

# 47 Beyond resilience: Exploring transitions to and through higher education of care experienced students and graduates.

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## Research Domains

Student Access and Experience (SAE)

## Abstract

Whilst care experienced young people are one of the most under-represented groups in higher education in the UK, some care experienced young people do make successful transitions to and through university. Research in this field has routinely drawn on the concept of resilience to understand why some care experienced young people succeed in higher education despite experiencing considerable adversities and inequalities (Cotton et al., 2014). Drawing on the voices of 10 care experienced students and graduates from UK universities, the paper highlights the role of their learning identities, positive experiences of education during their time at university, supportive adults and social capital as key to the formation of their resilience. The data provides an opportunity to critique the concept of resilience which is often used to explain care experienced students' success in higher education by highlighting the role of wider circumstances in their successful transitions to and through higher education.

## Full paper

In recent years there has been a burgeoning interest in care experienced students' transitions to higher education (Jackson and Ayaji 2007) and their experiences of it (Cotton et al., 2014; Cotton et al., 2017; Ellis and Johnston 2022). Research in this field has made significant progress in illuminating both the multifaceted challenges faced by care experienced students (Jackson et al., 2005; Jackson and Ayaji 2007; Ellis and Johnston 2022), as well as the positive outcomes and 'successes' of those who do make it to university and progress through it (Cotton et al., 2014; 2017). Given that care experienced students are amongst the most under-represented group of students in higher education (Harrison 2020), the recent focus on those who successfully transition to higher education and their experiences of it, is a valuable and welcome addition to research in this field.

As researchers have sought to understand care experienced students' successful transitions to and outcomes in HE, they have highlighted the numerous factors which help to explain why some care experienced students are successful in transitioning to HE and progressing in it. These factors include good prior educational attainment, supportive and encouraging adults (Driscoll 2013), stable and supportive school and care placements and good financial support (Jackson and Cameron 2012). In addition, young people's resilience and self-reliance has been identified as important in supporting young people's transitions to HE (Driscoll 2013). Indeed, the notion of resilience has become a widely used concept to explain why some young people with experience of care do well in and progress through HE, despite experiencing considerable adversities and hardships (Cotton et al., 2014; Pinkney and Walker 2020; Ellis and Johnston 2022). Researchers working in this field have been keen to emphasise that resilience is not an intrinsic characteristic, but rather, is enabled by environmental factors such as having supportive and caring adults (Driscoll 2013; Cotton et al., 2017). With respect to care experienced young people in higher education, Cotton et al (2017) argue that institutional and wider environmental factors are crucial in young people's university experiences and outcomes. Pinkney and Walker (2020) also reveal how care experienced students' success in higher education can be explained by a myriad of factors, including the presence of supportive adults who are able to provide practical, emotional and financial support, as well as students' own resilience, drive and determination. Collectively, these studies highlight the role of social environmental factors such as supportive relationships with key adults to students' resilience. In doing so, this body of research has countered individualising narratives embedded in resilience discourses in policy and public discourse.

Notwithstanding these important insights, there is a need to better understand the roll of young people's wider social and educational circumstances in their transitions to HE and progression in it. Drawing on data from qualitative interviews with 10 care experienced UK students and graduates, this paper reveals that a myriad of factors helps explain their successful transitions to university and progression in it. These include their positive learning identities

and enjoyment of learning prior to and during their time at university. They also include supportive adults, social capital, chance opportunities and luck. These factors are socially structured by circumstances beyond the students and graduates' own making. Thus, the resilience shown by these students and graduates was deeply bound up with and had emerged from their wider circumstances, including their positive learning identities which had begun to form at earlier stages of education and prior to embarking on university. The paper reveals therefore that whilst the concept of resilience may have value in illuminating the determination and drive shown by individuals, we should recognise that resilience is always forged in the context of wider circumstances. The paper also argues that the over-reliance on the concept of resilience can mask the deep and enduring inequalities, experiences of adversities and trauma, which powerfully shape care experienced young people's experiences of higher education.

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