

Tackling inequalities for those with experience of children's social care

Key findings and recommendations

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Introduction

Higher education has the potential to be a key driver of social change, but currently few young people with experience of children's social care attend higher education. Care leavers and those who have ever been in care are around four times less likely to attend higher education than the general population, with a participation rate of only 14% by age 22. Participation rates are not much higher for those with wider experience of children's social care, and also lag those on free school meals, as outlined below.

Beyond higher education, young people aged 19 to 21 in England with experience of the care system are [three and a half times more likely to be not in education, employment or training](#), compared with all other children.

To understand how those with experience of children's social care could be better supported in attending and progressing through higher education, we need to understand the pathways they take. Using newly linked datasets, we have looked at how their routes vary across five different groups: care leavers; those ever in care; those who have been on a child protection plan; those on a child in need plan for less than six months; and those on a child in need plan for more than six months. We compared these groups to both the general population, and individuals on free school meals – a cohort with lower attendance, progression and attainment rates than the general population.

There are notable differences in the pathways of those with experience of children's social care compared to their peers, as well as between the groups within this cohort. The patterns in attendance and progression in higher education provide insight into how providers might be able to better attract, support and retain students from these groups.

Findings

1. Young people with experience of children's social care are less likely to enter higher education by age 22. Care leavers and those who have ever been in care have the lowest rates of entry to higher education by age 22 (14% in each group). This is nearly three times lower than the free school meals group and four times lower than the general population.
2. 'Children in need' are between two and three times less likely to enter higher education by age 22 compared with the general population.
3. While care leavers have the lowest higher education participation rate, all those with experience of the children's care system have lower participation rates and greater inequalities in their student experience than both the general population and those on free school meals who have not experienced the care system.
4. People with experience of children's social care are more likely to enter higher education later in life, rather than progressing directly at 18, as is more common in the general population.
5. People with experience of children's social care are more likely to take vocational routes to higher education rather than following the 'traditional pathway' most common in the general population. Around a third of care leavers (36%) and those ever in care (33%) pursued a vocational pathway, compared to just 13% of the general population. These vocational routes, and the further education institutions that support them, appear to provide an alternative opportunity or second chance for many who are unable or choose not to attend higher education at age 18/19, allowing them to attend later in life.
6. All those with experience of children's social care have higher withdrawal rates from higher education, often leaving with unplanned qualifications or without completing qualifications. Among care leavers, withdrawal rates are approximately two and a half times higher than the general population, with 18% dropping out without a qualification.
7. Individuals with experience in children's social care are less likely to attend highly selective or prestigious universities. Only 13% of care leavers and 16% of those who have ever been in care attend these institutions, with participation remaining below 20% across all groups. In contrast, 35% of the general population attend top-tier universities.
8. Care leavers had the second highest entry rate at age 18/19 among all groups with experience of children's social care, possibly reflecting a higher level of support available for this group during the transition from post-16 settings to higher education.
9. The insights shared here – on the pathways of young people with experience of children's social care – have been gained through newly linked datasets, showing the value of effective data linkage.

It is also worth noting that achievement gaps between individuals with experience of children's social care and those without are substantial and evident across both Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 4 indicators of attainment, which is likely to be one factor in their progression to higher education.

What this means for the sector

Our findings indicate that young people with experience of children's social care are not progressing to university at the same rate as the general population, or those on free school meals, and that those who do attend are more likely to withdraw.

It is clear that more needs to be done to support students with experience of children's social care in progressing to, and succeeding in, higher education. The evidence suggests that vocational routes play a crucial role in facilitating early progression, particularly for care leavers, but also for others with experience of children's social care.

Acting on these findings will require higher education providers to consider how they can better reach, attract and support those with experience of children's social care.

Recommendations

1. Higher education providers should be encouraged to support the entry and progression of those with experience of children's social care. One possibility is additional funding in the form of a student premium, for example an extra £1,000 for each care leaver that providers recruit. As [suggested by the Social Market Foundation](#), any additional funding should focus on and be evaluated in terms of delivering better access and outcomes for these students.
2. Those with experience of children's social care are more likely to take vocational routes, and higher education providers – including prestigious and selective providers – should accept more students through these routes.
3. Higher education providers should develop and maintain strategies for recruiting mature students, as those with experience of children's social care are more likely to start higher education later in life rather than between the ages of 18 and 22.
4. Local authorities and higher education providers should continue to work together to meet the duty of support to care leavers. For example, local authorities and higher education providers can build on their collaborations to ensure that these students have appropriate accommodation options during both term time and non-term time, aligning as closely as possible with the options available to students in the general population.
5. As providers focus on supporting care leavers, they must extend their efforts to all those with experience of the children's social care system, given that they all

face stark inequalities. This broader group is around 20 times larger than the care-leaver population and requires outreach, as well as targeted support for retention and progression, to address the gaps identified in this report. Working with and learning from virtual schools could support these efforts.

6. Higher education providers should ensure that their efforts to support those with experience of children's social care focus on retention, and that their retention practices effectively support these students.
7. Higher education providers should evaluate their interventions to improve their support to those with experience of children's social care, both in entering and progressing through higher education.
8. 'Corporate parenting' is an approach that requires public authorities to better support care leavers, up to age 25. Universities in England and Wales should learn from Scotland's corporate parenting approach, with a focus on practical, evidence-based support. Local authorities and universities should work together to establish clear accountability, and to ensure those with expertise and trust are able to support students best. Universities should provide access, year-round accommodation up until post-graduation, targeted financial aid, and systematic needs assessments; and should continue to work collaboratively with other accountable institutions to deliver on the requirements of corporate parenting.
9. Given the link between inequalities in childhood and access to higher education, early identification of needs, engagement and attainment is particularly important for those with experience of children's social care. Schools and social services should work together to specifically help with these issues, especially as young people with experience of children's social care may have lower levels of family support.

These findings and recommendations are based on research from the report:

['Pathways into and through higher education for young people with experience of children's social care'](#).

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