

Patterns of higher education participation for care-experienced learners: exploring differences between local authorities

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Research Domains

Student Access and Experience (SAE)

Abstract

The proportion of care-experienced young people who access higher education in England has been increasing gradually over the last decade, with the most recent figure standing at 15%. However, there are held to be marked differences in participation rates between local authorities, suggesting that the likelihood of a young person accessing higher education is partly determined by where they happen to live. This paper reports an ongoing empirical study using national administrative data for those entering higher education between 2007/08 and 2021/22. The dataset enables participation rates to be calculated at the local authority level for the first time and compared to underlying factors such as area deprivation and school outcomes. This provides insight into how local authorities and other actors can support or weaken access to higher education for care-experienced learners.

Full paper

It is increasingly well-understood that care-experienced young people – i.e. those removed from their birth families due to concerns about their safety, usually due to maltreatment or neglect – have higher education participation rates that are substantially below the national average and among the lowest for any social group (Harrison 2020; Stevenson et al., 2020). This is due to a range of challenges, including frequent changes in care arrangements, school moves, societal stigma, and mental ill health arising from childhood trauma (Sebba et al., 2015).

Over the last ten years, there have been significant policy and practice efforts to increase access to higher education for care-experienced learners (Become, 2025). This has been reflected in incremental increases in the national participation rate, such that the proportion doing so by the age of 19 has risen to 15% in 2022/23 (Department for Education, 2024). However, discussions with practitioners suggest that there are marked differences in participation rates between local authorities, with some have significantly more (or fewer) progressing than the national average. This is perhaps unsurprising given that local authorities can provide radically different packages of support to care-experienced young people (Galloway, 2025). However, until now, no reliable participation rates have been published at the local authority level to substantiate this.

Meanwhile, a recent study that explored school attainment for care-experienced learners found that there were strong differences at age 16 between local authorities (Harrison et al., 2023). Importantly, these were not correlated with factors such as school performance or neighbourhood deprivation that usually held to influence educational outcomes for individuals. Rather, the findings suggested that there were novel factors at work at the local authority level that are specific to care-experienced learners. It was concluded that these included relationships with local schools, support for special educational needs and the availability of care places. It might be hypothesised that these factors would also influence participation in higher education, either directly or through their influence on attainment at 16.

The current study therefore seeks to answer two research questions:

- RQ1: What are the participation rates for care-experienced young people at local authority level, calculated up to the age of 25?
- RQ2: What relationships, if any, exist between these rates and background demographic data at the local authority level?

In order to answer these questions, a bespoke anonymised dataset was secured from the Department for Education through the Secure Research Service at the Office for National Statistics. This provides national administrative data for admissions to higher education between 2007/08 and 2021/22 from the Higher Education Statistics Agency, which has been linked to children's social care records for England across the relevant period. Ethical approval was provided by the relevant committee at the University of Exeter.

This dataset enables higher education participation rates to be calculated at the local authority level through a simple comparison of the total number of care-experienced young people in a given cohort with the numbers attending university up to the age of 25, with subgroup analyses by gender and ethnicity. (Data are also available for the university attended and course studied, but these are outside the scope of this paper.) Because of the relatively small numbers of care-experienced learners, data is pooled across the time period.

The analysis of the dataset is still ongoing at the time of writing. Once participation rates by local authority have been calculated across the period in question, these will be correlated against a range of demographic and education measures provided through the Local Authority Interactive Tool published by the Department for Education. These will include neighbourhood deprivation, attainment at 16 and other factors identified through Harrison et al. (2023).

The findings from this study will be useful to policymakers and practitioners in identifying 'hot' and 'cold' spots for care-experienced learners' participation in higher education for the first time. It will also provide some insight into why these areas have particularly high or low participation rates, offering the opportunity for future qualitative study of effective practices or localised structural barriers.