

## QAA Student Network Event: Glasgow University 1 April 2015

15:25 - 15:50: Graham Connelly

Graham will speak about why he thinks universities need to be more ambitious for students from looked after/care background.

### **“Supporting the Learner Journeys of Students from a Looked After Background: Why I think universities need to be more ambitious for students from a looked after / care background”**

Thank you for inviting me to speak at this event. The fact that the QAA student network is holding this event is significant and highlights for me the importance of the student body putting universities in the spotlight and holding their institutions to account for addressing what I think is a fundamental issue of fairness.

It is simply not fair that those who are most disadvantaged from a young age are even further disadvantaged in their life opportunities in young adulthood. But I think there is a lot of opportunity for the student body to show leadership in helping to address the problems and identify solutions.

I'm going to start by breaking a personal rule.

**Four...** that's the percentage of looked after school leavers who reported they were studying in higher education in 2011-12. But **Fifteen...** is the number that proportion is based on and 416 is the denominator.

I'll explain the statistic first and then explain my rule.

Skills Development Scotland conducts an annual survey of school leavers three months after leaving school and again six months later. This is used to populate the positive destinations table in the 'educational outcomes of looked after children' report published annually in June by Scottish Government.

Now a lot of people quote the four per cent figure (or two per cent as it has been in previous years), as I have done myself in the past, to demonstrate just how awful are the educational outcomes of looked after children and young people.

There are three reasons why I came to a personal decision to stop quoting this figure, at least without explaining it.

First, this number just simply underestimates the engagement with higher education of people from a looked after background, many of whom take a more circuitous route in education – sometimes a more interesting route – and inevitably take longer. Instead of wringing our hands and saying how awful this is, we need to accept it and adapt our post-school education system to take account of this reality.

Second, repetition of the statistic invites the response that it's hardly worth making special arrangements for such small numbers and that the problem really belongs in our schools that are not ensuring that looked after children leave with adequate entry qualifications. (To be fair, it's a while since I've heard this view articulated, and I detect a big improvement in the rhetoric lately.)

Third, it's a deficit approach which compounds the stigma faced by people with a looked after background.

So what steps could we take to make things better? I want to highlight five key ambitions.

- 1. One is to find opportunities to position positive stories about the achievements of students from a looked after background and to highlight their contribution because these will help to change attitudes.**

The belief that you can succeed applies to institutions as much as to individuals, so reinforcement of positive messages is important. That applies as much within an institution as outside. There is a lot of good work going on in our HE institutions targeted at widening access and supporting students to be successful. There's an important audience within institutions as well as outside.

We know that young people from a looked-after background need additional support and therefore consume extra resources, but the benefits do not flow solely in one direction: students themselves from a looked after background are contributing to HE in Scotland.

Here are two examples of positive stories: the first is a photograph of four young people from a looked after background at Harvard University in 2013. Each year since 2010, Who Cares? Scotland has provided scholarships for young people to attend the Harvard Summer School. The second example is direct influencing by members of the student community who themselves have a looked after background (e.g. Gary Paterson, USSA President and members of the executive of NUS Scotland).

- 2. Another ambition is that we will have much better information about participation in Scottish HE by students with a looked after background. Describing something is the first step in making improvements.**

Institutions can establish a baseline, have some dialogue about what this means, and set improvement targets. This includes detailed examination of recruitment history at departmental and course level.

The institutions that hold the Buttle Quality Mark have been reporting annually to Buttle and in theory since 2014 it has been a requirement for institutions to include information about enrolment of students with a looked after background in the HESA return but for various reasons it is unlikely that we will have accurate reports soon. So I think it would be really useful if we could have collaboration between the QAA student network, NUS

Scotland and CELCIS to collect and publish the first ever Scottish wide account of students who declare a looked after background in Scotland's 19 HEIs.

This graph is compiled from statistics published by HESA. It shows the rise in the number of students declaring disabilities in universities in the UK in a 10-year period. It also shows Scotland trailing in this respect. We can debate what this graph is telling us, and I would like to be able to have similar debates about how well we are doing in our attempts to increase the proportion of the student population with a looked after background. Incidentally, based on self-declaration through UCAS application, the University of Strathclyde has estimated that these students constitute about 0.5% of the undergraduate population. What should it be? Looked after children, and children on child protection registers together constitute about two per cent of the 0-18 population in Scotland and that proportion might give us the basis of a target.

**3. A third ambition is to scrutinise and review critically what institutions say about the support they plan to offer at the critical stages of selection, induction and being on course.**

Plans will appear variously in institutional review (ELIR) reports, outcome agreements with the SFC, and new corporate parenting plans which from today (1 April 2015) become a statutory responsibility for post 16 bodies.

References to support arrangements in outcome agreements have varied in text length, creativity and ambition – so there is room for improvement. I might look, for example, for evidence of understanding of the implications of the 2014 Act, such as the introduction of the legal entitlement to Continuing Care, which is likely to increase the number of undergraduates who continue to be looked after in care placements up to age 21.

If you want to read up on the changes, I recommend CELCIS's [Inform Briefings](#).

**4. A fourth ambition is to have effective local collaboration to support the learner journeys of students from a looked after background.**

The Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 encourages collaborative working between corporate parents to develop, enact and monitor (corporate parenting) plans.

There are two compelling statistics. One is the very high proportion of looked after young people who leave school at the minimum school leaving age or earlier. And we know that they are much less likely than the general population to be in positive destinations.

This and other issues related to the so-called 'attainment gap' is currently the subject of an Inquiry Education and Culture Committee of the Scottish Parliament. Detailed submissions, including from NUS-Scotland and some HE institutions, to three separate aspects of the Inquiry can be found on the Committee website.

The other statistic is the one I showed earlier indicating just how important further education (and therefore colleges) is for looked after school leavers (about a quarter). Add in adults with a looked after background who return to education via college.

Without getting into the details here, I think there are opportunities for local partnerships to consider how to identify and address barriers to progression and to support transitions and progression.

**5. My fifth ambition is that there is in place a credible Scottish accreditation framework to replace the Buttle Quality Mark when it ends this summer.**

The Quality Mark has, in my view, made an important contribution in the past seven years. It has helped to produce the culture which has stimulated knowledge exchange activities such as today's seminar. It achieved the UCAS voluntary declaration of 'care background'. It has helped institutions to improve the support to individuals available during application and induction especially.

Happily, there is work afoot to develop a replacement Scottish framework, and outline plans are due to be announced at an event at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland on 8 June. While there is still a lot of work to be done on the detail, I can exclusively reveal that an important principle that has been accepted by the planning group is the crucial importance of the involvement of the student body in the accreditation process.

So I think it's an exciting time. We have a lot of opportunities for collaborative work to make things better. There should be no limit to our ambitions.

Thank you for listening.