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Centre for excellence
for looked after children in Scotland

RESEARCH BRIEFING RB-2013-03

From care to uni

Looked after Children and Care Leavers in
Higher Education in Scotland

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The context

Government policy

Responding to the consultation on the Children and Young People Bill, the Scottish Government promises ‘better transitions for young people up to the age of 25 and a more deeply-rooted and widely-understood sense of corporate parenting in the public sector’ [1].

This commitment reiterates one made in the 2007 prospectus for improving outcomes for looked after children in, *Looked after children: We Can and Must Do Better*: ‘Scotland’s looked after children and young people should be encouraged and supported throughout their lives to maximise their educational potential’ [2].



Widening access

In a letter of strategic guidance (October 2012) to the Scottish Funding Council (SFC), Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning, Mike Russell, made clear his government’s policy on widening access to disadvantaged groups:

‘I want to see universities and the SFC strengthen the efforts they are already making on access. There is scope within the settlement to expand the number of students that you fund. I want to see that growth targeted at widening access, in increasing the ability of those universities with the highest demand to take more students from the most deprived areas in Scotland...’ [3].

The SFC has asked higher education institutions to demonstrate in their outcome agreements how they are making progress in relation to access, equality and diversity.

In particular, it has requested that institutions show how they will take action to achieve more even patterns of participation by learners from different protected characteristic groups, including those from care backgrounds [4].

Mike Russell:

“I want to see that growth targeted at widening access...universities with the highest demand to take more students from the most deprived areas in Scotland.”

Outcome agreements

We reviewed Scottish higher education institutions' outcome agreements for 2012-13, looking for references to engagement with looked after children and support provided for care leavers at university.

We found that while 16 out of the 19 HEIs made some reference to students from a looked after background in their 2012-13 outcome agreements, there is considerable variation in the degree of detail provided.

In most agreements the reference does little more than recognise that this group exists - that looked after children are included among other low participation groups.

Few institutions provide more detailed analysis of application and enrolment data, training for advisers and selectors, and experience of engagement activities in collaboration with local authorities. This finding is disappointing.

One author (Kinlochan) conducted a Freedom of Information (FOI) Inquiry in late 2012 of all 19 Scottish HEIs. Institutions were asked what supports were available specifically for applicants and students from a looked after background. The findings of the FOI were published in *Holyrood Magazine* [5].

The responses received indicated varied support arrangements. Some institutions provided information about halls of residence contracts being extended to 52 weeks, specific bursary funding and pastoral support. One institution (Glasgow Caledonian University) indicated that it provides accommodation in a hall of

residence free of charge to care leaver students: 'At GCU we guarantee all year round year free accommodation in Caledonian Court, our halls of residence close to the University, as we understand that this can be a challenge for some care leavers.'

One institution said no specific support was provided because the admissions software did not capture the UCAS care leaver data. A further three provided information about support services for disabled students. Kinlochan's subsequent email exchanges with one of these institutions indicated misunderstanding of the specific nature of the question about student support in this context and what it means to be a student from a looked after background.

It is clear that institutions are at very different starting points in responding to the needs of students who declare looked after and care leaver backgrounds.

The figures

Pupil Destination Survey

Skills Development Scotland (SDS) carries out an annual postal survey of all young people aged 16 and over who leave school in that year [6]. This is matched with data provided by local authority social work departments on looked after children to compile information on 'positive destinations' of looked after children [7]. In 2010-11, there was a total of 472 'matches' between the looked after and school leaver records, representing just

under 1% of the looked after children population.

The survey is conducted initially in September and then again six months later to compile information on what are called 'sustained destinations'. The follow-up survey in 2010-11 showed that, of the 472 leavers, 170 (36%) were described as 'unemployed seeking work', compared with 12% among all young people; and the latter figure is considered to be rather high by international standards.

The survey also reports that 2% of looked after school leavers who responded were in higher education (HNC/D or degree), compared with 34% of all school leavers. The 2% figure represents 10 of the 472 leavers [8]. This figure is useful in highlighting the relative disadvantage of looked after children compared with the overall school leaver population but it is not a good indicator of the actual number of looked after and formerly looked after young people studying in Scottish HEIs.

Almost a quarter of looked after school leavers who responded (105 people) were studying further education courses, the same proportion as is reported for all school leavers. It seems likely that most looked after and formerly looked after young people progress to higher education (HNC/D and degree) via further education courses, but statistics which would confirm this assumption are not so far collected centrally.

It should be possible in future to have more accurate figures for progression by using the Scottish Candidate Number (SCN) allocated to all children on school entry. The SCN is captured in FE and HE student registration procedures.

The figure of 1% or 2% progressing to HE which has been reported in Scotland for a number of successive years has sometimes been compared unfavourably with a higher figure of 6% in England (which has remained stable for at least 10 years, despite some suggesting an improvement from 1% to 6%), but the comparison is not valid.

First, the definition of the term 'looked after' in Scotland, which includes children looked after 'at home', is considerably broader than that used in legislation in England and Wales and Northern Ireland. Second, in the rest of the UK, destination surveys report on the economic activity of young people at age 19 who were looked after at age 16. Scottish school leaver surveys are likely to be reporting on a younger age group and will not therefore include wider access to higher education as a result of further education opportunities undertaken between ages 16 and 19.

Survey of aftercare services

The consultation on the Children and Young People Bill indicated a broad consensus for extending the right of care leavers to access support up to age 25. Many respondents highlighted the importance of this being a duty to provide support, rather than a right for care leavers to request support.

The Children Looked After in Scotland (CLAS) return reports on engagement with aftercare services. On 31 July 2012, 3,870 young people were eligible for aftercare services. Of these, 84% had a pathway plan and 80% had a nominated pathway co-ordinator [9]. This appears to be a considerable improvement in support

provided compared with the previous year. The economic activity was known for 2,542 (66%) of these young people; of these, 63% were recorded as not being in any form of employment, education or training. Some 4% (101 young people) were reported to be in higher education [10].

Consultation on the Children and Young People Bill

There was support for the proposal to extend the right to support up to age 25 but many respondents wanted this to be expressed as a duty to provide support.

Statistics from HEIs

There is no accurate data source for the number of current HE students who are looked after or have been previously looked after.

This will change, as a result of the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) agreeing to include a 'looked after/care leaver' field in the student registration form from the start of the new session in 2013.

There will be separate data returns for Scotland and England (Wales and Northern Ireland are not yet covered) and the Scottish data will distinguish between students looked after by Scottish local authorities and those looked after by authorities in other parts of the UK.

As part of the FOI Inquiry of all 19 Scottish HEIs referred to earlier, Kinloch asked institutions how many applicants had declared a looked after status or background through the UCAS application process, how many had been made offers

and how many proceeded to enrolment in session 2010-11.

Since the survey was for a single year, there is no information about trends, but it is the only survey ever conducted of all institutions.

Summing the data from institutions responding to Kinloch's FOI study gives a figure of 84 for new enrolments into undergraduate degree programmes in Scottish HEIs who voluntarily declared a looked after background in 2010. Several points need to be made about this figure:

- It does not include higher education students in further education colleges.
- It could underestimate actual numbers if students are disinclined to declare their status.
- It could also be an overestimate if applicants mistakenly declared a looked after background. The nature of the questions may make this more likely than an underestimate, but we do not know.

UCAS holds the data for the UK but the agency has not so far published any information because its statisticians are not yet convinced of its accuracy.

UCAS is currently collaborating with Buttle UK, a charity which awards a Quality Mark to institutions for additional support provided to care leaver students, to improve the data quality [11].

Kinloch received applicant data from institutions but it would not be valid to sum these to provide a total since we can assume that applicants will apply to more than one, and probably several, HEIs.

Of the 19 HEIs approached by Kinlochan, three said the data were not held, a further four were unable to provide numbers of enrolments and three had not enrolled students from a looked after background. The responses showed that 84 students who voluntarily declared a looked after status enrolled in only nine of Scotland's 19 HEIs.

The 84 reported is therefore likely to be an underestimate of the real number, as there may have been enrolments by students with a looked after background in institutions unable to supply information and by individual applicants disinclined to volunteer information.

Support for care leavers

Buttle UK Quality Mark

Following a recommendation in the *By Degrees* research report (Jackson, et al., 2003), the Frank Buttle Trust (now Buttle UK) established in 2006 a quality mark for HEIs (and later also FEIs) that provided additional support for care leavers. The Quality Mark is awarded to institutions providing extra support, scholarships and engagement with local authorities aimed at encouraging children in care to aspire to stay on at school to gain qualifications for entry to university [12].

Eight Scottish universities gained the Buttle UK Quality Mark, though one has since declined to renew the award which is re-assessed every three years. Buttle UK says another two Scottish universities are in the process of applying.

The Trust also suggests that a smaller proportion of institutions in Scotland hold the Quality Mark, compared with England, though the relative size imbalance between the countries makes meaningful comparisons difficult.

HE Handbook

The Who Cares? Trust introduced an annual guide for care leavers applying to HEIs in England in 2012. The Trust, in collaboration with CELCIS, produced the first HE Handbook for Scotland in 2013 [13].

The Handbook includes a page for each institution (18 of the 19 supplied information), with information based on 10 measures. Details of a named contact are also provided, and the Handbook indicates whether an institution holds the Buttle Quality Mark.

SAAS Care Leaver's Vacation Grant

“The maximum that we can pay is £105 a week during the vacation...You can apply if you are progressing directly from an HNC/D to another course without a break in study.”

The Student Awards Agency for Scotland (SAAS) provides a grant for looked after children and care leavers in higher education to help with accommodation costs during the summer vacation [14].

The Care Leaver's Vacation Grant cannot be claimed in addition to housing benefit and the student needs to decide which grant to choose.

One of the authors of this briefing (Connelly) noted that no statistics were published by Scottish Government on awards of the vacation grant, unlike those for other special grants (e.g. the Lone Parent's Grant), and approached SAAS in 2011 for information.

In its response, SAAS confirmed that it had made awards to only seven students between 2003-04 and 2010-11.

The agency wrote to all local authority social work departments in November 2011 to request that they draw the availability of the grant to the attention of leaving care teams and other appropriate advisers, as well as looked after children and care leavers applying to or at university.

No data are so far available from SAAS to indicate whether the uptake of the grant has improved.

More recently, following a review of student funding, a new student support package announced by SAAS guarantees students with a household income of less than £17,000, a living cost support package of bursary and loans totalling £7,250.

Students from a looked after background can also claim additional living cost grants, such as the Lone Parent Grant and Disabled Student's Allowance, if applicable.

Conclusion

In summary, it is possible to draw several conclusions from this brief review of participation in higher education by students from a looked after background.

- The Scottish Government has indicated a commitment to widening access to care leavers.
- The SFC in guidance to the university sector on outcome agreements has asked institutions to demonstrate how they are making progress in this regard.
- Institutional outcome agreements in 2012-13 mostly appear to lack detail, and are arguably limited in ambition.
- The SDS pupil destination survey is not a good measure of engagement with HE by students from a looked after background. The HESA return offers the possibility of a more accurate measure.
- Despite the existence of the UCAS voluntary declaration, not all HEIs have used this to collect data.
- Seven of the 19 HEIs currently hold the Buttle UK Quality Mark, with a further two said to be in the process of applying.
- The HE Handbook compiled by the Who Cares? Trust currently provides information on support arrangements for 18 HEIs.

Authors

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CELCIS is the Centre for Excellence for Looked After Children in Scotland. Together with partners, we are working to improve the lives of all looked after children in Scotland. We do so by providing a focal point for the sharing of knowledge and the development of best practice, by providing a wide range of services to improve the skills of those working with looked after children, and by placing the interests of children at the heart of our work.

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