



Going to

university

from care

Beyond the headlines

September 2018





Introduction

This is the first in a series of briefings – Beyond the Headlines – providing further information and analysis on some commonly reported statistics relating to children and young people in care, care leavers, and care experienced people in Scotland.

Headline statistics are often stark and deeply worrying; they can reveal the multiple adversities facing children and young people now and the difficulties they can continue to experience into adulthood. These headlines can serve an important purpose in raising political and civic consciousness about issues and be a call for action.

Stigma can be hugely detrimental to the experiences and aspirations of care experienced children and young people. Therefore, it is essential to be robust in how information, including data, is used, ensuring that this is done in ethical and responsible ways to represent diverse experiences and challenge negative stereotypes.

Headline statistics can only tell us one part of the story. CELGIS works alongside many others to improve outcomes for care experienced children and young people and in this briefing, we look at the issue of care experienced young people going to university and provide further analysis of data to reveal what's beyond the headlines. To support further discussion and debate, we also raise some key questions and talking points.

For the purposes of this briefing, the following definitions are used: 'looked after child/ children' – a child or young person looked after in a formal arrangement with a local authority (including compulsory supervision arrangements, looked after at home, kinship care, foster care or residential care placement) – a term which is used in legislation to mandate care and protection; 'care experienced student' – a student who has been looked after by a local authority at any time in their life, including adoptive children who were previously looked after by a local authority; and 'care leaver' – a young person who was looked after on or after their 16th birthday and who is currently under the age of 26.



1. What are some of the headlines?



Only 5 per cent go to university.

(The Scotsman, 24 January 2018)



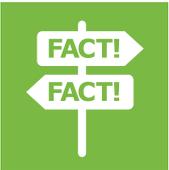
Currently there are 15,404 children in care with only 7 per cent going straight to university from high school compared to 39 per cent of their peers.

(Third Force News, 23 March 2016)



Media headlines such as these have often been reported to highlight an important issue. These headlines suggest that only a small proportion of care experienced young people in Scotland go to university, compared to a far greater proportion of their peers. This is frequently referred to as a big, persistent, and unacceptable 'going to university gap'.

However, interrogation of data concerning care experienced young people's educational journeys starts to reveal that the achievements of care experienced young people in further education are often overlooked. It also shows that while routes to university may be less direct, this is a route taken more than some headline figures used alone would suggest.



2. What do we need to know beyond the headlines?

So what do we need to know to get a clearer picture? A key national statistic published each June by the Scottish Government is the number of care experienced school leavers progressing from school into college or university.¹ Along with employment and apprenticeships, this is called a 'positive destination'. The table below shows the data on 'positive destinations' for the past five academic years.

Figure 1: Post-school destinations of looked after school leavers²

	2013 /2014		2014 /2015		2015 /2016		2016 /2017		Total number 2016 /2017
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	
Looked after school leavers									
Higher Education	25	6	15	4	23	5	31	6	31
Further Education	178	43	4	36	194	41	208	41	208
Other positive destination	125	30	159	37	147	31	170	35	170
% in a positive destination	418	78	427	77	468	78	409	81	409
All school leavers									
Higher Education	20,057	39	20,371	38.8	21,079	40.3	20,872	41	20,872
Further Education	13,518	26.3	14,511	27.6	13,917	26.6	13,768	27	13,768
Other positive destination	13,967	27.2	13,937	26.6	13,809	26.4	13,431	26	13,431
% in a positive destination		92		93		93		94	

1 Scottish Government (June 2017) [Education Outcomes of Looked After Children 2016/17, Edinburgh, Scottish Government](#)
Scottish Government statisticians have provided us with the numbers of individuals the percentages represent.

2 Ibid, Table 2.1

This set of statistics tells us that groups of children had particular destinations immediately and directly after they left school. The headline figure most commonly reported is the percentage of school leavers by follow-up destination (just 3 months after leaving school), who were looked after children for an academic year prior to leaving school.

The table of post-school destinations shows that 6 per cent of school leavers who were looked after for the whole year 2016–17 were studying in higher education three months after leaving school. This compares with 41 per cent for all school leavers, a very big difference. 6 per cent represents 30 students.

But we know that there are many more care experienced students in higher education. To understand a more complete picture, we need to know that:

1. The latest percentage (6 per cent in the case of the statistic published for 2016/17) isn't actually the number of 'looked after' school pupils who went to university directly from school, but the percentage who went on to study at any form of higher education provider, with higher education defined as 'entered University to study at degree level, or an FE/HE college to study at HNC/HND level'.
2. This statistic also relates to a very specific group of care experienced young people: those who were looked after at the time when they left school, not who might have been looked after at any point of their childhood or adolescence in any way, and who had been looked after for a full year prior to leaving school.
3. Many students in Scotland go to university after attending college first, or after a break from education. Looking only at 'school leaver' destinations – and three or nine months after students leave school – misses out all the care experienced young adults who do not go directly to university but go on to attend university at a later stage.
4. The set of these statistics also tells us that 4 per cent of looked after school leavers, who were looked after for part of a year rather than the full year, also progressed directly to higher education. Another 29 per cent (full year) and 24 per cent (part year) went on directly to further education.
5. It's also possible that the annual survey of school leavers does not track looked after children as successfully as other children since they are also more likely than most to move home address at this time.
6. Colleges are very important access routes for looked after children. The post-school destination survey found that 41 per cent of the 506 children looked after for the whole year who left school in 2016–17 started a further education course at a college, much higher than the percentage for all school leavers (27 per cent).
7. This set of statistics isn't the only data we have. Enrolment statistics are collected by colleges and universities and analysed by the Scottish Funding Council. These show that there were 629 new students with care experience who were newly enrolled in higher education courses at university or college in Scotland in 2016/17; and in total 3,387 care experienced students newly enrolled across all further and higher education courses. This indicates that of the young people looked after for the full year, 47 per cent were either in higher or further education, and of those looked after for part of the year, this figure being 33 per cent, were either in higher or further education.



3. Going beyond the headlines

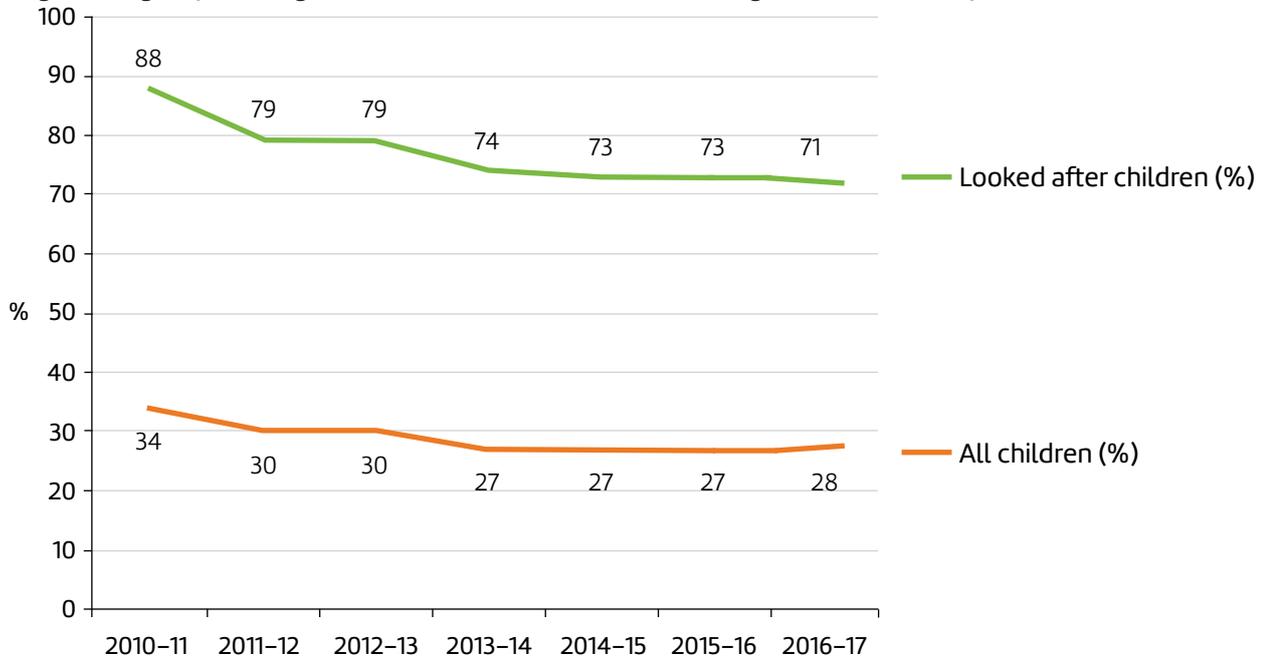
Why school leaving age matters

The [positive destination statistics](#) tell us that only 6 per cent of looked after school leavers go directly from school to higher education in Scotland. The average for all school leavers is 41 per cent.

What is the reason then for this big difference between how care experienced and other young people progress through education?

Principally it's because looked after children leave school much sooner than other children. In the 2016/17 academic year, 72 per cent (362) of looked after school leavers were aged 16 or younger, compared with 28 per cent (14,526) of all leavers. This rate has been improving over time – in 2010/11, 89 per cent of looked after school leavers were aged 16 or younger – but this difference between looked after children and their peers highlights how important the partnership work of schools, social services, and third sector, to encourage looked after young people to stay on at school, is in helping all children succeed to pursue their education.

Figure 2: Higher percentage of looked after children leave school aged 16 or under compared to all children



If a young person leaves school early (15–16 in Scotland), they are unlikely to have the minimum entry qualifications for higher education courses at college or at university. Some will complete these qualifications elsewhere, and later in their adolescence or in adulthood.

Some care experienced young people will also leave where they're living (foster, kinship, or residential care placements) around the same time they leave school, which means that they face new and significant financial and personal responsibilities which can be extremely challenging – circumstances that can differ from their school peers.

The official guidance published with the leaver statistics notes that the "...lower proportion of looked after young people entering higher education can largely be explained by leaving school earlier and consequent lower levels of qualifications"¹. Rather than a 'going to university gap', this very real 'school leaving age gap' should be where attention is focused.

1 Scottish Government (June 2017) [Education Outcomes of Looked After Children 2016/17, Edinburgh, Scottish Government](#), p.11

Why enrolment data capturing care experience matters

The Scottish Funding Council (SFC) now has four years of data on initial enrolments (i.e. enrolling on the first year of a course) of care experienced students [ii] in Scottish institutions, as shown in the table below (Figure 3). According to this data, in 2016–17, the total number of Scottish care experienced students enrolling at a Scottish university was 334. If we look beyond university, to courses at college, the total number of Scottish care experienced students enrolling on higher education courses was 629.²

Figure 3: Proportion of school leavers who left school at age 16 or under

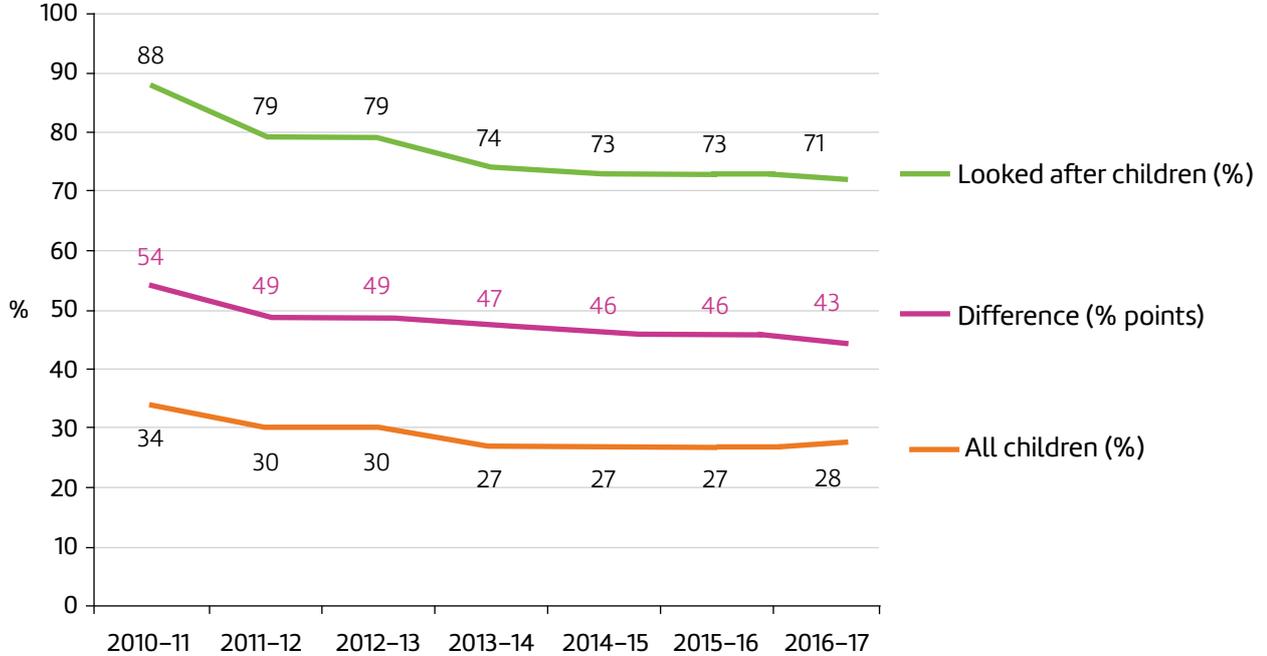


Figure 4: Scottish-domiciled Entrants with Care Experience

	University				College			
	First Degree		Other Degree		HE		FE	
	Full-time	Part-time	Full-time	Part-time	Full-time	Part-time	Full-time	Part-time
2016-17	170	40	35	20	165	30	1045	565
2015-16	160	30	25	20	140	20	715	390
2014-15	170	30	25	15	40	5	175	105
2013-14	145	30	25	10	20	5	165	160

Why declaring a care identity matters

The UK Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) and the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) now routinely ask universities and colleges to report on the backgrounds of their students, using data collected once students are registered and are attending courses. As with the UCAS (Universities and Colleges Admission Service) application process, students are invited to declare their care experience, along with other demographic data, when they register on to their course.

Enrolment data, collected by the SFC, reports every new student enrolling at the start of a course, whatever their age, and this counts all those who have declared their care experience. As explained in

² Scottish Funding Council (June 2018) Care experienced students at college and university, Scottish Funding Council

the introduction, it's important to note that 'care experience' is a broader category than 'looked after child' or 'care leaver' because it includes any previous experience of care.

The use of this broader definition and the reliance on self-declaration means that numbers could be unintentionally inflated. For instance, a student might incorrectly relate 'care experience' to their experience of being a young carer. It's equally possible that numbers could be underestimated, since students may choose not to declare their care background, or don't recognise that a particular period of their childhood was care experience.

But organisations like the SFC, the Student Awards Agency Scotland (SAAS), and Skills Development Scotland (SDS) are now working very closely with universities and colleges to improve how the data is collected. Universities and colleges are providing clearer explanations of what qualifies as care experience and encouraging self-declaration of care identity as a positive action that can lead to additional financial and other support.

Why supporting students with care experience matters

Universities and colleges have been under pressure from students, advocacy organisations and governments to improve their offer for care experienced students across the UK. The introduction of statutory 'corporate parenting' duties on Scottish universities and colleges in the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 has given additional focus.

In 2016, the Scottish Government announced an intention to introduce a full bursary for care experienced young people at university, and at the start of the 2017 academic a [Care Experienced Student Bursary](#) of £7,625 was made available to Scottish university students with care experienced backgrounds under the age of 26. The bursary is intended to help students towards any study-related costs, including general living costs, travel costs, books and course materials or field trips as appropriate. Students eligible for the bursary can also apply for an accommodation grant to support living costs during the summer vacation. In June 2018, the funding level for the bursaries was increased to £8,100, a level equivalent to the Real Living Wage. At the same time, the Scottish Government announced that care experienced students on non-advanced courses in colleges would also be eligible for the same level of bursary, responding to one of the recommendations of Scotland's Independent Review of Student Financial Support.

The provision of direct financial assistance is not the only form of support that can have an impact on the number of care experienced students able to pursue their education at college or university. Another important factor is fairness in relation to access. The [Commission on Widening Access](#) was established to advise Scottish Ministers on how to meet their ambition that children born in the most deprived communities should have the same chance of going to university as a children born in the least deprived communities. In their final report, the Commission recommended that: "...students with care experience who meet the access requirement should be entitled to the offer of a place at a Scottish university."

This would require affirmative action such as considering the grades for applicants who have more disadvantaged backgrounds; guaranteeing places for applicants with the minimum qualifications for a course; and fair treatment of college qualifications, to allow more seamless progress in degree-level studies. Such action could encourage people to declare their care experience at enrolment, which could in turn lead to significant year-on-year increases in the numbers being more accurately recorded.

Educational attainment for care experienced young people remains a focus of the Scottish Attainment Challenge and in June 2018 the Scottish Government announced £32m of specific attainment funding to enable schools and others responsible to further support care experienced children and their education needs.

To understand the situation in England, there is a study – 'Moving on Up' – from the National Network for the Education of Care Leavers, by Dr Neil Harrison at the University of the West of England. Educational attainment for care experienced young people remains a focus of the Scottish Attainment Challenge and in June 2018 the Scottish Government announced a further £32m of specific attainment funding to enable schools and others responsible to further support care experienced children and their education needs.³

3 ['Moving on up' report – National Network for the Education of Care Leavers \(NNECL\)](#)



4. Conversation points

This briefing is designed to prompt discussion, debate, and consideration of what action could be taken to improve the experiences of care experienced children, young people and adults.

Questions to consider:

1. Why do care experienced young people leave school earlier than their peers and what is being done to address this issue locally and nationally?
2. In what ways can all those who work with care experienced young people support them to declare a care identity when applying for university or college? And, are there particular challenges in declaring a care identity for young people in kinship care or looked after at home?
3. How can universities and colleges better support care experienced young people into university?
4. How can local and national data be improved to understand the participation of care experienced young people and adults in higher and further education?
5. How can the educational journeys of care experienced young people and adults help to inform and improve the opportunities for future care experienced students at all stages of further and higher education?



5. Summary

This briefing has looked at data that is often used to inform public debate and media headlines about the lives and prospects of Scotland's care experienced children and young people, and has provided data analysis to look behind and beyond this.

What stands out is:

- the picture is always incomplete when a single headline figure is used;
- there's a considerable 'school leaving age gap' between care experienced young people and their peers;
- using only the data on school leaver destinations does not present the full story of the number of care experienced people who go on to study at college or university at any other time in their life than directly from school;
- percentages can be misleading – a percentage going up or down year-on-year doesn't help us to understand us how many individual students are pursuing post-school education;
- care experienced young people face real personal and financial barriers to fulfilling their potential; and
- The Scottish Funding Council, universities, colleges, schools, and others are working together to get a more accurate picture of care experienced students in Scottish colleges and universities.

Things are starting to improve. The introduction of corporate parenting duties and new support, including on finance and access, underpinned by assistance to institutions from national agencies like the Scottish Funding Council, is improving the quality and reliability of the data, and opening up access to higher education for care experienced young people.

Definitions

- i. Looked after child:** A child or young person currently looked after in a formal arrangement with a local authority, typically, but not always, involving compulsory supervision arrangements following a children's hearing. Children can be looked after while remaining in the family home, with social work support, or in a kinship, foster or residential care placement.
- ii. Care experienced student:** A student who has been looked after by a local authority at any time during their life. This includes adoptive children who were previously looked after.
- iii. Care leaver:** A young person who was looked after on or after their 16th birthday and who is aged under 26.

CELCIS is committed to building brighter futures for children in need of care and protection. As an intermediary organisation between research, policy and practice, we strengthen the skills and capacities of people who care for children and young people. What's more, we take an evidence-informed approach to implement lasting and positive change, across the services and systems that affect the lives of children and families.

CELCIS is part of the Institute for Inspiring Children's Futures, based at the University of Strathclyde.

For further information please contact:

e: celcis@strath.ac.uk

t: +44 (0)141 444 8500

w: www.celcis.org

CELCIS

University of Strathclyde

Curran Building, Level 6

94 Cathedral Street

Glasgow

G4 0LG



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