

Reaching beyond or beyond reach: Challenges influencing access to higher education for care-experienced learners in Scotland

Peter Tormey

Abstract

Children in Scotland who spend time in the care of a local authority report lower educational attainment and are less likely to complete their secondary education than their non-care-experienced peers. Recent legislative changes designed to promote greater access to positive destinations for care-experienced people aims to enhance support into adulthood, promotes greater collaboration between public bodies, and increases non-repayable funding for care-experienced learners to study at college and university. This article will address the changes, unintended consequences and barriers that still persist from the period 2014 to the present. Education can be a catalyst for change and the rate of progress made to date to support care-experienced people into higher education must continue if Scotland is to achieve the ambition of a society where those with experience of care have the same equity of opportunities as the population at large.

Keywords

Higher education, corporate parenting, widening access, participation;Article

Corresponding author:

Dr Peter Tormey, Senior Widening Participation Officer, Edinburgh Napier University, Sighthill Campus, 6.B.29, EH11 4BN, p.tormey@napier.ac.uk

Background

The introduction of the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 set out the legal duty for public bodies, including colleges and universities, to provide care-experienced people with the support and guidance to promote access and participation (Scottish Government, 2014). As a corporate parent, public bodies must seek to support the wellbeing of care-experienced people in a holistic fashion, including in the case of educational institutions through the publication and reporting of a Corporate Parenting Plan to government ministers. This legislative intervention, in addition to the recommendations of the Commission on Widening Access Report, *A Blueprint for Fairness*, in 2016, has provided a new impetus to the pre-existing work undertaken by Scottish universities to widen access to higher education (HE) study. Until this point, access initiatives centred on lower or 'contextualised' access thresholds and named contact support established in achieving Frank Buttle Trust accreditation in the early to mid-2000s (Buttle, 2019).

Scotland's care-experienced young people report the lowest secondary education attainment in comparison to non-care-experienced peers, with the gap widening through the years of secondary education (Scottish Government, 2019). Children who are in the care of a local authority or 'looked after' consistently rank the lowest in terms of qualifications achieved compared to their contemporaries. Only 6% of care leavers who leave school go directly to university study, unsurprising when 75% leave school at the earliest possibility aged 16 or younger (Scottish Government, 2019). However, as with other widening participation to university groups, percentage figures mask significant issues in ascribing a definition to all from a similar background in a homogeneous fashion. A combination of archaic, imperfect or inadequate data capturing systems and inconsistent use of definitions mask a much more mosaic, complex access to university data for care-experienced people in Scotland. This article seeks to add clarity to the conversation of access to HE, provide practical guidance to those who wish to support individuals into HE and to promote post-compulsory education as a vehicle of change for care-experienced people who, without

targeted and informed guidance at key life stages, may not have the opportunity to achieve their academic potential.

Beware of differing definitions

From this point, the term care-experienced will be used to describe an individual who experienced any form of formal care, at any point in their life, and for any duration including those adopted shortly after birth, those looked after in early childhood and those who are commonly referred to as care leavers (leaving care after their 14th or 16th birthday). In this regard, the term care-experienced not only refers to a time when an individual was cared for or looked after, or the time when they became a care leaver when this formal care ended (aged between 14-16 years) but also the individual's sense of their experiences. In this sense the term care-experienced represents a life of experiences centred on an individual whereas the terms looked after, looked after and accommodated or 'LAC', and care leaver are often ascribed to an individual at a particular period of time or to signify eligibility to access services or support and are commonly used within a social work or secondary education setting. Within the context of tertiary education, the term care-experienced has become increasingly accepted by the majority in recent years including by student unions, funding bodies, universities and colleges, and by the Scottish Funding Council. However, respective university institutions may have their own definition of care-experience, which can add an additional layer of complexity.

As a consequence of the differing definitions published, and the respective scope of each definition, data pertaining to care-experienced student access to university is advised to be treated with caution, as direct comparison conclusions are not possible at present. For example, the annual school leaver destination survey recently reported 7% progression to university for care leavers, up from 4% in 2015/16 (Scottish Government 2019; 2017). This figure, though still significantly lower than broader peer group (40%), demonstrates progress is being made. However this is a one dimensional data which excludes the care-experienced learners studying at university who:

- Leave care before care leaver age (circa 16) and progress to university;

- Progress to university through other routes;
- Study at higher education level at college, not university.

In Scotland, unlike the other nations of the United Kingdom, the majority of students studying at HE level do so by studying Higher National qualifications at a college and not at a university (Scottish Funding Council, 2019). The Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) allows for parallel provision of levels of study with colleges commonly offering level 7 certificate (HNC) and level 8 diploma (HND) with universities offering undergraduate (levels 7-10) and postgraduate degrees (levels 11 and 12). College students can, where routes are available, 'articulate' onto a university degree programme gaining full credit for their HN qualifications, in essence direct-entry to progress to the next year of study and an honours degree (level 10). For example a student with a HND qualification joins at year 3 in a related degree programme, subject to meeting the admissions eligibility criteria, and achieving the same university in the same four year timeframe. In the context of care-experienced learners accessing HE, those studying HN programmes at college are missing from the national school leaver data introduced earlier (Scottish Government 2019; 2017). It is correct to note at this point that widening access initiatives aim to increase the numbers of care-experienced students, amongst other under-represented groups, to first year of a university degree programme, and that the aim to reach parity between peers irrespective of background is an important one within Scottish society.

Care-experienced learners in Scotland applying to Scottish universities do so under a capped places system where, although the cost of tuition is paid by the government, competition amongst applicants increases demand compared to English students applying to English universities who operate student fee paying, uncapped systems. Scottish universities under the guidance from the Scottish Funding Council 'Outcome Agreement' process encourage universities to broaden access and participation within universities, as a response universities set admissions policies with 'minimum access thresholds' (commonly referred to as contextualised) whereby entry requirements are adjusted down to take into account of disruption to secondary education. Additionally, universities may also

offer summer schools or bridging programmes pre-entry as a condition of a minimum access threshold offer.

Recent research investigating participation rates amongst care-experienced learners within countries who operate similar child protection care systems such as England (Harrison, 2019), Ireland (Brady, Gilligan and Nic Fhlannchadha, 2019), Australia (McNamara, Harvey and Andrewarthan, 2019) and the USA (Dworskey, 2018; Gypien *et al.*, 2017) report similar underrepresentation of care-experienced in HE. The Irish HE system, similar to the Scottish equivalent, is faced with many of the same challenges in recording, monitoring and tracking care-experienced learner participation within HE, namely an over-reliance on incomplete, imperfect and limited access and participation data (Brady, Gilligan and Nic Fhlannchadha, 2019). As a consequence, under reporting of care-experienced learners due to a paucity of accurate data is likely to exist at present. Similar findings within an English context have been found whereby, although care-experienced learners are less likely than their peers to participate in HE, and although official statistics of access rates appeared to have stalled, more care-experienced learners than expected are studying towards a degree were found (Harrison, 2019).

If there is no parity of participation within HE in Scotland, England, Ireland nor Australia and USA for that matter, what can be done to improve access and retention? One overarching and important finding (McNamara, Harvey and Andrewarthan, 2019; Harrison, 2019; Dworskey, 2018) centres on stability of accommodation within a care placement. In the context of corporate parenting responsibilities held by all Scottish universities and colleges this is key. Scottish Government statistics clearly illustrate the importance of stability with regards to optimising educational attainment. However to solely focus on in-care accommodation to increase educational attainment would be too narrow a focus and a one-dimensional response to counter the complexity of the issue. A broader conversation around providing stability to include those looked after (in care) and those without a statutory care order is recommended. Similarly colleges and universities need to work closer with local authorities, as corporate parents, to ensure those who are qualified and wish to progress to tertiary education have the information to make informed decisions, and have access to

continuing care accommodation (fee waived or substantial financial contribution). Stability through the key stages of transition, for example leaving care (Gypien *et al.*, 2017), or indeed starting university, is crucial for genuine participation when establishing a foothold in education.

In Scotland, 75% of care leavers (the larger care-experienced figure is unknown) leave secondary education aged 16 years of age or younger, at the earliest possible time (Scottish Government, 2019). On all measures, including qualification level achieved, number of qualifications achieved and post-secondary school destination, care leavers in Scotland underperform compared to their peers (Scottish Government, 2019). Strikingly, there is a linear negative correlation between an increased number of accommodation placements and lower levels of educational attainment. It is therefore unsurprising that care leavers, and indeed more broadly the care-experienced population of learners in Scottish universities, accounts for approximately 0.5%, or 334, of the student body (Scottish Funding Council, 2018).

Achieving university entry requirements, particularly for high tariff degree programmes such as medicine, law and dentistry especially at prestigious institutions, can be out of reach before a care-experienced student reaches their sixteenth birthday. Similarly, Harrison (2019) identified that care-experienced learners in England typically enter university with less prestigious qualifications and attend less prestigious institutions. Parallels to these findings exist in Scotland with data highlighting similar challenges in accessing prestigious universities and an over-representation in college sector studying at sub-degree or Higher National level (Scottish Funding Council, 2018). However as discussed briefly within the introduction, due to the SCQF and articulation agreements between colleges and universities the over 4,000 self-declared care-experienced learners in college (unpublished ahead of print) (Scottish Funding Council, 2019) in Scotland can continue to degree level study, although access to high tariff programmes is typically precluded.

Although care-experienced learners who may have experienced significant disruption to their education due to accommodation moves amongst many other challenges, a community or local college setting may be an ideal and nurturing

environment to gain a qualification prior to entering the labour market or as a bridge to university degree study (Dworskey, 2018). Importantly, decisions on post-compulsory education routes should be completed in an open and informed manner to best tailor information for the individual, and ideally publically-funded organisations with corporate parenting responsibilities in Scotland should consult one another to extend the reach of HE access.

Care-experienced, like other widening participation under-represented groups in HE, commonly face multiple, often concurrent, barriers (Mowat, 2019) in areas such as student finances, isolation, lacking social capital, weak social networks, and in respect of care-experienced learners in particular, lack of family support (Jackson and Cameron, 2012). The findings of a recent publication (conducted in Scotland) found that there is no lack of aspiration from widening participation or students from under-represented backgrounds debunking the 'aspiration myth'. Rather, from the over 4,000 individual responses, the level of aspiration from a child was linked to that of the parent or guardian (Treanor, 2018), with similar findings linking care-experienced and their carers' aspirations to the educational attainment (O'Higgins, Sebba and Gardiner, 2018). For care-experienced young people, therefore, aspiration to achieve one's potential must be perpetually reinforced and rooted in accurate information concerning options. Universities, colleges, schools and all corporate parents, and indeed society as a whole, must do more to build aspiration, help develop self-confidence and self-efficacy for people of all ages to access opportunities. Indeed, a steady mentor is key to improving post care outcomes (Gypien *et al.*, 2017) and has demonstrated to improve academic attainment levels for care-experienced learners in a Scottish secondary school setting when integrated into the teaching environment (MCR Pathways, 2018).

In addition to practical barriers, such as accessing secure financial and accommodation support, limited care-experienced learners to reach for HE study, having to overcome emotional barriers such as isolation or living without stable caring relationships, personal barriers such as disabilities and mental health occur at increased rates. Recent data published by the Scottish Funding Council pertaining to disability and mental health data from the near 320,000 students studying in the Scottish college sector show 10.6% of the

approximately 4,000 care-experienced learners report multiple disabilities (compared to 3.2% for non-care-experienced), 8.1% report dyslexia (compared to 4.2%) and 6.9% had a mental health difficulty (compared to 2.6% of total student population) (Scottish Funding Council, 2019). Issues concerning mental health and access to professional timely support affect many tertiary education learners, and indeed wider society, however with respect to care-experienced young people research suggests that 60% of those that have access to services before leaving care ceased to do so within the first month of leaving care (Piel, 2018). Without cognisant support, from family, through a mentor and by professionals, to aid care-experienced learners to successfully overcome the multiple challenges presented at each stage of their primary, secondary and college education journey then the disadvantage of opportunities may continue into the labour market (Jackson and Cameron, 2012).

A systematic review of the literature conducted by O'Higgins, Sebba and Gardiner (2017) found that with respect to care-experienced people who were in foster or kinship care placements, there are multiple contributory factors which influence educational attainment. However those with additional educational needs, minority ethnic, and males were consistent predictors of poor educational attainment. Similar gender imbalance findings have been reported in Scotland (Scottish Funding Council, 2018) and at my own university (Edinburgh Napier University, 2018) where approximately two-thirds of self-declared care-experienced learners were female.

Corporate parenting and continued education: An opportunity for effective, efficient person-centric working

Thus far this article has outlined the challenges that may commonly face care-experienced people to access, and stay in, tertiary education. In addition to these multifaceted and often complex barriers, recently a group of researchers from Australia (McNamara, Harvey and Andrewarthan, 2019) summarised some of the less homogeneous, more common, disadvantages as being linked to poverty, namely: lack of financial support; insufficient student funding; paying student tuition fees; and accommodation costs.

With respect to the current Scottish HE environment, recent policy changes afford support in all the areas listed, though in some cases access to support is based on one's care-experience background. For example, all care-experienced learners in Scotland studying at HE level in college or university have access to specific student funding. At university this comes in the form of the SAAS Care Experienced Student Bursary, a full £8,100 (non-repayable) grant for students aged 26 year or younger when starting their degree programme and summer accommodation grant (SAAS, 2019) (nursing-related programme access a different bursary). Additionally, many universities offer additional funding to supplement student income through their own bursaries and scholarships, the Propel website (<https://propel.org.uk/UK/>) provides funding, course information and contacts at the majority of universities and colleges in the United Kingdom. The majority of universities offer 52 week student accommodation tenancy options, and in some cases offer student accommodation scholarships either independently or as part of a partnership with third parties. Unlike in other nations of the United Kingdom, tuition fees are paid for by the Scottish Government through a student funding agency.

There is still progress to be made in harmonising the levels of support with funding accommodation. Care-experienced students who do not have access to statutory aftercare or continuing care support from their local authority due to leaving care before becoming categorised as a 'care leaver' aged 14-16 years commonly cannot access financial support under Section 30 of the Children (Scotland) Act 1995 to fund accommodation during their studies, even if they are under 26 years of age and in receipt of the SAAS Care Experienced Bursary. Consequently, anecdotal evidence suggests care-experienced students who self-fund their own student accommodation cost must work more hours of paid employment and may struggle to access or fully participate in HE in the first instance. Furthermore, those who do not have access to local authority or third sector aftercare services may not have access to the same level of information on post-compulsory education options or the relevant support services. For example, the approximately 25% of care-experienced people who come from a 'looked after at home' background, a placement type unique to Scotland, display the lowest positive destinations and educational attainment of all care-

experienced backgrounds and typically do not have access to the same continuing or aftercare services augmenting disadvantages (Barnardo's, 2015).

For corporate parenting to truly work as intended, corporate parents must continue to construct systems which work for the individual to promote their wellbeing, abilities and interests, moving away from an institutional systems based approach. The work done to develop these ideals to date has been primarily conducted at an individual or service level, however greater integration is required. For example, the university sector is built on a number of cycles which follow a distinct pattern linked to milestones or the academic calendar which, in the context of being open to individuals who through no fault of their own, may restrict access and openness. Care-experienced people who wish to attend university are dependent on third parties to receive in a timely manner the various documentation to support applications for funding, student accommodation and to study. Whereas non care-experienced students can complete prerequisites at a time of their convenience. Similarly, local authorities may not possess the expertise, contacts or resources (time, financial) to support transitions to university or college study, and have processes of their own to contend with which may not complement education providers' work practices. This disconnect between universities and local authorities can add to the feelings of uncertainty affecting the confidence of young people to access HE (Krongeter, Schroer and Zeller, 2016; Lewis *et al.*, 2015). Archaic systems, wherever found, must be re-established by corporate parents to take a more person-centric holistic approach to limit the effect of multiple accumulative barriers preventing care-experienced people accessing HE and the associated lifelong benefits of gaining a degree.

Access to HE, either from secondary school to university or college or from college to university, has never been more accessible for care-experienced people of all ages in Scotland. However, despite many enhancements in access and funding, care-experienced people still face multiple barriers to overcome to participate in HE. Corporate parents must work ever closer to preserve and expand opportunities, including in areas of funding, accommodation, pastoral and mental support, to remove barriers where possible especially in a challenging public services funding environment. Practitioners who support care-

experienced people must work ever closer together to share and disseminate accurate information and to build aspiration for positive futures where it is missing. Participation of formal or informal education can be a vehicle of change not only for one's career but also for one's sense of self and personal development. For education to act as a catalyst for greater social mobility for care-experienced people, the rate of progress made to date must continue if Scotland is to achieve the ambition of a society where care-experienced people have the same equity of opportunities as the population at large.

Care-experienced students studying in HE are talented, resilient, magnanimous and have the ability to achieve their goals and aspirations, however the journey into tertiary education can stall before it begins if timely guidance or a lack of aspiration by practitioners is the standard approach taken. As practitioners and corporate parents, we must exchange knowledge to ensure care-experienced people can reach beyond to access higher education.

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About the author

Peter Tormey is senior widening participation officer at Edinburgh Napier University with responsibilities in the areas of articulation (direct-entry) from college in the Schools of Engineering and the Built Environment and Applied Sciences, respectively. Additionally Peter holds named contact roles for underrepresented groups including care-experienced, unpaid carers and estranged students, contributing to the development of policy documents. Access, transitioning and participation within higher education are areas of interest which intersect the widening participation backgrounds of these cohorts.