CELCIS RESPONSE TO THE EDUCATION AND CULTURE COMMITTEE’S CONSULTATION ON STUDENT SUPPORT

The Committee is concerned with: ‘The extent to which the availability and balance of bursary and loan support in higher education and bursary support in further education are helping to improve access and student retention and to narrow the attainment gap.’

Introduction

We welcome the opportunity to submit evidence to the Education and Culture Committee on this matter. Established in 2011, CELCIS is the Centre for Excellence for Looked After Children in Scotland. Our remit is to work with service providers (such as schools and colleges and education agencies) to improve the experiences and outcomes of children and young people who are (or have been) ‘looked after’ by local authorities. For this reason our responses to the question posed by the Committee are framed in consideration of the particular circumstances of looked after young people and care leavers.

Going to college and university from a looked after background

Looked after children tend to leave school younger than is the norm for all young people in Scotland – 74% (293 young people) of children looked after for the whole year left school at 16 or under in 2013-14, compared to 27% (13,645) of all young people. The proportion of early leavers is higher among those looked after for part of the year – 81% (339 young people).

There are four things to note about these figures:

1. Leaving school younger has important implications for gaining qualifications which allow seamless entry to post-school education;
2. There is a trend of gradual improvement in these figures in recent years but the gap is still too big;
3. The distinction in the data between whole and part year is intended to be a proxy for disruption (i.e. changes in placements); while one year’s figures are insufficient to make firm conclusions, they are indicating what might be predicted – i.e. the negative effect on outcomes of disrupted lives;
4. The looked after student population is likely to be older, particularly in universities, and to have had more complex routes to further and higher education, and this can mean loss of easy access to traditional supports.

Unfortunately we are really not well served as a country in terms of the data available about the looked after student population.

**SDS Survey of post-school destinations**
The annual survey of school leavers by Skills Development Scotland (SDS) shows so-called ‘positive destinations’ at three months and nine months after leaving school.

The most recent data\(^1\) show that 7% of school leaver respondents who were recorded as being looked after progressed directly to higher education. While this figure compares unfavourably with the 39% of all school leavers who go to higher education, it is an improvement. But we should be cautious about over-interpreting this figure and its predecessors (and of comparisons with other nations) because the percentage is based on a very small number of respondents, and the SDS survey was not really designed to give detailed data about sub-groups of the school leaver population.

The importance of non-advanced further education for looked after school leavers is underlined by the 43% for whom this is their first destination, up from 36% in 2011-12, and much higher than the 26% of all school leavers who go on to further education. But the follow up survey at nine months suggests students from looked after backgrounds are more susceptible to drop-out - the 43% in further education drops to 36%, while no similar early drop-out is shown for all school leavers.

The survey also shows the contrast in outcomes for different types of placement. For example, while around 90% of school leavers in foster care were in positive destinations, the proportion for those looked after ‘at home’ was 67%, a figure that fell to 59% in the follow up survey. The report does not show sub-divisions (e.g. placement type) of positive destinations but we might expect that school leavers looked after at home are less likely than those in foster care to progress from school to further and higher education.

**UCAS and HESA data**
Other potential data sources (for higher education) include the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) and the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA). The former provides the facility for applicants from care backgrounds to declare a looked after status for the purpose of alerting institutions so they can draw attention to additional supports (e.g. personalised visits and advice, reduced tariff offered by some institutions and scholarships) provided in line with their ‘corporate parent’ responsibilities\(^2\).

UCAS data for the 2013 undergraduate entry cycle show that 4,925 out of 561,985 (0.8%) UK domiciled applicants to higher education declared a care background, while 3,085 out of 433,610 (0.7%) students gaining places declared a care background\(^3\). It is not known how close these figures are to the true proportion of the higher education student population accounted for by students.

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with a looked after background; there are several reasons why an applicant might choose not to disclose a care background and UCAS says it has evidence that some applicants mistakenly select the ‘care leaver box’.

We do know two things: first, 0.7% is considerably lower than the approximately 1.5% of the child/youth population in Scotland made up by looked after children; and, second, a proportion of students (varying between institutions) is recruited by non-UCAS routes, such as college-university articulation agreements and wider access courses, and care leavers may be more likely to access higher education by these routes.

The HESA data are potentially more accurate as they are based on information collected from students at registration, when a place is secure, and volunteering information is less likely to be affected by (erroneous) fears of prejudicing an offer. HESA first added this field to the student record in 2013 but has not yet published reports based on institutional returns.  

As far as we can ascertain, there are no national returns from colleges indicating the care background of further education students. The Scottish Funding Council (SFC) does not report such data, other than to reproduce the SDS destination survey from the Educational Outcomes of Looked After Children report. The SFC funded a study of (428) students from a looked after background in five colleges between 2009 and 2011. The study highlighted the relative youth of the students (48% under 16 in 2009-10), a fact that is a consequence of arrangements with schools and likely to be in contrast to the age profile of care leavers in higher education, and the high proportion taking lower level and introductory courses. The Student Award Agency Scotland (SAAS) also does not report on financial awards made to students from a looked after background.

We offer the following conclusions in respect of data collection:

1. It is important to have an accurate head-count of students in further and higher education who are currently looked after or are care leavers;
2. The differences in definition of ‘looked after children’ and ‘care leavers’ between Scotland and rUK leads us to the view that it would be preferable to try to collect these data directly from Scottish institutions and that institutions should be provided with support and advice to help them undertake this task;
3. We need to have good data on applications for student support funds and awards by students who are currently looked after or are care leavers.

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4. [https://www.hesa.ac.uk/component/content/article?id=2758](https://www.hesa.ac.uk/component/content/article?id=2758)
6. Connelly et al. (2011). [http://core.ac.uk/display/9036188](http://core.ac.uk/display/9036188)
Bursary and loan support for students from a looked after background

Most ‘young’ (i.e. under 25) higher education students from a looked after background will be regarded as having the lowest household income and thus will be eligible for a non-refundable bursary of £1,750, plus a maximum student loan of £5,750, giving a total income of £7,500, or £625 per month. (The funding provided to older - i.e. 25 and over - students amounts to the same, though the proportions of grant and loan are different.) The University of Edinburgh estimates the monthly living cost for a student to be in the range £606-£1,230.8 Accepting that cost of living varies across the country, it is easy to see that students who do not have additional funds from parents would be struggling to make ends meet on these amounts.

Unlike in some European countries (e.g. Sweden), the student support system in Scotland/UK makes assumptions that parents should and will make a financial contribution to the income of their student children. But the extent to which parents voluntarily make contributions or are able to do so varies, and there is some evidence that students from non-traditional backgrounds are particularly disadvantaged by this assumption. For example, the 2011-12 Student Income and Expenditure Survey of almost 4,000 English-domiciled students analysing expenses incurred by 53% of these, found that students who received the most from families tended to be from more traditional student backgrounds: they were younger, white, living away from home, from managerial/professional backgrounds and single9.

Students from looked after backgrounds can expect their local authorities (as corporate parents) to provide additional support, and it is generally accepted that support will continue to be provided until a care leaver completes his or her course. But the Support and Assistance of Young People Leaving Care (Scotland) Regulations 2003 left open to interpretation the precise nature of financial support to be provided. And here we need to rely on anecdotes, as we are not aware of recent research on the financial situations of students from a looked after background in Scotland. The author knows of one student who receives a refund of the cost of textbooks and rent-free accommodation from his local authority, while another receives no contribution to text-book cost and a part-contribution to rent payments. There are graduate students who continue to receive support, while other local authorities (or individual budget-holders) only provide support to the end of first-degree studies. The 2015 Amendment (to the Regulations) will not remove these inconsistencies since the wording of the Regulations continues to give scope for a wide degree of interpretation, viz. ‘...provide the person with such advice, guidance and assistance as it considers necessary for the purposes of meeting those needs.’10

There are at least two other complications which affect local authority funding arrangements. One is where a student was looked after by more than one local authority and was not in aftercare arrangements when starting studies. We have no hard evidence about the extent of the impact of such circumstances, but we do have case study testimony of disputes over which local authority

8 http://www.ed.ac.uk/studying/international/finance/cost-of-living
should provide support, and difficulties in providing the evidence of care background required by SAAS.

Calculations of the living costs of further and higher education are unlikely to take account of the additional costs associated with membership of a college sports centre, student societies, and travel or study abroad programmes. These additional opportunities are not simply frills, but are important for wellbeing and for helping to develop the ‘well rounded’ people often said to be highly valued by prospective employers.

A further complication is the position of students who are or were formerly looked after ‘at home’. There have been widespread assumptions by local authorities and educational institutions that the definition of ‘care leaver’ applied only to those who had been looked after ‘away from home’ (i.e. in foster, residential or kinship care). The intention of Parliament, expressed through the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014, is that the definition of ‘care leaver’ (in law and practice) should apply to all formerly looked after children, irrespective of placement type. But there will need to be a degree of education and monitoring to ensure that this clarification is understood and that the resource implications (it is bound to increase the demand for funds) have been calculated.

**Additional financial supports**

There are several other forms of financial support available to students from a low income background. These divide essentially between those provided by SAAS/SFC and those provided by individual institutions. The arrangements differ between the college and university sectors: funds from government sources provide broadly similar income supports for both sectors but the application and disbursement arrangements are different; colleges probably have more limited access to scholarship-type funds from bequests and alumni funds. Institutions also provide small ‘crisis loans’ which need to be repaid.

Additional funds from SAAS include the Discretionary Fund (means-tested and paid through institutions) and special grants, such as the Disabled Students’ Allowance (many looked after children will have been assessed as having learning difficulties but we have no data on the extent to which they are receiving allowances), the Lone Parents’ Grant, and the Vacation Grant for Care Leavers which in theory will pay £105 per month directly to landlords for accommodation over the summer vacation.

Students only qualify for additional funds if they have taken out the maximum loan, an important point in practice. CELCIS has received testimony indicating that some social workers and through-care workers have, understandably, advised students against taking a student loan, as part of general advice to avoid debt, only to discover that this causes a barrier to accessing special funds. We have no idea of the extent of this problem, but there is clearly a difference of view among professionals about debt, and even about whether it is legitimate to distinguish between ‘good debt’ (i.e. with low rates of interest) and ‘bad debt’ (i.e. commercial and pay-day loans, and loans from ‘loan sharks’).

**The care leaver vacation grant**

The SAAS-administered vacation grant is unquestionably an ineffective fund, and the rationale for it should be reconsidered in our view. It is significant that while SAAS publishes data on grants made to lone parents and students with disabilities it has not published any data on the vacation grant. The
The explanation is simple: the grant has made payments to very few students since it was established in 2003-4. For example between 2003-4 and 2010-11 a total of seven students were paid money from this fund.\(^{11}\)

The existence of the grant was publicised widely among local authorities and institutions in 2011-12 and this activity seems to have resulted in an increase in applications (a mean of 30 applications per year between 2012-13 and 2014-15), but the number of awards granted is appreciably smaller (a mean of 5 grants between 2012-13 and 2013-14, the current year’s figures not yet being available).\(^ {12}\)

The explanation for this low success rate may be related to overly restrictive and complicated entitlement criteria, leading to a very high threshold for qualification and also lack of operational clarity (e.g. it is not clear that the grant applies to those looked after at home, the need for a supporting letter from a social worker or other official, and the complications of changing rent payment arrangements from one source to another which defeat the most resilient of students).

SAAS is working with CELCIS to revise the guidance and remove the known barriers to making a successful application for this grant, but the wider matter of how care leaver students are to be supported in their accommodation costs during the summer, and whether the funds should come from central or local government budgets, remains to be resolved.

We offer the following conclusions in respect of financial support:

1. Students from a looked after background are highly likely to be in precarious financial circumstances;
2. The assumptions built into the system about ‘parental contribution’ are problematic for students from a looked after background because of the variations in interpretation between local authorities;
3. Cost of living calculations are unlikely to provide a margin to cover social, travel and study-abroad opportunities;
4. Students in the university sector may be more advantaged in terms of access to scholarship funding, compared with those in the college sector;
5. The Care Leaver Vacation Grant is not working and discussion leading to a decision about the most effective way funding year-round accommodation for students is urgently required.

The emotional impact of funding arrangement for students from a looked after background

It is not possible to consider the existence of funds for the most disadvantaged students in isolation from the assumptions that underpin them and the mechanisms for application and disbursement.

One assumption, already referred to in this response, is the parental contribution. Parental contributions extend to more than finance, since students are advised and assisted by parents in making decisions about loans, compiling evidence and negotiating the bureaucratic hurdles in

\(^{11}\) Personal communication between the author and a Scottish Government official.

\(^ {12}\) Personal communication between the author and a SAAS official.
completing grant applications. We would not be surprised if students looked after at home and in residential and kinship placements were most disadvantaged, compared to those who benefit from continuing relationships with foster carers. Care leavers in receipt of leaving care support will be more advantaged, but many students do not have such support and aftercare workers vary in their knowledge of the student funding system.

At the risk of generalising, and minimising individual differences, the continuing effect of damaging pre-care experiences impact the psychology of young people with a looked after background. There is a need for more research into the grant application behaviour of these young people but we do now have considerable anecdotal evidence of difficulties, from several authoritative sources. For example, the SAAS application process is made online, and requires having documentation to hand and providing the information requested in successive screens. In 2014, a group of students involved with Who Cares? Scotland made an impressive presentation to SAAS staff, demonstrating, among other barriers, a screen requiring information about parents appearing early in the application process. It is to SAAS’s credit that it has sought to co-operate with Who Cares? Scotland to remove that particular barrier.

Many students from a looked after background have great difficulties in negotiating the inevitable bureaucracy attached to receiving public funds. They may fail to turn up for appointments, miss deadlines for making applications, mislay vital documents with evidence of their status, and become discouraged if they face a hurdle in the process. One student known to the author went to a pay-day lender, leaving a part-completed application for the Discretionary Fund, having failed to turn up for an appointment to provide required documentation. One institution invited applicants who declared a looked after background to apply for scholarships – no-one did. An email survey found the explanation was a belief that the application would be unsuccessful.

Many students from a looked after background face major stressors, often compounded, which impact particularly on both course progress and their capacity to co-operate in the administrative requirements associated with applications for funding. These include the effects of mental health problems, the distractions of family difficulties (which may include providing money to help support family members), and inexperience at managing personal finances, debt, and avoidance behaviour. In addition, a considerable amount of time can be taken up in making complicated financial arrangements, and this can affect course performance. One student known to the author took time off studies to try to borrow money from friends. Another moved back in with his mother when he couldn’t pay his rent; the combination of becoming involved in difficulties his mother was having and a longer journey to college caused him to drop out.

Being looked after means attending meetings about your life; if being a student is supposed to be about developing independence and coping skills, how does it feel to find you need to engage in meetings with officials which serve to highlight your dependency? The stigma associated with being looked after can be keenly felt. One student in a shared flat was embarrassed when the landlord called to collect rent money and openly referred to the arrangement by which the local authority paid the money directly: ‘I didn’t realise you were in care.’
We offer the following conclusions in respect of the emotional impact associated with funding arrangements:

1. The bureaucracy of funding needs to be understood in the context of the particular circumstances of students from a looked after background;
2. It is vital that corporate parents collaborate to understand barriers and to take steps to remove them;
3. Arrangements in respect of financial support for students from low income backgrounds, particularly looked after young people and care leavers, should feature prominently in institutional outcome agreements and in corporate parenting plans.
4. Every student from a looked after background should have access to individualised support to ensure funding arrangements are in place and that finance-seeking does not negatively impact on studies.

Conclusion

In summary, we think that the financial support arrangements are insufficient in material terms and also in respect of their delivery mechanisms to improve substantially access and retention for students who come from a looked after background.

Thank you for this opportunity to contribute to this important inquiry. CELCIS welcomes any further discussions with the Committee which are felt to be appropriate.

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