

Care experience and institution choice: how does experience of the care system shape HE decision-making and choices about where to study?

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Research Domains

Student Access and Experience (SAE)

Abstract

Care experienced young people in the UK progress to higher education (HE) at lower rates than their non-care experienced peers (young people who did not spend any time in care under the age of 18). Previous studies have highlighted some of the barriers faced by care experienced young people in accessing undergraduate study, but less is known about young people's experiences of decision-making. This study aims to build on this growing body of literature by focusing on care experienced young people's experience of decision-making and choices about entering undergraduate study, such as the factors that shaped their choice of HE institution. An online questionnaire and semi-structured interviews were used to investigate the experiences of 125 care experienced young people. Findings demonstrated that pre-entry opportunities to explore a sense of belonging and to find out about support services were key to young people feeling satisfied with their choice of HE institution.

Full paper

Introduction:

Care experienced young people in the UK progress to higher education (HE) at lower rates than their non-care experienced peers (young people who did not spend any time in local authority care under the age of 18) (DfE, 2023). Previous studies have highlighted some of the constraints and barriers faced by care experienced young people in accessing HE, including but not limited to educational disruption at Key Stage 4, the 'care cliff' and challenges of leaving care at a transitional age, and poor quality support and guidance from local authorities (Jackson et al., 2005; Hauari et al. 2019; Harrison, 2017; Ellis & Johnston, 2019; Stevenson et al., 2020). This doctoral study aims to build on this growing body of literature on care experience and HE by specifically focusing on care experienced young people's experience of decision-making and choices about undergraduate study, such as the factors that shaped their choice of HE institution. The over-arching aim of the study is that findings can improve praxis in support and guidance for care experienced young people in access and transition to HE.

Methodology:

The study used a mixed methods research design. An online questionnaire and semi-structured interviews were used to investigate the experiences of 125 care experienced young people aged 18-25

in the UK. The online questionnaire was shared via social media, through organisations supporting care experienced young people and HE widening participation teams or HE named contacts for care experienced or estranged students. The online questionnaire included a mix of closed and open-ended questions and collected 122 responses. Semi-structured interviews were also carried out with 16 young people. All qualitative data collected in the study were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2022) and closed questions in the online questionnaire were analysed quantitatively.

Theoretical framework:

The study's theoretical framework draws on Marcus and Nurius' (1986) theory of possible selves and Erikson's (2019) discussion of the four aspects that influence the motivational power of possible selves: salience, probability, perceived control and emotional valence. My rationale for drawing on possible selves theory is that it can provide an understanding of how the social conditions and experiences of care and leaving care shape and influence higher education decision-making and choices.

Findings:

When asked what the most important factor behind their choice of institution was, the institution feeling like a good fit was the most selected option (20.6%). This was followed by career prospects (14.4%), being close to home/housing arrangements (11.3%), facilities and services available at the institution (10.3%) and financial support on offer from the institution (10.3%) and being close to support networks (8.2%). Ranking of the university was only considered most important by 7.2% of respondents.

Importance of exploring belonging

Young people constructed institutional 'fit' through a lens of belonging – fitting in, feeling comfortable, having their support needs understood. Campus visits and outreach, such as residential, played an important role in supporting young people to explore which institutions felt like the best match for them both in terms of comfort and available pastoral and financial support.

Most young people reported positive perceptions of their institution choice, but there was a significant difference between young people who had visited their campus prior to application and those who didn't. Out of those who did visit the campus, 9% stated that they wished they'd gone to a different institution compared with 19.6% who didn't visit their campus. The COVID-19 pandemic had been a barrier to visiting institutions for some young people, but for others it had been the cost of travel or a lack of awareness about available outreach activities and initiatives that they could have participated in. This highlights how important pre-entry opportunities are for satisfaction with institution choice and potentially for retention and success in HE.

Implications:

The implications of this study are significant for how both professionals and institutions can improve support for care experienced young people with HE decision-making and choices. Care experienced young people need to be better supported with access and participation in outreach activities and initiatives that can facilitate exploring belonging and the types of support that institutions can offer them. Professionals need to ensure that outreach opportunities are extended to young people outside of school settings, to young people studying in FE colleges and on access courses. These findings also

have important implications for policymakers who are looking to understand how institutions can improve retention and success in HE for this group of students.

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