

‘Widening Access to Higher Education for Looked After Children in Scotland’

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My aim in this short presentation is to provide an analysis of both the Government’s intentions in relation to widening access to higher education for looked after children and the data currently available to us, and also briefly to give my own views on what more we could be doing in the short to medium term.

In its response to the consultation on the Children and Young People Bill, the Scottish Government says: ‘The Bill is the result of a collective recognition of what we need to do if we seek to do right by our children and young people’¹.

Included in the list of things the government recognises it needs to do is to have: ‘better transitions for young people up to the age of 25 and a more deeply-rooted and widely-understood sense of corporate parenting in the public sector.’

So where are we now?

The Government’s 2007 *We Can and Must Do Better* prospectus for looked after children outlined this vision: ‘Scotland’s looked after children and young people should be encouraged and supported throughout their lives to maximise their educational potential’².

For that vision to be realised those who can influence looked after children need to have appropriate attitudes.

¹ <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2013/03/9148/16>

² Scottish Executive. (2007). *Looked after children & young people: We can and must do better*. Edinburgh: The Scottish Executive. Retrieved from www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2007/01/15084446/0

The importance of attitudes and behaviour in influencing whether children growing up disadvantaged circumstances progress to higher education was highlighted in a 2010 report for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation which emphasised that parents' and children's aspirations and expectations for advanced education should be raised from primary school, and it recommended help for parents and children to believe that their own actions could lead to higher education³.

The powerful effect of aspiration was dramatically portrayed in Michael Apted's 1964 film 'Seven-Up' in which one young boy talks about his plans to go to Oxford while another seven year old says: 'What's a university?'

A student at an English university speaking at the Buttle UK Best Practice conference in London in May 2012 described this reaction from a teacher when she said that she was keen to go to university: 'I don't know how to tell you this but people like you don't go to university.'

For every discouraging and stigmatising response there many more supportive experiences. But the importance of access to support and encouragement by at least one significant adult has featured in several studies of care leavers in post-school education, for example, the five-country YIPPEE study⁴:

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It is important to recognize the positive features, strengths and competences of these young people and their at times astonishing capacity for resilience. An essential factor to translate this into educational success is access to support and encouragement from at least one significant adult, not necessarily a direct carer, who can give them good advice, focus on the opportunities open to them and help them develop a perception of themselves as competent learners.

This 'essential factor' is being turned into reality in a project set up by Glasgow City Council and the University of Strathclyde, supported by CELCIS, in which looked after children currently in S2 and S3 in three Glasgow secondary schools are being provided with mentors recruited from University staff and alumni.

³ Goodman, A. & Gregg, P. (2010). *Poorer children's educational attainment: How important are attitudes and behaviour?* York: JRF. Retrieved from www.jrf.org.uk

⁴ Jackson, S. & Cameron, C. (2011). *Final report of the YIPPEE Project*. London: Thomas Coram Research Unit, Institute of Education, University of London.

The personal relationship with the mentor will be enriched with campus visits, support for carers and a three-day summer school with an optional residential component.

Another of the YIPPEE research recommendations was that:

Child welfare services, child protection agencies and institutions such as children's homes should collect regular and up-to-date information on the educational participation and attainment of individuals in their care as well as in aggregated form up to the age of 25.

We are still a long way short of this ideal in Scotland.

Local authorities appear to be at very different stages in relation to having access to information about educational progress and support needs that would be expected as part of GIRFEC planning.

For example, a research audit published recently by Henderson & Whitehead of SCRA found that only 68% of plans contained a reference to the child's education and less than half included specific actions. Plans were also more likely to identify problems than talents. For example, only 17% of children who were achieving educationally had plans to support their potential and continued achievement and none of the children who were described as talented had plans to support their abilities.

Few plans recorded the child's views or aspirations and only 6% of plans contained actions to support the child's ambitions. Less than a quarter had educational goals beyond the current school year⁵.

Jamie Kinloch, a fourth year undergraduate at University of the West of Scotland, conducted a series of FOI inquiries in late 2012, the findings of which were published in Holyrood Magazine in January. He asked a sample of local authorities whether they collected data on how many looked after children progressed to college or university. Only one said they could provide information.

In this respect Scotland appears to be poorly served compared to England where virtual heads should have this information. It is important to realise that this is not just a reporting function but a vital tool for identifying needs and planning for individual children. If the data aren't there you have to question whether the support is there.

⁵ Henderson, G., & Whitehead, I. (2013). *How much is education included in the plans of children on supervision requirements?* Stirling: Scottish Children's Reporter Administration Retrieved from www.scra.gov.uk

Hopeful of having another source of information about looked after children in higher education, in 2011 I asked SAAS to provide data on the Care Leaver's Vacation Grant. I was surprised that I could not find data tables on the SAAS or Scottish Government websites, though I could find data on other grants such as the Lone Parent's Grant.

I requested the information and a search of records confirmed that between academic sessions 2003-04 and 2010-11 only seven students were paid money from this grant.

I was very surprised that the Agency itself had not noticed the lack of demand however its staff were very supportive in improving awareness by putting a link on the home page of their website, and in writing to all local authorities to draw attention to the grant⁶.

Another source of data is Skills Development Scotland's annual surveys of the destinations of school leavers. In 2010-11, 12% of all school leavers were not in employment, education or training, a figure that is acknowledged to be high by international comparisons. About 95% of the most economically advantaged 16-19 year olds are in so-called 'positive destinations', compared with 78% among those in the SIMD-20, most deprived, category, and 77% of those with additional support needs. Among looked after young people, almost half who responded to the survey reported being unemployed nine months after leaving school.

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The SDS survey indicates that the proportion of looked after children progressing directly from school to higher education in Scotland is around 1-2%, a figure that has not changed since monitoring began. But it turns out that the 1% figure represents only 10 individuals, though the published report provides only percentages.

In my view, this report is not currently very useful for monitoring the progression to HE of looked after children and indeed risks minimising the later achievements of many care leavers. CELCIS will collaborate with Scottish Government and SDS to improve both the amount of data reported and the way in which young people are represented.

Our UK neighbours represent progression to HE a little differently, reporting on the destination of 19 year olds who were looked after when they were 16. The Welsh Government estimates approximately 2.4% of Welsh care leavers are in higher education. I have not been able to locate recent figures for Northern Ireland but a 2008 report indicated that 8% of young people in aftercare

⁶ http://www.saas.gov.uk/_forms/care_leavers_grant.pdf

were in higher education (based on 62 people). In England the figure is 6% and the pattern is the same – essentially there has been no change in the past 10 years.

In 2010-11 34% of all school leavers in Scotland surveyed by SDS progressed to HE, a proportion that has increased a few percentage points in recent years. The explanation for the small increase is likely to be the trend to stay on in school which is related to gaining more and better qualifications. As the Children's Commissioner's *Sweet 16* report highlighted, a very high proportion of looked after children leave school at the statutory minimum leaving age of 16⁷. And many of these young people will have become disaffected with school at least a few years' earlier.

Although early school leaving is characteristic of children in the care system in industrialised countries, this is not universally the case. In Scandinavia and Finland it appears to be much more common for children in care to complete the upper stages of secondary education and therefore to gain qualifications to allow progress to higher education⁸.

We don't have data on the numbers of students who have a looked after background currently studying higher education courses in Scotland. We have to interpolate from different sources. The SDS survey does not include mature students, students who progress from FE, or those who come from outwith Scotland.

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Another FOI inquiry conducted by Jamie Kinloch of all 19 HEIs in Scotland found that a total of 84 new students declaring a looked after background via the UCAS system had enrolled in undergraduate programmes in 2010-11. Not all of these students will be Scottish-domiciled. Three institutions said they could not provide data and only nine reported having enrolled students who declared a looked after background.

Further education colleges are important first destinations for looked after children leaving school – for 25%, according to SDS. Although many are undertaking low-level courses, for a proportion these programmes will lead progressively to higher education via introductory courses and National Certificate courses. HNC/D courses in FE colleges can lead to degree programmes in universities, by credit transfer and articulation agreements.

⁷ Scotland's Commissioner for Children and Young People. (2008). *Sweet 16?: The age of leaving care in Scotland*. Retrieved May 12, 2008, from www.sccyp.org.uk/webpages/Leaving_Care_Report_for_Web_20080325.pdf

⁸ Connolly, G., & Matheson, I. (2012). The education of looked after children in Scotland: Some comparisons with Scandinavian countries and Finland. *Research Briefing 1*. Retrieved from www.celcis.org/media/resources/publications/CELCSResearchBriefing1Web.pdf

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Illustrating the importance of the FE route, a majority of the applicants to Strathclyde University in 2012 who declared a looked after background through UCAS were in FE or other post-school education at the time of application. It would be useful to have Scottish-wide data on this wider access trend.

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A simple, but potentially effective, activity has been led by The Who Cares? Trust which, with assistance from CELCIS, published a Scottish edition of its HE Handbook. The Handbook, based on a questionnaire sent to all institutions, provides general advice about applying from a care background and includes a page for each institution, with a checklist covering 10 characteristics, such as website information for care leavers, availability of 365-day accommodation and whether scholarships are available. The name and contact details for an adviser are provided⁹.

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In 2007-08 four Scottish universities were awarded the Quality Mark for supporting care leavers in a scheme established by Buttle UK. A total of eight universities subsequently held the Quality Mark though one has since declined to renew. A further three universities have indicated they are in the process of submitting applications. According to Buttle UK, this is a lower rate of take-up than in England and Wales.

The eight institutions report that they are each receiving applications each year from about 50 students on average who have declared a looked after background. This represents a considerable commitment by advisers who contact the applicants and provide additional support. On average about 10 students per institution are admitted each year, with a range from about 4-6 to about 15 or more.

In February, CELCIS, with support from the SFC and Scottish Government, asked the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) to add a 'looked after' field in the student registration record. HESA readily agreed and the data will be published by HESA from 2015, but if there was co-operation from institutions we could have accurate data about the actual number of students with a looked after background in Scotland this autumn.

⁹ <http://www.thewhocarestrust.org.uk/pages/the-h.e-handbook.html>

This is important because the repetitious use of the 1% figure, in my view, had led the sector to assume that the number of students is so small that it is hardly worth committing resources to providing support. Reporting the actual numbers of students will help to change attitudes. Another argument is that institutions, although autonomous, are substantially funded by the public purse and should engage in activities in line with their corporate parenting responsibilities.

Some Scottish universities have been criticised, by NUS Scotland, for example, for enrolling few students from the least affluent, or SIMD 20, communities. St Andrew's University has come in for particular criticism. Principal, Professor Louise Richardson was quoted in *The Herald* as saying: 'There's no point blaming universities – the intervention needs to take place far earlier'¹⁰. Well, yes, but neither is it acceptable for universities to say the problem lies with schools. Universities are important members of our community and their expertise in research is needed to support local authorities, particularly in relation to the implementation of Curriculum for Excellence. There is an opportunity with the realignment of the FE sector for creative strategic groupings to emerge with a specific focus on improving educational outcomes for the most disadvantaged.

Across the UK and in many countries there are examples of projects aimed at improving access to higher education for looked after children. Summer schools specifically for looked after children, like the one that has been running for a number of years at the University of Michigan, represent one approach, providing a bridge to achieving higher education goals¹¹. The problem is that such initiatives tend to be championed by enthusiastic individuals in individual institutions and are not part of a co-ordinated country-wide programme. Institutions can do as much or as little as they want.

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The Scottish Funding Council (SFC) has asked HE institutions to demonstrate in their outcome agreements how they are making progress in relation to access, equality and diversity. In particular, it has requested that institutions show how they will take action to achieve more even patterns of participation by learners from different protected characteristic groups, including those from care backgrounds.

¹⁰ The Herald, 1 April 2013.

¹¹ Kirk, R., & Day, A. (2011). Increasing college access for youth aging out of foster care: Evaluation of a summer camp program for foster youth transitioning from high school to college. [Article]. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 33(7), 1173-1180. doi: 10.1016/j.childyouth.2011.02.018

Reviewing the outcome agreements for 2012-13 I found that while 16 out of 19 institutions make some reference to students from a looked after background there is considerable variation in the degree of detail provided. In most agreements the reference does little more than give recognition to looked after children among other low participation groups. Few institutions provide more detailed analysis of participation and indications of engagement activities and plans for future action. It is clear that different institutions are at quite different starting points.

I want to finish with two images which are indicative of different aspects of wider access for students with looked after backgrounds.

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The first is Jenny Fagan who spent her early life in care in Edinburgh. Her debut novel, *The Panopticon*, made the Granta List 2013 of best young British novelists. Jenni says: 'I don't want to be a poster girl for care homes...I spent 16 years in the system and that's enough.' Always a reader and, by her own admission, perfectly capable of doing well in school, she nevertheless didn't engage and left school at the earliest opportunity. However, by a combination of personal resilience and a series of creative writing opportunities and grants, she began higher education at 25, and gained degrees from Greenwich and Royal Holloway universities.

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The second is of Cally Ann Mackenzie and Mandy Clarke, who were recipients in 2011 of Who Cares? Scotland's scholarships for young people from a care background to attend Harvard University's seven week summer school. This year four young people supported by Who Cares? Scotland, will travel to Boston – two currently in school and two in FE. One of the places has been provided by Harvard which has waived the fee.

What both images convey is individuals with a looked after background being successful in conventional academic terms. They benefited from support of different kinds.

To summarise, if we are going to increase the number of looked after children who access higher education, I think we need to take a range of actions which could include:

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- promote more positive images of academic success
- improve our data gathering
- improve the quality of the educational aspect of GIRFEC planning
- concerted efforts to encourage looked after children to stay on in school beyond 16
- more institutions with the Buttle UK Quality Mark
- a more strategic approach to providing enriching opportunities, involving local authorities, FE colleges and HE institutions across Scotland
- more ambition in university outcome agreements