Understanding the higher education experiences of care-experienced young people in Wales

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CASCADE Infrastructure Partnership

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International research has demonstrated that care-experienced young people achieve poorer educational and lifecourse outcomes than their peers. Based on statistics from 2012, the Office for Fair Access reported that whilst 60% of the general population of school leavers in the UK entered higher education (HE), only 6% of care leavers went to university (although this is now assumed to be an underestimate, with a figure of 10-15% being more likely).

With rates of children taken into care increasing in Wales, there is value in understanding how best to support this group with their educational transitions. This report gives an overview of a HCRW-funded project examining access to, and success in, HE for care-experienced young people across Wales. It outlines the educational transitions of care-experienced students and the support they have – or have not – had when it comes to HE. As well as recommendations emerging from the project findings, it also details how these experiences have been translated into action by developing a website centred around information, advice and guidance for this group and those who support them.

Research Questions:

- What is the current provision offered by Welsh HEIs to improve access to HE for care leavers?
- What benefits and opportunities does this provision offer?
- What barriers or limitations are in evidence?
- How can these findings be implemented into future policy and practice?

Key findings and implications:

- The importance of key adults
- Regular contact and consistency with care-experienced students
- Flexible support that meets a care-experienced student's needs at every educational stage
- The importance of a personal touch
- Accessible information is key: what information is relevant to care-

Introduction

Background and Rationale

A large body of international and national research has demonstrated that care-experienced young people achieve poorer educational and lifecourse outcomes than their peers (Berger et al, 2015; Jackson, 1994; 2010; Mannay et al, 2017; O'Higgins et al, 2015; Sebba et al, 2015; Vinnerljung and Hjern, 2011). This inequality has been attributed to multiple placement moves and a potential lack of focus upon educational experience (Evans et al, 2016). In Wales in 2015, 58% of the student population achieved five GCSEs 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). Based on statistics from 2012, the Office for Fair Access (OFFA, 2017) reported that whilst 60% of the general population of school leavers in the UK entered higher education, only 6% of care leavers went to university (Allnatt, 2018).

Across three decades, a wide range of legislation within the UK and Wales has come into place to improve young people's outcomes, including educational outcomes. For example, The Children Act 1989 and subsequent Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000; The Children Act 2004; The Children and Young Persons Act 2008; The Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014; and strategies such as 'Raising the Ambitions and Educational Attainment of Children who are Looked After in Wales' (Welsh Government, 2016). Despite this array of policy that recommends better support for young people (including those who have been 'looked after' by the state), a pervasive educational attainment gap remains between care-experienced young people and the general population (Mannay et al, 2017), with this being just one of many inequalities that tertiary education reform in Wales seeks to address.

In Higher Education (HE), Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have increasingly been seen as responsible for delivering on such agendas to improve educational outcomes for those groups who are under-represented at HE level, including those who are care-experienced (Evans et al, 2017; Milburn, 2012). As a result of the Welsh Assembly Government 2009 HE strategy, 'For Our Future', alongside more recent reports such as the Diamond Review (2016), HEIs increasingly find themselves in a position where they must be accountable for their efforts in addressing this lower level of HE recruitment and progression for those who are under-represented. In particular, 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, this puts a level of pressure on 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). Whilst the future of HEFCW is currently uncertain due to changes being made as part of the Tertiary Education and Research (Wales) Act (Welsh Government, 2022), we can surmise that similar requirements are likely to be in place as long as top up tuition fees are charged.

As Banerjee (2018) notes, "It is unfair for learning and career trajectories to be pre-decided depending on family, neighbourhood or conditions at birth such as socio-economic status of parents". However, this unfairness persists. HEIs are aware of these barriers and attempt to put policies and practices in place that help to alleviate their impacts (Evans et al, 2017). Those who do progress to higher education have been marked as 'resilient' (Cotton et al, 2017; Gazeley and Hinton-Smith, 2018), but this labelling can potentially imply that a lack of resilience is a factor in poorer educational attainment. This deficit model can be problematic when it comes to researching (with) care-experienced young people (Burke and Lumb, 2018). Therefore, the term 'Looked After Children', or LAC, is not used here, though it is common in some of the literature cited. The abbreviation LAC infers a 'lack' of what may be required (Mannay et al, 2017; 2018), and may compound existing markers of difference that care-experienced young people face in education (Evans at al, 2016).

Whilst there has been an increasing range of interventions put in place to address the disadvantage that care-experienced young people face in continuing to post-compulsory education, the evidence base for the effectiveness of such interventions – and widening access and participation interventions as a whole – remains limited (Evans et al, 2016; Younger et al 2018). Additionally, it must be understood that removing barriers to access cannot be the only priority as retention of care-experienced young people in HE continues to be a concern (Cotton et al., 2017; Banerjee, 2018; Foster et al., 2021).

Research aims and objectives

This research sought to investigate the support that Welsh Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) provide to care-experienced young people both prior to and during their time in Higher Education (HE). By examining these programmes of support and care-experienced young people's experiences of them, recommendations for best practice have been formulated which can be used by HEIs seeking to ensure that they are providing appropriate and adequate support to this group who remain under-represented at HE level.

A key aim of the research was to address the tendency towards a 'deficit model' where support for care-experienced young people is concerned, seeking to move away from narrative within policy

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and practice that defines these young people as 'lacking'. As such, principles of co-production have been used throughout to work collaboratively with care-experienced young people and the HEI practitioners who provide support and resources for them. Each of Wales' eight HEIs have been involved, alongside care-experienced young people including those who have either attended outreach programmes offered by Welsh HEIs, or studied at one of the HEIs.

Research questions:
- What is the current provision offered by Welsh HEIs to improve access to HE for care leavers?
- What benefits and opportunities does this provision offer?
- What barriers or limitations are in evidence?
- How can these findings be implemented into future policy and practice?

Methods

The project design consisted of four main, overlapping, phases:

1 A rapid review of international literature, based around care-experienced young people and HE. An additional element of this phase was the accumulation of information regarding Welsh HEIs' policies on care leavers, including pre-and post-entry support. As this information was gathered, key contacts in each HEI were also established.

2 Interviews with key HEI staff involved in the admission and retention of care-experienced young people to the HEI. As well as developing an understanding of universities' policies and staff's experiences of developing and implementing these policies, these interviews were used to gain information regarding numbers of care leavers admitted to HEIs and identify young people for interview samples.

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.

4 Focus groups with both care-experienced young people and HEI staff. This phase was used to develop project impact in the form of a website providing information, advice and guidance.

Due to restrictions on movement and social interaction in the light of the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, alterations were continually made to this overall plan. Interviews were predominantly carried out online, and focus groups were only used where pre-existing groups favoured them. It also meant that phases two and three were carried out in the order presented here, as data collection commenced in Spring 2020 and professionals were more likely to have timely access to online software such as Zoom and Teams. This was also informed by the ethical consideration that care-experienced young people may be experiencing increased difficulties due to the pandemic and associated lockdowns (as later found by Roberts et al., 2021).

Research design and conceptual framework

The research used an inductive approach to make recommendations for best practice that can be used to better support care-experienced young people in HE. A participatory approach was used to ensure that stakeholders' voices are heard, in particular those of the young people themselves as their words and ideas are often found missing in research and policy (Mannay et al., 2018). This process began at the application stage, with the initial proposal incorporating the suggestions and feedback gained from the CASCADE Voices consultation group of care-experienced young people, and care-experienced young people attending Cardiff University's Confident Futures mentoring programme.

Such involvement continued to form a key part of the ongoing research, via a consultation group. This consultation group, formed of care-experienced young people identified through CASCADE Voices and Cardiff University, were consulted on the research, with the group meeting when possible to discuss progress updates and feed into future research planning. The frequency of these meetings was lower than initially intended due to restrictions as a result of COVID-19. This involvement of care-experienced young people in the development of best practice recommendations, alongside the involvement of HEI staff and relevant social care practitioners, is designed to foster an environment of collaboration to better facilitate positive outcomes.

Target population and sampling

Fieldwork for the research was conducted pan-Wales, with interviews and the collection of documentary evidence taking place in each of Wales' eight HEIs[1]. From these HEIs, interviewees were sought from Widening Participation and Student Support teams (N=16), specifically those who have responsibility for working with care leavers (N=12). These individuals were also the point of contact through which documentary evidence of support programmes and contact with young people was sought. Relevant staff from Colleges (N=2), Local Authorities (LAs) (N=4) and charities (N=2) were also interviewed. Welsh Government representatives were approached in addition to this in order to better establish the policy landscape, however, no engagement occurred. See Appendix 1 for a list of research participants in this phase.

Care-experienced young people were approached through a number of avenues: individuals highlighted by HEI staff (both those who have attended pre-entry support programmes and those who have received support as an undergraduate student); individuals identified through the

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[1] Aberystwyth University, Bangor University, Cardiff Metropolitan University, Cardiff University, Swansea University, University of South Wales, University of Wales Trinity St David and Wrexham Glyndwr University. The Open University in Wales was not included within this research due to its remote way of working and its attendant structures being very different.

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consultation group comprised of young people from CASCADE Voices and Cardiff University's support programmes; individuals identified by foster carers; and individuals highlighted by secondary school and LA staff with responsibility for care-experienced young people.

22 care-experienced people between the ages of 12 and 35 were interviewed. 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 allowed current undergraduate and postgraduate students, as well as 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 allows for the exploration of the educational trajectories of care-experienced young people in Wales. In Phase 4 of data collection, a small number of participants from this phase opted to join focus groups to develop impact outputs.

Setting and context

The pan-Wales approach of this Fellowship means that research was conducted across the country, in particular in each of Wales' HEIs: three within Cardiff, two in Swansea, and one in each of Aberystwyth, Bangor, and Wrexham, with the additions of Trefforest (home of one University of South Wales campus), Lampeter and Carmarthen (both of which are locations of Trinity Saint David's campuses). In terms of the young people involved in the research, a broader spread of locations was emergent from the initial stages of the Fellowship, including students who had been in care in Wales and studied here, those who had been in care in Wales but studied in England, and those who had been in care in England but studied in Wales.

Data collection

The research took place in a number of phases. During Phase 1, a rapid review of the literature was conducted in order to establish the research base for this field of care-experienced young people and Higher Education, with particular interest in care leavers' experience of HE. This included exploring international contexts. This helped to inform potential future policy for Wales, where there is scope for collaborative work or sharing of best practice between the eight HEIs.

Phases two and three focused on collecting qualitative, primary data. With data collection due to start in April 2020, the entire data collection period took place under varying levels of COVID restrictions. This impacted on the research in various ways. Recruiting participants was both difficult and delayed: whilst interest in the research had been seemingly high, recruiting

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participants was hard. In part this has been because of the increased workloads experienced by gatekeepers adapting their services during a pandemic, with some LAs simply declining to take part due to workload. Where access to gatekeepers occurred, there were delayed responses due to workload, and/or delayed relaying of information due to perceived inappropriateness of sharing the research with young people already potentially overwhelmed with changes and hardships.

During Phase 2 contact was made with every HEI in Wales (N=8), identifying staff who work with care-experienced young people in Widening Participation (WP) teams, Student Support and other roles. This established the support packages and dedicated staffing that HEIs provide. Semi-structured interviews with these 16 individuals gave further detail of support, as well as insights into 'what works' for these practitioners.

Phase 3 (which overlapped with Phase 2) focused on the experiences of care-experienced young people. The intention was to speak to care-experienced young people who:

- Have received an HEI intervention and progressed to HE
- Have received an HEI intervention and did not progress to HE
- Did not receive an HEI intervention and did progress to HE
- Did not receive an HEI intervention and did not progress to HE

As mentioned above, the context of data collection throughout the pandemic and associated lockdowns made recruitment, particularly of young people, difficult. In the end, 22 care-experienced people were interviewed as part of this phase: seven under 18s currently in secondary school or college, 13 18-25 year olds (nine of whom have experience of HE) and two over 25s currently studying at Welsh HEIs (see Appendix 2).

Different methods were on offer here, including semi-structured interviews, focus groups and the introduction of a range of creative and participatory techniques including photography, drawing and mapping. However, the inability to be in a room with individuals or groups made the use of creative methods difficult or impossible. Whilst various suggestions were made, invariably participants and gatekeepers opted for interviews rather than any creative methods.

Group interviews or focus groups were particularly difficult to facilitate and did not appear to elicit the same level of sharing as a face-to-face situation or one-to-one interview would. It was observed that whilst young people answered questions in these online group settings, the information shared was often perfunctory, with little to no focus on more personal aspects which would be easier to share in a face-to-face group where side conversations can occur.

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Despite these changes, this phase generated rich, qualitative data pertaining to the experiences of young people, enabling a better understanding of the impact of interventions designed to increase their access to HE. The input of the 22 young people from across Wales who participated has been invaluable. It should be noted that only five of the 22 participants were male, with the remaining 17 participants being female (a pattern often seen in qualitative research). Participants encompassed those in school, college and university, as well as young adults not in education, some of whom are in the process of trying to re-engage.

Phase 4 sought to build on the knowledge gained in previous phases, and use this to develop recommendations for practice, including the development of a website for care-experienced young people interested in HE, and those who support them. This was achieved through focus groups with both staff (N=11) and young people (N=3), using methods of co-production.

The data gathered during these phases comprised of documentary evidence of support programmes from HEIs, and recordings from 47 interviews and focus groups. The qualitative data was coded under emergent themes using NVivo. The findings gained from this synthesis of data have been used to establish suggestions for best practice that HEIs can use in their engagement with care-experienced young people. 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.

Public Involvement

As outlined in the methodology above, the public were involved in this research through contributions to the original project proposal, as participants within interviews and focus groups, and in a final phase of focus groups to co-design project outputs. The table below gives further detail on this, with a particular focus on the Application and Output phases (whilst the public took part in interviews and focus groups in phases 2 and 3, these were research methods rather than specific public involvement approaches so are not included here):

Public Involvement by project phase

Project Phase	Who was involved	Benefits
Application	CASCADE Voices (N=5) Confident Futures (N=12)	Refinement of idea Confirmation of importance of subject Initial indication of ideas worth exploring
Phases 1-3: Literature review and interviews	CASCADE Voices were consulted further at key stages of the project, particularly project outset (to refine research plans) and after data collection (to refine ideas for outputs and impact) (N=3)	Continued refinement of ideas Input on best methods of creative engagement (unfortunately not used due to lockdowns)
Phase 4: Outputs and Impact	Focus groups with practitioners (N=11) Focus groups with care-experienced students (N=3)	Input around emerging outcomes and ideas for further funding Collaborative design of outputs, particularly the CLASS Cymru website Greater understanding of impact of language

Art by Frank Duffy

Current provision offered by HEIs

Through interviewing HE professionals and researching online information provided by HEIs, a current picture of support that tertiary education providers offer to their care experienced (prospective) students has been developed here. For Welsh HEIs, much of the pre-entry support for care experienced students is offered through Reaching Wider partnerships which, following significant restructure in 2018-19, follow similar patterns. The Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) implemented these 'Reaching Wider' partnerships in 2002 to support greater access to HE for various groups under-represented at this educational stage (including care leavers). Reaching Wider comprises three partnerships: one for North and Mid Wales (incorporating Aberystwyth, Bangor and Wrexham Glyndwr universities); one for South West Wales (incorporating Swansea and Trinity St David's universities); and one for South East Wales (incorporating Cardiff, Cardiff Met and the University of South Wales), with each partnership running differently in part due to their different geographical remits (from a hub and spoke approach in South East Wales, to more individual projects in each HEI in North and Mid Wales).

One area of disparity between Welsh HEIs (and indeed UK HEIs more generally), is where within a university structure Widening Participation (WP) and Student Support teams sit, with WP finding itself aligned with recruitment, marketing or support services dependent on the university. Additionally, the size of teams is highly variable. Staff from various institutions reflected on this:

> "there is only me in Widening Participation, which I know where there's a lot of other universities that have a fair few people in. [their teams]. I work with anyone in the WP, sort of, field. I know that other universities have, like, maybe a set member of staff that might work with care leavers, care experienced, estranged and may work with BAME students, may work with mature students; that's all me. So… so yeah, I'm quite… quite a busy bee."
> HE Practitioner, North and Mid Wales

Resources also vary across institutions, affecting whether HEIs have dedicated workers within Student Support who act as point of contact for care experienced students. However, one comments that the support team has been almost "a victim of [their] own success", shifting and developing to support other vulnerable or under-represented students, such as estranged students, with little additional support:

> "I think we have been kind of leaders in Wales as well, because I was quite fortunate that there was that dedicated time in my role to do it. That's changed! So, I suppose, kind of, they call it, when you're so successful you become a victim of your own success really, so um, what we, what we found as well was we were approached by people, young people, students

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who were, who saw themselves or felt that their circumstances were very similar and why couldn't we support them, and there was one student in particular that, he was the editor of [the student newspaper] so he was quite vocal about his situation, and because of him we then extended the support to estranged students and that now has kind of gone leaps and bounds, we're supporting about 40 estranged students this year. I think about 22 care leavers." HE Practitioner, South East Wales

Reflecting here on both the importance of dedicated contacts, as well as the need for sufficient staff resource, we see how the structure of support teams within HEIs needs to be dynamic in order to adapt to changing areas of need amongst the student body. One thing that these regional Reaching Wider groupings seems to achieve is a move away from silo working:

"I think, historically with the three universities we've worked very much in silos, and we're really trying to start working a lot more heavily together" HE Practitioner, South East Wales

There is very little consistency in terms of where support for care experienced students sits in HEIs. This reflects the changing nature of this role: with increasing focus over time on WP agendas and a greater understanding of groups under-represented at HE level, institutions are trying to adapt and ensure that this support is developed and facilitated.

From examining the support on offer and speaking to HE professionals and LA staff across Wales it is clear that the type of support offered, both pre- and post-entry, follows similar patterns but is variable and develops over time (See Appendix 3). Common areas of support pre-entry include signposting, mentoring projects and summer schools, whilst post-entry support includes financial assistance, mentoring and support, and help with accommodation. Local Authority staff spoke of differing provision across the universities they have engaged with:

"[Some universities are] hit and miss but I think that is just the staff. I think it's just generally, I think they share roles, and I think they, um, I think they kind of have to do multiple roles so they're not solely a care leavers' mentor or kind of advisor, whereas I think some of the universities are, you know. [At some universities] they know everyone on first name terms you know, it's amazing" LA Staff, South West Wales

Many practitioners stressed the importance of networks, whether between HEIs, or with LAs, foster families, FE colleges, third sector organisations and more. Networks could often be difficult to build between such groups due to changes in staffing:

"I think councils is one of the most difficult ones because teams change so much. And finding the right way in and who you're supposed to be talking to. So I've got a few good

relationships, but it would be lovely to have a full network of whoever all the LACE teams or whatever, not the LACE teams now, but whoever the right people would be to speak to to get information. […] we're not party to the right information and where we should be putting this, where we should be talking to people […] obviously we talk to like Voices from Care and things like that, but whether there are networks we should be involved in." HE Practitioner, South East Wales

Some staff in other regions found that engaging with community organisations to broaden networks and expand delivery could be a success:

"we've done a lot of stuff with other community organisations which we've found worked really well, […] So you've got, like, say, Techniquest… Xplore now, the science centre doing some science experiments with them and blowing things up, and then you've got the World of Work doing some career stuff with them." HE Practitioner, North and Mid Wales

Whereas in South West Wales some of the positives of networking have been around the connections between HEIs and FE colleges:

"being able to connect with different colleges, being able to connect with different sort of groups around the local area is, is so important and I think it's sometimes what people can struggle with is sort of developing those connections because it takes time" HE Practitioner, South West Wales

As this practitioner outlined, building effective networks takes time, and with the often small teams (or individuals) whose time is dedicated to supporting care experienced students it can be difficult to start or keep this work. As one practitioner pointed out, "I wish I could have my finger in every single pie, but I know I can't." Some staff put this down to a siloed way of working:

"I think everyone's the same, you're focussing too much on the work at hand it's like you say it's hard to collaborate. I always see these things in government publications about sharing best practice and I don't know whether it does happen really. […] I think when people do share practice it's more of a publicity exercise really isn't it, I suppose to showcase what the organisation is doing rather than genuinely searching to collaborate" HE Practitioner, South West Wales

Further difficulties can arise from Wales' geographical spread:

"when you look at the cover that [the North and Mid Wales] team, being the smallest team, has to cover, it's just incredible, it's like, I know we're a more condensed area, but it's huge.

[...] it just amazes me sometimes when you look at the geography of Wales and how on earth they do it." HE Practitioner, South East Wales

One way of overcoming some of these difficulties in cross-institution communication and collaboration is to form and develop specific networks for this. A number of professionals commented that CLASS Cymru (Care Leavers And Student Support Wales) was fulfilling this role in Wales. Though CLASS Cymru has been running for over a decade, the rapid change in working practices precipitated by the onset of COVID-19 has enabled the network to grow and solidify its purpose. With wider understanding and acceptability of online meeting functions such as Zoom and Teams, CLASS Cymru has expanded its network to include staff from HEIs, FE colleges, LAs and charities, meeting roughly quarterly to share best practice and coordinate opportunities. Some staff felt that this type of network was helping to reduce that siloed way of working and some of the competitiveness or defensiveness that goes along with it:

"you're working in your own little bubble, and that's why it's good to attend things like CLASS Cymru, because you get a sense like, ok, well, everybody's feeling this way. We're all frustrated. Or you hear somebody do something and you think oh gosh, we're not doing that, we could do that, that's not going to cost much money or resources, just do that!" HE Practitioner, South East Wales

Evaluation and monitoring was another key area that practitioners focused on. As one HE practitioner puts it, "it's our ethical duty to have any evidence base" (HE Practitioner, South East Wales). The evaluation and monitoring of support programmes, whether widening participation and outreach or support offered to current care experienced students, can be key in developing support programmes over time and justifying the money spent on such activities – important especially when these programmes support relatively small numbers of students. However, evaluation and monitoring have not always been built into programmes from the start (as one member of HEI staff said, "I am being pulled elsewhere, so the engagement bit always gets left behind" (HE Practitioner, South East Wales)).

Overall, HE practitioners Wales-wide felt that evaluation and monitoring of interventions wasn't as well developed it should be, with one participant even saying "they're not evidence based, we can't claim to be offering evidence based interventions." (HE Practitioner, South East Wales).

For many practitioners, one of the barriers to effective evaluation and monitoring of programmes for care experienced students was the ability to track (potential) students as they move through their education. One suggested that using HEAT data can help with this, commenting that:

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"HEAT week means they collect participant data, their demographics, once a week, every year, but they update it, they refresh it, and people have to fill in, the cohort have to fill in a participant information form before they're even considered for, for eligibility. So you've already got your participant cohort, you can directly market to them because you have informed consent, and you've got 100% compliance because you're targeting your demographic." HE Practitioner, South East Wales

However, use of tools such as HEAT seem to be in their preliminary stages in Wales, and practitioners expressed concern around assuming causality of outreach programmes ("it's quite hard because they might have only been in contact with us once and that might not be the reason they went into university" HE Practitioner, South East Wales).

There seemed to be consensus that one key goal of developing evaluation and monitoring was to be able to track individuals' progress across a longer timeframe, primarily from Key Stage 3 through to HE, in order to "make sure that they're then supported, […] and then we would actually see them almost going on to university" (HE Practitioner, South East Wales). Although tracking of this kind is not without its tensions:

"we also have some officers who say that targets are not for the public sector, and they take the joy out of the work, they take the intuition and creativity out of the work. And somewhere there's a balance, but I don't believe that we, in the current climate, I really don't believe that we can put forward an evidence base for funding based on fresh air really." HE Practitioner, South East Wales)

For this practitioner, it is important to be realistic, as without robust evidence "someone else is possibly going to say that money could be deployed in a more effective way or a more meaningful way" (HE Practitioner, South East Wales). This can be particularly difficult where small numbers of care experienced students are being supported.

This issue of reducing support for care experienced students to some kind of 'numbers game' was echoed by another, who felt that those at a higher level within HEIs don't fully understand some of the barriers that a care experienced young person may face, that "there are huge barriers, that other people just would never have to consider, and it seems a shame then you have to get 100 of them, rather than actually get 20 who have kind of come through really difficult circumstances and achieved something that many wouldn't" (HE Practitioner, South East Wales).

In general, evaluation and monitoring was seen as an evolving field within Welsh HEIs, one that is particularly important due to the low numbers of care experienced students attending and also completing courses. Beyond the individual arguments of HEIs that this small but under-represented

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cohort of young people deserve to be supported in their journey to HE, one practitioner stressed that widening participation and outreach should be considered at a policy level within the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act:

"we're being asked more to consider the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act in everything that we do. It's…it goes without saying in our field of work that that's the right thing to shape what we do. But it's an interesting one in that the HE sector in Wales isn't bound by that act. Erm and so conversations within institution aren't as readily available because it's not on, it's not on colleagues' radar, you know they're not, they're not actually looking at it and measuring themselves against it" HE Practitioner, South East Wales

Art by Frank Duffy

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Benefits and Opportunities

> "For somebody that really didn't have the confidence to think that her ideas were worth anything, to then come forward and give her ideas, it was astronomical."
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> HE Practitioner, SE Wales

The benefits of Widening Participation activity can be seen in examples of individual projects, such as a Film Project which ran during 2020 in South East Wales. Facilitators of the project (administrative, managerial and creative) highlighted a range of benefits the project brought to its cohort of young people, in particular increased confidence and the support of those with similar life experience. Elsewhere, work in South West Wales was praised for working with care experienced children and young people from an early age:

> "I was just so interested to know that you know they start sort of these activities with young children in care in the last year of primary school, you know to start breaking down those barriers and misconceptions." Charity staff

Confidence was highlighted as a real benefit of these programmes and activities, because "you don't even believe that you can do your A levels if you haven't got a bit of confidence, you know?" (HE Practitioner, South East Wales). One member of staff recalled a particular young person who had benefitted from this confidence boost:

> "There was like one particular young person that just didn't' have any confidence, she didn't engage, but she came to the sessions, and just kind of listened, and you could tell that she was taking it all in, that she just didn't really want to, whenever you'd ask her she'd go "oh, I dunno, I dunno", but then as the sessions went on online she was then getting to a point where she was like "here's what I've done" kind of thing, and that was just phenomenal to see that, for somebody that really didn't have the confidence to think that her ideas were worth anything, to then come forward and give her ideas, which was just, it was astronomical. We, yeah, nearly cried at the end!" HE Practitioner, South East Wales

Early intervention and transition support were also seen as beneficial, both within FE Colleges and HEIs. Careful transition management, whether from school to college, or college to HE, was seen as a way of making sure "the anxiety's kind of lessened for the youngsters coming in" (FE staff, South West Wales), with consistent engagement with young people over time seen as a way of building "an element of trust" (HE Practitioner, South West Wales), allowing staff to identify areas where young people may be struggling and help provide tailored support.

A small number of care-experienced participants (N=3) spoke of attending widening participation or outreach events run by universities, with two specifying they had attended summer schools.

> "in the summer of 2013 I did a summer university placement at [University]. It was, kind of, like, 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, then some… a lot of, like, little projects at the end that you'd have to complete and do, like, a presentation or putting together, like, a… like, a portfolio sort of thing. So I did that for six weeks and I enjoyed it, and it also helped that if you did the placement [University] would give you… they reduced, like, entry requirement […] it was part… part of the reasons why I wanted to then come to [University]." Jessica

> "I did the Widening Participation 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, I guess, especially about going somewhere like [University], because it just felt very posh, very much, we were told you can't have a part-time job while you're at university and I was thinking, well, I can't go here then, because I can't afford to be here without a part-time job. […] So that didn't put me off uni, but it did put me off that type of uni." Emma

> "The useful thing about it is you also get a couple of contacts from doing that so if you are going to go through the application process, they can kind of talk you through it. Yeah, and it was quite like… I kind of came out of it feeling like, if I wanted to, I definitely could apply and would have a reasonably good chance of getting a place" Emma

Despite some issues these were overall positive experiences, but it's significant that such a small number of participants had attended such events. There were, however, other types of support that participants highlighted as being helpful, which are outlined here.

Transition support

"[University] offered me a starter-pack which is basically everything… every physical thing that I would need, 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… yeah, I had a meeting with Doug 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

"as soon as I knew when I wanted to move [to a different university], I phoned straightaway… like, spoke to my course leader… she's really nice, and she like sorted all the paperwork and everything out for me to switch. They've given me like loads of support and then they've got a care leaver team. I had a few like, meetings with her like, in person, when we were allowed to, and she's given me loads of support." Caitlin

Financial support

"the uni gave support straightaway, as soon as sort of I sent off the application, they found out was a care leaver, [care leaver coordinator] contacted me. She is the care advisor for [University]. 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

"Yeah, when I went the second time, um, I met up with [the designated contact], I met up with loads of the support people, I had loads of chats with them, they kind of explained ok, there's this, there's this, there's this, you'll be getting the cheque and things like that. […] I can't even describe how grateful I am for [University] to be honest. That sounds really cheesy but it's kind of, I dunno, just everything put together has kind of made me understand who I am and it's really helped me to get to grips with stuff and I feel like I'm on the same level now as everybody else, I don't feel disadvantage in any way." Lucy

"if I did want the option then [University] would have been my guarantor, but we, because I was living with my partner, um, he, his grandparents were our guarantors. But social services paid for my share of the rent for, until I think last June? So until last year. Which was a massive, massive help." Lucy

Support with health and wellbeing

"I'm quite lucky because like I get DSA, which I was assisted to access through [the designated contact], I wouldn't have known how to apply for that if I hadn't had their support, so that's been a huge help for me because they've allowed me to… basically, what they cover… because I can catch the bus to school but because I have panic attacks quite regularly my car is sort of like my own space, it gives me… Somewhere to go because obviously I don't have a hall on campus that I can go to so they actually… Cover part of my fuel… So that I can bring my car to university so that I have my own space on campus if I feel stressed." Sophie

"I've coped well; I've been an independent liver, like… obviously I've known, like, there's obviously, like, my… like, there's an advisor in the support team and my social worker who I could turn to. I… I've always had, like, help with… at university, and I always knew I could reach out to the care leaver co-ordinator at the uni. And it was her that helped put me into… when I did exams, I was in one of the secluded rooms, not, like, the big halls because I didn't cope well being in them halls, in the big… in the big rooms with exams" Jessica

Given that all HEIs in Wales had commented on the variety of pre-entry support they could provide to care-experience potential students, it is notable that so few participants were aware of, or had taken part in, any kind of pre-entry programmes such as summer schools. Despite this, there are clearly positive ways that Welsh HEIs have helped support these participants with transitions, finance, and health and wellbeing.

Barriers and Limitations

The barriers to support for care-experienced students can broadly be termed as operational or experiential, with a further set of barriers which have arisen more recently due to the complexities of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Operational barriers

> "I did struggle to find things that were specific for me as a care leaver, especially when it came to additional support. [...] I couldn't sort of find a comprehensive way of finding any information that was specific to my situation if that makes sense, not just general to new applicants."
>
> Sophie

A variety of operational barriers to support were highlighted by practitioners, from a lack of policy focus on widening participation more generally to reduced funding for adult learning at a local authority level, confusion around student finance and the sheer number of young people needing support meaning that those not at a crisis point (which may include those likely to progress to HE) are overlooked:

> "So at the moment, we've currently got just over 600 looked after pupils that belong to [our LA]. So it tends to be the ones that, unfortunately, are having the most issues that I'm involved with. The ones who may be more complex, particularly if they are statement of special educational needs or they're in more specialist provision." LA staff, South East Wales

One way of surmounting these barriers is through networks of engagement, but staff across HEIs, FE colleges, LAs and third sector organisations commented that such engagement could prove difficult, especially where gatekeepers can be involved:

> "So the first thing that I think is a barrier with care experience specifically is difficulty in forging or maintaining relationships with social services and social workers. I suspect that is a regional thing, based on you know conversations that I've had with people and it's just very difficult to break into that sort of network of key people. Um, we find it a very difficult to send out meaningful mailouts, um, and I have foster parents saying to me 'why don't I get emails about this? Because I'm always getting emails from my local authority about

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things, why can't they just include this information in that?' But we don't have access to that kind of reach." HE Practitioner, South East Wales

Young people, meanwhile, spoke of barriers including the distance between placements and school or college:

"I was placed in a placement [...] that was a good 40 minutes/45 minutes from [school]... Don't drive obviously, not being... not being able to fund driving, so... [...] that was my foster placement then. Yeah, so obviously... They wanted to move my school as well then to make it closer for me but I think... I was sort of like I don't want to lose my school as well as my town and everything else, [...] I was split up from where my life centre was." Sophie

Inconsistency of support was also an issue:

"there was no Care Leaver Team available at the college. The person I spoke to was in transport. So she wouldn't have been able to advise me and say, 'Well, if you contact your PA she should be able to offer this,' or, 'Social Services should be able to do this for you.' There was none of that at all. So I ended up dropping out of college, and I ended up working" Katie

A common complaint from participants who had been through HE applications was that information wasn't available, or was difficult to find:

"I did struggle to find things that were specific for me as a care leaver, especially when it came to additional support. [...] I couldn't sort of find a comprehensive way of finding any information that was specific to my situation if that makes sense, not just general to new applicants." Sophie

"so I had [universities] come in [to college] and that's fine, but it was... it was still, kind of, very, like, mass, like, it was still 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

"I think I found out about the grants that were available for care leavers and the support that was available. I think it was just going on the university's website, I think that was all it was. It wasn't made clear anywhere." Katie

Even at the point of writing applications, where there is the option to 'tick the box' to say you are a care leaver (which has now been expanded to include options for care-experienced and estranged), participants expressed uncertainty or confusion about what to do:

> "Yes, I did [tick the box]. Yeah, that... that was, like, a 'Y', and I... I... I think I was, 'Yeah, I'm definitely a care... care leaver at this point now,' because I think obviously by the many of... by the amount of years I'd spent in care at that point I'm, like, 'Yeah, I'm definitely a care leaver.'" Chloe

> "So I yeah just did the application on my own through UCAS. So I'm not sure if I did tick a box or even if there was a box to tick. I don't think it would have occurred to me to say that I was care-experienced." Emma

The financial aspect of university was outlined as a particularly confusing area.

> "student finance, it was a little bit confusing as a... like, as a foster child. Because, like, I felt like I wasn't truly independent because I lived in someone's household, but then they weren't my parents at the same time. [...] And so it just felt like none of the boxes made sense. [...] I didn't know anyone that was in my, like, predicament. I... I was independent, but I wasn't also independent at the same time." Chloe

> "I also think one of the main problems and part of the reason why I didn't go was I was really, really worried about funding." Sophie

> "Especially with finances as well. I found that tricky at the start, dealing with like student finance people and stuff" Caitlin

> "I remember when I first moved in, obviously I'd moved from living in my own independent living space where I was given £50 a week to live off, which meant that I didn't, I couldn't research anything, I had no internet, I, I couldn't save for the first week of fresher's, and my student loan didn't come in until two weeks after fresher's. So, like, there was no support and I literally, I had to like, it sounds horrendous but I had to steal food off my flatmates without them knowing because I didn't have anything." Lucy

Chloe's experience shows that even when the money is available, financial support can still be complicated:

> "I don't... can't really accept money anyway, like, I'm a bit too proud in that sort of sense. But, like... like... I always, like, sort of... personally I always, like, 'Right, I must do this all myself.' Like, I'm quite independent minded. [...] financially, especially from the district that

I am from in Wales, it's, like... like, for example, with the maintenance loan I'm, like... obviously being [a care leaver] I automatically got the full amount, but also at the same time my accommodation, my district... is it district, like, local authority... Paid for? [...] So not to be that person, but, like... it was, like, I just felt like I didn't deserve all this money that I suddenly got." Chloe

Experiential barriers

"we were all talking about our aims and ambitions for young people in care, and we were talking about 2 GCSEs. 2 GCSEs were enough. And that was the benchmark."

Charity staff member

Experiential barriers, whilst often harder to quantify, were noted by both young people and staff. Key amongst these was the theme of trust, particularly that trust can be a fragile thing for young people who have experienced so much change in circumstance, living situation, and support. As one practitioner explains:

"For some students, they've had a new named contact every year. They've been in the uni because, you know, a guy left and there was two in the team who went on maternity leave, and, you know, if they happen to be that person's named contact and that person was obviously, but then... you know, there's some of them, they don't know if they're coming or going with their named contact. But now, I'm a new person, and they're gonna have to get used to having a new person and build that rapport again." HE Practitioner, South East Wales

One member of staff recalled a student specifically telling him that "I do have trust issues because I've worked with so many different social workers" (HE Practitioner, South West Wales, recalling a student's words), going on to specify that this is a good reason to better manage any staff turnovers if named contacts do have to change. One practitioner went on to explain that cross-institution working to find opportunities that are best for the young person is of the utmost importance as "the last thing we wanna be doing is creating more barriers for the kids" (HE Practitioner, South West Wales). Having a background characterised by a level of instability does not just impact on the ability to trust and build relationships, but can result in the very tangible barrier of a lack of

qualifications, which can negatively impact on progress to HE. There was also a suggestion that care experienced young people may have felt a lack of expectation from the adults in their lives:

> "Yeah there's one girl in particular who is really keen on going to university but she is still in contact with her birth family and her birth family are really putting her off saying that they think it's a waste of time that she's not going to get a good job after it, that she'll get a better paid job if she just goes straight into an apprenticeship or a job when she finishes her college course erm and she's a very intelligent young person, she's very capable of going to uni [so] myself and her PA were speaking to her saying you know "it's up to you, you need to make this decision'" LA staff, South West Wales

Care-experienced young people, like any young people, can have their expectations moulded by those around them. Both practitioners and young people confirmed this, with one third sector worker saying that when they first started working in this field:

> "we were all talking about our aims and ambitions for young people in care, and we were talking about 2 GCSEs. 2 GCSEs were enough. And that was the benchmark." Charity staff member (13)

It seems that there is still work to be done, particularly for children in specialist or residential care placements. Katie recalls:

> "It was [placement], and they offer a couple of GCSEs with them, and I thought… I feel like I really want to push myself in education, and I felt, to me, [placement] was kind of a cop out, because I'd only leave with two or three GCSEs and I thought, 'I can't get into college with that, I can't go through university with that. I can't even get a decent job with just having a couple of GCSEs,' you know?" Katie

As far as Katie was concerned, "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.'" A lack of aspiration from educators alongside potential gaps in education due to placement moves gave some young people what Jack referred to as "an untrust in the education system":

> "I got to a point where I didn't trust the education system. I didn't trust that I had the ability, I'd lost a lot of confidence in my ability to perform, to study to do anything that was education based. […] You miss all of your school, when you go to college and university, you're always playing catch up." Jack

Young people also outlined a number of concerns they felt around accessing HE. the transition into HE can be daunting, regardless of the time that care experienced people undertake this journey. For Sophie, "the university just felt like this big faceless kind of terrifying organisation to me." She elaborates:

> "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 I… I was… part of the reason why I was put off was because I didn't know what sort of support was available. Obviously, I don't… you know at the time I wouldn't have had parents so I was thinking how the hell am I supposed to go to university and kit myself out, like how am I supposed to find the money to just get all the basics to just go and live there, like you know how am I going to get a laptop, how am I going to get this? […] that's the hardest bit about going to uni when you're a care leaver is that it's just you and there's nobody else and it can feel a lot like that sometimes" Sophie

Digital disadvantage and the impact of COVID

> "What I'm most worried about not, and this really is nothing more than a finger in the air because I just don't know how it's going to pan out, is the complexities of the pandemic for care experienced young people" HE Practitioner, South East Wales"
>
> **Charity staff member**

With this research taking place across 2020 and 2021, it is unsurprising that the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic was high on practitioners' lists of potential barriers that care experienced young people may be facing in their educational journeys, a concern that has played out in subsequent research (Roberts et al., 2021). Support staff would recall that "young people had actually said they didn't leave the halls on student nights and stuff like that cause they were scared to leave the room" (HE Practitioner, South West Wales) and "we were concerned at the beginning that even for the ones that we weren't supporting that it might have triggered some things being at home a lot more, or you know, kind of mental health issues" (FE staff, South West Wales). One member of student support staff elaborated on the effects that studying during the pandemic could have on their care experienced students:

"they weren't really engaging with student life on campus, they weren't involved in societies, they didn't have friends outside of university, a lot of them were socially isolated, there were a lot of erm (sighs) and there were genuine mental health issues and then at the same time you're hearing stories from university campuses where people have taken their own lives, students and you think how did it get to the stage where you've got a young person surrounded by all these people they could speak to, lecturers they could speak to, their dedicated personal tutor on campus, there's support staff in place and yet feel isolated and that they've not made that step to reach out for help" HE Practitioner, South West Wales.
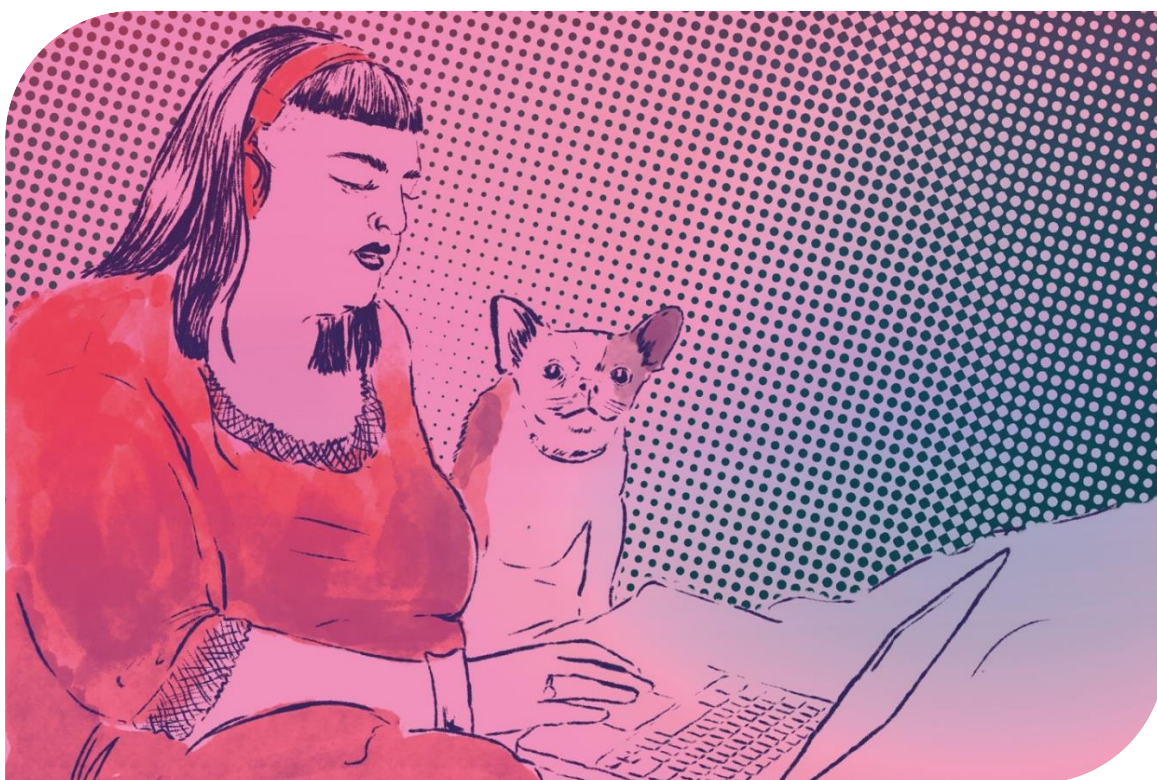
Art by Frank Duffy

Recommendations for future policy and practice

Throughout this research there have been clear messages from practitioners and young people alike, who have commented that the following could help to improve the experiences of care-experienced students both before and during their time at university:

- Dedicated staff and consistency of communication
- Flexible provision (including support beyond 25)
- Specific support around transitions (into, and out of, HE)

Dedicated staff and consistency of communication

"But 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

Whilst care-experienced students who took part in the research appreciated having support teams they could go to, some found that what was sometimes missing was the personal touch:

"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.' [...] It doesn't necessarily have to be a big system overhaul and big change. [...] But to me that would make a big difference" Katie

Katie linked this to her experiences throughout care, and the lack of trust in authority that comes when "The people that are supposed to care for us, haven't cared for us". Knowing that there were named individuals there to offer support can help to rebuild this trust. Emma agreed:

"But even just knowing that there would be a person. Because I think, as I kind of said, I always... university was never really advertised to me as like, a place that was for people like me. So I don't think I thought of university as being a place where there would be support,

more that you kind of had to do it on your own against the odds as opposed to that they were actively wanting people with my kind of background or whatever to come to university and that they would be supportive there." Emma

By ensuring that widening participation and student support teams are clear about who the named contact for care-experienced students is, universities can help care-experienced students develop greater trust in the system knowing that they are being supported.

Named contacts can also help to ensure that care-experienced students feel a sense of belonging, especially if there are possibilities for care-experienced students to reach out to one another. Sophie recommended hosting events for care-experienced students at the start of their university journey to help them build community and reduce anxiety:

"I'm going to go and be like the odd one out and you know everybody else is going to have their parents and I'm just going to feel really lonely and do you know what I mean? So I think actually yeah, a physical event or somewhere you can go to sort of have... have a physical thing to allay these fears a little bit and actually maybe speak to other people who've been in a similar situation or at least speak to someone from the universities who you can get direct answers to your questions then I think that would just be... I think it would make a huge difference to sort of settling people's nerves about going to university straight after school just leaving care." Sophie

Distilled to its simplest parts, the most important thing was for students to know where to turn, as Jessica commented:

"But 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

Sophie referred to this need as coming from a place where "one of the main things that happens to people in care is that they feel uncertain about their future all the time", adding that "it would have been so reassuring to sit someone down and actually ask the questions that were bothering me specifically", whilst Emma described it as being the case that "people need a bit of a champion, don't they?"

Throughout this research we have seen how the various barriers facing care-experienced people can hinder their progress to and through HE, as well as the types of support that may benefit them and help make this progress easier. What seems clear is that whilst HEIs are offering a range of support to their care-experienced students, take-up of this is patchy and knowledge of the support

available can be scarce. Those who did receive specific types of support found that welcome packages, named contacts and consistency of support to be beneficial.

Flexible Provision

> "I think a lot of the time for a lot of people they can go to a university and feel like it is a space for them, but I think it's probably worth looking beyond just the open days and stuff like that, and looking at what kind of events are on for people who maybe haven't come from that sort of traditional background."
>
> Emma

Alongside dedicated staff, flexibility of support provision was highlighted as an additional way to ensure care-experienced students have a positive experience of university. As Emma pointed out, this needs to go beyond the 'tick the box' exercise on UCAS applications:

> "So it has to be different at every stage, but I guess it's that thing around identifying what people's needs might be and actually not doing that just on the basis of like, do they tick this box, then give them some money, or they don't tick the box, they'll be fine, which is how it seems to be." Emma

With many of the participants stressing that care experience meant that going to university at 18 wasn't always possible or desirable, this flexibility needs to extend to having support options for mature care-experienced students[2]. Emma spoke of how this could work in the context of open days:

> "I think a lot of the time for a lot of people they can go to a university and feel like it is a space for them, but I think it's probably worth looking beyond just the open days and stuff like that, and looking at what kind of events are on for people who maybe haven't come from that sort of traditional background. You might be a bit older. It would be a shame to go to an open day as a 25-year-old care-experienced person and be like, oh, I don't fit in here, when actually, there might be loads of really good things going on in that university that you wouldn't see on an open day. Because open days quite often are focused on parents, as well; showing the parents that your child is going to be safe here and they're going to get a

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[2] In the UK, a 'mature' student is classed as being 21 or over at the time of commencing undergraduate study, or 25 and over at the time of commencing postgraduate study.

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good education. Whereas I think, for care-experienced people, they need to... we need to look beyond that kind of stuff and see how well the universities kind of recognise you and support you." Emma

Flexible support like this at all stages can help make it clear that universities are able to support care-experienced students in more than a one-size-fits-all way.

Transition Support

"Yeah, it was like the bridge between school and uni, that's the bit that's sort of like missing I think, because it's just not quite there. 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."

Sophie

The final area that was highlighted by care-experienced students as being of key importance was transition support, with some students finding such support was lacking:

"I didn't get the support. It was kind of like, I got down there, and just kind of left to my own devices, and nobody got in contact with me. They didn't have like a dedicated care leaver team or anything." Caitlin

The transition into HE can be daunting, regardless of the time that care experienced people undertake this journey. For Sophie, "the university just felt like this big faceless kind of terrifying organisation to me." She elaborates:

"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 I... I was... part of the reason why I was put off was because I didn't know what sort of support was available. Obviously, I don't... you know at the time I wouldn't have had parents so I was thinking how the hell am I supposed to go to university and kit myself out, like how am I supposed to find the money to just get all the basics to just go and live there, like you know how am I going to get a laptop, how am I going to get this? [...] that's the hardest bit about going to uni when you're a care leaver is that it's just you and there's nobody else and it can feel a lot like that sometimes" Sophie

This feeling that progressing to university is something to be tackled alone can be overwhelming. Ryan reflected on how this could negatively impact those with lower levels of confidence:

> "I could talk for England, as you could probably tell, I have the ability to speak and conversate with whoever I like, which makes things easier, when you're phoning up people to make appointments, or you're doing uni and you're trying to organise stuff. Whereas I know a lot of people who are a lot more timid and a lot more placid than I am, who are way smarter than me, have massive amounts of ability to get to university, but can't, because you need to be on it, when you're doing this sort of stuff" Ryan

This lack of confidence can be compounded by a fear of failure that comes from "starting something new, being outside of your comfort zone" (Sophie). Lucy also felt this could have an impact:

> "I've got an older sister, […] and she kind of had confidence thinking yes I'm going to do this, I'm going to do this, even though she wasn't that academically good in school she still got herself to uni, so it was kind of an idea in the back of my mind. But, I don't know if I ever really thought that I was good enough to go." Lucy

Support across the transition period into HE, although available at many universities, was seen as a missing bridge by some participants:

> "Yeah, it was like the bridge between school and uni, that's the bit that's sort of like missing I think, because it's just not quite there. 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 I think it's that… 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

The participants who have attended university also spoke of their post-entry experiences of HE and the various barriers they came across. For Emma, it wasn't just the transition that created a missing bridge, but the support at university was also lacking:

> "So I've now been at… 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

It is clear that universities in Wales are progressing towards offering greater levels of transition support for care-experienced students; with one university recruiting a transition-specific role

during the course of this research. These comments from care-experienced students serve to highlight just how key this is, with scope for developing standards of support Wales-wide.

Art by Frank Duffy

Project Impact

Throughout the course of this research, it was clear that HEIs across Wales were continuing to develop their support packages for care-experienced students, as well as developing new support for estranged students. With many of the professional participants being part of the CLASS Cymru network[3], there seems to be an appetite for taking the findings outlined here and using them to continue to work on the support offered by Welsh HEIs.

Developing CLASS Cymru

Moving beyond the findings presented here, further funding associated with this project (granted through HEFCW's innovation funding) enabled the development of the CLASS Cymru website[4]. The CLASS Cymru website project began in October 2021, and was managed by the Principal Investigator and a member of student support staff. This innovation funding was designed to further the impact created by existing research projects. To aid this, consultation groups were formed of previous research participants, CLASS Cymru network members and care-experienced students (N=14). These groups were consulted on three main stages of website development:

- January 2022: Online focus groups to discuss content ideas (including a broad overview of the project)
- April 2022: Online focus groups to review design concepts (developed with a local designer based on findings of the wider research project)
- Summer 2022: Review of overall content via email (written content, design and layout)

These groups were comprised of three care-experienced students and 11 professionals working with care-experienced young people. Within these groups an overview of the project was discussed, along with more focused discussion around what should be contained within the website.

The CLASS Cymru network was first established as a way for dedicated care leaver contacts (now often the contacts for care-experienced and estranged students) in all HEIs in Wales to share best practice. It now has members that represent over 35 organisations and provides training and updates as well as raising awareness of the support available and needed across Wales. This developed due to the need for better communication with external partners to

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[3] CLASS Cymru (Care Leaver Activities and Student Support in Wales) is a network of professionals across Wales who work with care leavers and other care-experienced and estranged young people in their educational journeys towards higher education, meeting to share best practice and improve support.
[4] https://classcymru.co.uk/

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establish a better experience and transition for care leavers, care-experienced and estranged students.

The establishment of the CLASS Cymru website has allowed the resources, knowledge and understanding of the network to be available to all practitioners and care leavers, care-experienced and estranged people looking into HE in one place.

Since the collaboration of research and support services in this project, the CLASS Cymru network has seen an increase in further researchers seeking collaboration as the website has shown the impact of these partnerships early on. The website is a key part of the network and will continue to grow and develop as the research grows and the network learns of further assistance and support services in Wales.

Partly due to the research and projects outlined here, the network has expanded its meetings to be more involved in the bigger picture in Wales supporting care leavers, care-experienced and estranged students accessing higher education. This partnership working looks set to continue, with plans to obtain external funding to extend the website and further research projects working with the CLASS Cymru network.

Art by Frank Duffy

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Appendix 1: Interview Participants (Professionals)[5]

Participant Number	Role	Region
1	HE Practitioner	North/West
2	HE Practitioner	North/West
3	HE Practitioner	North/West
4	HE Practitioner	South East
5	HE Practitioner	South East
6	HE Practitioner	South East
7	HE Practitioner	South East
8	HE Practitioner	South East
9	LA staff	South West
10	College staff	South West
11	LA staff	North/West
12	Charity staff	All
13	Charity staff	All
14	Independent	All
15	College staff	South West
16	LA staff	South West
17	LA staff	South East
18	HE Practitioner	South West
19	HE Practitioner	South West
20	HE Practitioner	South West
21	HE Practitioner	South East
22	HE Practitioner	South East
23	HE Practitioner	South East
24	HE Practitioner	South West
25	HE Practitioner	North/West

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[5] All professional participants are referred to by a participant number, their field of work and their region

Appendix 2: Interview Participants (Care-experienced people)[6]

Participant Number	Name	Region	Gender	Age Bracket
26	Chloe	North/West	F	18-25
27	Jessica	North/West	F	18-25
28	Sophie	North/West	F	>25
29	Jack	North/West	M	18-25
30	Ryan	North/West	M	18-25
31	Charlotte	South East	F	<18
32	Olivia	South East	F	18-25
33	Lauren	South East	F	18-25
34	Tom	South East	M	18-25
35	Katie	South East	F	18-25
36	Molly	North/West	F	<18
37	James	North/West	M	<18
38	Bethany	North/West	F	18-25
39	Grace	North/West	F	<18
40	Georgia	North/West	F	<18
41	Caitlin	South East	F	18-25
42	Lily	North/West	F	18-25
43	Ethan	North/West	M	<18
44	Amelia	North/West	F	<18
45	Shannon	North/West	F	18-25
46	Lucy	South East	F	18-25
47	Emma	South East	F	>25

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[6] All care-experienced young people who participated in the study have been given pseudonyms to protect their anonymity

Appendix 3: Support for care-experienced students provided by Welsh HEIs

HEI	Source	Pre-entry support	Post-entry support	Eligibility
Aberystwyth	2018/19 FAP	Summer school Outreach activities Mentoring Revision sessions Open Day support	Bursaries Named contact Skills hub Hardship fund Mentoring GO Wales	Those from a 'care background': Care leavers, care experienced, estranged, young carers
Bangor	2020/21 FAP		Bursaries Hardship fund Named contact	Care leavers and carers
Cardiff	2020/21 FAP	Targeted support	Bursaries Named contact Financial assistance programme priority 52 week accommodation Guarantor scheme	Care leavers (all support) and estranged (some support)
Cardiff Met	2020/21 FAP	Targeted workshops	Bursaries Mentoring GO Wales	Care leavers and estranged (being extended to carers in 2021)
Glyndwr	2020/21 FAP; 2018/19 FAP	Application support	Bursaries 52 week accommodation Mental health support Staff CPD	Care leavers (extended to carers in 2020/21)
Open University	2019/20 Access and Participation Plan	Not specified	Not specified	Care leavers, care experienced, carers
Swansea	2019/20 FAP	Grade reduction Financial assistance for open days Outreach support Application support	Bursaries Hardship fund Named contact Priority access to careers services	Care leavers, estranged
Trinity St David's	2020/21 FAP	Not specified	Bursaries	Care leavers, care experienced, estranged
USW	2017/18 – 2020/21 FAP	Visit days Application support Named contact	Bursaries Named contact 52 week accommodation GO Wales	Care leavers

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