Widening Access:
Care Experienced Students

Investigation into the retention and progression issues impacting upon care leavers and identification of effective transition support throughout their academic career including possible barriers in participation of placements/internships and international opportunities

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Executive Summary

Care leavers as a distinct group of students within higher education (HE) in Scotland have very little presence: *"only a small percentage, in comparison to the national average, go on to study at university"* (Scottish Care Leavers Covenant 2016). Professor Les Ebdon, Director of Office for Fair Access puts it bluntly *"there's almost no more underrepresented group in higher education."* Without significant support mechanisms many often struggle to cope financially and emotionally which impacts on their ability to academically achieve.

This paper reports on a study, conducted by a research intern at the University of Strathclyde, which investigated the retention and progression issues impacting on care leavers, specifically in relation to their experience with the University. It seeks to identify a positive environment for care experienced students and pinpoint best practice of effective transition support for students who encounter difficulties in their academic career. In addition to looking at the academic career of a care experienced student, the potential barriers of care leavers in accessing placements, internships and international opportunities were also investigated. Furthermore, a study of contemporary literature was used to identify key themes relating to care experienced students. To examine best practice elsewhere the study was conducted in collaboration with an intern at the University of Stirling whom had a similar remit. It is hoped that outcomes of this study will influence future developments in this area at the University.

Introduction

The current Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) Enhancement Theme is 'student transitions', meaning the transitions that people make into, during and out of higher education. During the period 2014-2017 universities across Scotland will undertake work to better understand the challenges students face in moving through their studies, and to improve the support for key points of transition. This study is intrinsically linked to the QAA Enhancement Theme. It is timely given that it coincides with the Scottish Government's recently published 'Blueprint for Fairness: The Final Report of the Commission on Widening Access'.

The journey an individual has had that has resulted in them being labelled as care experienced has meant that at some point they have been: in residential care; foster care; kinship care (living with a family member other than a parent) or looked after at home (Children and Young Persons Commission Scotland). As a Corporate Parent, under the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014, the University has a statutory obligation to be alert to matters that might adversely affect the wellbeing of looked after children and care leavers, provide opportunities to promote their wellbeing and take action to help them access such opportunities. In addition, Strathclyde's Outcome Agreement 2014-17 specifically commits the institution to improving support for those from looked after backgrounds and, since February 2016, the University has officially signed the Scottish Care Leavers Covenant, publicly demonstrating an institutional commitment to this group. There is evidence of a retention and progression 'gap' for care experienced students - Scotland wide 38% of school leavers' progress into HE, just 2-4% of those having experience of being in care (Scottish Government, 2016). In the stratosphere of HE there is a lack of insight into the circumstances and challenges faced by care leaver students and what is required for these students to successfully navigate these, ensuring a positive outcome. Cotton, Nash & Kneale (2014) suggest that *"for care leavers, accessing and succeeding in education is a significant achievement, and research which identifies the kinds of support which would be most usefully provided by universities is urgently needed."*

In a work context often the experience endured by a care leaver has a domino effect. Dixon (2007) has suggested *"care leavers may be further disadvantaged through their personal*

circumstances. Managing the wider challenges of early independent living and for some, coping with personal difficulties such as past trauma and estrangement from family and community support, can present considerable obstacles to finding and sustaining a career. Additionally, care leavers may experience a lack of confidence in their abilities, their potential and their employability." Taking Dixon's assertion at face value and considering that there is an expectation that graduates today have suitable work experience, the difficulties a care experienced individual may face are stark.

Methodology

An intern was appointed within the Widening Access team at the University to undertake a study and produce a report relating to the retention and progression issues impacting upon care leavers, identifying effective transition support throughout their academic career including possible barriers in participation of placements/internships and international opportunities. The intern was a current undergraduate student at the University of Strathclyde and whom was primarily based within the Widening Access office for the duration of the internship.

The report was compiled using a mixed method design. A review of contemporary literature was used and acted as a foundation for the report, general themes were identified to discuss and formed the structure of engagement: with care experienced students; support and administrative departments within the university; strategically chosen senior personnel from the four faculties (Faculty of Science, Faculty of Engineering, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences and Strathclyde Business School) of the University and external organisations. External organisations included Children and Young Peoples Commissioner Scotland (CYPS), Buttle UK, Who Cares? Scotland and the Scottish Government amongst others. To examine best practice elsewhere the study was conducted in collaboration with the University of Stirling. Where good practice was identified at other HE institutions they were also contacted for their input.

Care experienced students were interviewed from across all faculties whom were at various stages of their undergraduate academic career. It was viewed that because there was an emotive nature to the study that one to one informal meetings were adopted as opposed to an impersonal electronic survey or rigid questionnaire.

The content of the interviews gave a reality in the context of Strathclyde, supplementing the literature. Where there was a common theme identified similar points were grouped together, analysed and used to form the discussion element of the report. Thereafter, recommendations were made that could make a positive change on care leavers during their time at university and beyond.

Literature Review

The literature review was undertaken with a view to identifying and understanding key themes relating to care experienced students. There was a particular interest sought from the literature that related to the retention and progression issues in HE by care experienced students. The barriers in participation of placements/internships and international opportunities were also pursued throughout the review.

There is a general consensus fuelled by empirical evidence that educational outcomes for those who have experience of being in care are poor. Despite an increase in the awareness of widening access and policy to encourage greater participation from under-represented groups, specifically in relation to care experienced students in HE there is a void. Cotton (2016) states that *"there is a paucity of research on care leavers' experiences in HE, and limited evidence about the ways they overcome difficulties, and the sources of support they draw on."*

With poor recruitment and retention rates Professor Les Ebdon, Director of Office for Fair Access, states *"universities are missing out on talented young people whose life experiences have often given them a strong sense of resilience."*

The profile of a student who has experienced care at some point has several key characteristics. According to Driscoll (2013*) "[they are] notoriously hard to help, combining vulnerability and maturity with a sense of self-sufficiency and self-reliance."* Cotton et al (2014) adopt the opinion that *"these students undoubtedly display a number of characteristics which make them more likely to achieve their goals."*

Regardless, Jackson et al (2005) assert that *"care leaver students often took longer to complete their studies than others, needing to repeat assignments, modules or even whole years."* In recent years the Scottish Government has moved to recognise this, recently stating in their Blueprint for Fairness: The Final Report of the Commission on Widening Access: *"Fair access is not just about ensuring more people from deprived backgrounds enter higher education, it is just as important to ensure that they can maintain their studies and successfully graduate. Our support for this group of learners must reflect the specific challenges they face. Our message to those with care experience should emulate that of a positive parent: we believe in you, we'll do all we can to support you and if things don't go to plan, we'll help you to get back on track."*

It is important to understand what a care experienced student's circumstances may mean they are lacking in an academic context *"families stand as important support systems in their lives and can stress to the students the importance of persevering. These families can encourage students to explore academic and career options, and help them keep in mind that the educational process is a personal journey in which participation itself can lead to clarification of aspirations and the translation of these aspirations into educational and career goals"* (Moxley, 2001).

The university environment has changed markedly in the last few decades; record numbers of school leavers for example now embark on a university career. Temple et al (2014) feels that something has been lost and it is to the detriment of the student: *"The university now offers no distinctive visage to the young person … there is no vision, nor is there a set of competing visions, of what an educated human being is. The student gets no intimation that great mysteries might be revealed to him [sic], that new and higher motives of action might be discovered … that a different and more human way of life can be harmoniously constructed by what he is going to learn."* The environment a care experienced student finds themselves in within the context of higher education is crucial as identified by Hyde-Dryden (2012) *"The experiences of care leavers, particularly at some of the more prestigious universities suggest that students can face problems where the academic side of an institution works very much in isolation from the welfare side, with some universities being described as having a sink or swim attitude towards their students."* Gerri McAndrew, Chief Executive of Buttle UK is on record as having said *"if it was more obvious that there was information and support available, and that there was a culture that it was OK to ask, that would help. Understanding better the educational and psychological needs of the young person is the way forward. Educational needs can be quite easily plugged, but the psychological needs are more likely to be the reason for dropping out."*

'Nobody rises to low expectations' is a well-used proverb and it is the expectations set for care experienced students by those that have a caring role that is identified by Hojer (2008) as being crucial. Quite simply where carers *"displayed high expectations of educational attainment, children and young people performed better."* Mayall et al (2015) put forward that *"when care leavers looked back on what made the difference to sustaining their participation in college, it was having someone, whether it was a Personal Advisor, former foster carer or teacher, who kept in touch and asked how their day had been."* As an overview of what an academic environment entails Tinto (2003) argues that *"five conditions are known to promote persistence. These are expectations, support, feedback, involvement, and learning. Students are more likely*

to persist and graduate in settings that provide frequent and early feedback about their performance as they are trying to learn and persist. The use of early warning systems. The frequency and quality of contact with faculty, staff, and other students is an important independent predictor of student persistence."

The psychological profile of a care leaver discussed earlier within the context of the university environment is an interaction Mayall (2015) describes: *"naturally, whilst managing issues in this territory, a care leaver at university might find difficulties in forming new relationships, feel isolated, struggle to ask for help and consequently find themselves unable to study. The challenge this raises, of course, is whether or not the care leaver should disclose their background. Understandably, some will choose to leave it all behind and others will be content to share. It is clearly vital that HEIs have well trained, sensitive staff in post who can work with post-care adults and afford them sufficient flexibility to meet their needs through the academic cycle."*

The deficit that exists in internships generally is highlighted by Lawton and Potter (2010): *"[the problem with] unpaid internships is that people who are unable to work for free are excluded from these career-changing opportunities. Many young people who complete unpaid internships will do so while living at home (or living rent-free with friends or family), with their living expenses covered by their parents. The difficulties that young people from less affluent backgrounds face in accessing internships represents an unfairness for the individual and potentially a waste of talent if an able young person is denied the chance to enter their chosen occupation. It also adds to existing patterns of inequalities in both economic well-being and power by helping to ensure that certain occupations and sectors remain dominated by people from particular backgrounds."* Looking at it from a care experienced student's perspective the challenges are only exacerbated. Reed (2011) supplements the work of Lawton and Potter by suggesting *"many people leaving the care system do not have access to work and career networks. This results in a lack of relevant work experience or knowledge about the world of work. Given the realities of the labour market in terms of the much greater competition for new jobs, the lack of experience can result in young people finding it more difficult to find employment. Work experience is especially important for care leavers as they often miss out on alternative ways of experiencing a work environment. Children growing up in traditional households will often experience their parent's place of work, or will learn about it through conversation. They may have the option of gaining a part time job and benefit from their parent's contacts to ease their transition into the labour market. In contrast, young people in care are often unable to commit to part time jobs because of conflicting priorities and don't benefit from the experiences and networks of their parents. We know from our research that many young people are reluctant to undertake unpaid work experience as they fail to see the longer-term benefits that can result. This can apply particularly to young people who lack confidence or knowledge about what work experience might involve. This can be exacerbated for young people in the care system who often lack the family support networks that provide advice to help challenge expectations and assumptions."*

The work of both Lawton and Potter (2010) and Reed (2011) has roots with sociologist Pierre Bourdieu who examined the impact of economic, social and cultural mobility in society. Bourdieu (1992) wrote about social capital as the sum of the resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition. Berridge in 2006 remarked that *"traditionally, parents use the economic, social and cultural capital at their disposal to ensure their children have the best start in life."*

The positive outcome of educated and well-equipped care leavers for society is discussed by

Schuller et al. (2002) *"education underpins the maintenance of personal well-being and social cohesion. It prevents or inhibits decline, and, more positively, reinforces on a continuing and usually unspectacular basis the health of individuals or communities. Education has a 'sustaining effect' on health and well-being and on civic society."* Contrastingly Dixon (2007) states that *"the barriers to work encountered by vulnerable groups, such as care leavers, can have an adverse impact upon wider business practice, the economy and the community, as well as personal consequences for the individual."*

Discussion

Accommodation generally, and the associated costs specifically, were identified as a concern for nearly all students who participated in the study. Many had a non-existent relationship with their parents and their wider family and where there was contact it was often strained and intermittent. In Britain the average age of adult children leaving the family home is 27 (Saga, 2013).

Contrasting this to the experience of all care leavers there is an obvious deficit - the concept of the family home as a source of support was absent.

In Scotland, Glasgow Caledonian University offers free accommodation for two years for care experienced undergraduate students. In England, the University of Bristol offers accommodation for the duration of a care leaver's academic career. Perhaps the most comprehensive financial package is in place at the University of Portsmouth: care leavers are offered accommodation for the duration of a student's academic career as well as a finance package totalling £4,650 – consisting of a Care Leavers Bursary of £1,650 in addition to a cash bursary of £3,000.

Studies have suggested that there is better retention of students in university accommodation attributed to the establishment and development of student networks and support from their peers (May, 2004). More generally Allen (2003) comments that *"care leavers are more likely to stay in their jobs or training and educational roles if they have help with the other pressing issues they face, such as stable housing and financial security."*

The formulation of an accommodation policy that is comprehensive immediately removes a barrier. Security of tenure becomes an enabler and drastically increases the confidence to and likelihood of undertaking work placements, internships and international opportunities. As previously discussed, the numbers are small, therefore it may be worthwhile for institutions to investigate the costs associated with providing accommodation funding. A message akin to '*this is your home and it can be for the duration of your academic career*' is a powerful proposition. There is considerable evidence to suggest that it instils a stability that a student may have lacked. In the process it strengthens the relationship with the student and the university.

In almost all situations students had a pressing need to access additional funds in addition to that provided by SAAS, which was invariably met by employment. In some instances it was obvious that this was to the detriment of a student's studies and thus compromised their academic attainment, sometimes significantly. There was a general although not complete awareness that the University offered additional funds, through the Discretionary Fund for example. Additional funding was not always accessed because of the perceived stigma attached to it. The emotional abuse experienced by one student from their mother led to a general feeling of guilt being attached to seeking financial help. The culture of how additional finance is accessed by care experienced students is important as Cotton (2016) states *"students need to be encouraged to feel that they are entitled to the support that is available, rather than feeling that they are expecting too much in seeking help."*

The University of Portsmouth's approach to the financing of care experienced students demonstrates that by loosening financial constraints students then have access to opportunities which enhance their prospects. For example in 2015/2016 10% of their identified care experienced students were able to undertake work placements as a result of being in receipt of the Care Leaver's package.

Senior academics across the faculties identified only a small minority of colleagues whom refused to recognise or refuted the profile of a care leaver and the distinct challenges that many of these students may face. It would appear that these were not isolated to care leavers specifically but was underpinned by a more traditional outlook of what studying at university should entail. An explanation of this mind-set is offered by Moxley (2001) *"some educators will argue that this is above and beyond the mission of post-secondary and higher education (additional support for specific groups)…[it is] a time for autonomy, gained through emancipation from family and parents. It is time for independence and a time for self-sufficiency. Perhaps this is so, if indeed these are the values of the student and the student's family."* There is a '*tendency for some academic tutors to regard welfare work as not being part of their role and identify the dissatisfaction amongst students caused by this. This is significant for care leavers if they choose in the first instance, to turn to a member of academic staff for suppor*t' (Hyde-Dryden, 2012). From the literature and after engaging with so many academic and support staff who are passionate about education as a means to increase upward social mobility it must not be underestimated the influence teaching staff can have. For many care experienced students they are the 'face' of the University.

Throughout the course of the study, leaders within the faculties were generally understanding of the unique profile of a care leaver and the challenges they faced. They were well informed, demonstrating a great deal of empathy and a willingness to be flexible and to both propose and embrace innovative approaches to the student experience.

It would be beneficial for care leavers and the student population at large for these ideas and initiatives to be shared across the University through inter-faculty collaboration. The 'Study Skills Top Up Programme,' a four-session programme run during the summer months, is a recent initiative established in 2015 by the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences. Marketed as a Summer School it is aimed at the students within the faculty generally but '*students whose grades in one or more subjects indicated to the Board of Examiners that they would find the Summer School especially beneficial are personally invited to attend.*' This method of engagement is important according to the literature as it recognises 'that retention is a decision process.' It is advantageous to offer a continuous programme of retention and frame retention as a helping process (Moxley, 2001)

Whether this should be the benchmark for all students and not just care experienced specifically is not possible to determine within the context of this report. However, there did seem to be a widespread belief amongst most academics at both the University of Strathclyde and the University of Stirling that any support initiative should not be aimed specifically at one group – that it is embedded as standard.

Tellingly the care-experienced students who had encountered academic difficulty and had overcome these were able to identify by name the administrators within their faculty. Students who were currently experiencing severe academic difficulties generally could not. All students who had contact with faculty administrators spoke in a positive way about the support they had received. Generally there was evidence of fluid communication between administrators and academics when students encountered academic difficulties; this corresponds with best practice identified in the literature. Von Stolk et al (2007) suggest that *"improve[ing] support for the student: initiatives range from improving the visibility of the student tutor to professionalising student support officials. The common complaint is that support is often offered when it is too late. The reasonable answer would be to introduce a monitoring system that – aside from*

academic achievement – lists contacts between tutors/officials and students, keeps a record of the meeting, and specific action points. The overall aim is to increase the number of contacts, which has proved effective."

The study aimed to identify barriers to participation of placements/internships and international opportunities. Within the student cohort that were interviewed circumstances had not permitted them to undertake a period of study abroad. For most, the opportunity to study abroad through Erasmus (European Region Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students) for example was perceived as not realistic given their circumstances e.g. accommodation, lack of parental financial support. For one student there was the possibility of doing so in the future but this was subject to securing a place on the programme in the first instance and then having access to finance. The idea of studying abroad was generally presented to all students through open days, inductions and so on across all faculties.

Students generally held a positive view of the University's links with business and appreciated the value this could have for their education and personal development in terms of work experience opportunities. For one student in particular a vicious circle had developed in which academic performance had resulted in the need to undertake re-sits which then meant that a substantial amount of the summer was required to study to prepare for the re-sit diet.

Even where it was envisaged that there was a varied and substantial amount of support in place most students felt that any work experience would have to be in the locus of their place of residence.

Within the University the Widening Access team were tasked with devising and implementing general strategies aimed at supporting care leavers. One to one telephone conversations with prospective care experienced students were taking place – in some cases almost instantaneously but certainly in a very timely manner. The Widening Access team were seen to be extremely responsive to prospective students and had a good reputation with existing students. Consequently, externally the reputation of the University was being enhanced within influential organisations in the care leavers sector such as Who Cares? Scotland. It was evident that the Widening Access Team when required executed with competence new initiatives, the Strathclyde Cares mentoring programme for example.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Based on the study it is reasonable to assume that the challenges and issues faced by care experienced students are not exclusive to them; there are parallels with other student groups.

The issues faced by care experienced students are complex and multifaceted; the response by the University needs to continue to target these in order to achieve positive outcomes for its students: *"contemporary retention efforts must go beyond an academic focus to address the personal, economic, cultural and career issues students face and must deal or cope with in order to be successful in higher education"* (Moxley, 2001). It should be considered that any developments to support care experienced students are more likely to have the intended impact implemented in a tactful way, Arnau-Sabates and Gilligan (2015) warn *"immersion in a 'care identity' poses risks for segregation and stigma which may impair a young person's confidence and willingness to venture into new experiences."* Having said that there is an explicit obligation on the University to create conditions that are as favourable as possible for care-experienced students to thrive and succeed.

After careful consideration and analysis from the investigation recommendations and ideas have been derived. This report will now put forward these recommendations and ideas for future

development for the University to consider when formulating policy, initiatives and future strategies for care experienced students.

The security of tenure has been identified as a major enabler for students with care experience. The university should explore the feasibility of developing a comprehensive accommodation provision policy for care-experienced students that provides the security of access to accommodation throughout a student's association with the university. The policies of Glasgow Caledonian University, University of Portsmouth and University of Bristol should be explored with a view to being used as a benchmark.

How the burden of finance could be relieved to the level that it allows students to participate in placements/internships and international opportunities – similar to the University of Portsmouth should be explored. To ensure it is positively received and has a positive impact careful consideration should be given as to how this is propositioned to students with a care experienced background.

Good practice was in place at the University in terms of identifying students from a care experienced background in the form of the 'double lock' system in which students could declare their background upon registration at UCAS and then again whilst matriculating – this should be developed further. The facility to 'self-declare' at any point during a student's academic career with the University should be considered as is in situ on the student portal at the University of Dundee.

Having been rolled out in 2015 the mentoring scheme has been positively welcomed. This scheme is in its infancy; further exploratory work should be undertaken to ascertain how this could be developed to further enhance the experience of student care leavers at the University with a view to increasing retention and general engagement for care experienced students.

When a student experienced academic difficulties that resulted in resitting examinations there was evidence of strong support in some faculties. This should be the benchmark throughout the University. Where re-sits require to be undertaken a move towards meeting with the student at least twice prior to the re-sit diet would be beneficial: immediately upon identification that a re-sit is required and then at some point thereafter to discuss progress. The faculty should seek to identify the specific issue(s) which led to the need to re-sit examinations. Enhanced engagement with the student and the department thereafter should be encouraged. It may be that this triggers a pairing with a relevant academic for the duration of the student's academic career as an additional source of support. Best practice should be shared inter-faculty in a suitable forum.

The merits of having an offering similar to that of the Study Skills Top Up Programme Summer School introduced by HASS in 2015 across all faculties should be discussed in a suitable forum. The impact the programme has had on students should be analysed and developed accordingly.

A policy should be developed where during or after a period of significant academic difficulty has occurred that this should trigger additional on-going support outwith the faculty they are matriculated. In formulating a policy it would be helpful if dialogue took place with the Deputy Head of Careers and Employability, Careers Development Centre, University of Stirling to ascertain the positive impact that confidence building and enhancing courses has had on students there.

In terms of care experienced students being able to facilitate and undertake work experience the University should continue to be aware that a very real deficit might occur. In terms of the social and professional opportunities (and those identified by Bourdieu) a care experienced student may have access to may be magnified to the extent that they are not necessarily weak – it maybe that they are non-existent. The university should seek to continue to use its reputation to increase the scope of the opportunity of work experience.

A way of facilitating a discussion about the opportunity of studying abroad should be promoted on a one to one basis with care-experienced students. Any conversation should be more akin to that which would be reasonably expected to take place in a home environment. It may be that this discussion is repeated frequently throughout the students' academic career. The positive and determined approach by the University of Stirling should be adopted where possible to overcome barriers. The possibility of a shortened exchange programme as opposed to 1 year should be considered.

Further analysis should be done to examine the extent to which purely finance is a barrier to internship and work experience. That the financial costs of travelling to a work experience placement and associated costs, like appropriate clothing, are out of reach for many care leavers should be examined. Consideration should be given to the relatively large percentage of care-experienced students at the University of Portsmouth in receipt of additional financial support who are undertaking work placements.

Generally the provision of support appears to be fairly well developed – change should continue at a fast pace with a view to being renowned with care leavers, influential organisations and throughout Scottish universities.

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