

Empower Academy Project Summary of Evidence and Recommendations

1. Context

It is recognised that learners from a care experienced background are a significant 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. This paper provides a summary of the evidence and recommendations emerging from the research phase of the Empower Academy project.

2. Methodology and Data Capture

The research phase of the Empower Academy project has involved a range of activities including:

- Development and agreement of a research plan
- Population profile
- Literature search and review
- Desktop Scoping identifying examples of good practice and activities developed by other UniConnect partnerships and stakeholders aimed at supporting care experienced learners consider their education and career futures.
- A Learning Needs Analysis survey with care experienced participants which sought to specifically identify skills/ knowledge gaps and current support needs. This survey generated 134 usable responses completed by participants predominantly from an England wide geography. The survey was quantitatively analysed.
- Two interviews with current care experienced undergraduate students, producing narrative-based case study insights.
- In-depth, qualitatively analysed interviews, with three Local Authority professionals involved in the care and support of care experienced young people.

The scope, details of the approach used, and findings made for each of the activities identified are captured in short individual reports, together with the evidence bank underpinning the project. The intention will be to periodically review key aspects of this evidence bank such as the population profile, literature review and desktop research to help maintain currency of the resources and a source of future reference for the benefit of partners.

3. Key Findings

3.1 Population Profile

- As at March 2022, across Lancashire, Blackburn with Darwen, and Blackpool Local Authorities there were 2937 children with Looked After Status. The greatest number of looked after children (n=1,174) being within a 10 to 15-year age range.
- Approximately 50% of children who have been looked after continuously for 12 months or more had Special Educational Needs (SEN), with on average 27% of these receiving some form of SEN support.
- Nationally, 4% of aged 17 to 18 years and 7% of aged 19 to 21 care leavers progress to HE (i.e., studies beyond A level). The number of care leavers from the three Local Authorities in scope progressing to HE is very low, with the rate for Lancashire being approximately 3.7%.

3.2 Literature Review

- Significant variance in the terms used when seeking to capture, identify and describe different care experienced populations.
- Much of the literature is descriptive and qualitative in orientation. Only two recent studies being of the higher-level evidence threshold to show causal impact in relation to an outreach activity and its impact on supporting progression to HE for care experienced learners.
- Those care experienced youth who benefit from longer and more stable care placements and being supported to remain in education up to the age of eighteen have more successful outcomes.
- 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.
- It is frequently reported that care experienced children/youth experience low expectation and receive little encouragement by social care and education professionals with regards to supporting them in considering their education and career futures. This despite the indication that they can have high aspirations with the majority wishing to progress following post-sixteen secondary education.
- Most care experienced learners who do access HE are usually between the ages of 19 and 21 and typically enter without standard entry qualifications.
- Care experienced learners are more likely to achieve lower degree outcomes compared to peers, with more students 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.
- Given current patterns of access and participation in HE by care experienced youth, it is recommended that further efforts are focused on helping to increase participation by focusing on alternative, non-linear and 'second chance' pathways.
- More efforts are needed to ensure that the voices of care youth are sought, acknowledged and captured to directly inform any interventions designed to help meet any identified needs.
- There is a common recognition that the delivery of any interventions needs to be supported by facilitators with some understanding of trauma informed practice.

3.3 *Learning Needs Analysis*

- For pre eighteen aged respondents, the majority (74%) knew what their personal skills were and how to use them. Seventy-one percent reported that they had visited a university or college campus. Eighty-four percent of these respondents were aware of the different options they could take after their statutory education, with 84% wanting to study at HE. Many respondents indicated the need to improve their numerical and written skills.
- For respondents post eighteen, 81% of learners agreed that they knew what their personal skills were and how to use them. Ninety percent of learners were aware of the different options they could take after their education. In relation to HE, with 90% of respondents indicating that they would like to progress to HE. Like the pre eighteen aged group, requirements for improving numerical and written skills was high.
- Findings indicate that both groups of learners had strong ambitions and were determined to do well and indicated that they had sufficient awareness and knowledge to progress as they might hope.

3.4 *Case Studies and Interviews*

- The narrative-based studies of current care experienced undergraduate students highlight how further support at key points of transition could be helpful to aid successful progression to and readiness for HE. Some of the required support being on the application process for HE, support with acquisition of life skills but also psychosocial support such as strategies for being able to forge new (and trusting) relationships. The accounts indicate that 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 should be helpful.
- Themes emerging from the professional staff perspective noted the *barriers, enablers* and potential role and support *offered by key influencers*. These staff also identified suggested priorities for outreach support which included, trust building, supporting directly the HE application process and supporting the development of key life skills such as budgeting. The respondents reflected how promoting aspirations to consider the potential progression to HE needs to commence much earlier in the young person's life. These participants also identified and recommended the value of a continuous professional development programme to help ensure that professional staff and other key influencers have sufficient awareness of current HE education issues and career pathways and how these might be contextualised and relate to young people from care experienced backgrounds.

3.5 *Desktop scoping of interventions that have been supported by UniConnect Partnerships*

- Several of the other UniConnect Partners have either undertaken or funded activity aimed at supporting care experienced learners.
- Most of the activities which have been supported are related to briefing sessions for care experienced learners and their key influencers, engagement and production of digital resources which provide insights/case stories relevant to the needs of care experienced learners.
- Most interventions have not been formally evaluated for their impact.

- Subject to recognition of origin and copyright there is scope to request and assess the reuse of digital or other similar assets to support the design and delivery of any programme of support.

4. 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 youth.

5. Indicative Content and Format

Based upon the evidence and recommendations offered here, Appendix 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.

Appendix 1: Children Social Care Experienced Learners

Indicative Outline of Suggested Content and Delivery Format

Priorities for Indicative Content	Format	Special Note
<p>Personal Skills Development Supporting personal growth</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Setting and planning personal goals • Developing self-advocacy • Insights and Strengths • Managing finances and budgeting <p>Attainment-raising</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Building confidence in academic ability • Maximising motivation for learning • Support in writing and numeracy skills <p>Further Education & Higher Education Application Process</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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 	<p>Mentorship Growth mindset Individual guidance and support Identity and personality awareness</p> <p>Bespoke mentoring/ coaching/ academic tutoring dependent on individual need</p> <p>Tailored awareness sessions (face to face with supported online resource) and bespoke individual support at key application time points</p> <p>Creative approaches and workshop methods boot camp</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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

<p>Readiness for Higher Education</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Application for Disability Support Allowance • Enabling successful independent and shared living <p>Belonging Strategies</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developing social networks • Navigating systems, accessing, and maximising support (academic and personal student support elements) • Strengths – based coping <p>CPD for Key influencers (i.e. designated teachers, social workers, personal advisors, foster carers)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Annual update on labour market information, support available at universities • Link with Equality of opportunity risk register/ Access and Participation Plans 	<p>Tailored awareness sessions and bespoke individual support at key application time points</p> <p>Workshop & Role play, Technical skill assessment & challenge</p> <p>Workshop</p> <p>Online package/resource Scheduled CPD sessions. Pilot helpline advice on a case-by-case basis</p>	
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