"More of a Kind of Patchy Transition into University as Opposed to the Kind of Smooth Story that People Expect." Transitions to Higher Education for Care-Experienced Students

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ABSTRACT

Despite an increased focus on supporting under-represented groups into Higher Education (HE), care-experienced young people are still significantly less likely to transition into HE than their peers who have not had this experience. With rates of children taken into care increasing in Wales, there is value in understanding how best to support care-experienced young people with educational transitions. Based on pan-Wales research into access to, and success in, HE for care-experienced young people, this paper presents the experiences of 13 young people in Wales regarding educational transitions and the support they have – or have not – had in their transitions to university. Recommendations are made for improving transition support and for creating better signposting to existing support.

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INTRODUCTION

Care-experienced people achieve poorer educational and lifecourse outcomes than those who have not been in care (Berger et al., 2015; Jackson, 1994; 2010; Mannay et al., 2017; O'Higgins et al., 2015; Sebba et al., 2015). In Wales in 2015, 58% of the student population achieved five GCSEs[1] at A* – C (including Maths and English or Welsh first language), whereas only 18% of those with care experience achieved the same threshold (Mannay et al., 2017).[2] Based on statistics from 2012, the Office for Fair Access (OFFA, 2017) reported that 60% of the general population of school leavers in the UK entered Higher Education (HE) as opposed to 6% of care leavers (Allnatt, 2018). However, recent research in England suggests a rate of 12% (Harrison, 2020), and care-experienced people often enter HE at a later stage (Brady and Gilligan, 2019).

This paper examines the educational experiences of care-experienced young people in Wales. The paper explores aspirations to undertake HE and reflections on journeys to university, drawing on interview data from a larger study that developed recommendations for best practice in supporting transitions to HE for care-experienced young people across Wales. Participants ranged from those studying for GCSEs and considering future educational transitions, to those studying for postgraduate degrees. Across participants' experiences there were clear examples of best practice, alongside specific areas for improvement, enabling recommendations to be made in both policy and practice which can smooth transitions to HE for this group.

POLICY AND LITERATURE

Across recent decades, legislation has come into force to improve outcomes for vulnerable or disadvantaged young people in Wales, for example The Children Act 1989, later 2004 (UK Government, 2004) and subsequent Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000 (UK Government, 2000) (which cover England and Wales), along with Welsh legislation such as The Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014 (Welsh Government, 2014) and strategies such as 'Raising the Ambitions and Educational Attainment of Children who are Looked After in Wales' (Welsh Government, 2016b). Nonetheless, a pervasive educational attainment gap remains between care-experienced young people and the general population (Mannay et al., 2017; Foster et al., 2021).

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are increasingly seen as responsible for improving educational outcomes for groups under-represented at HE level, including those who are care-experienced (Evans et al., 2017; Milburn, 2012). Following the Welsh Assembly Government 2009 HE strategy, 'For Our Future', alongside the Diamond Review and related strategy plans (Welsh Government, 2016a; 2016b), Welsh HEIs are accountable for their efforts in addressing this lower level of HE recruitment and progression for those who are under-represented. The requirement placed on HEIs to account for their Widening Participation (WP) activities for under-represented groups via yearly Fee and Access Plans has led to an increased focus on WP activity regarding access to, and retention in, HE. As these Plans enable HEIs to charge the maximum tuition fee rate (currently £9250 per year in the UK), this encourages HEIs to evidence the work they do for the "attraction and retention of such groups [including care leavers] alongside raising aspirations and tailored support" (HEFCW, 2018).

HEIs have attempted to alleviate educational inequalities and widen participation (Evans et al., 2017). However, those who do progress to HE are often marked as 'resilient' (Cotton et al., 2017; Gazeley and Hinton-Smith, 2018). This labelling can become part of an individualising discourse, potentially implying that a lack of resilience is a factor in poorer educational attainment, that the fault is with young people and their own vulnerabilities rather than wider landscapes of inequality (Brady and Gilligan, 2020). This deficit model has been recognised as problematic in research with care-experienced young people (Burke and Lumb, 2018). The term 'Looked After Children' and its abbreviation LAC infers a 'lack' of what may be required (Mannay et al., 2017; 2018a; Children's Commissioner for Wales, 2016), and may compound existing markers of difference that care-experienced young people face in education (Evans at al., 2016).

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1   General Certificate of Secondary Education, taken by pupils in England, Wales and Northern Ireland between the ages of 14–16.

2   The dataset linking looked after status and GCSE attainment has not been updated since 2016. Whilst the component data can be gained through examining different datasets held by the SAIL databank (https://saildatabank.com/), this has not been possible as a part of this study.

'Care Leaver' or 'Care-Experienced'

This paper rejects the term Looked After Children (LAC) due to the negative connotations of the term. Additionally, the use of 'looked after child' as the parameter for educational support is limited to those 'looked after' by the local authority according to Section 74 of the Social Services and Wellbeing (Wales) Act 2014. Accordingly, children and young people who have had social services involvement but have not been removed from parental care under Section 74 would not be eligible for support. Similarly, the categorisation of 'care leaver' is limited to those young people who 'aged out' of care, excluding those who have experience of care but may have returned to the family home prior to their 18th birthday. This paper adopts the broad term of 'care-experienced young people' to incorporate those 'looked after' by the local authority, those with social services involvement, and those who have experienced kinship care and other living arrangements.

Educational Transitions for Care-Experienced Young People

Care-experienced young people can face numerous educational barriers. Placement changes are often cited as factors in the educational disadvantage of children in care (Clemens et al., 2016, 2017, 2018), and foster children are "disproportionately represented in special education [...] and are more frequently suspended from school compared to their peers who live with their biological parents" (Goemans et al., 2018: 33).

Henderson et al. (2016) found young people who had received social service contact had the comparable levels of aspiration to attend university as their peers but were less likely to meet university entrance requirements. Similarly, Mannay et al.'s (2018b, 2017) work with care-experienced children and young people in Wales found that at primary school age, those in care did not see themselves as 'different' to their peers and reported similar aspirations. However, many young people reported a "positioning of educational failure" directed at them once in secondary school (Mannay et al., 2017: 692), suggesting aspirations of teachers and other professionals may be lower than those of care-experienced young people themselves. This suggests that a lack of aspiration is not a primary barrier to educational success for care-experienced young people, yet more structural barriers such as access to knowledge and finances are still pervasive (Geiger and Beltran, 2017; Harrison and Waller, 2018).

In addition to structural barriers, the theme of resilience is often cited as playing a role in care-experienced people's transition to, and success in, HE (Ellis and Johnston, 2022; Cheung et al., 2021), especially in managing the transition to HE during the COVID-19 pandemic (Lopez et al., 2022). Whilst the development of protective and promotive factors can play a role in building resiliency amongst those with care experience (Anderson and Williams, 2018), there are risks that – much as with the language of aspiration – such narratives can be detrimental. The focus of resiliency on the individual implies that these students can "determine their own outcomes, despite their circumstances, without additional help" (Ellis and Johnston, 2022: 12). Dumais and Spence go further, suggesting that resilience is partnered with "a survivalist self-reliance that conflicts with the college student role" (2021: 137), finding that this leaves care-experienced students less likely to seek help when needed. It is thus important to understand that whilst resiliency may benefit care-experienced students, other more structural barriers pervade.

METHODS

The larger study from which this paper has emerged adopted an inductive approach to make recommendations for best practice to better support care-experienced young people in their transitions to HE. A participatory approach was used to ensure that stakeholders' voices were prioritised, in particular those of the young people themselves as their words and ideas are often absent in research and policy (Mannay et al., 2018b). The funding process for the larger study incorporated feedback from one consultation with care-experienced young people (n = 4), and one consultation with care-experienced young people attending a university mentoring programme (n = 12), both of which were conducted prior to funding being awarded to ensure that the study was addressing an area of relevance. Public engagement continued throughout the research, via ongoing meetings with a separate consultation group formed of care-experienced young people (n = 2–4), held at key points such as prior to data collection and on production of initial findings.

Involvement of care-experienced young people, HEI staff and relevant social care practitioners (the latter two of which are discussed in Bayfield, 2023, forthcoming), was designed to foster an environment of collaboration to better facilitate positive outcomes. Given the inequality that can be seen within access to, and success in, HE (Evans et al., 2016; OFFA, 2017), it is important to understand this as an issue of social justice. Accordingly, the active participation of those that the research concerns was key to its success.

The larger study this paper is based on consisted of four overlapping phases:

1. A rapid review of the literature on care-experienced young people and HE internationally;

2. Interviews with key HEI staff involved in the admission and retention of care-experienced young people to the HEI (n = 16) and other education professionals (n = 9);

3. Interviews and focus groups with care-experienced young people, including those who have attended interventions designed to improve access to HE, and those who have not (n = 22);

4. Focus groups with care-experienced young people, HEI staff, Local Authority (LA) staff and foster carers (n = 47), reflecting on study findings.

Due to the restrictions of the COVID-19 pandemic, interviews were predominantly carried out online, and focus groups in phase 3 were only used where pre-existing groups favoured them.

The evidence presented in this paper draws from the interviews and focus groups with care-experienced young people during phase three. Participants were identified through relevant charities; HEI staff; foster carers; secondary school and LA staff, with interested individuals being sent information sheets and consent forms via email before deciding to participate. Interviews were semi-structured, and typically lasted 30–60 minutes. Interview schedules were used with prompt questions relating to education, engagement with university, educational challenges and success stories, and the ongoing impact of COVID-19.

22 care-experienced people between the ages of 12 and 35 were interviewed (14 in individual interviews, eight as part of focus groups); five identified as male and 17 as female. Participants encompassed those in school, college, university and employment, as well as young adults not in education, employment or training, some of whom were in the process of trying to re-engage with education. The lower age limit was decided based on the point at which a young person is first likely to engage with HE via support programmes, whereas the upper limit enabled current students (including postgraduate students) and recent graduates to be incorporated. This is important as whilst a student or graduate over the age of 18 is no longer classed as 'looked-after', this experience still has an impact upon their education, for example, through access to student support, financial assistance and student accommodation options. It also enabled the exploration of the educational trajectories of care-experienced young people in Wales and their post-HE transitions.

The study was given ethical approval by Cardiff University's School of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (ref. SREC/3579), and all participants gave their informed consent. Pseudonyms are used for participants throughout. All interviews were transcribed by university-affiliated transcription services, with transcripts stored on password-protected computers and files. Transcripts were thematically coded in NVivo 12. Through these interviews, rich, qualitative data pertaining to the experiences of young people was generated, enabling a better understanding of the impact of interventions designed to increase their access to HE.

STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS

The study enabled a thorough examination of care-experienced young people's experiences of HE and a nuanced understanding of the benefits of, and barriers to, their participation in HE. The study was Wales-specific, and whilst this means the data cannot necessarily be transposed to other nations, there is scope to inform Welsh policy and practice. The small number of participants can be seen as a limitation due to the low chances of replicability of the data. Nonetheless, without sufficient generation of, and access to, data surrounding care-experienced young people's participation in HE, these qualitative vignettes provide an overview of a population still not widely understood within HE and WP practice.

FINDINGS

The findings presented in this paper are based on the experiences of a subset (n = 13) of the care-experienced people who took part in this study, the majority of whom (n = 9) had experience of studying at Welsh HEIs (with one further participant having studied at FE level in Wales but HE in England). These participants are focused upon here as they spoke in detail about educational transitions. Whilst this is not a representative sample of care-experienced students in Wales, such a sample would be difficult to obtain, in part due to a lack of available data, as one care-experienced student reflected on.

> *'Because you talked about those statistics around how many care-experienced people go on to university and I guess the point is that we don't know. There's no way anywhere that it would be recorded that I'm care-experienced and hopefully in a couple of years will have four degrees, right. It will be that at some point, I did go on to higher education when I was still kind of technically in the care system and then full stop; it just ends.'* (Emma, postgraduate student)

It can be particularly important to understand individuals' experiences of these transitions: where there are examples of good practice, where things need to be improved, and how the variety of institutions that support care-experienced students can be mindful of those they are trying to help.

TRANSITIONS DON'T START AT 18, AND DON'T START WITH HE

For many students, the transition to university may be the first time they have moved geographical location, shifted support networks, or lived independently. However, those with care experience may have encountered multiple transitions between family, foster care, residential care and independent living, which often have associated educational transitions. Participants discussed the educational impacts of these transitions.

> *'I've been to 12 different schools in my life, and that's just from moving so much with my biological family and then obviously moving into care.'*
> (Katie, undergraduate student)

For Jack, these multiple changes damaged his trust in the system and himself.

> *'By the time I'd missed out on all of that, I got to a point where I didn't trust the education system. I didn't trust that I had the ability […] You miss all of your school, when you go to college and university, you're always playing catch up. Even now in uni … I am twenty-one and my reading and writing level is not the same as the eighteen-year-olds.'* (Jack, undergraduate student)

It can also be difficult to consider applying to university if those around you do not have the knowledge or experience needed to offer relevant Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG).

> *'no-one in my family had gone to university. Like, my foster carer hadn't. She had a daughter who was a little bit older than me, but she didn't go to university and then most of my peers wouldn't have gone to university either. […] there was 180 looked-after children in [my area] when I was kind of leaving care age… three went to university.'* (Emma, postgraduate student)

Emma added that *'I think generally people… they all just thought I was a bit weird for wanting to go to university'*. Katie also described how self-determination got her to the point of considering HE, but this was compounded by placement and education transitions including time spent outside of mainstream education.

> *'I was never once pushed to join back to go to school, or to go to college to get A-Levels at any point, and that was from Social Services, there was never any push from them, and then in the care home there was never any push… when I'd said, "I wanted to go [to] school," they had said, "Well, why don't you just stay at [Placement], and get GCSEs there? It's way easier. You don't have to go to school."'*
> (Katie, undergraduate student)

Aligning with the findings of previous studies (Allnatt, 2018; Brady and Gilligan 2019; 2020; Brown et al., 2019 Mannay et al., 2017; Roberts et al., 2021), Emma and Katie's experiences suggest that without key, supportive adults who have the requisite knowledge, a transition into HE can be challenging. There were also accounts of the positive difference that key adults can make in young people's lives, which is the focus of the following section.

THE IMPORTANCE OF KEY ADULTS

Whilst Jack, Emma and Katie all felt they lacked any specific encouragement to go on to university, other participants found key supportive adults could make the difference. For example, Lucy reflected on the importance of her English teacher.

> *'There was one teacher that like, was really flipping good, and she really like, saw something in me... she just was like oh, you know what, you're really good at English, and I thought oh, am I?... Alright then. Well I'll try my hardest in that [...] The first instance that someone had given me positive affirmation [...] And I think... that's important. To tell somebody that they're good at something so then they have something to learn from, that gives them a bit of encouragement and confidence.'*
> (Lucy, graduate)

Young people who did not transition to HE, such as Lily, also cited schoolteachers as a key source of wider support.

> *'the one thing that was positive for me was my old high school because... I had severe problems, but they actually kept me in instead of sending me off to naughty kids' school because they knew that if they did that... I'd have a criminal record, and I'd be another one of the many foster children who didn't go anywhere.'* (Lily, not currently in education, employment or training)

For Sophie, Local Authority staff were positioned as central in supporting her earlier educational experiences.

> *'the leaving care support people they were fantastic. I mean I think they met up with me at least once every two weeks... we'd go for a coffee and we'd just talk about school and uni and if there was anything I needed help with. [...] without them I don't think I'd have done as well in school.'* (Sophie, mature undergraduate student)

As in previous studies documenting the importance of carers in enabling educational achievement (Brady and Gilligan, 2019; Mannay et al., 2017), Charlotte and Chloe commented that support from foster carers had been invaluable.

> *'I don't think she's [foster carer] ever been [to university] but she is very supportive and tries to be as educated as she can to help me make decisions. She really goes out of her way, to make sure that I'm doing what's best for me.'* (Charlotte, currently studying GCSEs)

> *'[foster carers] both came from, like, working-class backgrounds and... immediately took a job when they left school, but... they were very, like, supportive of me going to university.'* (Chloe, undergraduate student)

Whilst some participants described being self-reliant when it came to considering the transition to university, knowledgeable support or even simple encouragement facilitated young people to continue with educational trajectories.

SOURCES OF SUPPORT: WHAT WORKS FOR TRANSITIONS TO HE FOR CARE-EXPERIENCED STUDENTS

Beyond key individuals, there were more organised levels of support that care-experienced young people valued. Charlotte described her teachers as *'really, really good'* when it came to decisions about university, mentioning trips to visit universities, whilst Caitlin commented

'my personal tutor, she was really good. She helped me through my whole application, from like choosing, looking at universities with me … so like right down to when I started my application to when I finished it, she was helping with everything.' (Caitlin, undergraduate student)

Some participants had attended summer schools at different universities and Jessica's experience of summer school directly affected her decision to apply for that university.

'I did a summer university placement at [University]… a six week taster course, and it would give you an idea of what it would be like to go to university, obviously, like, live in halls, have… we'd do, like, different, like, taster modules… little projects at the end that you'd have to complete and do, like, a presentation… I enjoyed it, and it also helped that if you did the placement [University]… [it] reduced, like, entry requirement […] [A]ctually experiencing, like, living in [University], it was… part of the reasons why I wanted to then come.' (Jessica, graduate)

Summer schools could have a positive impact regardless of whether the individual subsequently applied to that university.

'I did summer school at [University] when I was 17 and that did show me a little bit what university was like, and not necessarily in a good way. So it didn't put me off wanting to go to university, but it did make me think twice.' (Emma, postgraduate student)

However, the majority of participants had not experienced summer schools or taster days before attending university, despite all HEIs in Wales confirming in the earlier phase of this research that these types of events were on offer (Bayfield, 2023, forthcoming), and that many were tailored specifically for care-experienced young people. Participants had little awareness of these programmes, suggesting a break in communication.

In terms of managing the transition into university, Sophie reflected on the comprehensive support at her university.

'they offered me a starter-pack which is basically everything… every physical thing that I would need, [like] pillows, and which was just fantastic. They offered me help with a peer mentor support so I have my own peer mentor who I could meet up with that year. They gave me a study buddy so that someone to help me sort of adjust because obviously I wasn't living in halls so I wasn't going to meet people in the same way as everybody else. I had… a meeting with [care leaver coordinator] and we sort of discussed what the problems I was having and what… is there anything that he felt I could do. So I mean to be honest, the support from [University] is fantastic.' (Sophie, mature undergraduate student)

Chloe had a similar experience.

'I immediately got a peer guide. I was put in touch with [care leaver coordinator], […] He's, kind of, like, the one who co-ordinates, like, care leavers. So was immediately put in contact with those.' (Chloe, undergraduate student)

For Jack, this immediate contact was particularly important in terms of finances.

'the uni gave support straightaway, as soon as sort of I sent off the application, they found out I was a care leaver, [care leaver coordinator] contacted me. She contacted me, you know, said, you know, here's the room, if you can't pay the deposit, don't worry, we'll take it out of your rent, and stuff like that, which made obviously a massive amount of help, and obviously, the university supported me with extra funding' (Jack, undergraduate student)

For others, just knowing there was somebody they could turn to was important.

'I know I had people to turn to and they would all… if they didn't, like, have the specific answer they would always quickly turn to, like, someone else and then any issues I had would be resolved.' (Jessica, graduate)

Lucy, who dropped out of the first university she attended before studying for, and graduating from, a course at another university agreed.

> 'I didn't do very well in my first year at uni. Like I didn't really... I think connections is the, is a big key factor into like education stuff, if you've got that support behind you, someone to just mull things over with, big decisions, and things like that, I think that's like paramount.' (Lucy, graduate)

Unfortunately, these experiences of support were not universal. As Emma commented.

> 'I've studied at, one, two, three, four universities now and never in that process have I been identified as care-experienced and have someone actively send me some information or anything like that.' (Emma, postgraduate student)

With this in mind, the following section focuses on the various barriers to transitioning into HE that care-experienced students can face.

OVERCOMING BARRIERS TO HE FOR CARE-EXPERIENCED STUDENTS

Initiatives such as summer schools, welcome packages, mentoring and clear, named sources of support can ease transitions into HE for care-experienced students. There are, however, barriers to overcome. Finances were a recurring theme, from a lack of understanding of the system, to inconsistency of LA support. Some concerns around finance were due to a lack of knowledge, or unclear signposting.

> 'I found that tricky at the start, dealing with like student finance people and stuff, because... like especially when I switched unis.' (Caitlin, undergraduate student)

> 'So we had, like, people... like, people come in [to school] saying, like, "Oh, I'm at university. This is, like, the general process," [...] But, yeah, like... the only thing is, like, student finance, it was a little bit confusing as a... like, as a foster child.' (Chloe, undergraduate student)

> 'I was really, really worried about funding, that was one of the biggest things, because I knew that you received funding but obviously because I didn't actually talk about money as much, people don't like to... and I think if I'd have been explained a little bit more about the finance, like I wouldn't have struggled as much as I thought I was going to.' (Sophie, mature undergraduate student)

The system of financial support for care-experienced students can be complicated not only due to the differing levels of support offered by different HEIs, but also the variation in support between LAs (Foster et al., 2021). Some participants had difficulty getting support from their LA.

> 'And Social Services, again, I pushed them, and I had said, "I need your support. I'm not going to financially make it through university for this year if I don't have that support from them." It was only again after I'd cried on the phone to them, saying, "If you don't give me this money, I can't go, because I can't afford to pay for accommodation. I can't afford to pay for food. Unless you help me I can't go to university." It was only then that they then made some money available to me.' (Katie, undergraduate student)

Chloe reflected on how unfair this system can be.

> 'it's ... an unfair thing because obviously then it's a bit of a roll of a dice of which Local Authority you come under. And, like, thankfully I was under one of the more beneficial Local Authorities.' (Chloe, undergraduate student)

One of the ways in which this can differ is age limits, with many LAs providing no support beyond 25.

> 'I still receive some support in terms of my financial support from [City] County Council. They still send me monthly instalments of support which was good. [...] I will be too old for the system come this December. So they will stop my funding then. So that's another source of income that's gone.' (Tom, undergraduate student)

For students who go on to HE at a later stage (which is common for those with care-experience – Brady and Gilligan, 2019), or those studying for longer courses (for example medicine and healthcare, or science and engineering disciplines with placement years), this funding cut-off can be a real cause for concern.

INVISIBLE SUPPORT

Many participants felt that even though support for care-experienced young people transitioning to university did exist, this support was often invisible or not available at the initial point of entry.

> *'The university just felt like this big faceless kind of terrifying organisation to me. So I went through the application process with the social services and stuff and with the school obviously, they helped me do UCAS and everything, but when it came to actually going to university… part of the reason why I was put off was because I didn't know what sort of support was available.'* (Sophie, mature undergraduate student)

Chloe explained that even if university staff came to schools and colleges to outline what support was available, this was not always helpful as it was not tailored to particular groups.

> *'so I had them [universities] come in [to college] and that's fine, but it was… very much made for the wider audience. So I think for people who are, like, if they've had to leave their foster placement behind and had to get their own place perhaps there was a bit of, I don't know, maybe, like… I'm… I'm presuming here that for me it would feel like… apart from maybe a slight financial thing, how much support would you get, like, if you had a problem?'* (Chloe, undergraduate student)

Sophie felt similarly, saying *'I did struggle to find things that were specific for me as a care leaver, especially when it came to additional support'*, whilst Emma commented that outside of financial bursaries, *'it's not signposted when you apply or enrol or anything like that.'* Both Olivia and Katie found that whilst the financial support could be found if you sought it out, wider support was hard to access.

> *'financially, there is money there, and there is support there. But it's only available, like I say, if you kick up a big fuss and you demand it. That's the only time they seem to be willing to step in and help, and then when it goes to actual emotional support, there's none.'* (Olivia, not currently in education)

> *'the emotional support, there's just none, and I feel like if maybe if there were either more PAs [Personal Advisors], or if the PAs they had were trained in not necessarily counselling but were trained in dealing with crisis situations regarding mental health, I feel like my experience would have been a lot different. I feel like maybe in my first year of university, maybe I wouldn't have dropped out. […] The mental health team at university, again, I think every university is crap for that. There's no way to get someone instantly if you need help.'* (Katie, undergraduate student)

Aligning with broader research (Mannay et al., 2022), a number of participants agreed that knowing where to go for emotional or wellbeing support was key, as Sophie explained.

> *'I think one of the main things that happens to people in care is that they feel uncertain about their future all the time… they don't feel like they're… on solid ground ever so I think having some… a physical person that you can sit and discuss these things with who knows… […] because it would have been so reassuring to sit someone down and actually ask the questions that were bothering me specifically.'* (Sophie, mature undergraduate student)

For Katie, a named contact could make all the difference.

> *'I've never received an email that said, "Dear Katie," you know? Just to even have an email that was addressed to me personally, to sort of let me think, "Okay, at least there's someone on the other side of this who's seen that I'm a care leaver and wants to make sure everything's okay." And again, it's never from "Claire", or from "Sam", or whoever. It's always from the Widening Participation Team, and I think that… just not*

having a name, or a contact, it puts a barrier there. [...] I wouldn't want to send all of my personal information, and all of these things that I'm struggling with to a generic email where, you know, 10 people can see it.' (Katie, undergraduate student)

This need for a specific point of contact is compounded by the lack of trust in systems that Jack highlighted previously. Katie agreed.

'I think I can sort of speak on behalf of all care leavers with this, that also comes from a complete lack of trust in the people that have said they're there to care for us. You know, we're in care for a reason. The people that are supposed to care for us, haven't cared for us. [...] So I think there's always a distrust in Social Services, in any team that says they're there to help us. There is always a certain level, a certain barrier there, where we're not too sure whether we want to disclose that we need help, because sometimes that leads to intervention from eight different teams, and it's all too much, and it's... you just want to talk to one person. [...]' (Katie, undergraduate student)

This advice on personalisation could be considered by universities, and participants also made further recommendations, which are outlined in the following section.

ADVICE FROM CARE-EXPERIENCED STUDENTS

Much of the advice that care-experienced students had related to visibility and accessibility of support that could help young people make the transition into university. This is important for initial decisions around applying, what courses to take and what support was available.

'I think not so much a tutor, but a person you could be like, "Right, I'm really struggling on this. Do you have any clue?" Because obviously your social workers, they don't know... I feel like having someone who's actually... not even so much like done it themselves, but researched it for the young person, and after it could be like, "Oh right, no, okay. It's cool. Good. I've got this."' (Olivia, not currently in education)

'just saying, "The support is there. If you need it, please contact us. Don't be afraid. Don't be worried about not being able to get help. There's always someone available to talk to." [...] It doesn't necessarily have to be a big system overhaul and big change.' (Katie, undergraduate student)

'I think as well that people need a bit of a champion, don't they? They need tutors and [...] people within the university to kind of ask about their experience and kind of say, actually, I think we can get some support for you, and sometimes those definitions don't allow for certain types of support but actually, people would be surprised by how flexible things are sometimes [...].' (Emma, postgraduate student)

Sophie also commented on the thread between pre-entry and post-entry support, the bridge that helps specifically with the transition to HE.

'Yeah, it was like the bridge between school and uni, that's the bit that's sort of like missing... It's like the prep. work running up to it is fab and then once you're in uni, like as I've found out now through [University] you can access the support but it's that bridge. And I think this is why a lot of people get put off by going to university who don't necessarily go from care because... it's that overwhelming feeling of your whole life's been a bit of a mess and it's that jumping off that cliff into a new life but doing it without really knowing where you're going.' (Sophie, mature undergraduate student)

DISCUSSION

Care-experienced young people highlighted that there is room for improvement both in terms of the types of support offered to (prospective) care-experienced students, and the visibility and availability of support. The COVID-19 pandemic has also had an impact here, with care leavers and care-experienced young people often experiencing greater difficulties with education than their peers (Roberts et al. 2021a; 2021b; Gilligan et al., 2022). It is important to note that whilst participants here did not speak about digital exclusion having a greater impact

during COVID-19 (as reported by Roesch-Marsh et al. 2021), conducting the research online will have led to self-selection by those with the knowledge and equipment to engage online. With disrupted study and periods of isolation, it becomes even more important to ensure that care-experienced students, who may not have consistent support networks, have everything they need to be able to succeed at university.

The three primary areas highlighted by participants were:

- The need for greater signposting of available support

- The understanding that support is not just financial

- The importance of bridging support across the transition period to HE

Whilst many participants had benefitted from support in their transitions into HE, this was often hard to find, discovered at a later stage, or happened upon rather than specifically offered. This would suggest that there is a need for greater signposting, and transparency of the support that HEIs, LAs and third sector organisations can provide for care-experienced students. University could be a 'hazy' concept prior to transition to university (Tobolowsky et al., 2019), making it difficult to make informed choices. This could account for participants who dropped out of university before returning at a later stage on a different course or at a different institution (n = 4).

Participants were also keen to point out that whilst financial support such as bursaries and assistance with rent were welcome, this is no substitute for adequate social and emotional support. Aligning with the findings Ellis and Johnston's Pathways to University: Journeys through Care study (2020), this research points towards the importance of integrated mental health support at all stages of a care-experienced young person's trajectory, especially given that care-experienced people's self-reliance may hinder them from seeking help (Dumais and Spence, 2021). Having experienced engagement with multiple agencies, social workers and carers, participants were clear that named contacts for pastoral support would help ease the transition into, and progression through, university.

For this support to be both meaningful and effective, bridging support across the transition period into HE is key. Whilst an earlier phase of this research found that some HEIs in Wales do specifically have staff who provide support across this transition period (Bayfield, 2023, forthcoming), these findings suggest that such support could be beneficial if rolled out across Welsh HEIs more widely.

The experiences of the care-experienced young people outlined here tally with Mannay et al.'s (2017; 2018b) findings that educational attainment and progression of those with care experience is not related to a lack of aspiration within that group, as seen in participants who have progressed to university despite the adults around them not having the knowledge to support them, and those who have persevered with HE despite changes in course and university. Between this and the difficulties that care-experienced young people have in finding the support that is available to them in the transition to HE, there is evidence that greater signposting of support could help to improve these transitions. As a result, a primary contribution of this research has been to devise and develop a website providing bilingual resources for care experienced people in Wales (and those who support them) to help support transitions into HE (Bayfield, 2022).

CONCLUSION

Whilst based on a small sample, these findings give an insight into the experiences of care-experienced students in Wales and have clear implications for practice. Considering the evidence presented here, specific steps that can be taken to help improve the support available Wales-wide would be:

- Transition-specific roles in HEIs to bridge the support available pre- and post-entry

- Ensuring all prospective care-experienced students know a named contact who is available to support them within their chosen HEIs

- Improving the availability of pre-entry support, including the signposting of IAG and financial support

In exploring the HE experiences of care-experienced young people in Wales, this research has contributed further to a growing body of work that not only highlights the barriers to care-experienced participation in HE, but also the examples of best practice where minor changes to support can make a demonstrable difference. In particular, this work has focused both on recommendations for HEIs from care-experienced students (the importance of transition support and named contacts) and improving access to relevant information (in part through the CLASS Cymru website developed from this research (Bayfield, 2022)).

One area that was not within the scope of this work was examining the next steps for care-experienced students, namely transitions out of university. With work having been completed on this area in England (Baker et al., 2021), further research in Wales could help to expand the picture of transitions support for care-experienced students. Research presented here and elsewhere (Roberts et al., 2021) suggests that care-experienced young people's transitions can be both complex and compressed, with transitions to HE being a *'kind of patchy transition into university as opposed to the kind of smooth story that people expect'* (Emma, postgraduate student). Care-experienced students, like all students, deserve to have the support they need to complete their educational journeys. Whilst Widening Participation and Access agendas have arguably helped to increase the number of 'under-represented' students such as those with care experience, the participants here have indicated that without tailored, personal (and personable) support, these barriers will endure.

DATA ACCESSIBILITY STATEMENT

The data are not publicly available as that could compromise the privacy of research participants.

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