

**MEANINGS OF 'CARE' IN HIGHER EDUCATION:
UNDERGRADUATES' EXPERIENCES**

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Certificate of original authorship

I certify that the work in this thesis has not been previously submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

Date:

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Abstract

Care is an integral component of education. Care at a tertiary level, particularly from the student perspective, is under-researched. University students are adults who have diverse experiences and needs, differing from their pre-tertiary counterparts in that care as nurturing or ‘mothering’ and ‘pastoral care’ are less expected or desired. This study sets out to develop a deeper understanding of what care for an undergraduate student might mean in the current university milieu where increasingly students are viewed as ‘consumers of educational services’.

Exploring the notion of ‘care’ is confounded by the pluralistic and contextual nature of the word care in everyday usage. An interpretive approach was utilised to tap into the essences of care evident in a student’s experiences in the first few transition years of university. Phenomenological interviews with students undertaking an introductory business course were explored. Automated Leximancer semantic text analysis was used to support iterative systematic interrogation of the interviews, building an understanding of common and uncommon care meanings. Further interpretation of the multifaceted meanings drew on educational and services marketing literatures.

Students said little about the university except in relation to selection of their degree, where reputation and family familiarity played a part in influencing their decisions. Despite being a prevalent topic in the education literature, institutional ‘duty of care’ was not identified by students as an issue. Rather, students held the institution responsible for providing opportunities to improve their future employment prospects, a form of ‘corporate care’. Care in educational relationships was most likely to occur between students and tutors. Lecturers provided ‘educational care’ through curriculum design and course management. Diversity was also apparent in care-giving and care-seeking activities outside the university in students’ ‘other lives’.

These findings have brought care in higher education into perspective. Care matters. Though lecturers do not need to know their students personally they do need to demonstrate care through knowledge and passion for their subject and design of effective learning opportunities. Tutors, in the students’ eyes, have an important, often undervalued, care role of engaging with students as individuals, knowing and responding to diverse needs. Academics need to be mindful of students’ complex lives. Students in turn need a stronger voice in their education. Services marketing principles can help us understand students as ‘customers’. It is only through engaging with students that we can begin to appreciate how we as academics might care for and help students *be* students.