Short Article

Dare to care: Why being care aware matters in further and higher education

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Abstract:

This article will explore outcomes for care experienced young people in education and will examine and dissect the current statistics for care experienced students. Furthermore, this article will identify various support mechanisms which could be implemented and embedded within further and higher education settings and will discuss how staff members can gain an awareness and understanding of supporting our care experienced population.

Introduction

In 2020, the Independent Care Review published statistics for care experienced children and young people which highlighted the need for change and an overhaul of the current system as we know it. Of significance, the review found concerning statistics which highlighted the multifaceted barriers that care experienced children and young people were facing. The review found that the care experienced population was significantly more likely to have poor health, and to have experienced homelessness and financial difficulties, and was more likely to experience severe multiple disadvantage (homelessness, substance use, mental health, offending, domestic abuse) (The Promise, 2023; Who Cares? Scotland, 2023). In relation to education, this group is significantly likely to have no or fewer educational qualifications than people who are not care experienced (Scottish Government, 2022).

In the period 2020 to 2021, a total of 13,255 children were identified as being looked after, an 8% decrease from the previous year. Whilst this article will focus on Scottish statistics and information, it is important to note that Scotland has the highest rate in the UK of children who are looked after by their local

authority, with 131 children per 10,000, in comparison to Wales (115), Northern Ireland (80) and England (67) (Scottish Government, 2022).

Qualifications framework

This article will be referring to SCQF levels, which stands for Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework. There are 12 SCQF levels, with level 1 being an introductory level of learning, up to level 12 which is doctoral level. For a point of reference, SCQF level 7 is the starting point of the higher education levels of this framework, with a Higher National Qualification (HNC) being recognised as an SCQF level 7 qualification (SQA, n.d).

Key groups course completion rates

The college performance indicators from 2021 to 2022 identify key groups, within which care experienced students are recognised as their own key group. Within this, 7,887 care experienced students enrolled in courses lasting 160 hours or more. Of this, only 4143 (52.5%) successfully completed the course, 1406 (17.8%) partially completed the course, and 2338 students (29.6%) withdrew and did not complete their chosen course (Scottish Funding Council, 2023). In comparison with other key groups on courses lasting 160 hours or more, the care experienced population had the poorest educational outcomes. To put this into context, those residing in the 10% most deprived postcode areas had a completion success rate of 60.1%, those living in the 20% most deprived postcode areas had a completion rate of 60.8%, those who are of an ethnic minority have a completion rate of 68.9%, and those with a disability had a completion rate of 61.6% (Scottish Funding Council, 2023). Whilst it could be argued that these groups have significantly larger numbers of students, and therefore the statistics are less comparable, it cannot be ignored that our care experienced population is not achieving in education we would hope for and are ranking last in attainment statistics for the key groups.

Types of accommodation

As identified by the Scottish government, children and young people can be 'looked after' in a variety of settings, including at home with parent(s), kinship placements, living with foster carers, or in residential care, including secure care (Scottish Government, 2022). When looking at the attainment of SCQF levels, children and young people living in foster care had the highest level of attainment at SCQF level 3, 4, 5 and 6, and the second highest rate of success of SCQF level 7, after those in kinship care. Children and young people who remained at home with their parents through a Compulsory Supervision Order consistently had the poorest attainment rates across all SCQF levels, highlighting the additional needs and support this subgroup require (Scottish Government, 2022).

At SCQF level 7 the statistics show a bleak forecast, with only very low percentages of students attaining this level. To illustrate this, at the top of the

spectrum, students who reside in kinship placements, only 4.8% are achieving this level. For students residing at home only 0.5% achieve this level, and for students residing in residential settings, excluding local authority homes, their attainment percentage at this level was 0.0%. For students who have endured more than one placement or multiple moves, their attainment percentage at this level is also 0.0%. This is in comparison to their non care experienced peers, of whom 21.5% achieve at SCQF level 7, highlighting the large disparity between these two groups of students (Scottish Government, 2022).

Educational attainment in the last five years

In comparison to their peers, there is still a significant education attainment gap for the care experienced population (Scottish Government, 2022). Indeed, the theme of disparity for care experienced students and their peers continues to be seen throughout attainment statistics. Moreover, as the difficulty of SCQF levels increases, the gap can be seen to widen. To illustrate this, in the year 2019-20, the year pre-Covid 19, care experienced students gaining one or more qualification at SCQF level 3 or better was 87% in comparison to their peers at 98%. At SCQF level 4, this falls to 72% for care experienced students compared to 96% for all school leavers. At SCQF level 5 the gap widens again, with 38% of care experienced students achieving at this level compared to 86% of their peers. At levels 6 and 7, care experienced attainment percentages are 14% and 2% respectively, compared to their peers at 64% and 23% (Scottish Government, 2021). Statistics from 2021 to 2022 show a slight improvement - for example, care experienced school leavers with one or more qualifications at SCQF level 4 or better was 78.3%, in comparison to all leavers at 96.4% (Education Outcomes for Looked after Children, 2021/22).

This highlights a recurring theme in that there is a disparity between care experienced students and their counterparts and shows that as education professionals we must gain an awareness of the complex issues and barriers to education facing our care experienced students and strive to close the attainment gap. Only by staff recognising and understanding the complexities facing our care experienced students will we be able to navigate and change the course of learning for future generations.

Support systems which can be embedded in education

For the care experienced population, their own complex personal histories and lived experience can impact upon their ability to access and sustain their chosen pathways in college and university. Identified barriers and hurdles for care experienced students to overcome in order to access support include financial burdens, inconsistent supports, and limited understanding from education staff. Therefore, having accessible supports and reliable relationships can help to overcome barriers and support each student to achieve (O'Neill et al., 2019).

As detailed in the research report 'Being a student with care experience is very daunting: Findings from a survey of care experienced students in Scottish

colleges and universities', students stated that supports need to be accessible and consistent, and not based on age, study setting, or type of care (O'Neill et al., 2019). Support mechanisms were highlighted, including practical support which is accessible for the full year, consistent accommodation, financial support, and consistent support from student advisors. Moreover, students who received support at the application stage of the process reported that they felt more included in their education community and valued the support that had been offered. This therefore highlights the need to identify and offer additional support to care experienced students at an early stage. Students reported that this helped to enable them to access and sustain further and higher education (O'Neill et al., 2019).

Financial support is another hurdle which impacts upon care experienced students. The Student Awards Agency Scotland (SAAS) offers a care experienced bursary, meaning that students may be entitled to a bursary, currently £9,000, with a summer accommodation grant also being available (SAAS, 2023, 2024). Previously, students had to be under 26 to access this financial support, however, this stipulation has subsequently been removed, which has been recognised as a positive and welcome move (Scottish Government, 2020). Removing this barrier enables care experienced students of all ages to embark upon and engage in education, which is a significant step forward.

As highlighted in research produced in conjunction with the National Network for the Education of Care Leavers (2017), some students felt there was no, little, or insufficiently responsive support for care experienced students (Harrison, 2017). It identified that additional supports around financial advice, form filling, engagement, and academic and emotional support would have been beneficial. Of note, it was highlighted that support received by students was reliant upon staff members, which raised the need for staff training around the complexities facing care experienced students (Harrison, 2017). Whilst staff absences and issues around staff retention cannot be avoided, organisations can implement and embed learning and training to overcome these practice issues, and in turn support care experienced students. This would therefore mean that in instances of staff absence or gaps in recruitment, there would be other staff who are trained, care aware and able to respond to any issues arising for care experience students. This would help in delivering more consistent care and would help care experienced students to feel included and engaged in education.

It needs to be recognised that every institution should embed learning, develop staff, and have a culture of support, so that the needs of care experienced students are not ignored. It is not good enough for there to be such inconsistencies in the support that care experienced students receive from institution to institution. There needs to be a high level of meaningful and accessible support for all students.

The practicalities of caring in education

Whilst each further and higher education establishment will have their own policies, guidance, and services to support the care experienced population, it is important to highlight some areas of good practice from my own experience which could be replicated across the sector. For example, in some settings there are specialised student support services which can offer tailored support to students ahead of their enrolment in college. This could be through individualised tours of education settings, meeting lecturing and course staff, and meeting specific support workers to ensure that each care experienced student has a designated person to speak to should any issues arise. Informal feedback from students who have accessed this support shows that it has been a beneficial stepping stone into the world of further and higher education and has alleviated some of their anxieties ahead of coming to study.

In addition to this, to overcome financial hardship and difficulties, in some education settings, student support services can offer fast track payments and discretionary payments which help with the financial burden of studying. Having robust financial supports in place, with accessible support from SAAS, helps to overcome a barrier to education.

In terms of recognising care experienced students, staff should be pinpointing these students at the application stage, with additional training provided to enable staff to identify students who may not self-disclose that they are care experienced, as there may be other indicators. Moreover, introducing markers and highlighting care experienced students on class registers would allow staff to identify care experienced students immediately. This would therefore enable lecturing and teaching staff to offer additional support to this key group of learners, with the goal of increasing attainment levels and narrowing the gap.

Being care aware in practice

As a lecturer who has worked in the care sector for a number of years, I am fully aware of the importance of supporting care experienced young people. However, in education, not all professionals will be aware of the complexities and challenges facing the care experienced population. Nor will every professional be aware of the attainment gap and barriers to education. It is therefore essential that educational establishments are sharing knowledge and understanding with all professionals, so that, as a sector, we can identify and support this key group, in the hope that we can narrow the attainment gap. Meaningful mandatory training should be available and accessible to all staff, with identified supports such as student services, student financing or counselling services being readily available too. It is hoped that by having these mechanisms and supports in place, staff will feel more confident and informed about this key group, which will in turn support positive educational outcomes.

Conclusion

This article has highlighted the educational attainment gap between care experienced students and their peers and recognises the need for future change in education. By using statistics and data, the article has reflected upon the attainment gap, breakdown in care provision and course competition rates, showing that there is a disparity across the board for care experienced students and that additional supports must be provided to help target and improve outcomes for this key group. Moreover, the article highlights the range of services that could support care experienced students and the current gap in provision, demonstrating that further supports, staff training and consistent care are needed to support our care experienced students to succeed in education.

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Acknowledgements

About the author

Kelly MacKenzie qualified as a social worker in 2011 and subsequently undertook further qualifications in 'Systemic Practice with Families and Couples', 'Practice Learning in Social Services', and 'Teaching in Colleges Today'. Kelly worked in children and justice teams both as a social worker and team leader, with areas of interest being working with vulnerable teenage girls and working with care experienced children and young people. Kelly was also director and chairperson of her local Rape Crisis branch and is passionate about supporting her local community. Kelly joined South Lanarkshire College as a lecturer in 2023 and continues to sit on the fostering and adoption panel for her local authority.