

318 Facing the 'cliff edge': Care-experienced graduates' transitions into and through taught postgraduate study

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Research Domains

Student Access and Experience (SAE)

Abstract

Care-experienced (CE) people are one of the most under-represented groups in HE (Ellis and Johnston, 2019; Harrison, 2017). Despite the growth in research attention paid to CE peoples' access to HE at the undergraduate level, there are currently no qualitative insights into their transition experiences into and through taught postgraduate study. To better understand these experiences, this paper presents findings from a British Academy-funded project which qualitatively and longitudinally explores CE graduates' transitions out of HE in England and Scotland (Baker, 2022). The project identified several constraints faced by CE graduates when accessing and progressing through taught postgraduate degrees. These arose from a support 'cliff edge', with various forms of support from participants' HE institutions and local authorities abruptly ending upon undergraduate graduation. This resulted in taught postgraduate degrees being unfeasible for some. For others, this led to significant financial and academic hardship resulting in withdrawal from their postgraduate studies.

Full paper

Introduction

Care-experienced (CE) people (those who have spent time in the care system as children) overcome profound challenges to access and progress through higher education (HE). These include educational disruption, stigmatisation, and mental health issues arising from childhood trauma (Harrison, 2017). They are one of the most under-represented groups in HE both nationally (Ellis and Johnston, 2019) and internationally (Jackson and Cameron, 2014; Okpych and Courtney, 2019; Wilson et al., 2019; Zeira, et al., 2023).

Despite the growth in research attention paid to CE peoples' HE access and success at the undergraduate level, there are currently no qualitative insights into their transition experiences into and through taught postgraduate study (see Baker et al., 2022). This is important to understand, as constraints in postgraduate access and progression mean that the transformative potential of HE for CE people may be restricted to the undergraduate level. In turn, this may limit: access to specific careers (Keane, 2017), higher future earnings (Walker & Zhu, 2013), job satisfaction levels (Rosenbaum & Rosenbaum, 2016), and protection from unemployment (Conlon & Patrignani, 2011). In establishing qualitative understandings of CE peoples' access and progression through postgraduate study, recommendations for policy and practice changes to redress the constraints that CE people face in this context can be proposed.

The study

To better understand the constraints that CE people face when accessing and progressing through taught postgraduate study, this paper presents findings from the *Care-Experienced Graduates' Decision-Making, Choices and Destinations* project. The project, funded by the British Academy (2021-2024), qualitatively and longitudinally explores: a) the influences that inform CE students' decision-making and choices in relation to their graduate pathways and destinations; b) the structural enablements and constraints that exist during their transitions out of HE and into employment and/or further study and c) what role CE graduates perceive their care experience as having in both their choices and decisions, as well as the constellations of any enablements and constraints they encounter. It does so through undertaking repeat semi-structured interviews with 18 CE graduates across England and Scotland from their final year of HE study (phase one), then at six (phase two) and 12 months after graduation (phase 3). The present paper specifically focuses on those participants who considered progressing to taught postgraduate study,

had accessed or attempted to access taught postgraduate programmes, and those who were actively studying at this level at the start of the project.

What constrains care-experienced graduates' access to, and progression through, postgraduate study?

The increasing research attention paid to CE peoples' HE access to the undergraduate level over the past 15 years has contributed to welcome changes in the amount and types of support available from HE institutions and local authorities in the UK (DfE, 2019; Harrison et al., 2021). This HE-provided support, however, ends at the point of undergraduate graduation (Stevenson et al., 2020) and frequently coincides with a reduction in or complete loss of support from CE graduates' local authorities (Baker, 2022). As CE graduates are less likely to have a safety net in the form of a family home (Bengtsson et al., 2018), losses in support were acutely felt.

This 'cliff edge' in support underpinned several constraints that CE graduates faced when contemplating, accessing and progressing through taught postgraduate degrees. The absence of financial support from the HE institution and local authority to enable them to afford living costs resulted in some participants rejecting taught postgraduate study, viewing this as an unfeasible option. Concerns over meeting living costs through another period of study were also exacerbated by the cost of living crisis in the UK (Francis-Devine et al., 2022), and a desire for stable living circumstances after experiences of persistent instability throughout childhood (Sinclair et al., 2007).

Those who progressed to taught postgraduate degrees were met with a sudden loss of the HE support structures that they had become accustomed to during their undergraduate degrees. This included bursaries, accommodation and disability support, as well as access to a 'single point of contact' within the institution. This contrast was especially jarring for those who remained in their undergraduate institution as they had a 'direct comparison' between the level of support they had received in their previous and current degree studies. Of the small number of participants who had successfully accessed taught postgraduate degrees, half had withdrawn from their studies during phase two of the project citing financial constraints and the loss of academic and disability support as reasons for this.

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