



Centre for excellence
for Children's Care and Protection

CEL CIS's response to the Scottish Government's Tertiary Education and Training (Funding and Governance) (Scotland) Bill

April 2025

We welcome the opportunity to respond to the Scottish Government's proposed Bill: Tertiary Education and Training (Funding and Governance) (Scotland). We provided a comprehensive [consultation response](#) to the [Scottish Government's Post School Education and Skills Reform Legislation: Consultation](#) in September 2024. This response reinforces our key messages from our previous contribution in this area. For full information on any of the points made within this submission, please refer to our previous consultation response.

This submission highlights some important considerations that are necessary regarding the specific needs, experiences and opportunities of and for supporting care experienced learners in Scotland.

CEL CIS, the Centre for Excellence for Children's Care and Protection, is based at the University of Strathclyde and is a leading improvement and innovation centre. We improve children's lives by supporting people and organisations to drive long lasting change in the services they need, and the practices used by people responsible for their care. We welcome the opportunity to respond to the Post-School Education and Skills Reform: Consultation on Legislation. The information in this submission and our responses to questions in the consultation is based on research evidence, practice and lived experience, and feedback from longstanding cross organisational networks, and maintains a sharp focus on the impact of national and local policy initiatives on children and young people in need of care and protection.

Context

Over 12,000 children are 'looked after'¹ by Scottish local authorities, and over 8,500 young people are eligible for 'aftercare'². There are a further 2,104 children assessed as being 'at risk of significant harm' and thus are on a Child Protection Register in Scotland. In addition, there are children who need care and protection who may not yet be identified or recorded within formal child protection systems³.

¹ 'Looked after' and 'looked after child' are the terms used in current legislation to refer to a child or young person who is cared for under a formal arrangement with a local authority. It has a specific legal meaning, but wherever possible, the more inclusive term 'care experience' is preferred.

² Scottish Government (2024) [Children's social work statistics](#) 2022-2023. Edinburgh: Scottish Government

³ Gilbert, R., Spatz-Widom, C., Browne, K., Fergusson, D., Webb, E. & Janson, S. (2009) 'Burden and consequences of child maltreatment in high-income countries.' *The Lancet* 373: 68-81.

Education and experience of care

Education outcome indicators in Scotland show that the gap between the attainment and achievement of 'looked after' children, and that of their non-care experienced peers, remains unacceptably large⁴. The COVID-19 pandemic, and the associated public health protection response, has a disproportionate impact on children, young people and families in need of support, who already were facing inequalities and disadvantage and continue to do so.

The individual circumstances and needs will vary for all learners who have had experience of being in need of care and protection. The vast majority will have encountered difficulties in their lives including loss and trauma, instability in important relationships and, for some, the impact of abuse and neglect.

Care experience students in further and higher Education

There are inherent difficulties in reporting figures for care experienced learners in further and higher education due to differences in what, when and how different agencies and researchers collect and report information and data. We can surmise from the figures that are available that the percentage of care experienced learners going onto further and higher education is increasing, including a recent threefold increase in Scotland. This is positive; however, it is important to note that this was from a lower starting point than all other students. There may however be a disproportionate dropout rate and there remains a significant gap between the percentage of care experienced learners who go to university when compared with their non care experienced peers. We also know that some care experienced learners return to study as mature students and succeed later but their experiences and outcomes are not reflected in statistics.

- 1.6% of Scottish-domiciled full-time first-degree entrants were care experienced.⁵
- 2.0% of Scottish-domiciled entrants to undergraduate courses at Scotland's colleges and universities were care experienced.⁶
- In the college sector, 3.9% of enrolments to full-time higher education and 9.6% of enrolments to full-time further education courses in 2021-22 were from care-experienced students. This is up from 3.6% (full-time

⁴ Stein, M (2005) Resilience and Young People Leaving Care: Overcoming the odds. Research Report. York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation

⁵ Scottish Funding Council (2023) Report on Widening Access 2021-22. Scottish Funding Council: Edinburgh.

⁶ Ibid.



higher education) and in line with the 9.6% (full-time further education) figures in 2020-21.⁷

- In one study 12% of care leavers had entered higher education by the age of 23, higher than previous estimates of 6% and a significant number were more likely to drop out.⁸
- 14% of care leavers go to university compared to 47% of young people who didn't grow up in care.⁹

Key considerations for learners with care experience

Financial Stability

Care experienced students face significant financial challenges, often lacking the safety net of family support. The costs of independent living, combined with financial insecurity, can negatively impact their ability to engage fully in education.

- In Scotland, the Care Experienced Student Bursary, while helpful, does not always meet the rising cost of living, leading many students to work part-time, which can affect their academic progress.
- Many care experienced young people can be expected to live independently from the age of 18, whereas people living with their parents often receive family support well into their 20s.

CEL CIS would support additional measures to enhance financial stability, including improved access to emergency funding, and streamlined application processes.

Holistic and Relational Support

Financial aid alone is insufficient in supporting learners to achieve their educational goals; care experienced students require comprehensive relational and emotional support.

- The success of student support systems depends on access to trusted relationships — support networks that extend beyond financial assistance.
- Institutions should ensure that all learners have access to designated support staff who understand their unique experiences and needs.

⁷ Scottish Funding Council (2023) Report on Widening Access 2021-22. Scottish Funding Council: Edinburgh.

⁸ Harrison, N (2017) MOVING ON UP: Pathways of care leavers and care-experienced students into and through higher education. University of the West of England: Bristol.

⁹ Young, F., and Lilley, D. (2023). Breaking the care ceiling.



- Care experienced students benefit from individualised support tailored to their needs, such as guidance on navigating funding, housing options, and transitions into employment or further study.

Transitions and 'Accelerated Adulthood'

Care experienced students often experience an 'accelerated adulthood,' moving quickly from childhood to full independence.

- Support must extend beyond initial entry into further or higher education and should include assistance with transitions into postgraduate education or employment.
- Policies should prevent a 'cliff edge' effect, ensuring that financial and practical support continues into early adulthood, rather than abruptly ending at a predetermined age, or stage of a learners' journey.
- Strengthening practical and financial post-graduation support is essential to help care-experienced students secure sustainable employment or further study opportunities.

Trauma-Informed Approaches

Many care experienced students may have experienced trauma, making a trauma-informed approach essential in learning provision and student support services.

- Educational institutions should ensure that staff are trained in, and supported to implement, trauma-informed practices, creating a more inclusive and understanding environment.
- A national approach to implementing trauma-informed policies will enhance support for students facing emotional and psychological barriers to their education.
- A welcoming and accessible environment is key to ensuring that care experienced students feel supported throughout their educational journey.

Proposal to create one single agency responsible for student support

CEL CIS supports the proposal to consolidate all student funding under a single body, the Student Awards Agency Scotland (SAAS). The move to centralise financial support for students provides the opportunity to create a streamlined, more equitable system that ensures consistency and accessibility across further education (FE) and higher education (HE). Currently, SAAS administers support for HE students, while the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) manages FE student support. The proposed changes will bring all student funding into SAAS, reducing



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complexity and administrative burdens for students, institutions and funding bodies alike.

We see the benefits of a Unified Student Funding System as providing:

- Consistency and Equity: A single system eliminates disparities between FE and HE student support, ensuring that care experienced students receive equal and transparent financial assistance regardless of their education pathway.
- Simplified Access: A centralised system reduces confusion and administrative barriers, making it easier for students to understand and apply for financial aid.
- Improved Responsiveness: With all funding under one agency, SAAS will have enhanced abilities to adapt policies and financial support mechanisms to meet the evolving needs of students, including care-experienced learners who face unique challenges.
- Stronger Support for Care Experienced Students: By integrating support mechanisms, the proposed changes can provide a more holistic approach to financial stability, reducing the risk of students falling through the gaps.

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