Empower Academy Project

Evidence Review & Primary Research to Inform the Development of Outreach for Learners with Experience of Children Social Care

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OfS Uni Connect Programme   FUT RE

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1.0 Introduction

It is recognised that learners from a care experienced background are a significantly underrepresented population in Higher Education (HE). Moreover, it is accepted that young people from care experienced backgrounds frequently experience poor educational outcomes, which has been associated with potential adverse circumstances and significant disadvantage in later life. Consequently, there is a common aim in both national public social-care and education policy to put in place effective strategies and plans to help ameliorate the adverse impact that care experience status can have.

Future U, with the support of its university partners and the Lancashire Virtual School, have undertaken a project to consider how best it might collaborate, plan, design, implement and evaluate a programme of support aimed at supporting young people from the Lancashire region who have required and experienced direct social care support as they consider their education & career futures. As part of this project, a research component was undertaken initially.

1.1 Aims of the Research

The overall aim of the research was to develop an outreach programme to support the educational choices including progression to HE that was based on the needs of care experienced learners.

The aim was achieved via the following research objectives:

- To scope, identify and quantify the locality of the care experienced learners within the Future U outreach footprint
- To learn more about the attitudes and experiences of the care experienced learners towards progression
- To explore the perspectives of social care staff and any other key influencers on the needs of care experienced learners
- To identify any best practice evidence and/or current outreach activities delivered to care experienced learners
- To develop an understanding of the potential enablers and barriers to progression faced by care experienced learners
- To identify the current support needs of care experienced learners

1.2 Methods

A range of methods were utilised to undertake the research component including:

- Population profile
- Literature search and review
- Desktop Scoping identifying examples of good practice and activities developed by UniConnect partnerships and stakeholders aimed at supporting care experienced learners consider their education and career futures.

- A Learning Needs Analysis survey with care experienced learners that identified skills/ knowledge gaps and current support needs
- interviews with current care experienced undergraduate students and social care staff directly working with care experienced individuals

The primary research (i.e., learner needs analysis survey and interviews) conducted for this project followed the correct ethical processes and ethical approval was granted from the University of Central Lancashire BAHSS Ethics Committee.

1.3 Scope of the Report

This report provides an outline of the; evidence underpinning the project, the primary research undertaken, and the recommendations for outreach. Each component of the research is captured as standalone individual reports.

Throughout this report, the term Children Social Care Experienced (CSC-experienced) is used to ensure consistency in language and definition of groups. This term denotes all those children/young people, who have or have had experience with children's social care at some point before they turned 18. However, other terms are also used to differentiate between groups that describe this population.

2.0 Profile of Care Experienced Population

Various terms with significant overlap have been used to describe the target population in scope. Based on the available data, five emerging subgroups within the target population have been identified; (1) children looked after, (2) previously looked after children (3) care leavers, (4) children in need and (5) children on protection plans.

This paper outlines the most recent data for the five emerging subgroups as of the end of March 2022.[1,2]

Children looked after in England

Under the Children Act 1989, a child is looked after by a local authority if they are provided with accommodation for a continuous period of more than 24 hours or are subject to a care order or are subject to a placement order. As of March 2022, there were 82, 170 children looked after by local authorities nationally. Figure 2.1 shows the number of children looked after in three local authorities (Blackburn with Darwen, Blackpool and Lancashire) on 31 March 2022.

Figure 2.1: Number of children looked after in three local authorities on 31 March 2022
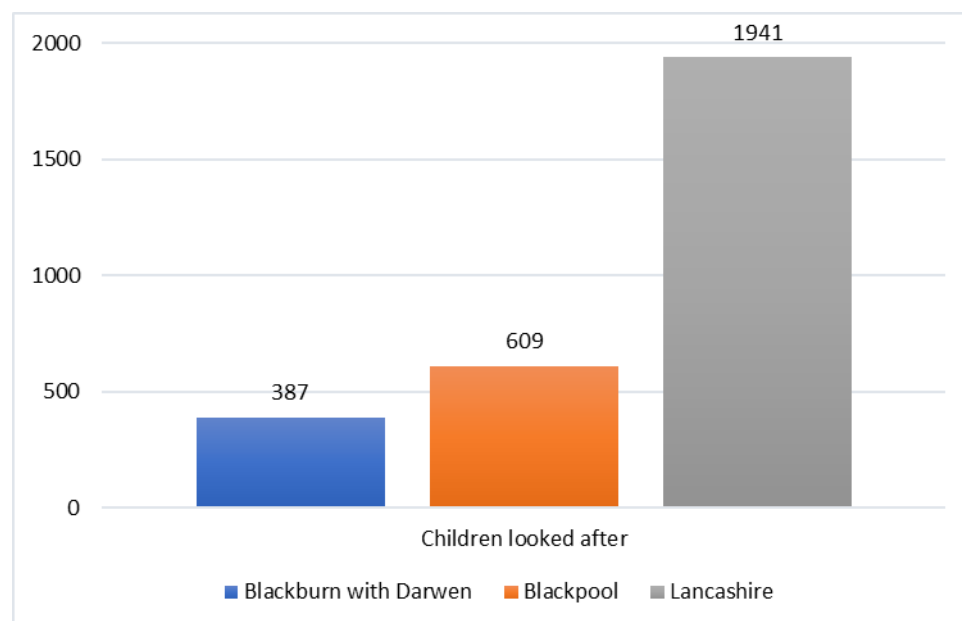
Characteristics of looked after children in three local authorities (Blackburn with Darwen, Blackpool and Lancashire)

In each of the three local authorities, more males (range from 53% to 54%) than females were looked after. The majority of looked after children were from a white background (80% in Blackburn with Darwen; 91% in Blackpool; 85% in Lancashire). The greatest number

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[1] https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/children-looked-after-in-england-including-adoptions
[2] https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/characteristics-of-children-in-need

of looked after children were from the age group 10-15 years in each of the three local authorities (see Figure 2.2). About half of children who had been looked after continuously for 12 months in each of the three local authorities had special educational needs (SEN) on 31 March 2021 (see Figure 2.3). The most common type of need for looked after children on 31 March 2021 was 'Social, Emotional and Mental Health'.

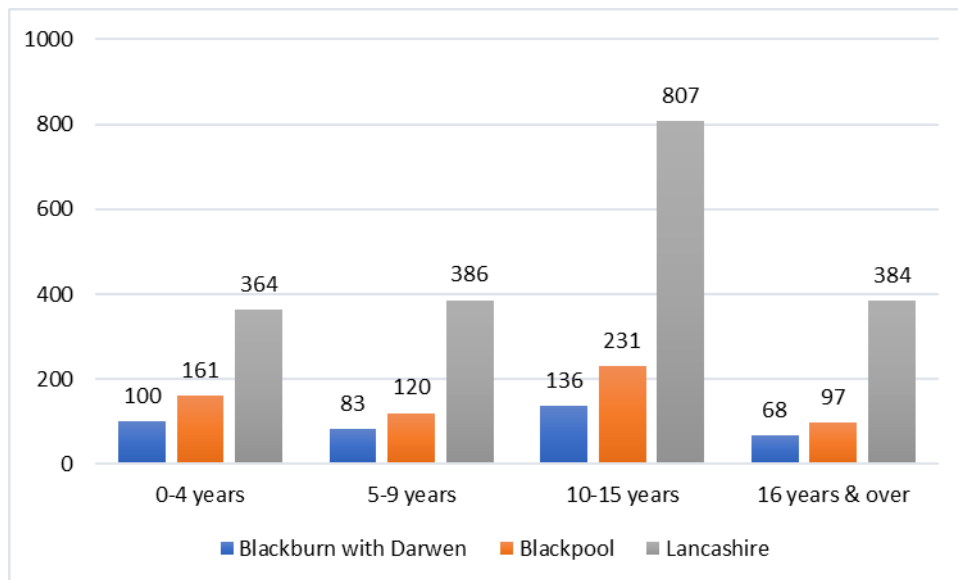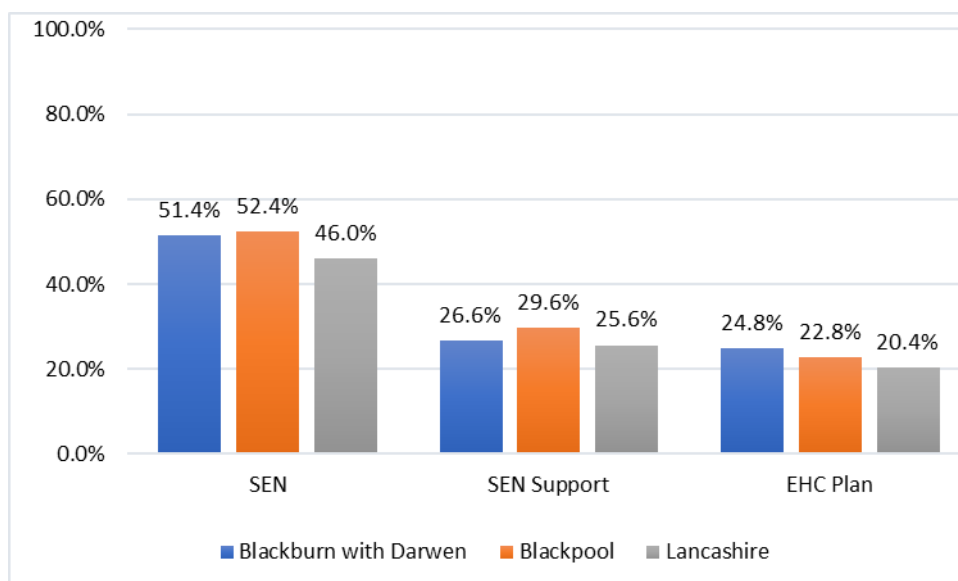Figure 2.2: Age profile of looked after children in three local authorities on 31 March 2022

Figure 2.3: Percentages of looked after children with SEN, SEN Support and on EHC plans in three local authorities on 31 March 2021

Previously looked after children (i.e., children ceasing to be looked after)

As of March 2022, there were 30, 070 children ceasing to be looked after by local authorities nationally and 2, 950 children were adopted nationally. Figure 2.4 shows the number of children ceasing to be looked after in three local authorities (Blackburn with Darwen, Blackpool and Lancashire) on 31 March 2022.

Figure 2.4: Number of children ceasing to be looked after in three local authorities on 31 March 2022
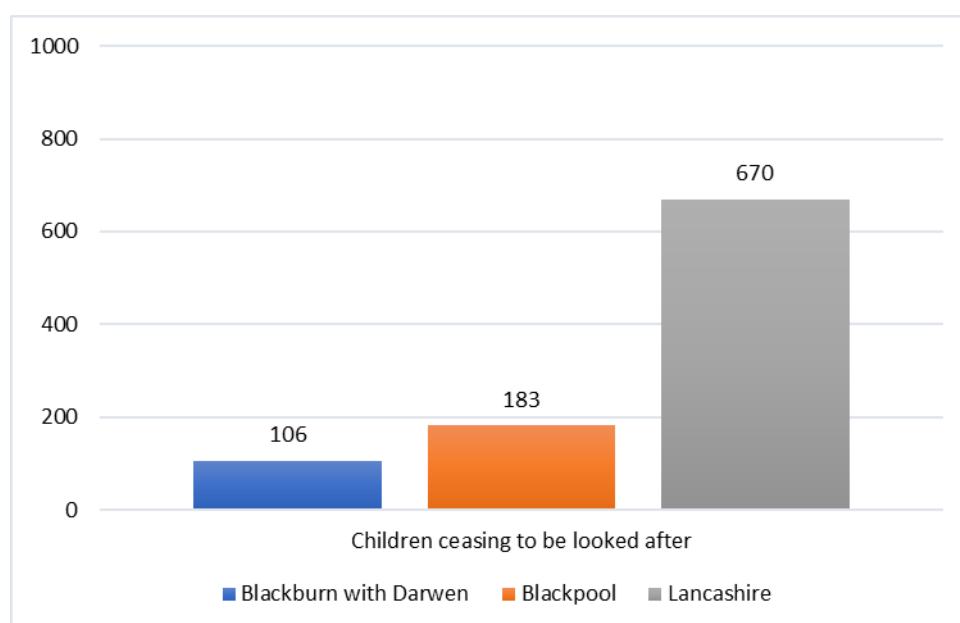
Children are ceased to be looked after by their local authority for several reasons, with two being adopted and placed under special guardianship order (see table 2.1).

Table 2.1: Number of children adopted and placed under special guardianship order in three local authorities on 31 March 2022

Local Authority	Adoption	Special guardianship
Blackburn with Darwen	17	20
Blackpool	16	63
Lancashire	73	111

Care leaver and care leaver activity aged 17 to 21 years

A care leaver is someone aged between 16 and 25 who has been looked after for at least 13 weeks and are/were in care on or after their 16th birthday. Currently, in England there are 45, 940 care leavers aged 17 to 21 years old. Out of this, 8210 aged 17 to 18 years and 18610 aged 19 to 21 years in touch with their local authorities are currently in education, employment, or training. Figure 2.5-2.7 shows whether care leavers at the age of 17 to 21 years are in education, employment, or training. Nationally, 4% of aged 17 to 18 years and 7% of aged 19 to 21 care leavers progress to Higher Education (HE) (i.e., studies beyond A level). Similarly, a very limited number of care leavers progress to HE in the three local

authorities. For Blackburn with Darwen and Blackpool, numbers are not reported to protect confidentiality or due to very small cohorts. In Lancashire, 21 care leavers aged 19 to 21 progressed to HE.

Figure 2.5: Care leaver activity at the age of 17 to 21 years in Blackburn with Darwen for 2020 to 2022
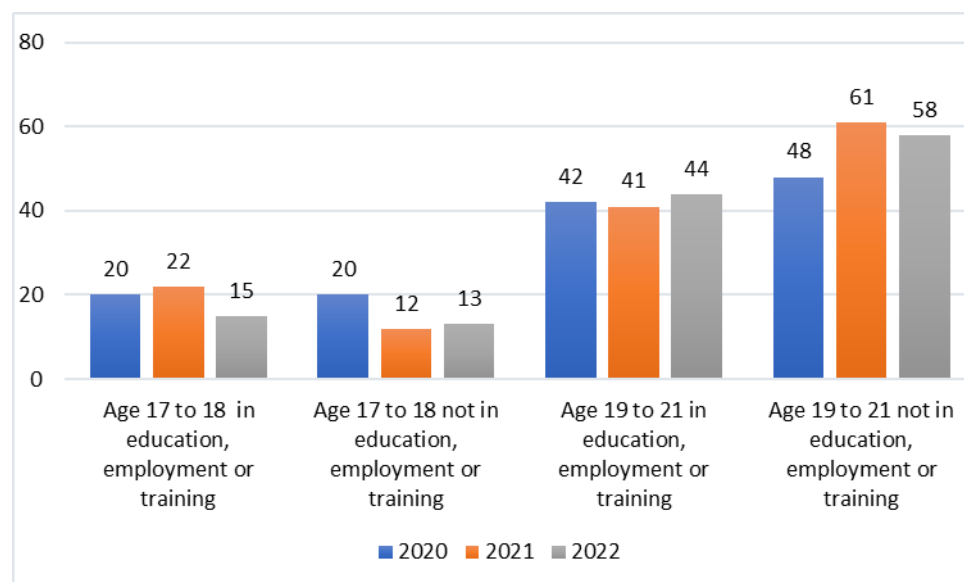
Figure 2.6: Care leaver activity at the age of 17 to 21 years in Blackpool for 2020 to 2022
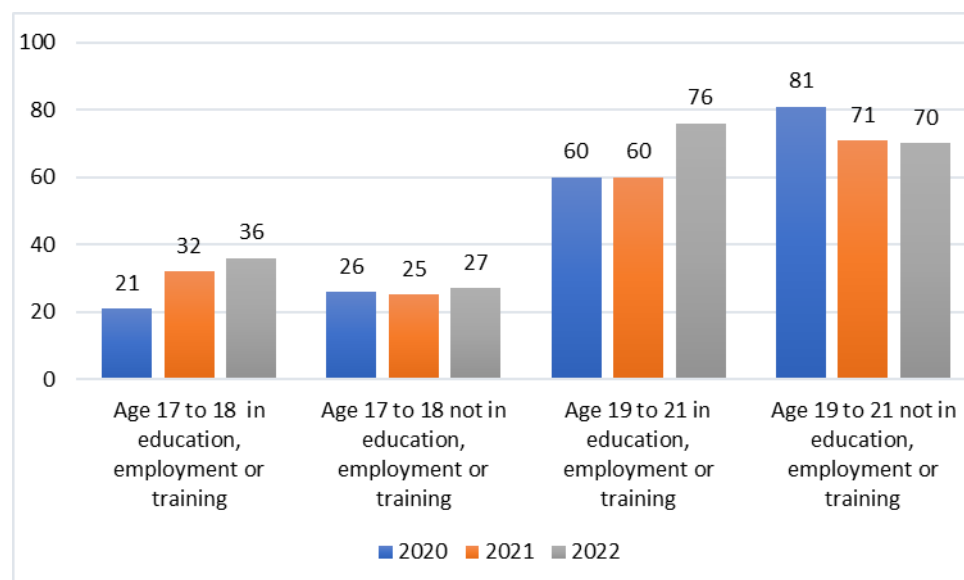
Figure 2.7: Care leaver activity at the age of 17 to 21 years in Lancashire for 2020 to 2022
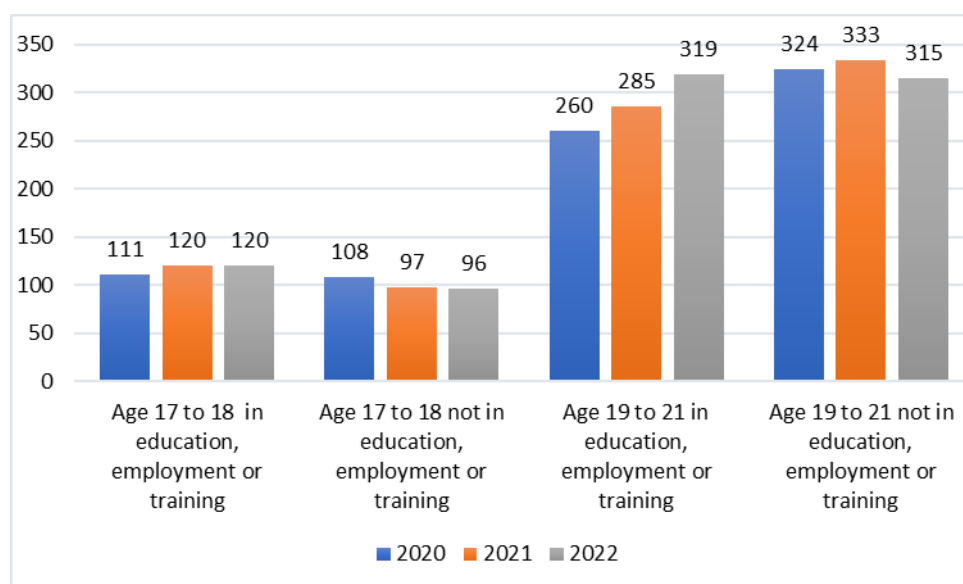
Children in Need including those on Child Protection Plans

Under the Children Act 1989, Children in Need are a legally defined group of children assessed as needing help and protection as a result of risks to their development or health. This group includes children on child in need plans, children on child protection plans, children looked after by local authorities, care leavers and disabled children. Figure 2.8 shows the number of children on child in need plans and on child protection plans in three local authorities (Blackburn with Darwen, Blackpool and Lancashire) on 31 March 2022.

Figure 2.8: Number of children on Child in Need Plans (left) or Child Protection Plans (right) in the three local authorities on 31 March 2022
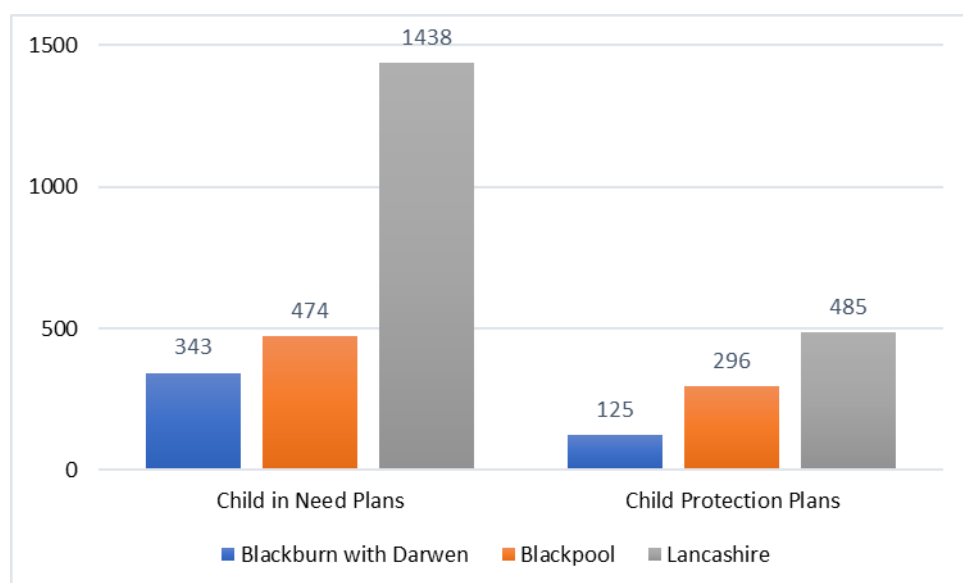
3.0 Summary of Key Findings from the Literature

Context

Members of the Future U partnership, in collaboration with the Lancashire Virtual School, have agreed to support a collaborative approach in the planning, design, implementation and an evaluation of support activities aimed at supporting young people who have required and experienced direct social care support as they consider their education and career futures. This is in recognition that Children Social Care experienced (CSC-experienced) frequently experience poor educational outcomes, which has been associated with potential adverse circumstances in later life.

This briefing provides an overall summary of the key findings from the available literature and provides an understanding of the implications from these findings as they might relate to the planning, design, and implementation of any interventions for the consideration by partners supporting the Empower academy project.

3.1 Conceptualisation of Terms for Care Experienced Individuals

One of the key findings from the literature review stage of the Empower Academy Project is an understanding of the various terms used in policy directives and the research literature to identify and categorise different groups of young people in care (Looked after Children, Care Experienced, Children & Young People in Foster Care, Care Leavers, Young Care Leavers, Children in Need etc.). The OfS (2022)[3] recommends that education providers in supporting young people that are care experienced students or looked after children provide support to any learner who has experienced care at **any** stage of their lives, including those who have been adopted. UCAS[4] defines care experience as being any young person that has spent time living with foster carers under local authority care, in residential care (e.g., a children's home), looked after at home under a supervision order, or in kinship care with relatives or friends, either officially (e.g., a special guardianship order) or informally without local authority support. The Lancashire Virtual schools supports Children Looked After (CLA) and Previously Looked After (PLA) and children with a Social Worker and Children with a Child Protection order. As TASO (2020) notes the variance in conceptualisation or interchangeability of terms for this population group can be problematic when trying to target, plan and evaluate support activities[5]. This is because some terms used may not be mutually exclusive or exhaustive, there is a need for consistency to aid planning and monitoring but more importantly there is risk of assuming one term reflects a homogenous

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[3] Office for Students. Topic Briefing – Care Experienced Students and Looked After Children https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/promoting-equal-opportunities/effective-practice/care-experienced/

[4] UCAS Undergraduate: Care experienced students https://www.ucas.com/undergraduate/applying-university/individual-needs/ucas-undergraduate-care-experienced-students#:~:text=Being%20care%20experienced%20means%20you,special%20guardianship%20order)%20or%20informally

[5] Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education: Evidence Review Supporting access and student success for learners with experience of children's social care https://s33320.pcdn.co/wp-content/uploads/Supporting-learners-with-experience-of-childrens-social-care-1.pdf

group when there can be significant differentiated needs (and impact on long-term outcomes) between children and young people with different care status and experience.

Therefore, to ensure the most inclusive approach and to inform best planning and aid any prioritisation for intervention, the recommended term to be used to comprehensively identify the proposed target population as proposed by TASO is *Children Social Care Experienced* (CSC-experienced). This being used to denote all those children/young people, (except for those children/young people who have a Children in Need plan solely as the result of having a disability), who have or have had experience with children's social care at some point before they turned 18.

3.2 Characteristics of the Literature

Understanding the needs of CSC-experienced individuals and supporting developments which can have a positive impact on maximising education outcomes for this vulnerable group of young people is a common international concern. Commentary in the literature frequently note that given increased understanding of the impact of care experience, that there has been, in many developed countries at least, significant national policy developments and public investment put in place to help address and ameliorate the adverse impact that care experience status might have.

There is a significant literature base concerned with identifying, understanding, responding to the needs of CSC-experienced individuals in supporting access to and sustaining progression within post-secondary education, including higher education (HE) (Appendix 1). This evidence also includes reports of research efforts designed to test the efficacy of interventions to improve access to and success within HE.

Yet while there is a significant evidence base much of the literature is focused on understanding the needs, experiences and barriers faced by CSC-experienced individuals, mapping and patterns of engagement following post-secondary education, description, and evaluation of interventions. Most of the literature is qualitative or descriptive in design, with some of the quantitative based reports being based upon secondary analysis of key data sources. Much of the literature has emanated from North America, some parts of Europe and Australia which consequently has potential limitations in application of findings to a UK setting.

In relation to the evidence of effectiveness of interventions designed to support CSC-experienced individuals in relation to progression to HE, TASO in a recent comprehensive review of the available literature could only identify two studies that reached a higher level of evidence threshold that investigated the causal relationship of an intervention and its impact on progression to HE. Consequently, the current assessment in relation to the effectiveness of interventions designed to support CSC-experienced individuals' aspirations, enrolment, and success in further or HE is best described as emerging.

3.3 Key findings

Needs of CSC-Experienced Individuals

CSC-experienced individuals can, compared to the general population, experience a higher frequency of adverse circumstances which can significantly affect future personal, social, education and economic outcomes. CSC-experienced individuas can experience, and report much higher rates of mental health and disability compared to the general population.

While it is commonly reported that CSC-experienced individuals can experience adverse outcomes, it is also noted that there is variation between outcomes for different groups of CSC-experienced individuals, with those who benefit from longer and more stable care placements and being supported to remain in education up to the age of 18 having more successful outcomes.

There is recognition that much of the adverse impact on the educational attainment and trajectories and outcomes for many CSC-experienced individuals is a result of disrupted school attendance due to frequent changes in care arrangements and placements. Previous research has also reported that frequent school changes can result in academic delay and increase risks of mental health consequences. Consequently, the importance of a stable school environment has been emphasised as a key influencing factor if successful education progression and wellbeing is to be enabled.

The literature notes that CSC-experienced individuals have to negotiate multiple transitions simultaneously, often without the practical, emotional, and financial support that non-CSC experienced individuals might. This materially then affecting their motivation, capability, and capacity to manage difficult transitions successfully. It is commonly highlighted that the level of preparation and readiness for transition from leaving care is a key factor impacting on outcomes in key domains of life such as education and employment.

The lack of encouragement and expressions of low expectations by social care and education professionals with CSC-experienced individuals is frequently reported in the literature as being a negative factor, impacting on the individual's personal confidence, motivation, and ability to realise full potential.

There is common agreement in the literature that efforts are needed to ensure that the voices of CSC-experienced individuals are sought, acknowledged and captured to directly inform any interventions designed to help meet any identified needs. Wherever possible, there is a common message that efforts are needed to ensure that any planned interventions are designed in such a way as to help CSC-experienced individuals gain a sense of self-agency[6]. Some of the literature indicates how committed engagement with CSC-experienced individuals in planning interventions can also be proactively presented as a development opportunity which might then help foster development of skills of leadership,

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[6] Self-agency refers to a psychological concept which describes the feeling of being in control of personal actions and the consequences they have on an individual's life. A strong but realistic sense of self-agency can have positive benefits for an individual's sense of well-being, confidence, and motivation.

advocacy, personal and professional development. The acquisition of such skills then being associated with increased confidence, problem solving, adaptability and resilience.

Much of the literature exploring the support needs of CSC-experienced individuals reports the importance of supportive relationships with adults, which can include social workers, teachers, and personal advisors. These relationships can be influential in promoting a sense of connection and belonging, gain a sense of control and encourage positive expectations and engagement to promote personal, social, and educational achievement. However, it is noted that those that engage with CSC-experienced individuals need awareness, and dependent upon the extent of their involvement, to be supported to develop capability/ expertise in engaging with participants who have experienced trauma.

Access to Higher Education

CSC-experienced individuals are recognised as being one of the most under-represented groups in HE, participating at a rate four times lower than non-care-experienced individuals at the age of 19. Most CSC-experienced individuals who do access HE are usually between the ages of 19 and 21 and typically without standard entry qualifications. This later profile of access raises potential intersectional barriers with the individual being considered and grouped as a mature student, whilst the qualification profile having potential implications for students in being ready and able to cope with the academic requirements of their programme.

A range of factors such as gender, ethnicity, mental health, disability, remaining in care are more associated with whether progression to post 16 secondary educations occurs. Within HE in the UK, CSC-experienced individuals are more likely to be women, twice as likely to identify as being disabled and over twice as likely to be a non-UK national.

The literature reports that CSC-experienced individuals can have high aspirations with the majority wishing to progress following post-16 secondary education. They would typically welcome more information on the opportunities available, with the recognition that any support offered needed to be specific and relevant to the individual person. Another common finding is that CSC-experienced individuals may, given a strong sense of self-reliance, be reluctant to ask for help when needed which then potentially impedes their progress.

Given current patterns of access and participation in HE by CSC-experienced individuals it is recommended that further efforts are focused on helping to increase participation by focusing on alternative, non-linear and 'second chance' pathways.

It needs to be noted that there is a difference in reported patterns of progression to HE between HE providers and Local Authorities. This relates to the scope and type of data being monitored and reported by respective organisations. There are concerns that this difference has implications for being able to measure the impact of supportive developments. Consequently, it has been recommended that a systems-based approach is needed to review datasets and agree how best to maximise common reporting.

Progression through Higher Education

CSC-experienced individuals are more likely to achieve lower degree outcomes compared to peers, with more individuals also being more likely to take longer or discontinue their studies with issues of personal health, lack of social support, financial concerns and accommodation being influencing factors.

3.4 Implications for design, planning and implementation of relevant interventions

There is some literature advocating a reframing of approaches for support with those from a CSC-experienced background from a *deficit* to a *strength's-based* model. This being achieved by trying to help participants realise their available personal and social assets, how to further develop supportive relationships, identify the resources available to them and how they might maximise these to support control over their lives. A strength's-based approach also being more associated with approaches that help increase personal confidence and a sense of optimism, using processes of realistic goal setting as a key way to generate a sense of momentum and moving forward.

Importance of interagency collaboration, particularly with Virtual Schools and those professionals whose role is to support CSC-experienced individuals is emphasised.

Although potentially challenging to achieve, a key finding from the literature exploring issues for consideration when supporting CSC-experienced individuals is the importance of trusting relationships The conditions for enabling this being fostered by facilitators being concerned, consistent & reliable in approaches, with an informed and sensitive understanding of the challenges that CSC-experienced individuals may have experienced.

Interventions that help promote a sense of strength, self-reliance and resilience combined with promoting high aspirations and skills to navigate systems and processes and help cope and persist in the face of challenges have been encouraged.

Mentorship type-based interventions are frequently reported in the available literature as being helpful in the overall support of CSC-experienced individuals. Similarly, summer school type programmes/formats are identified as being of potential benefit for this group of learners. However, TASO in their general review of such formats for students from other contexts has indicated variable impact given potential cost implications.

Given the context and potential complex needs of CSC-experienced individuals there are indications in the literature that multi-collaborative approaches which draws upon the expertise of a range of professions (education, psychology & social work) might be more helpful in delivering a successful and impactful intervention programme.

4.0 Key National Organisations

Several key national organisations and developments support the wellbeing of CSC-experienced learners by providing specific information about developments and promoting Further Education (FE) and Higher Education (HE) opportunities. Table 4.1 provides a brief outline of these organisations.

Table 4.1: Outline of key national organisations that support/promote the educational progression of CSC-experienced learners

Organisation	Purpose	URL Link
Become. The Charity for Children in Care and Young Care Leavers	A national charity aimed at supporting children in care and young care leavers to reach their potential and have the same chances of success as all. BECOME's provides the PROPEL website which seeks to provide a fully searchable website on the support available at colleges and universities for care experienced students considering progression to level 4 study.	https://becomecharity.org.uk/
Care Leaver Covenant	A national inclusion programme where organisations/businesses from all sectors seek to provide opportunities and support for care experienced and young care leavers. The Covenant includes a spotlight on education providers. To date 99 education providers have committed to the Covenant. ***Blackburn College, The Blackpool & Fylde College, Burnley College, Edge Hill University, Lancaster University, Newcastle College group (West Lancashire) are local signatories.***	https://mycovenant.org.uk/
Foster Talk	Website mainly focused on supporting Foster Carers in all aspects of fostering. They publish a comprehensive Care Leavers Guide to University, with the lastest guide being published for academic year 2022-23. This guide details the support offered for children in care by each of the Universities in the UK.	https://fostertalk.org/care-leavers/
National Network for the Education of Care Leavers	A registered charity which provides a membership network for HE providers and national organisations with the aim of enabling more care experienced students to access and progress successfully through FE and HE. To date, there are 62 members. ***Edgehill University, Lancaster University, The Blackpool, and Fylde College are local members.***	https://www.nnecl.org/

Organisation	Purpose	URL Link
Office for Students - Effective Practice Advice for Care Leavers	National regulator for the HE Sector advises on policy priorities for underrepresented student population within HE. The OfS has prioritised Care Experienced Students as a key underrepresented group.	https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/promoting-equal-opportunities/effective-practice/care-experienced/advice/
Propel	A comprehensive searchable website which fully details all the support available to care experienced learners considering progression to HE. This support usually details the full range of services, including accommodation, finance, and pastoral support specifically available for care experienced learners.	https://propel.org.uk/UK/
Stand Alone Pledge	Aimed at developing support for estranged students at HE. Seeks commitment from individual HE providers to commit to the pledge support for care experienced and estranged students. To date 102 HE and colleges have committed to the pledge. *Edgehill University, University of Central Lancashire, The Blackpool & Fylde College are local signatories.*	https://www.thestandalonepledge.org.uk/
The Care Leavers Association	An association which brings together the voices of care leavers of all ages, with the aim of improving the current care system, improving the quality of life of care leavers throughout their life and promotes change for the better society's perception of people who have been in care. Includes a section on promoting support for learners undertaking further and HE.	https://www.careleavers.com

5.0 Interventions supported by UniConnect Partnerships

Several UniConnect Partnerships have either undertaken, or funded activity aimed at supporting CSC-experienced learners. Table 5.1 provides brief details of the developments supported. Most of the activities which have been supported are related to briefing sessions for CSC-experienced learners and their key influencers, engagement resources which provide insights/case stories and experiences of CSC-experienced learners. Several of the UniConnect Partnerships have dedicated web pages detailing key information and support links for CSC-experienced learners. While most developments do not appear to have been formally evaluated nevertheless, they provide useful insights which can be applied for potential programme design for the Empower Academy project. It should also be possible to 'reuse' some of the developments given potential core application and ensure best use of public investment.

Table 5.1: Outline of interventions supported by UniConnect Partnerships

Intervention	Organisation	About	Evidence of Evaluation/Impact	URL Link
H.E. 4 ME	Aim Higher West Midlands	Specific campus-based session for children in care in Years 7 & 8 to provide opportunities to gain some insights into higher education (HE).	TBC	https://aimhigherwm.ac.uk/care-experienced-young-people/
Go Higher	Go Higher West Yorkshire	A CPD programme aimed at key influencers/foster carers supporting care experienced leaners and enabling them to support potential progression to HE. The programme was delivered online, with delivery supported by partners. The programme culminated in a graduation event. Other UniConnect partnership have similar type activities.	Programme in its third year of delivery, with positive feedback from participants about increased awareness and confidence in being able to support learners.	https://gohigherwestyorks.ac.uk/positive-feedback-for-care-to-go-higher-cpd-programme/
Go Higher Project Summer	Go Higher West Yorkshire	A collaborative project with local partners and the virtual schools to provide care levers aged 16+ with an online programme to undertake an independent project. The project included access to visual resources, an online weekly briefing and opportunity to showcase their completed project.	Informal feedback which indicated lack of engagement by care leavers.	https://gohigherwestyorks.ac.uk/blog/ghwy-trials-innovative-online-outreach-for-care-experienced-young-people/
Understanding and Supporting Care leavers/	Go Higher West Yorkshire	An eLearning programme aimed at those supporting care experienced/estranged students, identifying key issues and supportive approaches.	TBC	https://gohigherwestyorks.ac.uk/courses/understanding-and-supporting-care-

Intervention	Organisation	About	Evidence of Evaluation/Impact	URL Link
Estranged Students				experienced-estranged-students/
The Hepp guide to higher education for care experienced students	Higher Education Progression Partnership (South Yorkshire & Northeast Derbyshire)	A short bespoke guide aimed at learners in care, outlining some key considerations for learners in care and whether progression to HE might be an opportunity for them.	TBC	https://www.hepp.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/210318-Hepp-CES-Booklet-v5-2x2.pdf
Campus events for Looked after Children and Foster Carers	Higher Horizons	A programme of activities supported in partnership with Virtual Schools to provide information, advice and support aimed at Looked After Children and Foster Carers	TBC	
Foster carer workshops aims to open doors to university	Kent & Medway Progression Federation	Guidance workshops aimed at supporting Foster Carers to aid their understanding of HE and supporting their children. The sessions were delivered by one of the HEI providers.	TBC	https://kmpf.org/2022/02/23/foster-carer-workshops-aim-to-open-doors-to-university/
Choices Together Progressive Programme	Outreach North East UniConnect	Working with the North East Raising Partnership (NERAP) to support the delivery of the Choices Together programme, which is a programme aimed at Year 7 -13 care experienced students to provide information, personalised support and campus visits. Delivery supported by current university students called Our Choices Together Representatives.	TBC	https://www.nerap.ac.uk/students/choices/
Discover your potential	Shaping Futures	A collaborative project supported by Edgehill University and Liverpool John Moore's University provided a package of resources, 1:2:1 guidance for care experienced students helping them in considering and preparing for going to university. A community of practice focused on care leavers developed a local signposting document for the region.	TBC	https://shaping-futures.org.uk/author/abbie/

Intervention	Organisation	About	Evidence of Evaluation/Impact	URL Link
Care leavers – Going to Uni Podcasts – 'From Our Experience'	**Southern Universities network**	A short series of podcasts which provide insights by care experienced/estranged students on key aspects of accessing and progressing through HE. Series developed by University of Portsmouth with part funding provided by local UniConnect partnership.	TBC	https://www.sunoutreach.org/students/resources/care-leavers-going-to-uni-podcasts/
Care Leavers Reaching University – Shaping best practice through strategy and reform	**Sussex Learning Network**	A UniConnect Funded project to enable the local authority and partners to increase the numbers of care experienced learners within their area to access and succeed at university. Project included statistical analysis of need and interviewed care leavers to give their insights on the strategies required to support learners like them to consider and progress to university.	Care Study Report highlights the importance of individualised support, the role of Personal assistants in advising and supporting young people and the role of education providers in making sure that students know how to access and maximise the available support.	https://www.sussexlearningnetwork.org.uk/projects/clru/71
Supporting Care Leavers and Children in Care. Alternative pathways to HE through a Forest School Approach	**Sussex Learning Network**	A UniConnect funded project which sought to use the Forest School methodology, which is based around using woodland, or other natural areas, to inspire children, to help them address barriers to progression into HE for care leavers and children in care. The intention of the programme was to support a small group of care leavers to gain a qualification and then mentor other children to undertake a 6-week programme. An initial programme was delivered with 12 participants.	Case Study Report– revealed recruitment difficulties, insufficient lead in time and significant behavioural challenges by some participants.	https://www.sussexlearningnetwork.org.uk/index.php?mact=LISECase,cntnt01,detail,0&cntnt01item=supporting-care-leavers-and-children-in-care&cntnt01returnid=42
Home Comforts – Supporting students without families over the winter break	**Sussex Learning Network**	A pilot project aimed to provide 1st year care experienced HE students lacking family support with a nurturing relationship outside of official university assistance over the winter break.	One delivery has taken place but unclear how many participants were supported. Required effective engagement and commitment of Foster Carers/Agencies.	https://www.sussexlearningnetwork.org.uk/projects/HC/71

Intervention	Organisation	About	Evidence of Evaluation/Impact	URL Link
UniversityGo	**Think Higher**	A progression-based programme aimed at care experienced learners to develop their awareness, develop skills, and provide mentorship with the intention of supporting access and progression to HE. Includes some incentive trip to help maintain engagement.	TBC	http://www.thinkhigher.ac.uk/universitygo.html
Supporting Care Experienced Students	**UCAS**	A toolkit aimed at Teachers/Facilitators to support them in engaging with care experienced students. Includes a free online module which identifies key issues of support.	TBC	https://www.ucas.com/advisers/toolkits/adviser-toolkit-supporting-students-individual-needs/supporting-care-experienced-students
Uni Connect Role Models – Care Experienced Students	**Wessex Inspiration Network**	A set of YouTube videos where care experienced students share their stories, insights, and experience of applying, progressing, and benefiting from HE Other UniConnect have similar resources i.e., GROWS, Go Higher West Yorkshire	TBC	https://www.winncop.ac.uk/students/care-leavers

6.0 Learning Needs Analysis

Context

As part of the Empower Academy Project, a Learner Needs Assessment (LNA) was developed to capture feedback from Children Social Care Experienced (CSC-experienced) learners. The LNA took the form of a short anonymous questionnaire that aimed to specifically identify current skills/ knowledge gaps and current support needs of these learners.

Method

LNA Development

The LNA was developed and distributed online from February to April 2023. The LNA was based on the Future U Progression Framework and identifies themes/outcomes that are known to be important in supporting progression and which are a priority for the partnership. See Appendix 2 for the questions included in the LNA. The LNA used in this research was adapted from a previous version, which was tested in two schools and one college with learners aged 14 to 17 years.

The LNA consisted of two sections that asked respondents to complete: (1) demographic information and (2) thirty-five skills/knowledge-based statements on a five-point scale with the categories strongly disagree, disagree, agree, strongly agree, don't know. For the purposes of the LNA analysis, the categories strongly disagree and disagree were combined to create a single disagree category, and categories strongly agree and agree were combined to create a single agree category.

LNA Distribution

Initially, the LNA was distributed locally via Lancashire County Council and Blackburn with Darwen Council contacts. Council contacts were asked to distribute the messaging with the survey link to designated teachers in schools to relevant learners from year 9 to 13. Council contacts were also asked to include the survey messaging and survey link in relevant newsletters. In addition, a member of the Future U evaluation team attended a Lancashire local housing project meeting to encourage survey completion by attendees. Even after the use of multiple strategies and attempts of recruitment to the survey, the response rate remained significantly lower than expected. Therefore, the Future U evaluation team made the decision to widen the scope of the survey distribution to the national level and the advert was placed on social media (i.e., twitter, Instagram) to increase response rate.

Data Cleaning/ Data Analyses

After taking the necessary steps to clean the data, a total of 134 responses were included in the final analysis. The findings are reported separately for Pre 18 (age range 14 to 17 years) and Post 18 (age range 18 to 25 years) learners from CSC-experienced backgrounds.

6.1 Key Findings for Pre 18 learners

Profile of learners

A total of 38 learners completed the LNA from the age range of 14 to 17 years. 13% of learners considered themselves to have a disability. 37% reported being in care currently and 63% reported being a care leaver. Over half (68%) of the learners were from a White background; 8% were Asian or Asian British; 16% from Black, Black British, Caribbean, or African background; and 8% from a mixed background.

Visiting a university or college campus

About three-quarters (71%) of the learners reported visiting a university or college campus once or more than once. Whilst 29% of the learners reported that they had not visited a university or campus.

Personal skills for life

Three-quarters (74%) of learners agreed that they knew what their personal skills were and 68% of learners reported that they knew how to use their personal skills. Majority (84%) of learners knew what a CV was, whilst 68% reported being able to write a CV. Similarly, 68% of learners knew the information needed to write a CV cover letter. Two-thirds of learners (63%) knew about digital footprints and how they may impact careers. Over half (66%) of learners knew about the different recruitment and selection processes which might be required by employer, whilst 82% knew how to make a good impression when applying for a course or job. Figure 6.1 shows the percentages of learners responding to each statement in this category.

Figure 6.1: Percentages of learners responding to each statement for personal skills for life category
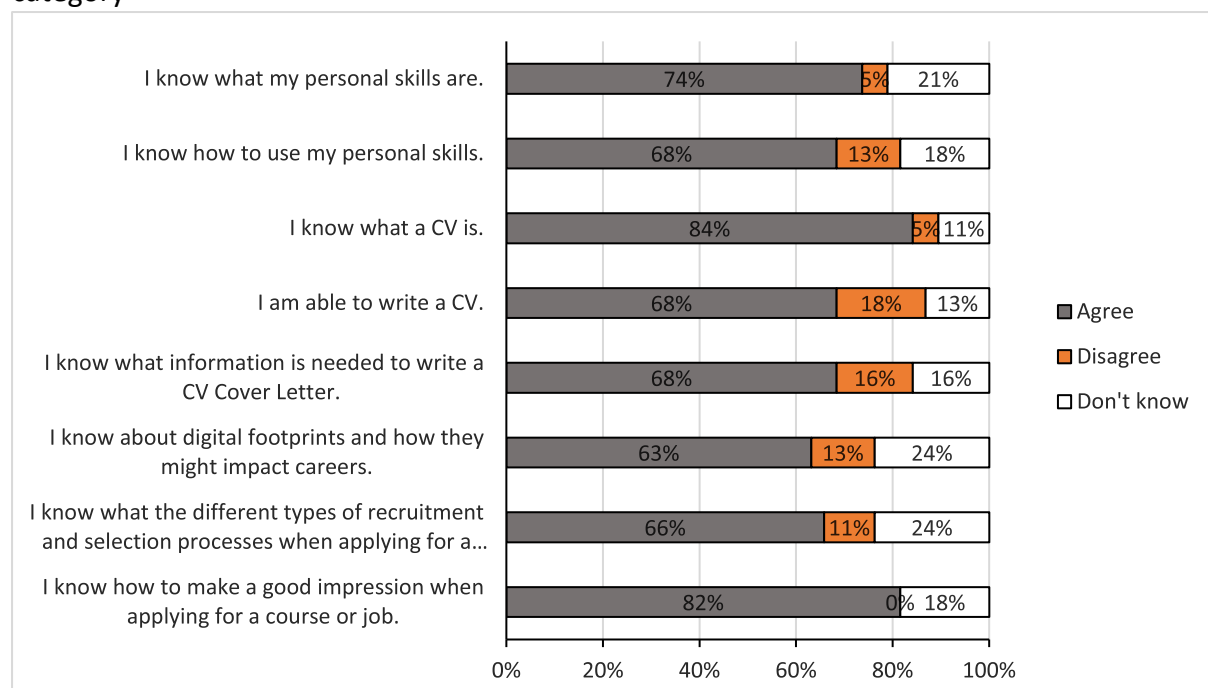
Study skills and strategies for success

76% of learners reported knowing how to revise successfully for exams or assessments, and 68% reported that they understood how they learned best. Nearly three-quarters of learners reported they needed to improve their writing skills (76%) and numerical skills (71%). Majority (87%) of learners reported that they look for opportunities in difficult situations. Whilst 76% of learners reported that they were confident in asking for help and support when needed. Figure 6.2 shows the percentages of learners responding to each statement in this category.

Figure 6.2: Percentages of learners responding to each statement for study skills for success category
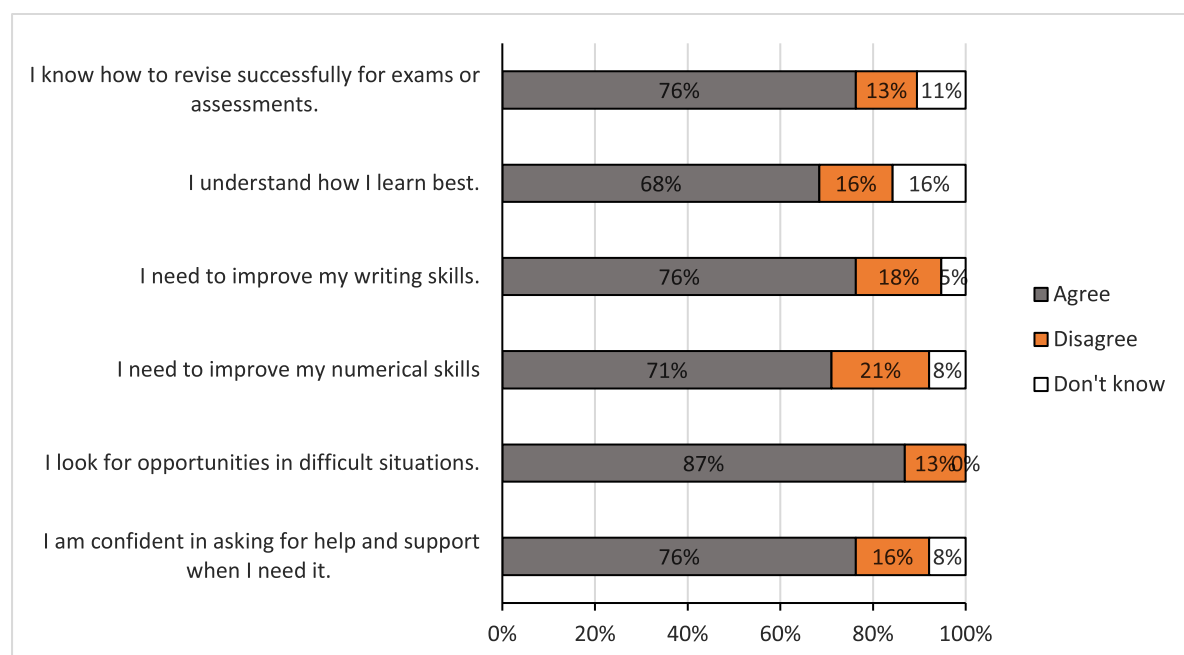
Knowledge and understanding of future pathways

More than three-quarters (84%) of learners were aware of the different options they could take after their education. In relation to Higher Education (HE); 82% of learners knew the benefits and costs, 71% were aware of the financial support available, 82% knew about the support available, 84% knew what it would be like to attend, 84% knew how to apply. Two-thirds (63%) knew about the support to undertake an apprenticeship. More than half (63%) reported that they understand how to manage finances and budget. Figure 6.3 shows the percentages of learners responding to each statement in this category.

Figure 6.3: Percentages of learners responding to each statement for knowledge and understanding of future pathways category
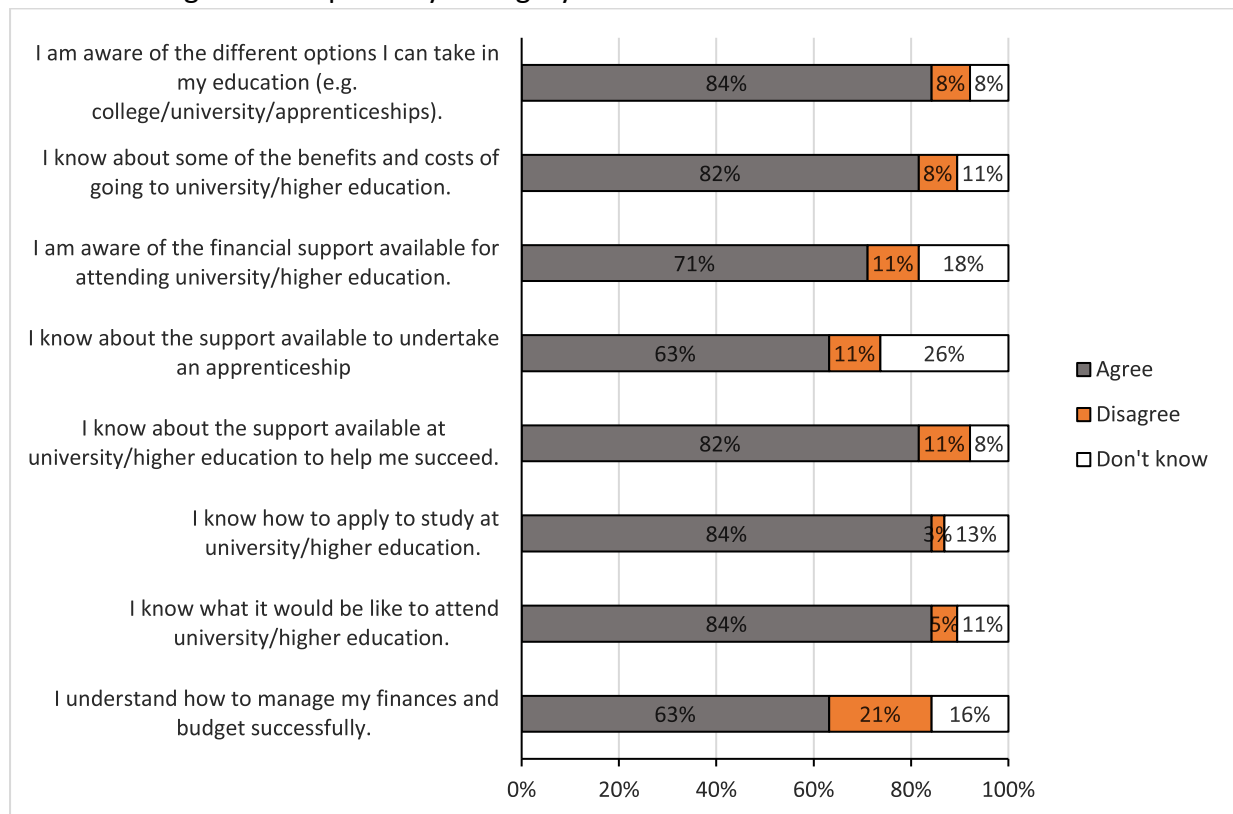
Pathways to potential futures

Three-quarters (74%) of learners know about the industries that have jobs available in their local area and 74% report knowing what skills employers are looking for. 87% have heard people talk about their jobs and 71% know about some of the careers available to them in the future. More than half (63%) of learners know how/where to find out information about future options, 68% know who to speak to for advice about future plans and 58% know what they want to do in the future. Figure 6.4 shows the percentages of learners responding to each statement in this category.

Figure 6.4: Percentages of learners responding to each statement from pathways to potential futures category.
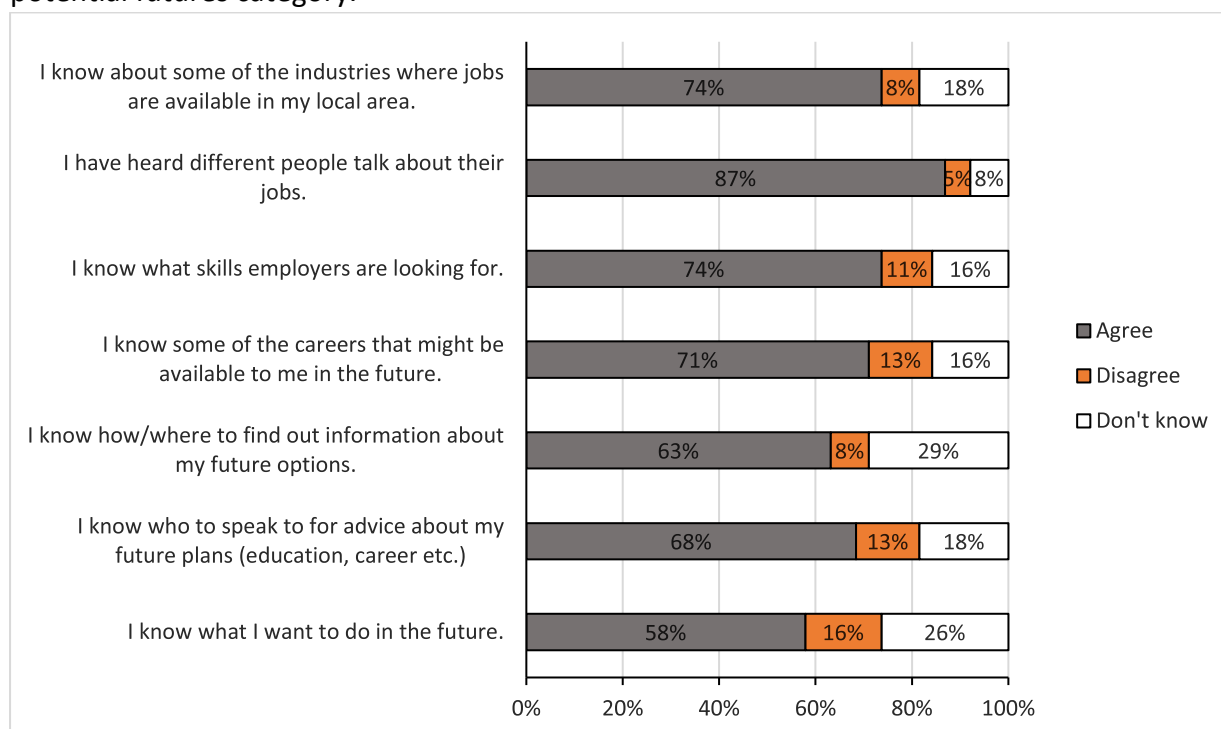
Global outcomes

As well as specific outcomes, learners' level of self-efficacy, sense of belonging, aspirations, and intentions to study at HE was also measured.

90% of learners were determined to do well in life (8% disagreed; 3% didn't know), 79% were confident they can achieve their goals in life (16% disagreed; 5% didn't know) and 82% thought they could get the grades to progress to further study (13% disagreed; 5% didn't know). Three-quarters (76%) of learners thought they could fit in well at HE (11% disagreed, 13% didn't know). 82% of learners believed they could study at HE (11% disagreed; 8% didn't know) and 84% wanted to study at HE (8% disagreed; 8% didn't know).

Conclusion

It was clear from the LNA that most respondents had the aspirations and determination to do well in life. The LNA indicated that respondents were aware/understood future pathways and potential futures, which suggests respondents are gaining this information from relevant sources/ avenues (i.e., schools, colleges, key influencers). Around three-quarters of respondents reported that they needed to improve their writing and numeracy skills. As English and maths are the core skills, activities may consider incorporating attainment as a specific element or develop this element as a standalone activity. In addition, the LNA indicated specific gaps in knowledge that may be a consideration in outreach activities: (1) support on managing finances and budgeting; (2) understanding support available to undertake apprenticeships; (3) knowing how/where to access information about future options; and (4) confidence-building to make informed decisions about the future.

6.2 Key Findings for Post 18 learners

Profile of learners

A total of 96 learners completed the LNA from the age range of 18 to 25 years. 26% of learners considered themselves to have a disability. 60% reported being in care currently and 40% reported being a care leaver. Over half (62%) of the learners were from a White background; 17% were Asian or Asian British; 12% from Black, Black British, Caribbean, or African background; and 9% from a mixed background.

Visiting a university or college campus

Majority (95%) of the learners reported visiting a university or college campus once or more than once. Whilst 5% of the learners reported that they had not visited a university or campus.

Personal skills for life

81% of learners agreed that they knew what their personal skills were and 81% of learners reported that they knew how to use their personal skills. Majority (88%) of learners knew what a CV was, whilst 79% reported being able to write a CV. Similarly, 81% of learners knew the information needed to write a CV cover letter. Three-quarters (78%) of learners knew about digital footprints and how they may impact careers. 73% of learners knew about the different recruitment and selection processes which might be required by employer, whilst 70% knew how to make a good impression when applying for a course or job. Figure 6.5 shows the percentages of learners responding to each statement in this category.

Figure 6.5: Percentages of learners responding to each statement for personal skills for life category
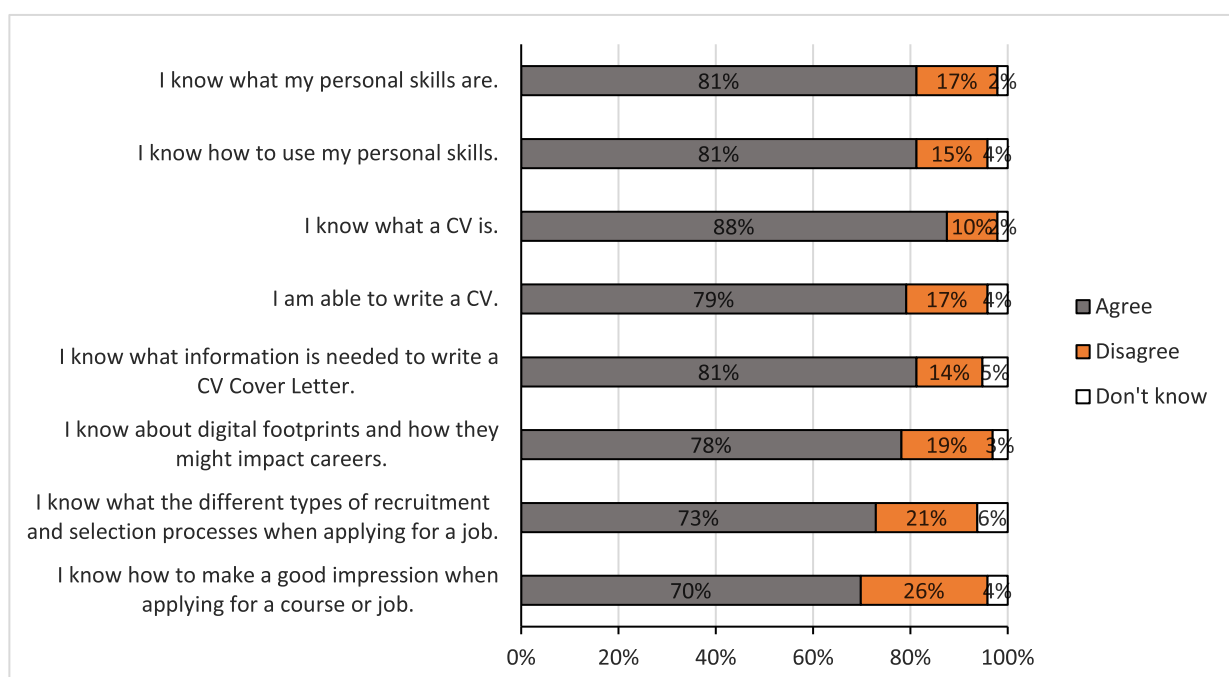
Study skills and strategies for success

74% of learners reported knowing how to revise successfully for exams or assessments, and 78% reported that they understood how they learned best. Nearly three-quarters of learners reported they needed to improve their writing skills (80%) and numerical skills (79%). Majority (91%) of learners reported that they look for opportunities in difficult situations and 91% of learners reported that they were confident in asking for help and support when needed. Figure 6.6 shows the percentages of learners responding to each statement in this category.

Figure 6.6: Percentages of learners responding to each statement for study skills for success category
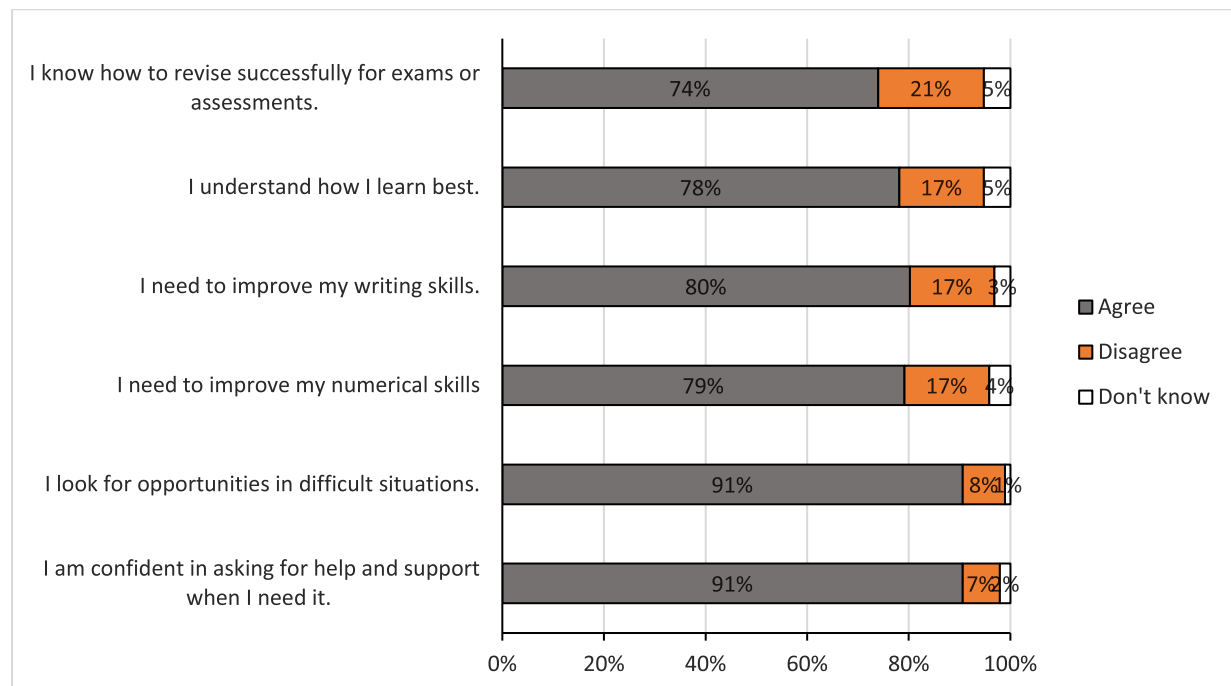
Knowledge and understanding of future pathways

90% of learners were aware of the different options they could take after their education. In relation to HE; 88% of learners knew the benefits and costs, 75% were aware of the financial support available, 83% knew about the support available, 85% knew what it would be like to attend, 80% knew how to apply. Three-quarters (78%) knew about the support to undertake an apprenticeship. 73% reported that they understand how to manage finances and budget. Figure 6.7 shows the percentages of learners responding to each statement in this category.

Figure 6.7: Percentages of learners responding to each statement for knowledge and understanding of future pathways category
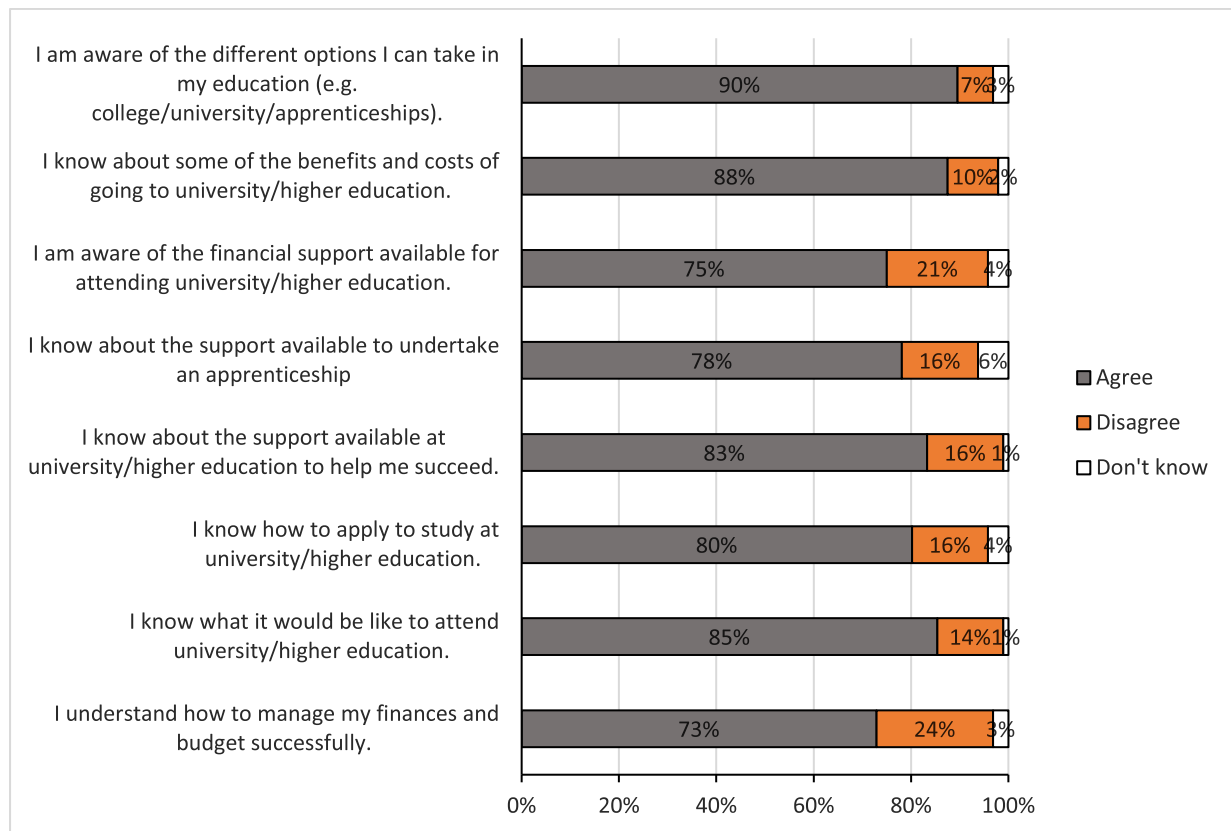
Pathways to potential futures

81% of learners know about the industries that have jobs available in their local area and 79% report knowing what skills employers are looking for. 78% have heard people talk about their jobs and 80% know about some of the careers available to them in the future. 79% of learners know how/where to find out information about future options, 84% know who to speak to for advice about future plans and 79% know what they want to do in the future. Figure 6.8 shows the percentages of learners responding to each statement in this category.

Figure 6.8: Percentages of learners responding to each statement from pathways to potential futures category.
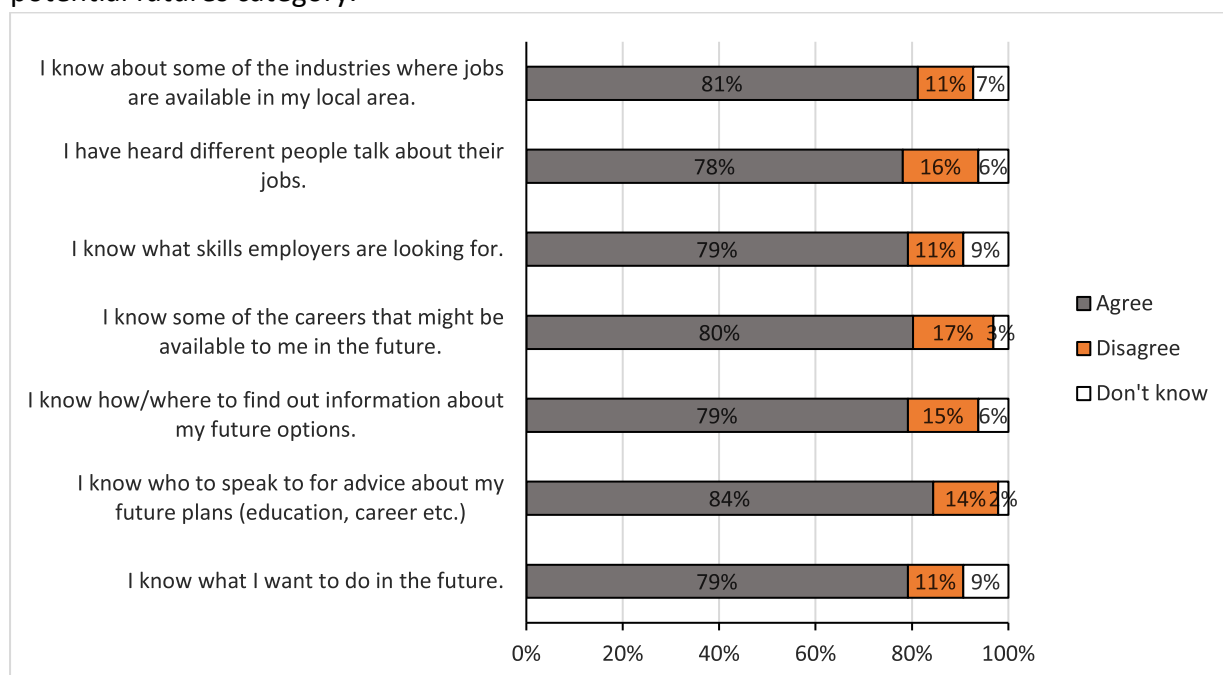
Global outcomes

As well as specific outcomes, learners' level of self-efficacy, sense of belonging, aspirations, and intentions to study at HE was also measured.

85% of learners were determined to do well in life (12% disagreed; 3% didn't know), 88% were confident they can achieve their goals in life (10% disagreed; 2% didn't know) and 84% thought they could get the grades to progress to further study (12% disagreed; 5% didn't know). 85% of learners thought they could fit in well at HE (8% disagreed, 6% didn't know). 85% of learners believed they could study at HE (10% disagreed; 4% didn't know) and 90% wanted to study at HE (5% disagreed; 5% didn't know).

Conclusion

Overall, the LNA indicated that most post 16 respondents did not have many gaps in specific knowledge and skills. Most strikingly, more than three-quarters of respondents reported that they needed to improve their writing and numeracy skills. As English and maths are the core skills, the focus of any activity may factor this in.

Limitations

Findings of the survey should be interpreted with caution as despite taking steps to clean the data, the data set analysed may not have included all true or unique respondents. In addition, the research used a self-reporting questionnaire which could have led to response bias. Lastly, the motivation of the participants may have influenced the findings such that the motivated participants were more likely to complete the questionnaire or that they chose to complete the questionnaire rather than being prompted/encouraged to complete via a session.

7.0 Perspectives of Undergraduate Students

Context

As part of the Empower Academy project, the intention was to interview several current undergraduate students from a Children Social Care experienced (CSC-experienced) background. This was with the aim of gaining some insights and appreciation of their experience and the factors that best helped them when they were considering making an application and progressing to Higher Education (HE). In addition, the aim was to discover whether the participants had been exposed to and involved in any outreach programmes designed to engage, foster, and support their progression to HE. Finally, it was anticipated that the participants might, drawing upon their own experience, be able to share their recommendations for the effective design and delivery of any programme of outreach support aimed at supporting CSC-experienced learners as they consider their futures.
To enable a meaningful insight, the hope was to interview at least six current CSC-experienced undergraduate students. However, despite utilising a range of known access points to recruit potential participants, three participants came forward, with only two of these agreeing to be interviewed within the agreed project time frame.

While the two interviews have provided insightful data, the breadth of data being sought and the potential for deep thematic analysis was less than anticipated. Therefore, to better and cohesively reflect the data and to elicit any common elements of experience a descriptive account of the two CSC-experienced participants and their journey to HE is offered.

By presenting the data in this way the individual context and factors that impacted on the participants progression is captured and, in doing so, helps identifies some helpful elements and content for inclusion in any programme of outreach being designed for delivery through the Empower Academy project.

Progression Accounts

Participant 1: Harry (pseudonym) is a 30-year-old male and is in his first year of degree study at a university in the North West of England. Harry is studying child and adolescent wellbeing, and although he has been finding elements of the programme challenging, he is enjoying the programme.

Harry described his journey to university as 'a bit of a roller coaster', in part because of the chaotic impact of his early and adolescent childhood, his care experience and the impact this has had on his secondary education. Harry had a traumatic early life, exposed to parental neglect, and had several extended periods of residential care. Harry's experience of residential care was at times also fraught and disturbing, with episodes of being bullied and leaving him with a perception his care experience has had a significant adverse impact. Harry expressed his worry how the care system is frequently failing young people.

Educationally, Harry was not able to enjoy and maintain a stable secondary education pathway, missing large parts of school, particularly in years ten to eleven, which meant that he did not leave school with any qualifications. Part of Harry's education was conducted in an educational setting connected with the service provider providing Harry's residential care service. Harry did not recall being given any encouragement or guidance about his education or career futures when at school.

Following school Harry, with the support and advice provided by Connections (a youth career service), gained a place at a college to undertake a qualification in IT. This was something he passed with ease and then took a range of jobs working in call centres which he did not find satisfying. With encouragement from a friend who helped him think about his life knowledge and skills and how his background in care could be used to beneficial effect motivated him to seek employment in the adult care sector, something he did for about five years. During this period of employment Harry was able to benefit from undertaking a range of work-related qualifications.

While enjoying working in the care sector, Harry still had a powerful desire to channel his experience further for the benefit of others and so moved into the children's' care sector, finding employment as a support worker in a children's residential care setting. Harry reflected that he has found the area of work in which he is happiest yet, strong, insightful and can make a personal difference in the lives of some children and adolescents that have experienced some of the difficult tribulations that he himself has faced.

While Harry has found his vocation, his personal life has been affected with periods of debilitating mental health crisis due to his early traumatic experiences, a significant period of homelessness, and the impact of other personal issues, including a diagnosis of ACDH, all leading to feelings of debilitating anxiety, and at times, a lack of personal confidence. Yet despite these challenging circumstances Harry nurtured a long term aim of wanting to go to university, setting himself the goal that by the age of 30 he would be as well as he could be, (which has been enabled with access to specific therapies, and a strong focus on ensuring his own personal care and wellbeing) and undertaking a degree at a particular university at which he wanted to study. Harry is at the university of his choice, having been given an unconditional offer and is nearing completion of his first year of study.

In reaching his goal Harry noted how the support of college tutors at points had been influential for his progress. Harry recounted how, when at college undertaking his access to higher education course, he needed frequent support and guidance from tutors given his lack of personal confidence and 'not believing he was good enough.' With their feedback and support he developed his self-belief. Harry grew in confidence, progressed well and completed the course with distinction.

Although anxious, Harry felt he could pursue his application for university. He recalls being given support by a college tutor to help navigate the UCAS element of application and to also develop his personal statement for his HE application. This was key as he wanted to ensure he could reflect his personal life experiences and the challenges he has faced in a reflective and appropriate way that would illustrate how he would benefit from undertaking

his chosen programme and progressing to HE. Harry found the application process for the student finance aspect of his application straightforward. Given some ongoing health issues, Harry was advised by a friend, who was also at university that he might be eligible for the Disabled Students Allowance (DSA). Without this friends' advice, Harry was not sure he would have known about the DSA support available but was so pleased that he made the application. Harry noted how having the DSA support in place has meant the support has been in place since the start of his programme and has allowed him to focus on other key aspects to ensure his personal success without any additional unnecessary stress.

While Harry's own personal efforts and resilience was instrumental in enabling him to pursue his goal of progression, he could identify the type of support that would be helpful to other care experienced young people to help them understand and maximise their options. These suggestions included awareness of volunteering, and apprenticeships. However, critical to any support was the need for those who are supporting care experienced young people to appreciate the trauma that many will have experienced and the potential significant impact it can have upon their feelings and behaviours. Interventions designed to help them understand such feelings and behaviours being key to help foster a sense of confidence, help reduce anxiety and encourage a positive sense of self-worth.

Harry was certain that any programme of support that is developed needs to include the involvement of facilitators/peers with their own direct experience of being a care leaver who can share their experience of the positive strategies and the sources of support that are available and that they have used to follow their goals.

While Harry recognises that he remains on a journey of personal discovery and health and is a work in progress, he is keen to pursue his endeavour of helping to address and overcome some of the stigma and system challenges that many young care experienced young people can perceive and feel, particularly those who experience residential care as part of their care experience. Harry reflected how he is using his own personal experience and insights to help educate his peers as part of contributions in group teaching discussions on his degree programme.

Harry indicated his future intention to plan and develop his career further and is hoping to undertake a master's degree at some point in the future.

Participant 2: Shelly (pseudonym) is a female second-year undergraduate student. Shelly is from an ethnic minority and a follower of Islam, studying Law at a university in the North West of England. Shelly completed her secondary education and attended college, where she studied a BTEC Level 3 qualification. Shelley entered university directly aged 18 following completion of her Level 3 qualification.

Shelley indicated that the prospect of progressing to HE was something both encouraged by the school at which she attended, where there was a strong culture of academic expectation for progression. This expectation was also shared by Shelly's adoptive parents. Shelly recounts that progressing to HE was something that she was both motivated for and hoping

to do. While Shelly was personally motivated to progress to HE, she could recall how concerned parental influence and high expectation could be stressful to contend with.

Shelley did not perceive any particular concerns or anxieties about the process or making the application to progress to HE. However, Shelly noted that she was able to benefit from guidance and support to develop her personal statement, a key aspect of the application process. Shelly recalled this support being offered as part of an outreach activity being supported by a local university, with the HE representative being able to help review the statement, offer some guidance and recommend some changes prior to submission, particularly about capturing personal passions and examples of life activities that she had undertaken to help show her readiness and suitability for HE. Shelly found the support helpful in making sure the statement was comprehensive, coherent, and grammatical correct. Shelly was able to act upon the feedback given. Shelly could not recall attending any other specific outreach activities apart from attending an occasional career's fair.

Considering potential support interventions that might have been useful for other young care experienced people when considering future education and career options, Shelly noted how more effort needs to be made to help young people prepare for life at university, with more focus on how to make friends, prepare for meeting academic expectations and undertaking successfully more personal tasks such as cooking in the readiness for independent living. Shelly noted a lack of personal readiness for independent living and while she still receives family support noted the importance of being self-reliant. In relation to readiness for meeting academic expectations Shelly expressed how a more immersive encounter, perhaps enabled through attending a residential outreach experience, would be more beneficial to gain the level of insight needed to adequately prepare for life at university.

Shelly noted some of the system challenges faced by young people from CSC-experienced backgrounds, with some concerns expressed about why any support is discontinued when a person reaches the age of twenty-five. Similarly, Shelley noted the difficulties created by different care contexts in which young people may be moved to various parts of the country in order to receive care and support. The perception being that this is unhelpful and distressing as it uproots the young person affected from the surroundings and area in which they may be more familiar, comfortable and might not be without a negative impact. In this same vein, Shelly questioned how many young people there are from a care experienced and different ethnic backgrounds, and particularly those from a Muslim faith. This lack of recognition or identity potentially being a source of strangeness and isolation. Shelly indicated that this might mean that the creating of opportunities for young people from care backgrounds from different ethnic minority backgrounds to connect could be a helpful development.

As Shelly approaches the end of her second year of undergraduate study, her immediate priority is to study and progress effectively. While Shelly does not yet have a definite view of the specific type of job role she would like to do, she is hoping to remain and gain employment in the legal sector.

Discussion

The accounts and insights offered by two current undergraduate CSC-experienced students as they progress to HE resonate with some of the research findings exploring the concerns, issues, and recommendations for supporting CSC-experienced participants if they are to be able to consider the progression to HE as a viable pathway (see summary of the literature). The accounts shared, depict students who have progressed to HE but from different care contexts and start points but share some of the same issues that can influence the journey of CSC-experienced people. This includes having to experience and cope with different care arrangements which can provoke a sense of deep upheaval, have potential traumatic implications, and can disturb life trajectories.

Both accounts also indicate the lack of readiness for independent living and how some further support at key points of transition could be helpful to aid successful adaptation. Some of this support will be related to acquisition of life skills such as cooking, but also psychosocial support such as strategies for being able to forge new (and trusting) relationships.

The benefit of concerned, informed and timely support at key points is reflected by both participants, noting the support of academic staff in encouraging progression and completion of some key tasks associated with enabling the progression to HE – such as the writing of personal statements and insights into HE. The two cases indicate that the support provided at such points is not just technical but may also have an emotional/confidence building element. This may be something that needs to be particularly appreciated as part of any outreach being developed and supported. This links with the need for designing any interventions with an explicit personal growth and confidence building element.

Given the diversity of experience reflected in the accounts shared here, it points to the need for the skilled facilitation of any programme by practitioners who have a sensitive and insightful understanding of the potential context, background experience and the potential psycho-social impact that care experiences could have on the participants that they seeking to support.

Although only two accounts have been shared here, they reflect some of the intersectional challenges that might complicate progression for care experienced participant such as being a mature student, being female, being from a minority population group and personal life circumstances being exacerbated by chronic health conditions. Outreach support which helps participants gain insight into the potential impact of these factors on their progression, the sources of support that are available and helping participants adopt positive support-seeking strategies will be beneficial to help nurture confidence in making application to and succeeding in HE.

Finally, both accounts point to a programme of support which is designed to be incremental, is more than just a factual exchange of salient information but actively supports personal cope building strategies and confidence. If this is to be meaningfully, it points to a multi professional input into the design and delivery of any programme being supported through the Empower Academy project.

8.0 Perspectives of Social Care Staff

Context

As part of the Empower Academy project, it was considered necessary to gather the perspective of staff who support learners from a Children Social Care Experienced (CSC-experienced) background given their significant role in supporting and influencing CSC-experienced learners as they progress through their education journey and key transitions associated with receiving formal care support. It was considered that the perspectives of social care staff could offer an additional valuable prism to help provide a richer understanding of the needs and support of the needs of learners. In addition, given their knowledge, day to day experience and engagement with CSC-experienced learners, it was envisaged that they could provide insights which might help inform the design and delivery of the programme of outreach support aimed at CSC-experienced learners wishing to consider potential progression to Higher Education (HE).

To ensure meaningful insights and sufficient depth the intention was to interview at least six social care staff with direct experience of working with those in care (i.e., social workers/ personal advisors, or virtual school education staff) from Local Authority Social Services operating within Lancashire, Blackburn with Darwen or Blackpool regions. However, despite using a range of strategies to recruit potential participants, only three participants from Lancashire County Council came forward and were interviewed for this element of the Empower Academy project.

Method

The three interviews were analysed using thematic analysis. Transcripts were coded manually, and subsequently categorised by combining codes that were similar, creating a list of final themes.

Participant Profile

Figure 8.1 identifies the profile of the participants that took part in the research. The three participants reflected a spectrum of experience from recently qualified to two participants with significant periods of experience working directly with CSC-experienced learners. Two members worked within the Employment and Support Team which has a role in supporting CSC-experienced learners with key aspects of employment preparation such as providing careers advice, preparation for work, sourcing work experience and the transition to work. One team member worked as a member of the Housing Project, a specific service to support young CSC-experienced individuals as they prepare for transition to independent living and accommodation.

Figure 8.1: Participant profiles

Participant 1	Participant 2	Participant 3
• *Role*: Member of the Employment and Support Team • *Experience*: 25 years • *Directly work with:* those in care and care leavers	• *Role*: Member of the Employment and Support Team • *Experience*: 11 years • *Directly work with:* those in care and care leavers	• *Role*: Member of the Housing Project Team • *Experience:* 1 years • *Directly work with:* those in care and care leavers

Key Findings

From the insights provided during the interviews, the following six themes offer an understanding on the needs of learners with a CSC-experienced background.

Barriers

This theme refers to the interviewers' perceived barriers faced by CSC-experienced learners and ranged from emotional, financial, and practical barriers.

All interviews highlighted that learners with CSC-experienced backgrounds have additional struggles and concerns that may influence decisions to progression or actual progression to/within HE. Expectedly, finance was seen as one of the main barriers, with all participants reporting that "…student fees put people off." (Participant 1)

Linked to the issue of finance, one noted that accommodation at university plays a vital part;

> "They shouldn't be worrying about their accommodation; they shouldn't be worrying about the next meal. They need to be able to focus on their education, if that's what they need to pursue." (Participant 3)

In addition, Participant 2 highlighted the emotional barriers faced by CSC-experienced learners. This included the lack of stability at home, anxieties and mental health, and a reliance on support to do things. Similarly, Participant 1 noted that the innate lack of self-belief that CSC-experienced learners often have about their options and ability to progress to HE as indicated in the following;

> "They're not aware that this is something they could aspire to, whether it's unintentionally done by schools or by people in their lives. And they don't see it as a viable option." Participant

Enablers

This theme refers to the perceived enablers that could support learners from CSC-experienced backgrounds progress to HE. These factors include awareness of the benefits of HE, cultivating hobbies/interests to careers and offering practical tools.

When asked about enablers that could aid progression of CSC-experienced learners, Participant 3 reflected that awareness of the benefits of HE is key:

> "I would also expect that there's an understanding that potentially moving into higher education can improve life chances to wages, etc." (Participant)

Participant 1 also noted that promoting hobbies and interests into possible career routes could also aid progression as indicated in the following:

> "I think sometimes the hobbies and interest that they have as well as has led on to that, particularly if someone is thinking about going to HE and they've have a particular hobby that's related to that, then it's something to be encouraged like sport for example. And we think ever thought about taking this further as a potential job and this is what it could get aspired to if you thought about going to uni." (Participant)

In addition, Participant 2 acknowledged that CSC-experienced learners have the aspirations to progress but lack the tools to progress as indicated in the following:

> "To actually go to university. The aspirations are there. I think it's just giving them the tools to actually do it." (Participant)

Key influencers

The three participants indicated the potential influencing role that they can provide in supporting learners with CSC-experienced backgrounds to possibly progress to HE. This was reflected within each of their current roles and in individual roles that may not necessarily be focused on education. Participant 3 observed

> "I talk to them quite a lot about college and university. If it comes up." (Participant)

All participants identified roles within the wider team that may support learners to progress to HE such as social workers, personal advisors, and employment advisors. It was indicated that other people such as foster carers and professionals in schools can also inspire and support learners. However, there was common agreement that much more could be done by key influencers to maximise the support for CSC-experienced learners.

Participant 1 reflected;

> "… perhaps we could be doing a little bit more to try and promote HE and doing a bit more to alleviating some of those barriers." (Participant)

Current support

The interviewers highlighted the current type and extent of support that is already available to learners with CSC-experienced backgrounds in Lancashire. The participants noted that this support was extensive and was perhaps unique to learners living in this local authority setting. As indicated above in Figure 8.1, Participant 1 and 2 both worked in the employment and support team that was described as an "education improvement service for looked after children in the Lancashire area." (Participant 1)

Participant 2 highlighted the uniqueness of the service in Lancashire noting:

> "I think we're quite unique in the team that we are and what we do …. And I don't think you'd find another employment support team service in other council areas." (Participant)

Specifically, the team work to raise aspiration and promote educational pathways as indicated by Participant 1:

> "We work primarily with students in school and post 16 from year 9 upwards to raise aspiration and promote post 16 learning and whether that's college, apprenticeships, jobs with training, we also try and promote universities to these students who are able to consider that from an academic and social point of view." (Participant).

As part of their role, they also signpost learners to financial information and websites. The team have also held HE conferences for CSC-experienced learners. The varied role within the team was further signified by participant 2 who indicated that the role involved taking learners around universities and attempting to set up tutoring for year 11 CSC-experienced learners.

In addition, one participant indicated that support is available to deal with accommodation issues at college and university. Participant 3 also reflected on the overall ethos of their team as reflected in the following.

> "I certainly think that there's a goal in my workplace for young people to achieve and do the best that they could do, but also to be happy. And it might be that university isn't for them and they want to do something else and that's their goal. But if it is, there's an aspiration to make that happen." (Participant)

Priorities for outreach

All three participant had suggestions on the priorities to include in the design and development of an outreach programme to support CSC-experienced learners to consider potential progression to HE.

Participant 2 and 3 indicated the importance of trust-building with learners and the awareness of trauma informed practices. Participant 3 highlighted that taking into consideration individual need would be beneficial:

"…individual need, I think, individual goal… you've got to take into account the past and future projection, family, friends, all of that, I think you've got to look at that person as a whole. And I think that's important." (Participant)

Regarding the format and content of any proposed outreach activities, suggestions included providing opportunities for learners to look around universities, taster days, one-on-one support for learners that want to go to university, support with the whole application process and development of skills needed for the process. In addition, supporting CSC-experienced learners to effectively budget and manage their finances was seen as key to success.

Regarding the timing of any proposed outreach activities, all participants agreed that helping young people appreciate that progression to HE could be a viable option should be done earlier on in the young people's lives, with the indication that this potential needs to be seeded and cultivated within primary school. One participant noted that;

"…because the earlier they have that kind of seed planted in the mind, then it's gonna be beneficial in the long run…"   (Participant 1)

Supporting Staff

The interviews highlighted that the level of knowledge for promoting HE to learners with CSC-experienced backgrounds varied between colleagues and within teams. This was identified as a concern by participant 2, despite providing support to staff they reflected:

"…as a team, we are getting universities in to come and present to officers. We've done it recently, but I think it's getting those officers to engage and put that support in place where they follow it through." (Participant 2)

When asked about the frequency of this. It was indicated that this happened maybe once or twice a year. None of the participants were aware of the potential additional resources, training or CPD that can be accessed to help new staff gain an understanding of the specific knowledge and guidance available to support them in being confident in encouraging CSC-experienced learners to consider progression to HE. All participants agreed that providing further advice on the support available to them in their role as key influencers would be beneficial.

Implications

The perspectives gained from the interviews with professional staff suggests several implications for consideration in the design and delivery of any outreach programme. Relevant to the development of the programme, all interviews indicated the need for early intervention was key. Noteworthy, reflections included that facilitators of the outreach activities should develop trusting relationships with learners to seek engagement and should be aware/advocate trauma informed practices.

The findings suggest that as part of the Empower Academy project that a useful component to include as part of the overall programme design is a Continuous Professional Development CPD element designed to focus directly and support potential key influencers with key knowledge and guidance around issues related to progression to HE. This is with the intention that they have currency of knowledge and can feel confident in guiding CSC-experienced learners.

As described above, a substantial amount of support is already in place for CSC-experienced learners, although the potential sustainability or impact of this work remains unclear at this time. It would be important that any programme put in place compliments the support already in place or else there is risk of duplication which might lessen impact and best uses of limited resources. If this is to be achieved the explicit involvement of a representative influencer needs to be involved in the design stage and development of the programme so that any mapping to other potentially available support is informed, understood, and effectively linked.

9.0 Recommendations

Based upon a synthesis of the evidence the following recommendations can be made to inform the development of a proposed programme of support for care experienced learners within the local authorities in scope within the Future U footprint.

Any programme:

- Should adopt the term Children Social Care experienced (CSC-experienced) to better capture the whole population group that might require additional support in considering potential progression to HE.
- Should maximise interagency collaboration and input into the design and delivery of the programme. This may include seeking input from children's social work, education, and psychology.
- Should adopt a strength-based approach to help nurture any participant's personal confidence, encourage aspiration, motivation, and planning.
- Seek to involve the direct involvement of care experienced individuals who can share their own insights, aid understanding and encourage participants in how they might achieve their aspirations and how to maximise the available sources of support.
- Feature an approach which seeks to offer individualised, tailored, holistic support for participants.
- Look to maximise and integrate the assets that have been produced by other Uni connect partnerships/stakeholders to accelerate programme and/or resource design and the use of public funds.
- Include a continuous professional development element to support the role of key *influencers* with their currency of knowledge and understanding regarding HE education policy & developments and career pathways as they might relate to care experienced individuals.

9.1 Indicative Content and Format

Based upon the evidence and recommendations offered here, Table 9.1 identifies the proposed indicative content, potential type of activities and other key considerations that should be incorporated in the development of any outreach programme put in place to support the Empower Academy project.

Table 9.1: Indicative Outline of Suggested Content and Delivery Format

Priorities for Indicative Content	Format	Special Note
Personal Skills Development Supporting personal growth • Setting and planning personal goals • Developing self-advocacy • Insights and Strengths • Managing finances and budgeting	Mentorship Growth mindset Individual guidance and support Identity and personality awareness	• Facilitators have some awareness of trauma impact • Take into consideration individual need and a holistic approach • Include facilitators/participation with direct care experience • Design some assessment tools to compliment the progress plan
Attainment-raising • Building confidence in academic ability • Maximising motivation for learning • Support in writing and numeracy skills	Bespoke mentoring/ coaching/ academic tutoring dependent on individual need	
Further Education & Higher Education Application Process • Vocational & Work based Pathways • Apprenticeships support • Accessing information • UCAS Application Element • Developing a personal statement • Contextualise Student Finance Information • Awareness of Disability Support Allowance (DSA) • Developing confidence and supporting motivation and education persistence	Tailored awareness sessions (face to face with supported online resource) and bespoke individual support at key application time points Creative approaches and workshop methods boot camp	

Readiness for Higher Education • Application for Disability Support Allowance	Tailored awareness sessions and bespoke individual support at key application time points	
• Enabling successful independent and shared living	Workshop & Role play, Technical skill assessment & challenge	
Belonging Strategies • Developing social networks • Navigating systems, accessing, and maximising support (academic and personal student support elements) • Strengths – based coping	Workshop	
CPD for Key influencers (i.e. designated teachers, social workers, personal advisors, foster carers) • Annual update on labour market information, support available at universities • Link with Equality of Opportunity Risk Register/ Access and Participation Plans	Online package/resource Scheduled CPD sessions. Pilot helpline advice on a case-by-case basis	

Appendix 1: Literature Summary Table

Title	Authors	Year	Classification of Literature Type	Key Findings	Implications for the Project
Strategies for Engaging Youth Currently and Formerly in Foster Care in Child Welfare Policy Advocacy: Lessons from the New England Youth Coalition (NEYC)	Augsberger, A. et al	2020	Mixed methods research	Identifies six key strategies to support development of Foster Care experienced individuals including engaged leadership, youth–adult partnership model, ongoing training, and professional development opportunities, multi-tiered mentoring model, meaningful policy projects, and creating a supportive social context.	Potential implications for design of intervention.
What makes life good? Care leavers' views on their well-being	Crookhall, L.B. et al	2020	Quantitative survey data analysis	A significant minority of CSC-experienced individuals can experience a sense of low well-being. Importance of hearing and noting care leavers voices. Importance of having high expectations for CSC-experienced individuals. Importance of specific and relevant, tailored support on employment and training.	Potential implications for design of intervention.
Fostering Success in Higher Education: An Evaluation of a Holistic Model to Bridge Gaps for Foster Care Alumni and Youth who have been Displaced	Ellis, T. et al	2020	Multi method study	Importance of wraparound programmes. Supports a holistic approach to enable participants to flourish through developing relationships and connections.	Potential implications for design of intervention.
Universities need to Up their Game in Supporting Care-Experienced Graduates	Harrison, N.	2020	Commentary	Profile of participation in higher education by CSC-experienced students.	Policy and engagement.
Patterns of participation in higher education for care-experienced students in	Harrison, N.	2020	Synthesis and secondary analysis of national data sets	Outcome profile for CSC-experienced individuals. System monitoring and data management.	Policy and engagement.

Title	Authors	Year	Classification of Literature Type	Key Findings	Implications for the Project
England: why has there not been more progress?					
''That Piece of Paper is Your Golden Ticket': How Stigma and Connection Influence College Persistence among Students who are Care Leavers	Horn J,P.	2020	Qualitative research	Recommends that when developing interventions that any design seeks to include concepts and skills development and enable self-advocacy, independence, and support. Important for practitioners to acknowledge differences in experiences.	Potential implications for design of intervention.
'We Need That Person That Doesn't Give up on Us	Katz, C.C. & Geiger, J.M.	2020	Qualitative research	Themes were drop-off of formal supports for CSC-experienced individuals, high stakes of post-secondary education programs, friendships, and peer support, and increase in self-reliance.	Potential implications for design of intervention.
Individual and interpersonal factors associated with psychosocial functioning among adolescents in foster care: A scoping review	Kothari, B.H.	2020	Scoping Review	Identifies key categories of individual factors that can have positive value on the psychosocial functioning of adolescent youth in foster care. Promote a strength and resilience-based approach.	Orientation of programme to ensure a strengths-based approach.
Students For Children: A Volunteer programme – Model for Universities for the Support of Children in Foster Care.	Kulcsar, G. et al	2020	Individual project review	Identifies the potential benefit of a mentorship programme for HEI students to support children in foster care.	Potential implications for design of intervention.
'The educational outcomes of children in care–a scoping review'	Lund, S. & Stokes, C.	2020	Literature review	Need for trusting relationships with adult, teachers, and caseworkers. Interventions should help promote a sense of resilience, high aspirations and promote education persistence.	Engagement and principles for design of interventions.

Title	Authors	Year	Classification of Literature Type	Key Findings	Implications for the Project
'Educational Trajectories of Youth Formerly in Foster Care who are LGBTQ: Before, During, and After Emancipation	Mountz, S. et al	2020	Qualitative study	Staff supporting CSC-experienced individuals need to be trauma aware/informed.	Preparation of staff supporting CSC-experienced individuals.
Learning on the margins: Care leavers in higher education	Murphy, S.	2020	Qualitative study	Supports themes of overcoming low expectations for CSC-experienced individuals. Recommends developing coping strategies and development of networks.	Engagement and principles for design of interventions.
The roles of Campus-Support Programs (CSPs) and Education and Training Vouchers (ETVs) on college persistence for youth with foster care histories	Okpych, N.J.	2020	Quantitative secondary data analysis	Identifies the key factors required to support successful progression including caring and supportive adults, being able to navigate systems and processes, importance of incentives.	Engagement and principles for design of interventions.
Lessons Learned from College Support Programs for Students with a History of Foster Care	Piel, M.H. et al	2020	Survey design	Key findings for a successful intervention; supportive staff, programmatic elements, partnership, financial support, and access to others. Ensure staff are trauma informed. Importance of openness and consistency in approach. Promote a strengths-based approach.	Orientation of programme to ensure a strengths-based approach. Engagement and principles for design of interventions. Preparation of staff supporting CSC-experienced individuals

Title	Authors	Year	Classification of Literature Type	Key Findings	Implications for the Project
Factors Associated with Postsecondary Engagement for Youth Leaving Foster Care: An Analysis Using the National Youth in Transition Database	Salazar, A.M	2020	Secondary analysis of USA national /state data sets related to learners being supported by foster care	A range of factors are more associated with whether education progression occurred, gender, ethnicity, mental health, disability, remaining in care. Preparation and readiness for transitioning from care can have an impact on outcomes in key domains of life such as education, employment etc. Other areas of life may need to be stable if post education engagement is to be feasible and supported.	Policy and engagement. Engagement and principles for design of interventions.
Systematic review of the educational experiences of children in care: Children's perspectives	Townsend, I.M et al	2020	Systematic review of qualitative research exploring children's perspectives (primary and secondary)	Importance of a stable school environment. Role of teachers as influences and in promoting voices of CSC-experienced learners. Educational achievement of children in care can be influenced by the perceptions, attitudes, and expectations of educators and caregivers. Need to promote a sense of agency for participants. Importance of interagency collaboration.	Engagement and principles for design of interventions.
I Needed to Aim Higher: Former Foster Youths' Pathways to College Success	Avant, D.W et al	2021	Qualitative study	Internal and external factors that influence CSC-experienced learners to seek, progress and succeed in college education. Key factors include extent of support and help to navigate systems, processes, barriers, and perceptions of stigma.	Engagement and principles for design of interventions.

Title	Authors	Year	Classification of Literature Type	Key Findings	Implications for the Project
"There's Just a Certain Armor that You Have to Put On': Navigating College as a Youth with Foster Care Experience	Dumais, S.A. and Spence, N.J.	2021	Qualitative study	Interventions need to help support relationship development, build trust, involve CSC-experienced individuals. Promote a sense of self advocacy.	Potential implications for design of intervention.
What are the factors influencing the school functioning of children in residential care?	Garcia-Molsosa, M et al	2021	Systematic review	Identifies factors which influence schooling and subsequent progression of children receiving residential care. Key factors include gender, externalizing and internalizing behaviour problems, age at entry into care, relationships with peers at school, and school changes (associated with placement changes).	Engagement and principles for design of interventions
Social and Emotional Supports During College Years: Associations with Post-college Outcomes Among Alumni of Foster Care	Kelly, P et al	2021	Secondary data analysis of USA state care leaver data set	Social and emotional supports present during the college years, particularly social support and engaging in frequent social activities with others, were associated with better outcomes post-college.	Engagement and principles for design of interventions.
Foster Kids Capital	Medlin, A.& Jaeger, A	2021	Qualitative research	Impact of personal and social characteristics in influencing outcomes for CSC-experienced individuals. Importance of a strengths-based approach to help avoid a sense of stigma. Include a focus on leadership and advocacy, realistic goal setting,	Orientation of programme to ensure a strengths-based approach. Potential implications for design of intervention.
Interventions to support entry into further or higher education or training in looked-after children and young people	NICE	2021	National clinical guideline	Notes only generally weak evidence of any interventions that support access to and progression to HE. Notes importance of working with Virtual Schools. Suggests that interventions which provide residential experiences and visits to university or college	Engagement and principles for design of interventions. Potential implications for design of intervention.

Title	Authors	Year	Classification of Literature Type	Key Findings	Implications for the Project
				campuses, mentoring by near peers in higher or further education, and coaching potentially useful.	
Supporting access and student success for learners with experience of children's social care	Styrnol, M. et al	2021	Evidence Review	Significant evidence review exploring evidence base on activities designed to support access to post-secondary education who have background of CSC-experienced. Overall evidence base emerging but weak Concerns about consistency of terms used and implications for data recording and management. Common findings from the research emphasises the intersectional and complex needs of the group and importance of context.	Engagement and principles for design of interventions. Potential implications for design of intervention.
The role of informal networks in the lives of young people transitioning from care: A review of the literature	Teer, P	2021	Literature review	Importance of informal and formal networks in supporting better outcomes. Importance of influencers having high expectations for CSC-experienced learners.	Engagement and principles for design of interventions.
The Care-Experienced Graduates' Decision-Making, Choices and Destinations Project: how does a background of care affect graduate transitions? a literature review	Baker, Z	2022	Literature review	Explores literature related to CSC-experienced learners as they graduate from higher education. CSC-experienced individuals can encounter unique challenges and restrictions including less likely to access professional employment.	Engagement and principles for design of interventions.
Annual Report 2021-22	Lancashire County Council	2022	Activity and data profile report	Profile of CSC-experienced learners within local Authority boundary. Variance in terms used.	Awareness and engagement.

Search Strategy and Search Terms

The Transforming Access and Student Outcomes Research and Evaluation Hub (TASO) has recently conducted a substantial evidence review to support access and success in postsecondary education for learners who have had experience of children's social care[7]. This review provides a substantial starting point for supporting the evidence review element of the Empower Academy project. The review searched for evidence of interventions and impact in the academic and wider grey literature published between January 2012 and October 2020.

Therefore, to support the evidence review for the Empower Academy Project the intention is to only search for and review any academic and wider grey literature published since the publication of the TASO review. Further, to support consistency, the search terms used in the TASO review will be used for the follow-up consolidated search. On this basis the search strategy to be used is as follows.

Search Terms

In Title Field:

Care Leavers OR in care OR looked after OR care experienced OR in social care system OR subject to a child protection plan OR subject to a child in need plan OR kinship care OR foster care OR residential care OR unaccompanied asylum seeker

AND higher education OR HE OR college OR university OR degree

AND Participation OR access OR admissions OR enrolment OR aspirations OR progression OR attainment OR engagement OR intervention OR support

And 2nd search

AND Evidence OR impact OR intervention OR evaluation OR effect OR review OR analysis

Databases: Pro quest: Central
             Pro quest: Education Database
             Pro quest: ERIC
             Proquest: Social Sciences
             EBSCO: Host

Grey Literature Search (To identify government policy, reports, non-government organisations, charity reports etc.): Google Search & Google Scholar

Years: 2020-2022

Language: English

Context: UK (wherever possible)

Availability: Full Text **/** Peer Reviewed

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[7]TASO: Evidence review: Supporting access and student success for learners with experience of children's social care (2021) https://s33320.pcdn.co/wp-content/uploads/Supporting-learners-with-experience-of-childrens-social-care-1.pdf

Appendix 2: Data Collection Tools

Learning Needs Analysis Questionnaire

What is your age?	……………………
What year are you in?	Year 9 Year 10 Year 11 Year 12/college Year 1 Year 13/ College Year 2 Other…………….
Do you consider yourself to have a disability?	Yes/No/Prefer not to say
Are you:	Currently In-Care A Care Leaver Other………………
Are you:	White Black, Black British, Caribbean or African Asian or Asian British Mixed heritage Other (please specify)…………
Which Local Authority area do you live in?	Lancashire Blackburn with Darwen Blackpool Other ……………………..
Have you ever visited a university or college campus?	Yes, more than once Yes, once No, not yet Can't remember/ Don't know

Q8) How much do you agree with the following statements…? (Using your own personal judgement please answer honestly and tick one box for each statement

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree	Don't know
I know what my personal skills are.					
I know how to use my personal skills.					
I know what a CV is.					
I am able to write a CV.					
I know what information is needed to write a CV Cover Letter.					
I know about digital footprints and how they might impact careers.					

I know what the different types of recruitment and selection processes when applying for a job.					
I know how to make a good impression when applying for a course or job.					
I know how to revise successfully for exams or assessments.					
I understand how I learn best.					
I need to improve my writing skills.					
I need to improve my numerical skills.					
I could get the grades I need for progressing to further study.					
I look for opportunities in difficult situations.					
I am determined to do well in life.					
I am confident I can achieve my goals in life.					
I am confident in asking for help and support when I need it.					

Q9) How much do you agree with the following statements…? (Using your own personal judgement please answer honestly and tick one box for each statement)

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree	Don't know
I am aware of the different options I can take in my education (e.g. college/ university/ apprenticeships).					
I know about some of the benefits and costs of going to university/higher education.					
I am aware of the financial support available for attending university/higher education.					
I know about the support available to undertake an apprenticeship.					
I know about the support available at university/higher education to help me succeed.					

I know how to apply to study at university/higher education.					
I know what it would be like to attend university/higher education.					
I understand how to manage my finances and budget successfully.					
I think I could fit in well at university/higher education.					
I believe I can study at university/higher education.					
I know about some of the industries where jobs are available in my local area.					
I know about some of the industries where jobs are available in my local area.					
I have heard different people talk about their jobs.					
I know what skills employers are looking for.					
I know some of the careers that might be available to me in the future.					
I know how/where to find out information about my future options.					
I know who to speak to for advice about my future plans (education, career etc.)					
I know what I want to do in the future.					

Interview Guide: Undergraduate CSC-experienced learners

Target: Current undergraduate CSC-experienced learners

Purpose of Interview:

- To learn of the insights and experience of current CSC-experienced undergraduate students and the factors that best helped them when they were considering making an application and progressing to higher education.
- To elicit and understand in what ways how exposure and involvement in any outreach programmes might have impacted on their application process.
- To learn and gain an understanding of the participants recommendations for the design and delivery of any programme of outreach support aimed at care experienced learners wishing to consider potential progression to higher education.

Mode of Delivery: Telephone, Teams, or Face-to-Face dependent upon wishes of interviewee
Resources: Digital voice recorder

Format:

- Welcome and introduction
- Explain purpose of interview
    - Discussions will help to inform the planning, design and delivery of the interventions required for the Empower Academy project.
    - Audio recording of the session
- Identify ground rules
    - Shared discussion, listen with respect
    - All information will be kept confidential, and no personal identifying information will be shared
    - It is your insights, there are no pre-defined expectations,   right or wrong answers
    - Can stop the interview should that be your wish or if you feel uncomfortable
    - Information will be used in reports and websites
    - Mobile phones on silent mode

Question Guide

1. Please can you tell me a little about the programme you are currently studying,
    - How is your programme going?
    - How is your experience of university going?
    - What factors helped you decide about doing this course and at this university?

2. Thinking about your personal circumstances as a care experienced/care leaver what was your experience in feeling able and confident in choosing to go to university?
   Prompt:
    - Were there any factors that made your decision easier or more difficult in any way?
    - How did you find the process for applying for university – was there anything that helped you navigate this?
    - Did you encounter any difficulties in any way with the application process – if so, was there anything which helped you overcome these.

- If there was one thing that could have helped you most when you were considering making an application to higher education – what would you say it was?

3. Can you share any recollections about whether you received any encouragement or not when you were considering progressing a HE application?
   Prompt:
   - Who from and in what ways?
   - How did this encouragement/or lack of it impact upon you?

4. Thinking about your time at school/college can you recall participating in any kind of activities that were aimed at helping you think about and plan your future education? If so, what can you recall about such activities?
   Prompt:
   - May need to give an example to trigger recall – i.e., thinking about going to university, attending a careers fair, going on a campus tour

5. What if you can remember was the most memorable aspects about any of the activities that you participated in?
   Prompt:
   - Were there any standout moments that you found helpful and enjoyable?

6. Can you recall whether and if any, how and in what ways, participating in the activities that you have identified helped you in your decision in any way in making your application for university?

7. If there was one thing that could have helped you most when you were considering making for an application or being ready for higher education – what would you say it was?

8. So, we are looking to design and deliver place a programme of support to helping young care leavers to consider the potential of higher education - based upon your experience and perspective can you make any recommendations about what you think would help make the programme appealing and effective?

   Prompt:
   - Content
   - Format
   - Duration
   - Place of delivery

9. Finally, some of the research indicates that while care leavers can face additional challenges when making an application to, HE, care leavers can have many strengths and thus any programme should help focus on a strengths-based approach to maximise these – do you have any thoughts about this?
   Prompt:
   - From your own personal perspective do you recognise any strengths you have which you consider other care leavers might have and which could be drawn on as an element in the design of any programme.

10. Is there anything else you would like to share relevant to what we have been discussing that you think would be helpful for us to know that we haven't already covered.

Interview Guide: Perspectives of Social Care Staff

Target: Staff with direct experience of working with those in care i.e., social workers/ personal advisors, or virtual school education staff

Purpose of Interview:

- To explore the perspectives of social care staff on the needs of CSC-experienced learners.
- To learn and gain an understanding of recommendations for the design and delivery of any programme of outreach support aimed at CSC-experienced learners wishing to consider potential progression to higher education.

Mode of Delivery: Microsoft Teams

Resources: Recording via Teams

Format:

- Welcome and introduction
- Explain purpose of interview
  - o Discussions will help to inform the planning, design and delivery of the interventions required for the Empower Academy project.
  - o Recording of the session/ gain consent
- Identify ground rules
  - o Shared discussion, listen with respect
  - o All information will be kept confidential, and no personal identifying information will be shared
  - o It is your insights, there are no pre-defined expectations, right or wrong answers
  - o Can stop the interview should that be your wish or if you feel uncomfortable
  - o Information will be used in reports and websites

Question Guide

1. Please can you tell me a little about your current role?
   - What does a typical day entail for you?
   - Do you prominently work with those currently in care, care leavers or both?
   - How many years have you worked in the role?

2. In your role, have you worked with any care experienced/care leavers who have progressed to higher education? If so,
   - What do you think helped them make that decision?
   - What do you think supported them on their journey?

3. Based on your professional experience, what do you think are the main barriers that care experienced/ care leavers face in progressing to higher education?

4. Based on your professional experience, what do you think are the enablers that may support care experienced/ care leavers in progressing to higher education?

5. So, we are looking to design and deliver place a programme of support to helping care experienced/ care leavers to consider the potential of higher education - based upon your experience and perspective can you make any recommendations about what you think would help make the programme appealing and effective?
   - Content
   - Format
   - Duration
   - Place of delivery

6. What do you think the top three priorities are to include in the design of the empower academy project?

7. In your role, how confident are you in discussing/promoting higher education options to care experienced/care leavers learners? Or would you say that is not part of your role?

8. What do you think would support you in your role to support care experienced/ care leavers in their journey to progression to higher education?

9. Is there anything else you would like to share relevant to what we have been discussing that you think would be helpful for us to know that we haven't already covered.