Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (Included Submissions)

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Enabling Care-Experienced Students to Thrive in Higher Education Using the Capabilities Approach

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Abstract: There are around 7,000 higher education students in England who were 'in care' as children, usually due to neglect or maltreatment in their birth family. Care-experienced people have a significantly lower-than-average propensity to access higher education and are more likely to leave their courses early – although those who complete generally have high levels of success. There has been growing academic and policy interest in this group over the last fifteen years, with a series of major studies being published since 2017. This paper will re-examine the data from three of these studies using the lens of the 'capabilities approach', as developed by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum, with the goal of identifying core capabilities that support care-experienced students to access and thrive within higher education. This analysis, which is intended to be applicable to other national contexts, will be used frame policy recommendations for government, universities and other stakeholders.

Paper: There are around 80,000 young people in the care of their local authority in England, usually due to neglect or maltreatment within their birth family. They often experience significant educational and social disruption, mental health issues and stigmatisation. One implication is that care-experienced people have a significantly lower-than-average propensity to enter higher education – around 13% do so by the age of 19, compared to 43% in the general population (Department for Education, 2020). They tend to study later in life than average and make greater use of 'lower status' forms of higher education (Harrison, 2020). They are also around twice as likely to leave their studies early as other students, with around one-in-five doing so (Harrison, 2017). More positively, those that are able to complete their studies have graduate outcomes that are commensurate with their peers (Harrison *et al.*, in press).

The presence of care-experienced students in higher education has been of academic and policy interest for over fifteen years. In particular, there has been growing concern in the last five years, with a series of studies focusing on their experiences and the support they receive both in England and the other UK nations (Centre for Social Justice, 2019; Ellis and Johnston, 2019, 2020; Harrison, 2017; Hauari et al., 2019; O'Neill et al., 2019; Stevenson et al., 2020). Care-experienced students report a range of interlocking challenges including poor support from their local authority, unmanaged transitions, difficulties securing and maintaining accommodation, feelings of isolation, mental and physical health problems, interrupted financial support, underdeveloped financial management skills, immigration issues and gaps in academic knowledge.

This paper re-examines the key findings from three of these studies – which collectively capture the voices of over 500 care-experienced students – and situate them within a broader theoretical context. The aim of this re-examination is to develop a holistic model of supportive policy and practice for care-experienced student to inform future developments in England, but that will also have relevance in other national contexts.

The *capabilities approach* (e.g. Nussbaum, 2011; Sen, 2001) is a normative theoretical framework for social justice. It argues that, as individuals, we have different life outcomes that we have good reason to value, founded in our beliefs, experiences and sociocultural context. However, we have different 'capabilities' to achieve these outcomes – freedoms that can be constrained by resources, knowledge, laws and other factors. The role of policy and practice interventions is thus to remove 'unfreedoms' and permit the individual's pursuit of what has value for them. These capabilities are expressed through everyday 'functionings' – what the person is able to do and to be through their own choice. Sen and Nussbaum's work has primarily been used to understand social justice in the context of economically-disadvantaged communities, particularly within the 'global south'. An interesting and more recent development has been its application to educational participation as a collection of potentially-valued functionings – e.g. 'being an expert', 'doing research' or 'being in a graduate career'.

Drawing on work with marginalised communities in South Africa, Wilson-Strydom (2016) argues that one can specify a collection of core capabilities that underpin a socially-just higher education system and suggests a list of seven: *practical reason; knowledge and imagination; learning disposition; social relations and social networks; respect, dignity and recognition; emotional health; language competence and confidence.* She suggests that where these are absent, the student's functionings are constrained and their likelihood of educational success is compromised.

Our paper uses Wilson-Strydom's list as a jumping-off point to see how the experiences of care-experienced students map onto the capabilities that she suggests are required within a fair and supportive higher education system. We have identified unfreedoms from the students' accounts and explore the functionings that they are not able to realise as a result. For example, *practical reason* may be compromised by poor knowledge from professionals that leads to incorrect guidance about higher education options. Similarly, intrusive and repetitive university administrative processes can undermine students' *respect, dignity and recognition*. Perhaps most importantly, care-experienced students may experience poor *emotional health* due to services that are designed around short-term and low intensity interventions.

We use this mapping to critique the formal support available from national government, local authorities and universities/colleges, highlighting shortcomings in existing policy and practice with the aim of informing the next wave of developments in England. However, the strength of the capabilities approach is that our conclusions are likely to be useful in other nations seeking to increase the number of care-experienced students accessing and thriving within higher education.

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