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## How does a background of care affect transitions into graduate employment?

Zoe Baker

University of Sheffield, Sheffield, United Kingdom

### Research Domains

Employability, enterprise and graduate careers (EE)

### Abstract

Care-experienced people are more likely to be unemployed (Harrison et al., 2023), precariously employed (Arnau-Sabatés & Gilligan, 2015), and/or in low-paid employment (Zeira et al., 2022). One of the most cited reasons for this is lower educational attainment and qualification levels among the care leaver population (Courtney and Hook, 2017). Yet, little is known about access to employment among highly qualified care-experienced people who have graduated from higher education.

To address this gap, the paper reports on empirical findings from the first study to explore the graduate transitions of care-experienced people – the Care-Experienced Graduates' Project (2021-2024). It evidences the unique structural constraints that care-experienced graduates face when accessing graduate employment, and argues that these restrict access to the employability benefits of higher education. To ensure that care-experienced graduates can attain these benefits, the paper calls for enhanced support for transitions out of HE.

### Full paper

#### Introduction

Care-experienced people are more likely to experience lower earnings (Zeira et al., 2022), and higher rates of unemployment (Harrison et al., 2023) than the general population. Due to the private benefits it offers, HE could offset these disadvantages for care-experienced people. For instance, degree holders are more likely to experience higher earnings (Britton et al., 2020), and less exposure to unemployment (Gov.uk. 2025).

In response to research highlighting low levels of HE participation among the care-experienced population (Jackson et al., 2003), coupled with an acknowledgement of the transformative potential that HE has for care-experienced people's futures (DfE, 2019), support offered by HE institutions and local authorities to help care-experienced people access HE has increased considerably (see Baker, 2024a). However, until now, no research attention has been paid to their transitions out of HE and into graduate employment. Existing research on care-experienced people's transitions into employment has instead focused on non-graduates, and points to low qualifications as a significant barrier to the labour market (Bilson et al., 2011; Courtney and Hook, 2017; Furey and Harris-Evans, 2021).

This paper addresses this gap by providing insights into whether HE is transformative in terms of employment outcomes for care-experienced people, or whether they continue to experience challenges associated with their care backgrounds despite being highly qualified. It does so by presenting data from the first study to provide research attention to care-experienced graduates – the Care-Experienced Graduates project (2021-2024). The project took a qualitative longitudinal approach to understand care-experienced graduates' transitions out of HE and into employment in the English and Scottish context.

### **How does a background of care affect transitions into graduate employment?**

The post-graduation period was an incredibly risky time for care-experienced graduates. Unlike many of their non-care-experienced peers, participants did not have a safety net in the form of a family home to undergo a boomerang transition where they could return to if they found themselves without employment upon graduation (Stone et al., 2014). Compounding this was the two-fold loss of support from their HE institutions and local authorities at the point of undergraduate graduation – termed as the 'undergraduate cliff-edge' (Baker, 2024a).

This cliff-edge combined with the absence of a family home meant that the threat of homelessness was acutely felt, especially by those residing in student accommodation. In response to this, care-experienced graduates took a 'survival' rather than 'strategic' approach to locating employment, where they prioritised locating 'any job', rather than one aligned with their degree qualification or long-term career goals (Baker, 2024b). Although this provided some protection from homelessness in the immediate post-graduation period, existing literature on accessing graduate employment has found that accepting work that is 'mismatched' to qualification levels reduces the likelihood of finding 'matched' work later on (Meroni and Vera-Toscano, 2017). The unavailability of a family home to return to and the support that this provides to hang on for the 'right job' can therefore

restrict care-experienced graduates' ability to realise the labour market benefits of HE over the long term.

Among participants who did manage to progress into graduate-level employment relevant to their degree qualification immediately upon graduating, the absence of safety nets and the support cliff-edge resulted in the perpetuation of economic instability. Participants who were living alone, and therefore relied on one income, reported working multiple roles and/or excessive hours to meet their basic day-to-day living costs. This led to poor physical and mental health (Baker, 2024c). Without family safety nets or local authority support to provide economic respite during periods of ill health, it was challenging for graduates to find the time and strength to locate better-paid employment to disrupt this cycle.

## **Conclusion**

Obtaining a university degree in the UK has been shown to result in positive labour market outcomes for graduates (Britton et al., 2020; Gov.uk, 2025). However, the Care-Experienced Graduates project revealed that these are harder to attain for graduates with a care background. Despite increased investment in supporting access to HE for care-experienced people (see Baker, 2024a), the present study highlights that a degree qualification will not ameliorate circumstances arising from a background of care alone. Supporting care-experienced graduates into HE without providing the support needed to access the benefits of a degree later is insufficient in social justice terms. To ensure that care-experienced graduates can realise the benefits of a degree, support for transitions *out* of HE needs to be comparable to that which is currently offered to support transitions *into* this level of study.