suggest that student caregivers experience forms of institutional misrecognition, whereby caregiving responsibilities are rendered largely invisible within academic structures and are consequently treated as private matters rather than legitimate educational concerns. This misrecognition has both practical and symbolic consequences: it limits access to support, weakens the legitimacy of students' claims, and contributes to the internalization of difficulties that are structurally produced rather than individually generated.

Drawing on recognition theory (Honneth, 1995), these findings suggest that the lack of institutional acknowledgment undermines students' sense of legitimacy and belonging. The coexistence of guilt toward the cared-for person and shame regarding academic delays reflects a dual moral burden: studying may be experienced as selfish, while academic underperformance is interpreted as personal failure. In the absence of supportive frameworks, these tensions foster self-blame and discourage help-seeking, reinforcing invisibility and isolation (Kettell, 2018; Kirton et al., 2012).

4.4 Resources, resilience, and the limits of individual coping

Despite these challenges, student caregivers demonstrate remarkable determination, strict time management, and meaning-making capacities. Academic achievement often acquires a strong symbolic value, functioning as a form of moral and personal redemption. These findings resonate with research on young adult caregivers highlighting both vulnerability and resilience (D'Amen et al., 2021; Haugland et al., 2020).

However, resilience appears here as an ambivalent resource. While it enables persistence, it also risks masking structural inequalities. When endurance and self-discipline become the primary means of survival, responsibility is implicitly shifted onto individuals. As critical scholarship on higher education suggests (Brooks, 2011), celebrating resilience may inadvertently legitimize institutional inaction. The perseverance of student caregivers should therefore not be interpreted as evidence of system adequacy, but rather as a compensatory response to structural gaps.

In this sense, resilience should be understood not as the solution to student caregivers' difficulties, but as a response developed in contexts where institutional recognition and support remain insufficient.

4.5 Institutional misrecognition and the transformative potential of universities

The findings highlight the central role of institutional recognition. Recent policy developments in Italy, including the draft law on caregivers currently under discussion in the Parliament, suggest an emerging institutional awareness of informal caregiving and its social value. Still, the current absence of formal mechanisms, flexible regulations, and dedicated services contributes to a context in which caregiving remains largely unrecognized within academia. This limited visibility reflects a broader tendency to naturalize caregiving as a private family matter rather than acknowledge it as a legitimate educational concern and a potential source of inequality within higher education. As a consequence, student caregivers may be discouraged from disclosing their situation and may engage in forms of self-censorship, thereby limiting both their access to support and the development of broader collective awareness around their condition. This dynamic may be further reinforced by the fact that many caregivers do not readily identify themselves as caregivers, but rather interpret their activities as a natural extension of family obligations and relationships (Chevrier et al., 2022).

Importantly, these findings emerge in a regional context often considered relatively advanced in terms of caregiver recognition and support. In Emilia-Romagna, recent initiatives have begun to address the specific condition of student caregivers within higher education, introducing experimental support measures. The persistence of invisibility and unmet needs in this context suggests that institutional recognition remains partial and uneven, highlighting a gap between emerging policy attention and the lived experiences of student caregivers.

At the same time, even minimal acts of acknowledgment—such as explicit mention of student caregivers in teaching contexts or the provision of listening spaces—carry strong symbolic power. They enable processes of self-recognition and foster the emergence of legitimate claims. In a welfare regime still strongly grounded in family-based care (Papa & Lamura, 2019), universities can act as key sites of recognition, contributing to reframing caregiving as a socially valuable role rather than a purely private burden.

Transforming universities into more equitable environments therefore requires moving beyond individualized accommodations toward structural recognition. Flexible organizational models, accessible part-time options, dedicated multidisciplinary services, psychological support, peer groups, and systematic awareness-raising initiatives are not exceptional concessions, but measures consistent with principles of educational equity. Formal recognition of student caregivers as a group with specific needs and social value can contribute not only to reducing educational inequalities and preventing dropout, but also to a broader cultural shift that makes care visible as a shared social responsibility.

4.6 From Standardized Biographies to Institutional Pluralism

Ultimately, rethinking the university through the lens of student caregivers does not imply tailoring the institution to a marginal minority, but questioning the normative figure of the “traditional” student around which higher education has historically been organized (Brooks, 2011; Moreau & Kerner, 2013). Taking caregiving seriously as a legitimate student condition invites universities to reconceive themselves as public services oriented toward heterogeneous life trajectories, rather than linear and uninterrupted ones. In this perspective, responding to the needs of student caregivers becomes part of a broader institutional transformation: from an organization implicitly calibrated on standardized biographies to one capable of accommodating differentiated students with non-standard needs (Burke, 2013). Such a shift would strengthen the university’s inclusive mission by aligning its structures with the social complexity of the populations it serves.

Conclusion

The present study set out to explore the experiences of university student caregivers in Italy, a population that remains largely overlooked in both higher education research and policy. Drawing on focus groups conducted with students enrolled at the University of Parma, the findings show that caregiving responsibilities significantly shape educational trajectories, generating challenges that extend beyond academic performance alone. Participants described experiences marked by uncertainty, fragmented temporalities, emotional strain, and difficulties in reconciling educational aspirations with non-negotiable care obligations. At the same time, the study highlighted how these difficulties are often reinforced by a broader condition of institutional invisibility and limited recognition, which may hinder both access to support and the development of collective awareness around student caregivers’ needs.

These findings contribute to a growing international literature on student caregivers and support the argument that caregiving should be recognized as a potential source of educational inequality. More broadly, they suggest the need for universities and policymakers to pay greater attention to the experiences of students with caregiving responsibilities. As discussed throughout the article, measures such as greater flexibility in educational pathways, dedicated support services, opportunities for peer exchange, and awareness-raising initiatives may help reduce some of the disadvantages experienced by student caregivers. In this sense, the study contributes to informing both future research and the development of policies and support mechanisms tailored to university student caregivers.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study was based on a relatively small number of focus groups conducted within a single Italian university. As is typical of qualitative research, the aim was not statistical generalization but the exploration of meanings and experiences. Nevertheless, the contextual nature of the data calls for caution when considering the transferability of the findings to other higher education settings. Second, participant recruitment proved particularly challenging, reflecting both the difficulties many caregivers face in finding the time and resources necessary to

participate in research and the fact that some individuals may not readily identify themselves as caregivers. As a result, the study may not have captured the full diversity of caregiving experiences among university students. Third, the focus group methodology may have influenced participants' narratives through processes of interaction, mutual recognition, and group dynamics, potentially shaping the interpretations that emerged during discussion. While these limitations do not diminish the value of the findings, they should be taken into account when interpreting the results and considering the extent to which alternative understandings of student caregiving experiences might emerge under different research conditions.

Future research should continue to investigate the experiences of student caregivers across different institutional, geographical, and cultural settings, combining qualitative and quantitative approaches to better understand the prevalence and diversity of caregiving situations within higher education. Longitudinal studies would also be valuable in examining how caregiving responsibilities shape educational and professional trajectories over time. Finally, in light of the growing policy attention devoted to caregivers in Italy, future research could assess the impact of emerging institutional and legislative measures on student caregivers' educational experiences, well-being, and opportunities. At the same time, universities should continue developing initiatives aimed at recognizing and supporting student caregivers, contributing to a more inclusive higher education system capable of responding to increasingly diverse life trajectories and care responsibilities.

Declarations

Competing Interests

The authors declare that they have no competing financial or non-financial interests related to this work.

Ethics Approval

The study protocol was reviewed and approved by the Board per l'Etica della Ricerca non Medica sulle Persone (Board for Non-Medical Research Involving Human Subjects) of the University of Parma (approval date: 26 September 2023, protocol no. 254686). The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles of the Declaration of Helsinki (1964), the European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity (ALLEA), and the Guidelines for Good Research, Dissemination and Publication Practice of the University of Parma.

Consent to Participate

Participation in the study was voluntary. All participants received an information sheet explaining the aims of the study, data protection procedures, and their rights as research participants. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to participation.

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Author Contribution

AS designed the study and coordinated and conducted the field work. CD conducted the thematic analysis. AS drafted the Introduction and Results sections. CD drafted the Background, Materials and Methods, and Conclusion sections. AS and CD jointly wrote the Discussion section. MC critically reviewed the initial draft of the manuscript, provided substantial intellectual input that informed major revisions, and contributed to the interpretation of the findings. All authors reviewed and revised the manuscript and approved the final version.

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Data Availability

The datasets generated and/or analysed during the current study are not publicly available due to ethical and privacy considerations but are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request, subject to approval by the relevant ethics requirements.

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Footnotes

1. This reflection builds on ongoing work at the University of Parma, particularly through the Comitato Unico di Garanzia (CUG), which since 2022 has promoted research and initiatives on caregiving within the academic context. Within this framework, in 2026 a dedicated support service for young adult caregivers (aged 17–24) in the Parma district was activated, as part of the OR.I.oNE project (Orientamento, informazione e networking per i giovani adulti caregiver nel Distretto di Parma), aimed at promoting the social well-being of students and university staff.
2. As mentioned above, the Italian Disegno di Legge Caregiver, currently under discussion in Parliament, explicitly addresses this issue by proposing a formal recognition of the caregiver role.