EduCare

Design Research with Students

Uncovering Key Issues & Wellbeing in Design Schools

Brief Report · Student Perspective · Work Package 2

Project partners:

BAU, College of Arts & Design Barcelona

LUCA School of Arts

Cumulus Association

The Care Lab

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Project	EduCare — Teaching as a Caring Profession: Nurturing Care & Creativity in Higher Design Education
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All institutions and individuals are anonymised throughout this report. Quotes originally spoken in Catalan or Spanish are presented in English translation.

All content was reviewed, validated and approved by the project partners, who remain fully responsible for its accuracy, originality and compliance with Erasmus+ requirements. Artificial Intelligence tools were used only as support instruments for specific tasks (survey data systematisation, extraction of structured information from focus group transcripts, and drafting support).

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1 Executive Summary

This brief report presents the student-perspective research conducted within Work Package 2 of the EduCare project. It integrates an international student survey completed by 90 design students with four participatory focus groups conducted across two contrasting institutions — a private university centre and a public university — spanning Bachelor, Master and PhD levels in art and design. All evidence was analysed through the shared EduCare analytical framework and is reported anonymously.

The picture is strikingly consistent across institutions and levels. Students experience design education as relational at heart: care is carried, again and again, by individual educators and small-group human contact. Yet that care rests largely on personal goodwill rather than institutional design. The clearest care gaps cluster around feedback and critique culture, time, assessment, belonging and the absence of systemic wellbeing support — and the sharpest harms come from critique and jury practices that expose or diminish students in public.

Students do not ask for less challenge. They ask for accompaniment over evaluation: high expectations combined with structure, dialogue, respect for different rhythms and formats, and a care ecosystem that includes peers, educators, support services and even the non-academic staff who shape everyday life in a school.

KEY FINDINGS AT A GLANCE

Theme	What the student evidence shows
Strongest asset	Personalised teacher attention and small class size — "you have a name, not a DNI".
Dominant care gap	Feedback that is late, inconsistent, or redirects rather than accompanies the student's process.
Sharpest harm	Jury and public-critique practices that shame students — in one case prompting a student to abandon her studies.
Top structural barrier	Time pressure and uncoordinated deadlines; compressed intensive modules at MA level.
Inclusion gaps	Language of instruction, belonging, presentation-format bias and ownership of space.
Assessment effect	Numeric, socially visible grades generate competition and risk-aversion.
Lowest survey item	Institutional support for wellbeing (2.82 / 5) — informal and educator-dependent.
Shared aspiration	Accompaniment over evaluation; process valued as much as final product.
Key enabler	Peer community, workshop and atelier practice, and educators who accompany the process.

2 About EduCare and This Report

EduCare — Teaching as a Caring Profession: Nurturing Care & Creativity in Higher Design Education — is an Erasmus+ Cooperation Partnership that develops a care-centred educational framework for higher design education. The project responds to growing concerns about wellbeing, mental health, inclusion and burnout in design schools, for students and educators alike.

Work Package 2 researches and defines care gaps in design education. This document is one of its two planned brief reports and corresponds to activity WP2.2, Design Research with Students. It summarises the student-perspective evidence: what students understand by a caring learning environment, how care is experienced today, what obstructs it, what an ideal caring school would look like, and which enablers and good practices already exist. A companion brief report presents the educator perspective; an internal report and the beta version of the Care-Centred Practices Handbook build on both. The findings serve as a blueprint for Work Package 3, which develops care-centred methodologies and training for design educators.

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3 Research Methods and Protocols

The student research combined a quantitative-qualitative survey with four participatory focus groups, conducted between December 2025 and July 2026. Both strands were analysed with the same analytical framework so that findings could be integrated into a single student-perspective evidence base.

3.1 OVERVIEW OF THE EVIDENCE BASE

Method	Participants / scale	Primary contribution
International survey	90 complete responses (Bachelor, Master and PhD design students)	Ratings of relational, pedagogical, creative and institutional care; open accounts of moments of care and lack of care; barriers to creative engagement; good practices and change proposals.
Focus groups	4 participatory sessions across two institutions	In-depth accounts of teacher-student dynamics, feedback and jury culture, assessment, belonging, studio life and desired change.

3.2 STUDENT PERSPECTIVE SURVEY

The survey was distributed through an international mailing to more than 1,000 students across the partner institutions and their networks; 90 complete responses were received and analysed. The instrument was structured around the four dimensions of the EduCare framework and combined five-point Likert batteries with open questions, in six blocks: the meaning of care in education; care in classroom relationships; care in teaching practices; care, attention and creativity; self-care and learning; and good practices and possibilities. Respondents also identified the classroom dynamics that make creative engagement harder, choosing among prompts such as competition, time pressure, critique culture, teacher authority and peer relationships. Likert items are scored 1–5; for relational, pedagogical and creative items, scores below the 3.7 care-gap line are read as care gaps.

3.3 PARTICIPATORY STUDENT FOCUS GROUPS

Four focus groups were conducted with students at two contrasting institutions: a private university centre and a public university.

Session	Participants	Format and language
Focus group 1	Bachelor design students from different itineraries (fashion, graphic design, audiovisual),	In-person participatory session building on prior mapping and categorisation exercises;

Session	Participants	Format and language
	2nd–3rd year, private university centre	conducted in Spanish and Catalan.
Focus group 2	Master research students, private university centre	In-person reflective session within a programme co-design workshop; conducted in English.
Focus group 3	Master students in a health-care design programme, public university	Online semi-structured group conversation (June 2026); conducted in English.
Focus group 4	PhD design researchers with backgrounds in architecture and policy design, public university	Online semi-structured group conversation (June 2026); conducted in English.

All sessions were facilitated by the EduCare research team and structured as reflective conversations around the same guiding questions used across the project: what a caring learning environment means; moments of feeling cared for and uncared for; experiences of feedback, juries and assessment; group dynamics, space and belonging; personal practices for staying present; and proposals for a more caring education. Sessions were recorded and transcribed with the participants' consent.

3.4 THE EDUCARE ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

All transcripts and open survey responses were coded with the shared EduCare analysis framework: four dimensions of care are examined through four lenses, each read across three layers of educational life. Sections 5.1–5.4 of this report work through the four lenses, each subdivided by layer; recurring findings are marked throughout as CARE GAP, ENABLER or TENSION.

Four dimensions of care	Four lenses	Three layers
Relational care	1 · As it is today	a · Interactions & behaviours
Pedagogical care	2 · Barriers to caring practices	b · Organisational culture
Creative conditions	3 · As we want it to be	c · Underlying conditions
Institutional culture	4 · Enablers & good practices	—

3.5 ETHICS, ANONYMISATION AND DATA PROTECTION

Participation was voluntary and based on informed consent, and survey responses were collected anonymously. Focus-group recordings were transcribed and then anonymised: names of students, educators, facilitators and institutions were

removed or replaced with generic descriptors, and quotes originally spoken in Catalan or Spanish were translated into English preserving register and meaning. Raw data are stored on access-restricted project drives in line with GDPR; only anonymised material is reported here.

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4 What Students Mean by “Care”

Asked to describe a caring learning environment in three words, students converge on a remarkably consistent emotional vocabulary. Respect and empathy dominate, followed by support, safety, patience and collaboration. Care, in the student imagination, is fundamentally relational and affective before it is procedural.

Most frequent words (open question, n = 90)	Mentions
Respect	19
Empathy	15
Support / help	12
Safety	8
Collaboration	5
Patience	5
Solidarity · Freedom · Trust · Communication	4 each

When prompted on expectations beyond academic content, the same orientation appears: students come to design school above all for personal growth (86 %), to feel respected (80 %) and to receive meaningful feedback (75 %), followed by intellectual challenge (64 %). Emotional safety (50 %) and sense of belonging (42 %) are named by roughly half the cohort — a significant signal that the affective dimension is not a minority concern.

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5 Findings

5.1 AS IT IS TODAY

a · Interactions & behaviours

Relational care is the strongest asset in the dataset. Students feel broadly respected (4.08 / 5) and "mistakes are treated as part of learning" scores even higher (4.14). The most valued relational moments are concrete and human: teachers who remember students by name, stay reachable, respond to personal difficulty with empathy, and stop to listen even when busy.

> *"We have a more personalised follow-up with the teacher — you have a name in class, you're not a DNI like in other universities."*
>
> — Focus group 1, BA student

> *"I'm always chatting with the teachers after class, and that truly feels like a real bond that can be trusted."*
>
> — Survey respondent

ENABLER	Small class size and named, personalised teacher relationships are the structural foundation of relational care.

The picture changes when students are asked about exposure. Feeling safe to share unfinished ideas scores 3.64 and expressing vulnerability falls to 3.41 — the lowest relational-creative item. MA students also distinguish between teachers who accompany the student's own creative direction and those who quietly redirect it toward their own preference.

CARE GAP	Feedback that redirects toward the teacher's vision — rather than deepening the student's own — is experienced as a withdrawal of care.

b · Organisational culture

Core teaching practices score strongly: constructive feedback (4.37), openness to experimentation (4.30), space for dialogue (4.30) and time for reflection (4.22) are the highest-rated items — real pedagogical strengths whose gaps lie in consistency, not capacity. Studio culture matters too: shared workspaces, duo and team work, visible work-in-progress on shared boards, and collective tasks such as building a large model or decorating the studio together create bonding and reduce isolation. PhD participants describe mapping weeks organised in mixed teams that teach newcomers, including international students, to talk to one another.

At the same time, both cohorts at the private institution feel its relational identity straining against commercial logic: “I feel a lot like a client who pays”, one BA student notes. And numeric, socially visible grades introduce comparison, anxiety and a results-oriented mindset.

TENSION	Students value the relational, small-school culture but increasingly feel its tension with the commercial imperatives of a private institution.

CARE GAP	An assessment culture built on numeric, socially visible grades generates competition and risk-aversion that works directly against caring and creative learning.

c · Underlying conditions

Time is the single most-cited factor in the whole dataset: “lack of time” scores 4.00 as an institutional pressure and 77 % of students name time pressure as a barrier to creative engagement. For BA students the problem is the uncoordinated accumulation of deadlines across subjects, which renders feedback useless by the time it arrives; MA students locate the same problem in compressed four-week intensive modules. Several students work part-time to afford their studies, while workloads are calibrated for full-time availability. Students also notice that most caring moves are voluntary extras — an educator cutting an assignment down for students stranded far from home, or slowing their speech so a student translating between languages can follow.

> *“The educational system is like Alice in Wonderland — no time, no time, no time. This hyperproductivity doesn’t always work in our favour.”*
>
> — Focus group 1, BA student

CARE GAP	Uncoordinated deadlines and compressed modules prevent deep creative engagement and make feedback arrive too late to use.

CARE GAP	Time demands assume a full-time student; those who work face a significant but invisible structural disadvantage.

5.2 BARRIERS TO CARING PRACTICES

a · Interactions & behaviours

Feedback is the most-cited care intervention and the most inconsistently delivered. Four failure modes recur: feedback arriving too late to apply; feedback that is positive in process but negative at assessment without warning; feedback that

redirects rather than deepens; and the absence of shared, collective reflection on work.

> *"The teacher told me my project was going well, and at the end gave me a 5 without explaining why."*
>
> — Focus group 1, BA student

Public critique is the sharpest care risk. Critique sessions score only 3.66 for feeling constructive rather than intimidating, and the focus groups sharpen the picture: an 'automatic' critique mode in which a teacher criticises before understanding what is being shown; a jury member tearing apart a classmate's presentation — attacking how she spoke rather than the project — after which she left the programme; a funding pitch in a dark room before an unintroduced panel, remembered as 'dehumanised'; a professor's cold-calling ritual that left students crying in lectures. The same critique also lands differently on different students: one shrugs it off, her project partner shuts down for the rest of the semester.

> *"My project wasn't the best and a teacher started criticising me in front of all my classmates. I had to go to the bathroom with an anxiety attack."*
>
> — Survey respondent

> *"They judge way more than the project — they judge how you talk, how you stand there. This is so uncaring."*
>
> — Focus group 4, PhD student

CARE GAP	Feedback is too often delivered too late, too superficially or inconsistently — failing its core function as a care practice.

TENSION	Students are urged to take creative risks, then exposed or penalised in public critique — the double message erodes trust.

Both cohorts also identify unclear briefs as a barrier to confident creativity — framing clarity and freedom as complementary, not opposed: too much openness without orientation produces paralysis, not liberation.

b · Organisational culture

Grade visibility between peers produces social comparison and competition that sometimes strains friendships. MA students experience their programme as a series of disconnected modules rather than a coherent journey, unable to see how subjects connect, build or differ. Presentation-format bias rewards charismatic speakers over strong researchers and disadvantages anxious or neurodivergent students. The administrative relationship — secretariat, mobility offices — emerges as an under-discussed care dimension in which students feel unseen and

dismissed. And large groups with efficiency logics, including automated or AI-generated feedback replacing human attention, erode the relational core of design teaching.

> *"I've seen friendships break because students thought a classmate's grade was better than theirs."*
>
> — Focus group 1, BA student

CARE GAP	Grade visibility between peers generates comparison and competition that undermines community; programme incoherence disorients and wastes learning.

CARE GAP	Administrative interactions are an unacknowledged dimension of institutional care; students feel unseen and dismissed in these encounters.

c · Underlying conditions

Underneath these interactions sit structural conditions: the financial architecture of private education (hidden costs, no academic recovery options, a client dynamic that complicates the pedagogical relationship); a predominantly Western, Euro-centric theoretical frame that does not reflect an international cohort's knowledge traditions; language of instruction as a hidden barrier; social isolation and lack of belonging that no course or service picks up; and briefs that feel distant from students' own interests, draining motivation — 'the motor' of their work.

CARE GAP	Financial structures, Western-centric references and language barriers create quiet exclusions that the institution does not systematically address.

5.3 AS WE WANT IT TO BE

Asked what a more caring and creative education would look like, students across all four groups converge on a single shift: from evaluation toward accompaniment — from judging the product to walking alongside the process.

a · Interactions & behaviours

The desired interaction is proactive and process-oriented: feedback that observes and deepens the student's own process; proactive check-ins that notice difficulty before it becomes crisis; tutoring as genuine accompaniment; critique that is private or sensitively framed; and teachers who are active professionals, learning visibly alongside students.

> *"I'd like a teacher to come to me and say — here's a reference, I think it could help you. Not wait for me to ask."*
>
> — Focus group 1, BA student

> *"It's not about the feedback at the end — it's how they accompany you in the learning process."*
>
> — Focus group 2, MA student

b · Organisational culture

Students want an institutional culture that values process over product in its structures, not only its discourse: assessment that recognises effort, growth and risk-taking; coordinated deadlines across subjects; a psychopedagogical support service that does not depend on individual teachers; explicit programme architecture; and ways for students to communicate their backgrounds, strengths and support needs through a mix of formal channels and informal exchange.

> *"I'd like the university to be a space of resistance — a place that slows down, that lets you breathe, not another place that accelerates."*
>
> — Focus group 1, BA student

c · Underlying conditions

Structurally, students identify: a dedicated tutor or intermediary figure who knows each student's needs and represents them to the teaching team; genuinely coordinated workload; briefs with room for autonomy so every student can connect the project to something they care about; explicit theoretical diversity reflecting international cohorts; access to tools and materials without additional financial burden; and recognition that a caring school is an ecosystem including peers, support services and non-academic staff — down to the canteen workers whose conditions also shape everyday care.

> *"When we're thinking about caring systems, it's an ecosystem of care — the relationship between student and teacher, student and student, and everyone else."*
>
> — Focus group 3, MA student

TENSION	Students want preparation for a demanding professional world — challenge and honest critique — without harshness being normalised as pedagogy.

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5.4 ENABLERS AND GOOD PRACTICES

a · Interactions & behaviours

The single most-cited positive experience is a teacher or coordinator present throughout the process, not only at assessment. Teachers who share their own creative struggles or research-in-progress reduce the authority gap and model the very disposition they ask of students. Pace and language accommodation matters: teachers who slow down on request, hold on to key terms for students translating between languages, and legitimise silence — naming that not speaking in class is not disengagement.

> *"She set a pretty high bar in terms of expectations of our work. She did a very good job of including us in the conversation. There was a lot of very good structure to the overall class."*
>
> — Focus group 2, MA student

ENABLER	Continuous process accompaniment — being present throughout the creative journey, not only at delivery — is the highest-value care practice students name.

ENABLER	Teacher vulnerability and active professional practice: sharing one's own creative struggle models the learning disposition students need.

b · Organisational culture

Workshop and atelier formats — making, prototyping, working together in the studio with the teacher present as guide rather than evaluator — are the most engaging and caring pedagogical contexts named. Care-full feedback formats already work in places: one-to-one 360-degree peer feedback in unrecorded pairs; peer review framed as opinion and help-seeking rather than grading; recorded-presentation options for anxious or neurodiverse students; juries arranged as conversations rather than tribunals. Deliberate team formation from declared strengths protects newcomers; a community-building first module and study trips build the peer trust that carries a programme; dedicated support figures — a first-year tutor, a librarian, a technician — act as consistent, low-barrier care anchors.

ENABLER	Workshop and atelier learning, community-building openings and named support figures form an existing, expandable care infrastructure.

c · Underlying conditions

Structural enablers already in place include a humane timetable experienced as an act of respect for students' lives beyond university; continuous assessment that,

when genuinely implemented, values process and makes experimentation safe; lightweight emotional check-ins after studio sessions (weather metaphors, sketches or a direct note to the tutor) and weekly informal check-ins by a programme coordinator, so difficulties surface during the semester rather than in end-of-term evaluations; flexible, humane assessment that can discount a project affected by documented personal circumstances; and peer community itself — student-initiated practice groups, shared studio rituals and collective ownership of space, including a personal place to store work and materials. A strong majority of students also report personal balance strategies: a motivated student body actively caring for itself, a resource the institution can scaffold rather than deplete.

ENABLER	Emotional check-ins, flexible assessment and peer community are low-cost practices, already proven by students and educators, ready to be systematised.

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6 Care Gap Map

The survey allows the four care dimensions to be mapped quantitatively. In the three positive dimensions, items below the 3.7 care-gap line (highlighted in orange) mark where lived care thins out. The pattern is clear: relational and pedagogical care are strong; the gaps open around vulnerability, time and institutional support.

Relational care

A strong base — respect and the treatment of mistakes score highest. The gaps sit at the exposed end: trust, peer support and, above all, safety in sharing unfinished ideas. Mean agreement, 1–5.

Mistakes treated as part of learning	**4.14**	
I feel fully respected by my teachers	**4.08**	
Teachers attentive to learning processes	**3.90**	
Classroom allows trust & dialogue	**3.69**	**CARE GAP**
Students support each other (vs compete)	**3.66**	**CARE GAP**
Safe to express unfinished / uncertain ideas	**3.64**	**CARE GAP**

Pedagogical care

The strongest dimension overall: every item clears the care-gap line. Feedback quality and openness to experimentation lead; the gaps here are about consistency, which the qualitative data exposes more sharply than the means. Mean support rating, 1–5.

Feedback helps me understand how to improve	**4.38**	
Constructive feedback	**4.37**	
Space for dialogue	**4.30**	
Openness to experimentation	**4.30**	
Time for reflection and creation	**4.22**	
Clarity of assignments	**4.20**	
Critiques are respectful & constructive	**4.04**	
Manageable workload	**4.02**	
Clarity in evaluation criteria	**4.01**	
Evaluation recognises my process, not only results	**3.99**	
Respect my rhythms	**3.97**	
Assessment criteria are clear	**3.77**	

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Creative conditions

Here the gaps are sharpest. Encouragement to explore is strong, but vulnerability (3.41) and time to develop ideas deeply (3.38) fall well below the line — the quantitative signature of the time-and-exposure pressures described throughout this report. Mean rating, 1–5.

Teachers encourage exploration	**4.04**	
I feel safe taking creative risks	**3.86**	
Critique sessions feel constructive (not intimidating)	**3.66**	**CARE GAP**
I can express uncertainty / vulnerability	**3.41**	**CARE GAP**
There is time to develop ideas deeply	**3.38**	**CARE GAP**

Institutional culture

These items measure the strength of pressures and supports rather than agreement: for pressures, higher = stronger barrier; for support items, lower = weaker provision. Lack of time and heavy workload register as the strongest negative influences, while institutional support for wellbeing and administrative structures are felt as weak — the structural counterpart to the relational strengths above. Strength of influence, 1–5.

Lack of time	**4.00**	
Heavy workload	**3.82**	
Performance pressure	**3.34**	
Lack of dialogue with teachers	**3.04**	
Competition among students	**2.91**	
Institutional support for wellbeing	**2.82**	
Administrative structures	**2.79**	

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7 Priority Care Gaps

Across the survey and the four focus groups, nine care gaps recur with enough weight to be treated as priorities for the EduCare framework. They are not ranked; several are interdependent.

Gap	Description
1 · Feedback	The most-cited care intervention and the most inconsistently delivered: too late to apply, too shallow, or redirecting rather than deepening the student's process.
2 · Assessment	Numeric, socially visible grades generate competition and risk-aversion that undermine the creative and relational culture design schools aspire to.
3 · Time	Uncoordinated deadlines and compressed intensive modules prevent deep engagement and make feedback practically irrelevant.
4 · Critique and juries	Public critique can slip from the work to the person, with lasting harm — the sharpest care risk in the student evidence.
5 · Wellbeing	No psychopedagogical support structure; wellbeing depends on individual teacher goodwill, which the lowest survey score (2.82) confirms.
6 · Belonging and inclusion	Language of instruction, presentation-format bias, social isolation and lack of ownership of space exclude quietly.
7 · Coherence	Modules experienced as disconnected; the absence of a visible programme architecture disorients students and wastes learning.
8 · Financial and client dynamic	Hidden costs, no recovery options and a client relationship that complicates the pedagogical bond in private institutions.
9 · Epistemological and administrative	A predominantly Western theoretical frame that does not reflect international cohorts, and bureaucratic encounters in which students feel unseen.

CROSS-CUTTING READING

Most of these gaps are structural rather than interpersonal. The relational warmth students prize is real, but it is doing the work that institutional design should share — which is precisely why care in design schools is felt as generous yet fragile.

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8 Tensions and Emotional Patterns

Several patterns surface not as simple gaps but as genuine tensions — places where two things students value pull against each other.

TENSION	Encouragement to take creative risks vs. public critique that punishes vulnerability.
TENSION	Process-oriented pedagogy in discourse vs. result-oriented assessment in practice.
TENSION	A relational, small-school culture vs. the commercial pressures of a private institution.
TENSION	Freedom without scaffolding vs. over-freedom without orientation — both produce anxiety.
TENSION	Community and peer learning are valued — yet grade visibility breeds competition inside that same community.

Beneath the analysis runs a consistent emotional texture: gratitude and attachment toward specific teachers and staff; chronic low-level stress from time and workload; anxiety around assessment and public critique, with anxiety attacks named directly; self-doubt in open-endedness; critical metacognition — students reflect analytically on their own learning, a real resource for co-design; and hope: all cohorts are invested in improving their programmes and believe they are worth improving.

9 Conclusion

Students describe design education as relational at its core, sustained by attentive teachers, human scale and peer community rather than by institutional design. The work ahead is not to soften design education but to design its care: to move it from individual goodwill to institutional structure — by protecting time, rebuilding feedback and assessment around process, making belonging deliberate, and giving wellbeing, coherence and support structures that no single teacher should have to provide alone.

FINAL TAKEAWAY

Students are cared for by people, not by systems. Turning goodwill into designed, consistent care — especially in critique, time and assessment — is the central challenge for design schools.

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Project partners:

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