CELCIS
Centre for excellence
for Children's Care and Protection

'Being a student with care experience is very daunting'

Findings from a survey of care experienced students in Scottish colleges and universities

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Foreword

Education changes lives; it transforms people and communities and contributes not only to economic prosperity but equally to human flourishing and well-being. Access to education should be accessible to all, irrespective of background or personal circumstances.

We know that for care experienced students accessing education can be more difficult and so I am delighted the Scottish Funding Council has supported CELCIS to carry out this research to help us broaden and deepen our understanding of the barriers and enablers that care experienced students encounter in applying for, attending and remaining at college and university in Scotland.

I would like to thank everyone who took part in the survey; for their candour, insights and time. The results build on the anecdotal evidence we have gained over a number of years and provide us with a solid base from which to work to make a real difference for our care experienced students.

This robust piece of research will give us the tools to drive change. I am particularly pleased that the student voice was at the centre of this work. While data, professional knowledge and an enabling context all play an important part, meaningful, positive change is best driven by experience. The rich stories that our students shared, and in particular the personal nature of these, will, I hope, give us all, our institutions and our agencies, much to reflect on so that improvements can be made in line with the recommendations. There are many wonderful things happening but so much more to be done.

SFC has a clear commitment to improving the outcomes of care experienced students and we look forward to working with our colleges, universities and other corporate parents to bring about real, impactful, sustainable and positive change.

Karen Watt

Karen Watt
Chief Executive, Scottish Funding Council

Executive Summary

Introduction

CELCIS carried out, on behalf of the Scottish Funding Council (SFC), the first Scotland-wide survey of care experienced students in Scotland's colleges and universities. The online survey was carried out between 27 November 2018 and 6 January 2019. This research is based on the HERACLES (Harrison 2017) research conducted with care experienced university students in England and aimed to broaden and deepen understanding of the barriers and enablers that care experienced students encounter in going to, being at and staying at college and university in Scotland.

Methodology

The survey used online questionnaires, one for college students and another for university students. Both were structured in three sections: Going to College / University; Being at College / University; and About You. Students were encouraged to complete the questionnaire by direct contacts from college and university care experienced student advisers and also via social media. Following analysis, the initial findings were discussed with a focus group of care experienced students to enrich the research team's understanding of the responses and sense check initial analysis with students who had direct, lived experience.

TOTAL RESPONSES

■College ■University
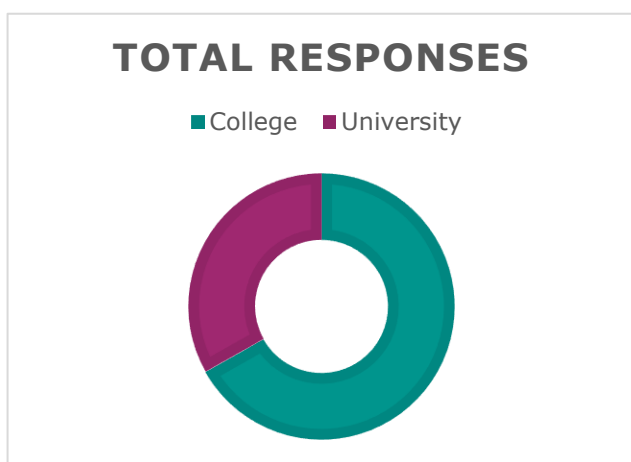
There were 500 responses to the survey, 334 from college students and 166 from university students. After removing respondents who had only agreed to the initial ethics questions but who had not proceeded to answer any of the questions, there were 413 usable responses, 276 from college respondents and 137 from university respondents. Of the 413 responses, 365 were complete, while 48 responses were incomplete.

The 276 responses from college students included 91 students who were studying courses at higher education level (33%) - e.g. Higher National Certificate and Higher National Diploma - 141 who were studying at further education level (51%), while in 44 cases (16%) the course level was not explicitly stated.

There was very good institutional representation in the responses. There were one or more responses from students studying at 18 out of the 19 higher education institutions across Scotland. Of the 16 non-UHI (University of the Highlands and Islands) colleges, 15 were represented in the responses. Of the 11 UHI campuses, four were represented.

Scottish colleges are organised into 13 geographical regions; all were represented in the responses.

Key Learning Points

A number of important themes emerged from the findings of this study:

1. Having reliable, consistent relationships with a trusted member of staff is very important to care experienced students. While specific practical supports are invaluable in removing systemic barriers, equally important is more holistic, relational based support.

2. Care experienced students highlighted the level of complexity they face in their personal lives which can impact upon their ability to access and sustain college and university courses.

3. Older students (i.e. 26+) indicated that whilst they had 'aged out' of formal supports related to corporate parenting and the care experienced bursary, the complexity of their circumstances, relating to their time in care, meant that continued access to informed and good quality practical, financial and emotional support, advice and guidance was very important to their ability to sustain study.

4. Care experienced students felt strongly that access to supportive services should be consistent, enduring and without discrimination on the basis of age, type of care experience or study setting.

5. Practical support in the form of year round, consistent accommodation; financial support in the form of the care experienced bursary; and advice and support services in the form of care experience student advisors are helpful and can be important enabling factors which support care experienced students to access and sustain college and university. Respondents felt that improvements are required in some areas of each of these practical resources in order to enhance the existing support available.

6. Processes and systems, while often well intentioned, can feel bureaucratic and disempowering and be experienced as traumatising for some students. The needs of care experienced students need to be placed at the centre of all service design and delivery in order to ensure systems and practices are developmentally informed and trauma sensitive.

7. Students who are care experienced and also have a disability or parental caring responsibilities can face additional challenges and may require further tailored support to the provision offered for the wider cohort of care experienced students.

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The effectiveness and impact of this support is greater when it is bespoke in its nature and nuanced in its understanding of students' needs.

8. Corporate parents, and other relevant public sector organisations, have the opportunity to be proactive and aspirational in their approach to collaborating with each other to go beyond their statutory duties, to ensure that every care experienced student has access to appropriate support at every stage of their learning journey.

Key Findings

Going to college or university

A majority of respondents reported that they did not get help with their application to college or university. This is important as the data showed that students who had more help as part of the application process felt more included in the college or university community. Access to this help for care experienced students though can be limited by the lack of wider support networks and disrupted educational journeys that this group of students often have.

Most respondents said they declared their care experience when applying to college or university and found this experience to be positive. Students particularly valued the support they received when institutions contacted them early in the application process. A minority of students said they had not been asked if they had care experience; this was more of an issue for college students with around a quarter of college respondents saying they had not been asked.

A majority of respondents did not report any significant difficulties with their transition to college or university, but of those that did, three specific issues emerged: moving residence, a lack of support networks and a feeling of isolation.

Being at college and university

Whilst most respondents reported feeling positive about their time in college and university, students who reported having a disability or mental health issue were less likely to rate their experience as positive. The proportion of care experienced students reporting a disability in our survey was much higher than the national average: 51% of university students, 43% of

Proportion of students reporting a disability

College FE students
College HE students
University Students

0%   20%   40%   60%

■ All students   ■ Care experienced students
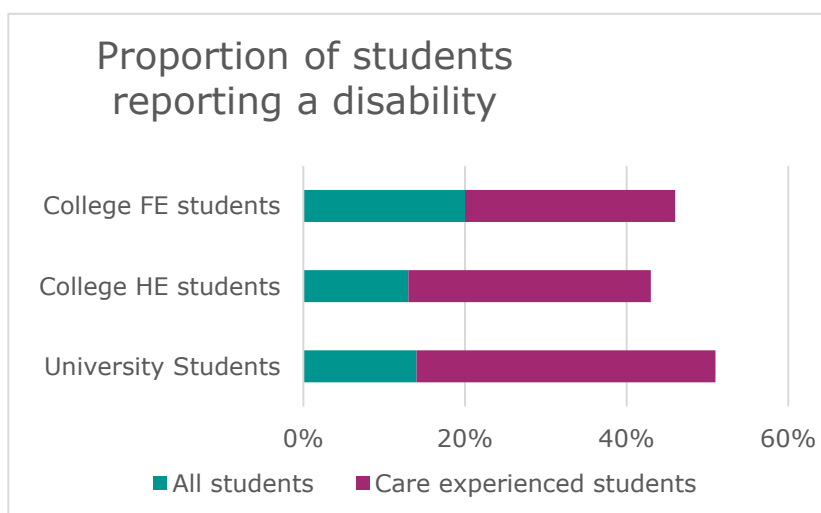
college HE students and 46% of college FE students reported having a disability. (This is considerably higher than the figures for all students with 14% of university students, 13% of college HE students and 20% of college FE students nationally reporting having a disability.)

A majority of students stated that they were managing financially while at college or university, but a minority were clearly not coping with their finances. A notable majority of disabled students were less likely to report coping with their financial situation. Many respondents described stringent financial management skills they had developed. The data indicates a distinction between students feeling that they are coping financially and students feeling financially comfortable. For those who responded that they were not coping financially, there was little difference between disabled and non-disabled students in the reasons each group cited for not coping. However, disabled students reported these issues in more detail and with greater frequency. Students described complex family situations, having caring responsibilities and being too old for the Care Experienced Student Bursary as some of the factors which affected their ability to cope with their finances.

45% reported housing difficulties

Accommodation was a concern for respondents, with 45% reporting housing difficulties. Students described having to move university accommodation during holiday periods and a lack of practical support with these moves. Some students described the emotional impact of accommodation moves compounding previous trauma experienced during care placement moves.

Just over half of respondents had considered leaving their course. In 2017-18 the retention rate for first year care experienced students in higher education in Scotland was 87.2%, i.e. 12.8% of students left their course (compared with 7.5% for all students and 10.6% for SIMD20 students) (Scottish Funding Council, 2019). Our findings suggest that a much higher proportion of care experienced students consider leaving but somehow manage to remain on course. Reasons for this included academic expectations, financial strain, a lack of support, feelings of not belonging and social isolation, and caring commitments. Complexities of family and personal lives outside of college or university were also factors in consideration to leave a course.

Positive reflections
Alongside identifying areas for improvement within current systems and practices, there was a significant amount of both good practice and positive experiences highlighted by respondents in this survey.

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Many students reported having received attentive and sensitive support from institutions and accessing opportunities, both academically and more widely, which they feel they would not have had access to without attending college or university.

Of particular significance is the number of named individuals that respondents were keen to identify and celebrate for the personalised, caring and sensitive support they provided throughout students' educational journey.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1

An institution's care experienced student advisor should make proactive, personal contact with every prospective student who has declared that they have care experience. Information and guidance on support services relating to learning, finance and accommodation should be offered alongside details of key contacts within the institution.

Recommendation 2

The Student Awards Agency for Scotland (SAAS), Scottish Funding Council (SFC) and colleges should review the documentation required to provide proof of care experience and develop a system which facilitates personalised discussions based on individual circumstances, if required, to resolve cases where evidence is not freely available.

Recommendation 3

On receipt of a Care Experience Student Bursary application, the Student Awards Agency for Scotland (SAAS) should provide information, in the form of an automated return email, with a list of care experienced student contacts within each further and higher education institution. This will ensure that students who elect not to disclose their care experience during their admissions application still receive this information, should they wish to make contact at a later date.

Recommendation 4

Further and higher education institutions should provide to the Student Awards Agency for Scotland (SAAS) the name and contact details of their care experienced student contact by an agreed annual date to allow these to be compiled into a standard SAAS application acknowledgement response.

Recommendation 5

The Student Awards Agency for Scotland (SAAS) and the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) should host the details of all care experienced student contacts on its website to widen access to this information for prospective students who have care experience but are not eligible for the Care Experienced Student Bursary.

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Recommendation 6

Colleges and universities should develop common wording for a question, with an associated definition, to be used when inviting students to declare care experience during application and registration procedures. This should include the option to select 'prefer not to say'.

Recommendation 7

The Scottish Funding Council (SFC) should work with colleges and universities and care experienced students to develop a standard data set which should be used to inform future decisions regarding support for care experienced students. Universities should ensure that their HESA return accurately reflects the data they hold on care experienced students.

Recommendation 8

Colleges and universities should develop a directory of local organisations and services which can provide practical support to care experienced students moving into college or university accommodation and make this available to care experienced students.

Recommendation 9

Institutions should ensure that dedicated support services are available for care experienced students, providing a named contact who can connect with other support services when necessary on the student's behalf. Consideration should be given to how students can access support during holiday periods to ensure continuity of support services. Particular attention should be given to Christmas and summer holiday periods as students report particular difficulties in relation to both emotional and practical support during these times.

Recommendation 10

Support services should remain available for students who have previously chosen not to use these services. It is important that students know that support services will be available to them throughout their time at college and university, regardless of how many times they choose not to use these supports.

Recommendation 11

Colleges and universities should ensure that year-round accommodation is available for all care experienced students. Where an institution does not hold their own accommodation, they should ensure that year round provision is guaranteed for care experienced students by contracting for this in any new or renewed partnership with private companies who offer accommodation on an institution's behalf.

Recommendation 12

Any accommodation changes required, particularly during the summer holiday period, should be kept to a minimum and be arranged in the least disruptive manner possible and in consultation with students. Exit from previous accommodation and entry to new accommodation should be well coordinated to prevent students from experiencing delays between moving-out and moving-in.

Recommendation 13

The Student Awards Agency for Scotland (SAAS) and further education providers should provide year round financial support, rather than the standard September to May package. The current value of care experienced packages may be sufficiently spread over 12 months, but we recommend this is monitored and reviewed as part of the Student Finance Review.

Providing year-round support reflects the needs of care experienced students to pay for accommodation during the summer months, when it is often expected that students from 'traditional' backgrounds return home and avoid these costs.

Recommendation 14

The Student Awards Agency for Scotland (SAAS) and colleges should offer financial advice to students who are successful in applying for the Care Experience Bursary. The Student Awards Agency for Scotland (SAAS) and colleges should agree a standard 'offer' of financial advice and guidance that is consistent across both Further and Higher Education settings but should certainly include the opportunity for students to discuss financial matters with an advisor on a one to one basis.

Recommendation 15

Colleges and universities should provide a detailed list of the variety of study options which exist for learners, and the flexibility within those options. This should include the possibilities around breaks in study, deferment, distance learning, part time learning and any other option which may support learner retention.

Recommendation 16

Where care experienced students do take the decision to leave their courses early, colleges and universities should try to ascertain the reasons for care experienced students leaving their course early, and should offer support for students who wish to return to studies. These reasons should be systematically recorded, and the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) should work closely with colleges and universities to use this data to improve completion rates and retention.

Recommendation 17

Colleges and universities should provide opportunities for care experienced students to give feedback on the support services available, what does not work well for them, or what staff or institutions have done particularly well. This information should be collected alongside other student satisfaction processes and used to inform improvement planning.

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Recommendation 18

The Scottish Funding Council (SFC) should use existing, or create new structures and forums for Corporate Parents to work together to identify, collate, share and scale good practice in relation to effective support for care experienced students.

1. Introduction

1.1 Aim

The Scottish Funding Council (SFC) commissioned CELCIS to conduct an online survey of care experienced students in Scotland's colleges and universities. The idea came from a survey which was conducted as part of the HERACLES project among care experienced university students in England (Harrison, 2017).

The survey took the form of online questionnaires (one for college students and one for university students) that were live from 27 November 2018 to 6 January 2019. The questionnaires were structured in three sections: Going to College / University; Being at College / University; and About You. They included closed and open-ended questions, intended to capture broad trends as well as in-depth experiences.

The aim of the survey was to inform the SFC and relevant stakeholders about the views of current and recent care experienced students in relation to their circumstances, engagement with study, their social and emotional wellbeing, and the support they receive. A small focus group with care experienced students took place after the questionnaire data was analysed to explore some of our initial findings in more detail.

As far as we are aware, this is the first Scotland-wide survey of care experienced students. The importance of the research is that it records the real-life experience of students who have experience of the care system.

1.2 Background

1.2.1 Terminology

This research sought the views of care experienced college and university students. The term 'care experienced' is not defined in Statute; it appears to have originated among adults who themselves have experience of the public care system and has gained broad currency relatively quickly.

It is a broader term than 'looked after child' and 'care leaver', both of which are defined in legislation. There are two particular features of the term 'care experienced' to note. One is that many adults have found it helpful to use it to claim their care identity and have been vocal in advocating for change of the kind that led to the introduction of a Care Experienced Student Bursary[1] in Scotland. Secondly, the term refers to people who have been looked after by, or on behalf of, state agencies at any point in their lives. In Scotland, the definition of a looked after child or young person includes both those in care away from home (in foster, kinship and residential care) and those who receive

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[1] https://news.gov.scot/news/more-financial-help-for-students

formal support from social work agencies while living in the family home with their parents.

Students self-identify as care experienced, either at the point of applying (as in the UCAS application for higher education courses), or at the point of registration on a course at a college or university, or both. The advantage to students of declaring care experienced status to an institution is that this should lead to tailored personal, financial, and accommodation support. It is likely that some students prefer not to declare past care experience, either for very personal reasons or because they are uncertain about how the information might be used. The inclusivity of the term raises some issues. On the one hand, institutions are free to use their resources in creative ways to support students who self-identify as care experienced. On the other hand, some financial supports have restrictions related to statutory definitions. For example, the Care Experienced Bursary is available to students who can evidence past care experience and are aged under 26, while the Council Tax Exemption is available only to care leavers[2] aged under 26.

The Scottish Funding Council (SFC) uses the following definition of care experience.

> We use the term care experienced to include anyone who has been or is currently in care or from a looked-after background at any stage of their life, no matter how short. This care may have been provided in one of many different settings such as in residential care, foster care, kinship care or looked after at home with a supervision requirement.[3]

1.2.2 Context

There have been concerns about low average attainment of children with experience of the care system in Scotland, in other countries of the UK, and elsewhere, for at least 40 years (Connelly & Furnivall, 2013; Essen, Lambert, & Head, 1976; Evans, Brown, Rees, & Smith, 2017). In particular, it is noted that, on average, looked after children have lower school attendance, and lower average attainment than all pupils in Scotland, and a much higher proportion (72%) leaves school at

72% leave school at the minimum age

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[2] 'Care leaver' is defined as 'a young person who ceased to be looked after on, or at any time after, their sixteenth birthday' https://www.gov.scot/publications/guidance-part-10-aftercare-children-young-people-scotland-act-2014/pages/4/

[3] http://www.sfc.ac.uk/access-inclusion/access-priorities/care-experience/care-experience.aspx

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the minimum age compared with all pupils (28%). Pupils who are looked after children are also less likely to progress to 'positive destinations' (including employment, college and university) than all pupils[4].

It should be said that while the early research on the education of children in care drew attention to hitherto unreported low attainment, disrupted schooling and the lack of prioritising education among professionals (Jackson, 1987), the research narrative has become more nuanced, particularly emphasising high achievement (Duncalf, 2010; Martin & Jackson, 2002; Mendis, Lehmann, & Gardiner 2018).

In the annual year 2015-16, the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) set out a National Ambition for Care Experienced Students 'to address the under-representation and poor educational outcomes for this group'[5]. The ambition is that: 'by 2021 there is no difference between the outcomes of care experienced students compared to their peers.' In order to realise this ambition, the SFC has engaged in several important activities, notably:

- Collecting, analysing and reporting statistics from colleges and universities on enrolments and progress of students who self-declare care experience;
- Requiring colleges and universities to demonstrate their commitment to care experienced students through 'outcome agreements';
- Supporting colleges and universities as they develop responses to their legal responsibilities as 'corporate parents', as defined in the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014;
- Providing financial support for the Propel[6] website giving targeted information and details of contacts for care experienced applicants to Scottish colleges and universities;
- Asking institutions to implement Recommendation 21 of the Commission on Widening Access[7], which proposed that every care experienced applicant meeting entry requirements should receive an offer of a place at a Scottish university, a recommendation subsequently accepted by Scottish Government;
- Establishing a Care Experienced Governance Group (CEGG) to provide advice and oversee work aimed at realising the National Ambition.

The first of these activities, i.e. collecting, analysing and reporting statistics from colleges and universities on enrolments and progress of students who self-declare care experience, forms the context for this research.

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[4] http://www.gov.scot/Topics/Statistics/Browse/Children/EducOutcomesLAC

[5] http://www.sfc.ac.uk/access-inclusion/access-priorities/care-experience/care-experience.aspx

[6] www.propel.org.uk

[7] http://www.gov.scot/Resource/0049/00496535.pdf

The SFC negotiates outcome agreements with each institution annually. These outcome agreements represent the detailed strategy for implementing the Scottish Government's priorities for further and higher education, as outlined in the Letter of Guidance to the SFC from the Minister of Further Education, Higher Education and Science[8]. The direction from the SFC to institutions to prioritise the needs of care experienced students comes from various sources, including the Minister's guidance to facilitate widening access and retention of students from disadvantaged backgrounds, and secondary legislation on 'corporate parenting' requirements arising from the provisions of the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014.

A basic requirement for reviewing progress against commitments in outcome agreements is to have a robust system of statistical monitoring. Since annual year 2013-14 the SFC has analysed and published data on care experienced students in Scottish colleges and universities. These statistics come from institutional returns. Data about students on courses of higher education in universities is provided by HESA (the Higher Education Statistics Agency for the UK)[9]. Data about further and higher education students in colleges comes from colleges' annual FES (further education students) returns to the SFC. At the time of writing, four years of data about care experienced students were available. This data show a significant uplift in student numbers across the period but the SFC's statisticians suggest this may be a result of improved data collection procedures (such as routinely asking about any care experience at enrolment) rather than a true increase. This more robust data collection, and nuanced understanding of the data, is however an achievement that should be acknowledged as progress towards deepening understanding in this area.

> While reported numbers of CE students at colleges has changed significantly over that period we believe much of this change is to do with improved reporting rather than increased levels of enrolment. Unfortunately we are not yet at the stage where we believe the reporting process is stable and therefore have more work to do before we can fully rely on these figures.
> (Scottish Funding Council, 2018, p.1).

Nevertheless the statistics, especially those for recent years, provide a baseline of sorts that will be useful in considering the results of the research reported here.

1.2.3 Related research

The earliest research in this area was the *By Degrees* project which tracked 129 care leavers (all of whom had been in foster care) into higher education in the UK (Jackson, Ajayi, & Quikley, 2005). This research found that students faced challenges which were distinct from those of other students or that were heightened because of their care

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[8] http://www.sfc.ac.uk/about-sfc/letter-guidance/letter-guidance.aspx

[9] https://www.hesa.ac.uk

experience. Among the challenges reported were financial difficulties, access to year round accommodation and academic difficulties related to gaps in knowledge attributable to disrupted schooling. The research was funded by the Buttle Trust (now Buttle UK) and it led to the charity instituting a Quality Mark (now withdrawn) which arguably significantly influenced the development of supportive policy in the different UK administrations, and also led to improvements in support for care experienced students (Starks, 2013). The experiences of institutions awarded exemplary status within the Quality Mark scheme have been distilled into a guide to the 'caring university' (Rawson, 2016). The National Network for the Education of Care Leavers (NNECL) plans to pilot a quality framework in higher education institutions in England in autumn 2019[10].

The HERACLES (Higher Education: Researching Around Care Leavers' Entry and Success) project, was a study of care experienced students in higher education institutions in England that was conducted between November 2016 and March 2017 (Harrison, 2017). The study comprised an analysis of 650,220 young people (including 6,470 care leavers) who completed Key Stage 4[11] in 2007-08 and appeared in the HESA database in 2014-15, i.e. they had progressed to higher education, even if not directly from school. The research found that 11.8% of care leavers in the cohort had entered higher education by 2014-15, considerably higher than the proportion in national data for progression directly from school – typically reported as being 6%[12].

For reasons that are not relevant to the present report, it is not presently possible to replicate this type of cohort study in Scotland, but the HERACLES research also included a survey element that the SFC believed could be replicated in Scotland. It was hypothesised that the recent visibility of care experienced students' issues, particularly following the work of the Commission on Widening Access[13], the existence of the SFC's Care Experienced Governance Group and the networks of college and university advisers for care experienced students (Care Experienced, Estranged & Carers East and West Forums) in the East and West of Scotland would help to achieve higher rates of return than the HERACLES survey.

In a review of the literature on the experiences and outcomes of foster care alumni[14] in post-secondary education, the authors note that all articles that met their review criteria, except one, were published after the year 2000, with at least one article having been published every year since 2008, indicative of the growing interest in the issues, and presumably also the increased visibility and articulacy of care experienced students (Geiger & Beltran, 2017). The review noted that published research in the area has

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[10] https://www.nnecl.org

[11] Age from 14-16, typically the stage for national examinations such as GCSE

[12] https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/statistics-looked-after-children

[13] http://www.sfc.ac.uk/access-inclusion/commission-widening-access/commission-widening-access.aspx

[14] This is a term most commonly used in the North American context, where foster care is a broader term than used in Scotland/UK and, for example, includes group (residential) care.

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mostly focused on student successes, barriers and overall experiences in higher education. Among the barriers and challenges experienced by students from care backgrounds relevant to the research findings reported later are gender disparities and disengagement with studies.

A US study of care alumni found women were twice more likely than men to obtain a Bachelor's degree (Kirk, Lewis, Brow, Nilson, & Colvin, 2012). Factors related to disengagement with studies reported in research include having a history of mental health problems, emotional or behavioural problems, having difficulties accessing healthcare and working too many hours per week. Another US study found a care history alone increased the likelihood of students dropping out prior to graduation (also found in the HERACLES study), with foster care alumni being almost twice as likely to drop out compared to low-income, first generation students (Day, Fogarty, & Damashek, 2011). A later study by the same team found foster care alumni graduated at slower rates than low-income, first generation students even when they were succeeding academically (Day, Dworsky, & Feng 2013). The researchers found students' need to work was a relevant factor and recommended policy reforms to shift the age for support to age 21 or 25 – something that has already been implemented in Scotland.

Another review article helpfully groups contextual considerations arising in research under a number of headings: previous placement and educational instability, inadequate academic preparation, ongoing mental health issues, inadequate financial support, housing and employment challenges, parenting and family responsibilities, and lack of social and emotional support (Hayes Piel, 2018). These headings summarise the issues faced by care experienced people moving into further and higher education. In a mixed-methods survey of care leavers aged 17-78 years old, Duncalf (2010) indicates that there is a general lack of support, poor accommodation, isolation, lack of employment and overall financial issues in this group of adults.

In a study of care leavers in UK higher education, Cotton, Nash, & Kneale (2014) state that to overcome these issues, care experienced students should be well-prepared for academic life and learning, and have access to academic, personal and financial support. In particular, those with a 'safety net' and support from a significant and trusted adult were most likely to succeed in higher education. Research with young people leaving care in England suggests that it is these protective factors that are missing from their lives as they prepare to move on from care. Young people discussed feeling isolated, abandoned, unsupported and being thrust into 'instant adulthood' (Rogers, 2011). The HERACLES research concluded that because care experienced students tend to start higher education later than their school leaver peers, efforts to increase participation need to focus on alternative pathways into higher education, rather than assuming a linear and unbroken progression from school/college (Harrison, 2019).

To address some of these missing protective factors, there has been an increase in researching the potential of mentoring relationships for people with care experience. Thompson, Greeson, & Brunsink (2016) conducted a systematic review of research on mentoring relationships for care experienced people. They highlight the role of mentors

in providing encouragement, assistance, emotional and informational support. Additionally, they indicate that care experienced people value trusting, loving, caring and committed relationships with people in these mentoring roles. These qualities are transferable to many different support roles for people with care experience.

In summary, research has identified the importance of valuing education within the care system, the need for widening access arrangements that actively promote going to college and university for care experienced people, and the recognition of the particular support needs of care experienced students.

2. Methodology

2.1 Introduction

The research was conducted in five phases. Phase 1 (September – November 2018) involved developing and piloting the questionnaires, and gaining ethical approval. In Phase 2 (November 2018 – January 2019) the questionnaires were live on the CELCIS website and were promoted via institutional contacts and on social media channels. During Phase 3 (January to April 2019) the questionnaire responses were analysed and used to inform the development of some focus group questions for seven care experienced students, which took place on 1st April 2019. In Phase 4 (April – May 2019) a draft report was prepared and presented to the Research Advisory Group for comment. Finally, during Phase 5 (May – June 2019) the final report was prepared and submitted to the SFC, prior to its launch at the Fair Access Conference in Perth on 26 June.

2.2 Developing the Questionnaires

At an early stage in the research, it was decided to prepare two questionnaires: one targeted at university students, and one for college students. This decision was reached following consultation between the research advisory group and the research team. Although the issues relating to post-school education are generally common for college and university students, the contexts are different. We wanted to avoid having complex questions that attempted to take account of both contexts. A case could have been made for distinguishing between higher education and further education, particularly because of differences in funding arrangements. We discounted this, on advice, for several reasons, including the likelihood that students would be more likely to identify with a particular institution.

Both questionnaires included closed and open-ended questions. The intention was to capture broad statistical trends as well as in-depth information about care experienced students and their experiences of college and university. The process of developing the content of the questionnaires benefited from the experience of the HERACLES research (Harrison, 2017). We had access to the questionnaire used in that research and we also used our own informal networks to help us to generate draft questions. We sent an email to contacts, providing some background to the proposed survey and requesting their help. The email included a link to a set of questions using the same Qualtrics survey tool intended to be used in the research. There were three questions: two asking what kinds of questions we should ask about coming to college/university, and being at college/university; and a questions inviting any other advice for the researchers. Draft questionnaires were prepared. SFC colleagues and members of the Research Advisory Group reviewed these initial drafts.

Both questionnaires were piloted by a small number of care experienced students in the presence of members of the research team. We were able to pilot-test in both computer and mobile phone formats. Changes were made as a result of advice from students. Pilot testing also allowed us to gauge the mean time required to complete the questionnaire - 15 minutes.

2.3 Ethical Approval

The research received ethical approval from the School Ethics Committee (SEC) of the School of Social Work and Social Sciences in the University of Strathclyde. The ethical approval application process involves seeking peer-review of the research approach from an experienced researcher unconnected with the proposed research. No variations were made to the research approach as outlined in the ethics application and no issues of an ethical nature emerged during the fieldwork phase.

2.4 Research Advisory Group

The SFC appointed a Research Advisory Group, chaired by Nick Stansfeld, SFC Policy Officer. The membership included representatives from the college and university sectors, Who Cares? Scotland, and the research team. The Group met on three occasions: during the survey preparation phase (October 2018); after the close of the survey to review the response rates and some initial findings (February 2019); and again to review the draft report (April 2019).

2.5 Promotion of the Survey

Members of the CELCIS Communications team handled promotion of the survey. A Survey Marketing Strategy document was prepared and discussed at the October 2018 meeting of the Research Advisory Group. The document included proposals for the technical aspects of the on-line survey, the marketing campaign to college and university contacts, and the social media campaign.

2.5.1 Online Survey

A news item was created on the CELCIS website with information about the survey and a hyperlink to a survey landing page, from which there were links to the separate questionnaires for college students and university students. The survey could only be started once students had agreed that they had read the survey information sheet and provided consent for their responses to be used anonymously for data analysis purposes, as well as in the final report and subsequent dissemination.

Students also had the option of entering a prize draw; two prizes (Amazon vouchers to the value of £100) were available for winners in each of the university and college categories. Students wishing to be included in the prize draw were requested to provide an email address for contact purposes. The information made clear that email addresses

would not be stored beyond the time needed to conduct the draw and send the vouchers electronically to the winners.

2.5.2 Marketing to college and university contacts

An email to all care experienced college and university contacts listed on the Propel website sent in advance of the survey going live requesting co-operation of relevant staff in promoting the survey among care experienced students. The correspondence was co-ordinated with a news item on the CELCIS website on 7 November 2018. Information about the survey was also provided to the following networks.

- Care Experienced, Estranged & Carers East Forum
- Care Experienced, Estranged & Carers West Forum
- Colleges Scotland
- Universities Scotland
- College Development Network
- Who Cares Scotland alumni
- Scottish Throughcare and Aftercare Forum
- SAAS (Student Awards Agency Scotland)
- Robertson Trust
- SDS (Skills Development Scotland)
- Education Scotland
- Hub For Success, Edinburgh
- Care Review
- CELCIS Education Forum
- Members of the SFC's Care Experienced Governance Group

A mailing list of college and university contacts was prepared. This was constructed from the Propel website which lists contacts for care experienced students and from the list of members of the two Care Experienced, Estranged & Carers Forums. In the process of compiling the list, we found a small number of cases of out of date contact information and we made efforts to pass details to the relevant bodies.

Two bulk communications were sent to contacts. One email was sent in the first week of November 2018 giving advance notice of the survey. The second email was sent out to coincide with the survey going live on 27 November. That email included a specimen text for inclusion in a letter or email to care experienced students.

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2.5.3 Social Media Campaign

The survey was promoted on CELCIS's Facebook and Twitter feeds and in turn received considerable further promotion by networks and individuals, including students who had completed the survey and encouraging others to do so. The original plan was to have the survey live for four weeks until 21 December 2018, but it was then decided to leave the survey open until midnight on 6 January 2019, on the grounds that analysis was not planned until January and that we might pick up more responses in the post-Christmas period. CELCIS Communications promoted the survey actively weekly in the first three weeks and the extension until 6 January was announced in the fourth week.

In week 4, the research team checked the responses received against names of colleges and universities. By that stage, most institutions were represented by at least one response. A member of the research team made personal contact with the care contacts in the small number of institutions not represented requesting assistance in promoting the survey.

2.6 Focus Group Discussion

A focus group discussion was held with current students on 1 April 2019, arranged by The Hub for Success, Edinburgh. Eight students were invited to attend, and seven students subsequently participated in discussion lasting one hour 20 minutes. Of these, four were in college and three were in university. Additionally, the group comprised five women and two men. With permission from all in attendance, the focus group was recorded and later transcribed verbatim. The questions asked were designed to clarify the survey data and provide explanations for some of the quantitative responses, with the discussion. Participants were provided with food, travel expenses and an Amazon voucher to the value of £10. Participants were invited to choose a pseudonym; four participants elected to choose their own pseudonym, and three students asked the researchers to allocate a pseudonym. Data from the focus group were analysed thematically and are incorporated within the report.

2.7 Data Analysis

Initial analysis of quantitative responses was carried out. The research team reviewed the data tables produced alongside a rough analysis of text-responses. Further analyses of issues of interest were then conducted.

For the purposes of analysis, subgroups of sufficient size were assembled. This regrettably meant that some small groups of respondents were omitted from analysis or were aggregated into larger groups. For example, non-binary students and those choosing not to declare their disability status were excluded from analyses of gender and

disability respectively, while the older two age groups were collapsed together and minority ethnicities collectively refers to all minority ethnic groups. The limitations of this approach are well understood, but this approach is inevitable with a relatively small sample.

Three statistical tests were used within the quantitative analysis: chi-squared (χ^2), Mann-Whitney (U) and Kruskal-Wallis (KW). These all share the same basic purpose of determining whether differences between subgroups are sufficiently large to be unlikely to be due to random variation; chi-squared is used for categorical data, whereas Mann-Whitney and Kruskal-Wallis are used for scale data with two or more than two subgroups respectively. In all cases, only relationships that were significantly at the 5% level have been reported (as indicated by a p-value of less than 0.5), with the relevant test statistics, degrees of freedom, subgroup sizes and p-values as relevant. Where results of these statistical tests are discussed, the test used and results of that test are given in brackets (e.g. $\chi^2_6=48.564$, p<.001). A few notable or counterintuitive negative results have been noted in the text, but these have otherwise been omitted for reasons of space.

Qualitative data gathered from the survey and focus group discussion were analysed thematically by the research team. The quotations selected for use in this report reflect the overall sentiment of each identified theme. Where direct quotations are used from the survey, the original spelling and grammar remains, where possible. In some instances, small changes have been made to correct for mistakes or to ensure consistency[15]. Given the size of the survey sample, quotations taken from questionnaire responses reference only the institution and course type. Focus group participants, on the other hand, were given the opportunity to choose their own pseudonyms (or one was allocated for them). As such, quotations taken from focus group responses are referenced using these pseudonym: in some cases, participants chose a first name and surname, and this choice is reflected in the report.

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[15] Brief examples include: 'i' has been changed to 'I'; 'saas' or 'SASS' has been changed to 'SAAS'.

3. Results

3.1 Responses

TOTAL RESPONSES

■ College ■ University
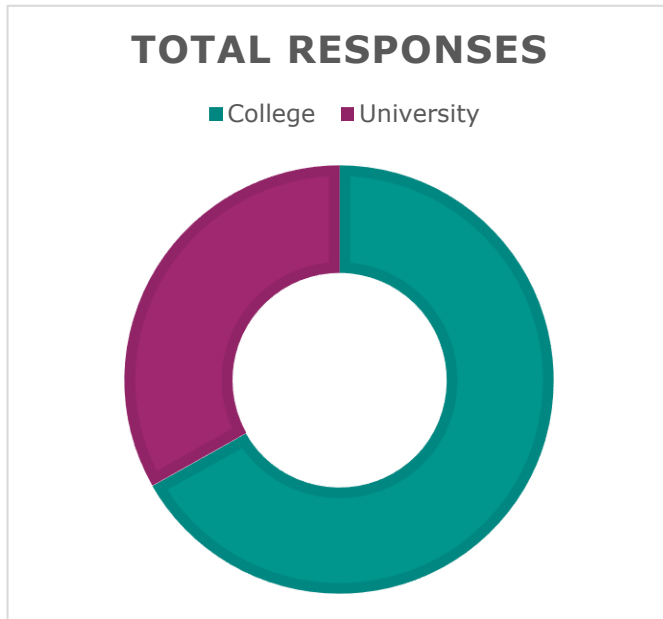
In total 500 responses were received, 334 from college students and 166 from university students. After removing respondents who had only agreed to the initial ethics questions but who had not proceeded to answer any of the questions, there were 413 usable responses, 276 from college respondents and 137 from university respondents. Of the 413 responses, 365 were complete, while 48 responses were incomplete, i.e. a small proportion of students chose not to answer all questions – generally the later questions, perhaps indicating fatigue, declining interest, or interruption.

The 276 responses from college students included 91 students who were studying courses at higher education level (33%) - e.g. Higher National Certificate and Higher National Diploma - 141 who were studying at further education level (51%), while in 44 cases (16%) the course level was not explicitly stated.

There was very good institutional representation in the responses. There were one or more responses from students studying at 18 out of the 19 higher education institutions across Scotland. Of the 16 non-UHI colleges, 15 were represented in the responses. Of the 11 UHI campuses, four were represented. Scottish colleges are organised into 13 geographical regions; all were represented in the responses.

3.1.1 Representativeness of the responses

In relation to the representativeness of the college responses, as a comparison, of just over 303,000 college enrolments at all Scottish colleges in annual year 2017-18, 16% were at higher education level[16]. This means that our survey responses from college students were not representative of the HE/FE mix of all students; this is unlikely to be problematic but should be borne in mind when considering the issues highlighted by the college-based students.

To get some sense of how representative our sample is of the population of care leaver students, we approached HESA (the Higher Education Statistics Agency) who provided

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[16] Source: InFact database query, Scottish Funding Council.

the table below. According to these figures (based on returns from higher education institutions, including the Open University in Scotland), in 2017-18, there were 800 Scottish-domiciled students (585 currently looked after by local authorities and 215 who were 'care leavers') and 120 students from the rest of the UK (England, Wales and Northern Ireland). This gives a total of 1,015 higher education students. But the high proportion in the 'not known' group – generally students who did not complete UCAS applications - will include an unknown proportion of care experienced students. On this basis, our sample of 228 HE students represents 22% of known care experienced students.

Table 1: Students with a care background in higher education in Scotland in 2017-18 (HESA)

Category of student	Number	%
Looked After in Scotland	585	0.30
In care in the rest of the UK	120	0.06
UCAS defined care leaver	215	0.11
Not a care leaver	112445	58.30
Information refused	1105	0.57
Not known	78395	40.65
Total	192865	

The definitions used (i.e. looked after, in care or care leaver rather than the broader care experienced terminology) mean that these students will be mostly aged under-26. The SFC represents another source of data about care experienced students, a broader definition, including students of any age who self-identify on registration as having experience of the care system currently or at any time in the past[17]. In 2016-17, returns from institutions to the SFC provide provisional estimates of 335 care experienced students in universities and 3,055 in colleges. Using these figures our sample would represent 41% of care experienced students at Scottish universities and 9% of students in colleges. The SFC figure for colleges of 3,035 includes 285 students on higher education courses. Using the SFC figure of a total of 630 higher education care experienced students, the 228 responses in our sample would represent a response rate of 36%.

Taken together, these figures suggest that our sample fairly represents care experienced students in university and on higher education courses in general, but may under-represent college students and those on further education courses. We cannot be sure why this is so, but it may be that higher education students have greater investment in

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[17] Source: http://www.sfc.ac.uk/access-inclusion/access-priorities/care-experience/care-experience.aspx

being students and may therefore be more inclined to respond to a surveys about being a student. Other possible explanations include differences in age and literacy levels between university students and some college students, and, more speculatively, the more established widening access/care contact networks in universities.

3.1.2 Response rates in context

The 2016-17 HERACLES (Higher Education: Researching Around Care Leavers' Entry and Success) project, a study of care experienced students in higher education institutions in England, included a survey aspect which was planned at short notice while awaiting data for the main analysis (Harrison, 2017). There were 212 responses, representing about 3% of care experienced students in higher education in England. There was also an uneven distribution of responses, with four HEIs accounting for 58 responses (27% of the total).

Given that the research reported here was designed as a survey from the outset, it is not surprising, and somewhat reassuring, that it achieved a greater number of responses, a much higher estimated response rate and more even coverage of institutions than the survey aspect of the HERACLES study. One review of online questionnaire response rates quotes a range of 20% to 47% (average 33%) for nine online surveys (Nulty, 2008). Online surveys typically have lower response rates than paper surveys, but are more convenient to use, particularly as they are easier to promote using social media. In our proposal to the SFC, we aimed for a conservative 20% response rate. Our overall response rate was 413 out of an estimated 3390 care experienced students. At 12% this falls below our expectation, but, as noted above, the 41% response rate for university students is relatively high.

3.2 Characteristics of the sample

As noted above, all 413 responses were included in the analysis, but because some were incomplete, in the tables that follow in this report, slightly different sample sizes will be found. Table 2 below provides a demographic breakdown of the sample by institutional type and level of study, where known.

The research sample differs from the care experienced student population as reported in the SFC data. The sample has a much higher proportion of female students, a smaller proportion of younger students, a higher proportion in the 20-25 age group, and a higher proportion declaring disabilities.

Table 2: Demographic of the sample (%)

		University	College (HE)	College (FE)
Gender	**Women**	81	68	81
	Men	17	31	17
	Non-binary	2	1	1
Ethnicity	**White**	88	90	95
	Black	3	3	1
	Asian	3	2	1
	Mixed, other and unknown	6	4	3
Age	**Under 18**	2	18	28
	18 or 19	22	28	25
	20 to 25	42	35	28
	26 to 30	10	7	6
	31 and over	25	13	12
Disability[18]	**Disabled**	51	43	46
	Not disabled	41	53	44
	Chose not to declare	8	4	10
Housing	**Family home**[19]	11	43	51
	Student residence	24	8	1
	Own house/flat	59	43	39
	Other housing[20]	6	7	9

Table 3: Educational profile of the sample (%)

		University	College (HE)	College (FE)
Mode	**Full-time**	88	91	94
	Part-time	12	9	6
Level	**Further education**	-	-	100
	Access/first year undergraduate	38	72	-
	Second year undergraduate	22	28	-
	Third year undergraduate	18	-	-
	Fourth year undergraduate	13	-	-
	Postgraduate	11	-	-

[18] Respondents were asked to detail their disabilities, and 144 respondents in total decided to do so. Of these responses, 47% declared having a mental health issue, 25% declared a mental health issue and a disability, and 28% declared a disability alone. These responses were consistent across university, college HE and college FE.

[19] For the purposes of this analysis, this could be with birth family, adoptive family, foster carers or extended family within a kinship care arrangement.

[20] This included homelessness, staying with friends, supported accommodation and residential care.

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3.3 The entry process

3.3.1 What were students doing before college/university?

As might be expected, the majority of respondents were in education prior to their entry into college or university – see Table 3. However, there was a notable minority who had joined from work or other circumstances (e.g. unemployment or caring for family); this was a majority among FE students in college (56%).

Table 4: Activity prior to college or university, by institution type (%)			
	University	College (HE)	College (FE)
At school	34	57	43
At college*	34	2	1
– entered through articulation pathway[21]	(11)	n/a	n/a
Working	20	21	19
Not working (including caring/unemployed)	12	20	37

* For college students, the percentage represents those who were previously at a different college.

Unsurprisingly, those entering from outside education tended to be older (χ^2_{12}=160.17, p<.001) and those who were working were also significantly more likely to work during their studies (χ^2_6=48.564, p<.001). These could include students undertaking vocational programmes linked to continuing jobs (e.g. on a day-release basis). Around a third of students entering university did so having previously been in a college; a third of these did so as part of an articulation agreement.

Among university students, 74% were studying at university for the first time, with 13% having successfully completed a previous course (mainly students on postgraduate courses) and 13% having started a previous course, but not completed it. In contrast, only 37% of college students were on their first college course, with 43% having completed a previous course, and 19% having started a previous course, but not completed it.

Given that 13% of university students and 19% of college students had started a course previously but not completed, participants were asked to reflect on reasons for non-completion during the focus group discussion. For example, Oswald felt that joining the educational environment of college or university could provide a structure that care

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[21] Articulation pathways are a formal agreement between a college and university that allows direct progression from a college course to the corresponding university course when all stipulated criteria are met.

experienced people are not necessarily used to. She felt this commitment and structure were difficult to maintain when the situation was so foreign to her.

> I think it comes down to the fact that many of the people that are in care experienced situation haven't had regular patterns or regular situations for a lot of their lives. It is a big thing to commit to a course for two, four years whatever it is. If you're not used to being in one situation and in that same situation over and over it's difficult to maintain that.
> (Oswald Smith, focus group)

Meanwhile, Aurora spoke about her first post-school educational experience a decade earlier, on a course that she did not complete. She discussed leaving this course because she felt like 'a wee fish out of water', suggesting that the decision to leave was linked to being unfamiliar with the environment and struggling to fit in with her peers.

> … in uni, I think like when I did my first course when I was about 19 I dropped out and I felt like that was because I felt like a wee fish out of water. It was just totally, like I would have been lost in crowd. I don't remember any of my lecturers, any support but I mean that was 10, maybe a bit more than 10, about 13 years ago now. So it's changed days.
> (Aurora Monroe, focus group)

Similar experiences of struggling to settle in and finding it difficult to cope with educational experiences were also highlighted by participants in the online questionnaire when asked whether they had thought about dropping out of their course. These are discussed later in the report. However, the pattern suggests that care experienced people who do not complete their college or university course drop out due to their previous experiences of learning. Care experienced students have often had 'non-traditional' routes through education; multiple school placements, time away from school due to placement moves, exclusions and lower average attendance can all impact on learning experience. These factors may cause gaps in conceptual knowledge of curricular areas and may also affect a person's ability to engage in learning in the way that colleges and universities would traditionally expect of a student. Therefore, there could exist a mismatch in understanding between institutions and care experienced students in terms of expectations.

3.3.2 Choosing and applying to an institution

10%
influenced by services offered

Only 10% of respondents reported being influenced in their application by the services offered by the college or university under their corporate parenting responsibilities. It is possible that many students are not sure what corporate parenting responsibilities are, or how

they might be relevant to them. Those influenced tended to be older students (χ^2_3=9.186, p=.027) and disabled students (χ^2_1=9.907, p=.002). This is slightly counterintuitive given that those most likely to be influenced were outside of the age range for corporate parenting, in the legal sense of the responsibilities, but it possibly reflects a higher level of information retrieval about support services in general among older students.

Respondents to the survey indicated three main reasons for selecting their institutions outside of the options offered. These were supports on offer to care experienced students, pro-active contact from the institution and a direct link from a previous course. It was important to prospective students that the institution they chose should have a good reputation for providing support to care experienced students during their studies.

> I had heard great things about [Named University], not just academically but their support of care experienced students. This is vital to prevent isolation. I felt encouraged and hopeful that my experience would be positive. At my previous university I felt isolated as there was no support.
> (University student)

As well as preventing isolation, an institution's care experienced student support was thought to be most useful when it was continuous.

> My college website showed that it gave additional support to care experienced young people and have had continuous support throughout.
> (College further education student)

The support offered to care experienced students was even more important when the institution pro-actively contacted prospective students. Upon applying to different colleges and universities, the respondents to our survey indicated that they narrowed-down their choice based on which institution reached out to them prior to their final selection.

> It matters that the university I choose contacted me about being care experienced when none of my other choices did.
> (University student)

> The University called me soon after I applied to arrange a visit to discuss support. Other Universities I applied to refused to discuss support until I had registered so I decided that since the [Named University] was so pro-active I would go there.
> (University student)

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Students valued the link that their new institution had with previous courses. This made their decisions easier, and allowed them direct access to their new courses.

> I was able to get into university by taking part in the DUAL summer school program. They automatically let those with care experience into the programme. (University student)

This comments suggest that prospective students and students value institutions making direct, pro-active contact with them.

3.3.3 Getting help to make an application

Overall, only 39% of respondents reported receiving help to make their application for college or university. This proportion was significantly higher for younger students (χ^2_3=14.125, p=.003), those who had previously been in school (χ^2_3=28.282,

39% received help with application

p<.001) and those living in a family home or a student residence (χ^2_3=17.295, p=.001). These are, of course, overlapping groups. Correspondingly, the sources of help available also differed between the different forms of course being pursued, as shown in Table 4. There was no strong relationship between receiving help with an application and later experiences as a student.

Table 5: Sources of application help reported by students, by institution type (%)

	University	College (HE)	College (FE)
Teacher	54	45	38
College adviser	36	-	-
SDS adviser	8	34	43
Relative	24	24	14
Friend	20	14	7
University admissions/outreach	5	-	-
College admissions/outreach	-	7	4
Employer	5	0	2
Social worker (or similar)	2	14	18

Note: Students were invited to indicate all that apply and % reflects proportion of those saying that they had help, so the columns total more than 100% – the final four rows were 'write-in' responses and so are likely to underestimate the proportion of students gaining help through these sources.

The table also highlights the importance of teachers, relatives and friends for providing support and assistance in making applications to college and university.

3.3.4 Applying for financial support

When asked about applying for finances, students reported different experiences. Some said that applying for financial support was straightforward. This was especially true for people who received support from family, friends, and people in their preferred institution.

> It was excellent. [Advisor named] explained everything I have needed, and any additional information was requested I sent it through an email.
> (College higher education student)

> It was relativity easy. The university Scholarship & Mobility Coordinator [advisor named] contacted myself as I had identified as spending time in Care. I was made aware of the Care Leavers Bursary and The [name removed] Family Bursary, both of which I received. Which was very helpful!
> (University student)

Others said that they found the process difficult and complex, especially when they did not have support to complete their applications or where repetitive information was requested.

> Nobody actively helped me or made me aware of them. Applying for funding and being approved was easy but if I hadn't known about them, I wouldn't have done it. Teachers were useless helping me fill in my SAAS in 2016 before they [SAAS] improved their forms and care awareness and social workers and teachers were not aware of any extra bursaries or funding I was eligible to. I found out most of my information myself through research, but many people might not. People employed to support us should know what support is available to us and support us to access it.
> (University student)

> If they only want my details that's fine, it's when they start wanting me to hand forms into childcare providers again to get them to fill out forms it all gets a bit too much on top of everything else.
> (University student)

These complexities were intensified for those who found that declaring their care experience in the financial application was distressing.

> I found my particular personal circumstances to make my SAAS application more complicated as they require you to 'prove estrangement' which is, to an extent, a paradoxical statement as the very reason I was applying for such funds was due to the complete lack of contact that I have with my parents.
> (University student)

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> I hated re-telling my story over and over and feeling like I need to invoke sympathy. However, I also found it useful to demonstrate my resilience and strengths despite adversity. I was fortunate for the opportunity. I think the university should be able to nominate certain people without them having to spend time writing applications, writing sob stories and seeking out references. All time consuming and stressful above the everyday stresses and demands.
> (University student)

> This year it was horrible as I was estranged from my mother, I was told I could apply for Self-Supporting Bursary, but I had no official documentation as I was taken off the Child Protection Register when I was 16 and I don't have any more contact with social work. I got 4/5 different letters from different sources (and received a fair amount of abuse for asking for a second one from my doctor) and was told they didn't have any valid info, so I was forced to go on Universal Credit at the same time I started a new job, stressing me out massively.
> (College further education student)

> I never identified as care experienced until I was put in position when I left school got good grades and the university went we need your biological mum's information and everything for us to provide you with funding. And I went, but that's something I don't have. That's, for me, the first time I thought 'No, I'm not like everyone else' which is horrible.
> (Oswald Smith, Focus Group)

It is apparent that many care experienced students find declaring their personal care circumstances in the financial process difficult, anxiety inducing, and very likely humiliating. This is problematic, as many of the financial resources available to care experienced students require 'proof' of care experience. Some respondents commented that they appreciate the need for this 'proof', but that it comes at a cost to their wellbeing.

Overall, respondents' experiences of applying for financial support were very variable. Even those who reported that the process was easy found that there were challenges along the way. For this reason, it is possible that existing processes are not as effective or people-friendly as intended. Financial support is a crucial component in enabling many care experienced people to access and sustain college and university. If this part of the process is perceived or experienced as bureaucratic and uncaring by students it is likely to have an impact on both wellbeing and feelings about studying.

3.3.5 Declaring care experience

The majority of respondents declared their care status to their college or university, usually through the admissions process, with only 5% deliberately declining to do so for reasons of privacy – see Table 5. The youngest (under 18) and older (26 and over) age groups were most likely to report that they had not been asked about their care status (χ^2_6=15.747, p=.015). Also, students in colleges were significantly less likely to have been asked than those in universities (χ^2_2=6.737, p=.034). This may be because of differences between college and university admissions procedures. For example, universities have a longer history of developing procedures and further education students do not use the UCAS system that has for many years now included a self-declaration at application. Colleges can also be more flexible and responsive in offering places and progression between levels, advantages in many ways, but such flexibility may make it more difficult to introduce procedures for declaring and responding to care status.

Respondents were significantly more likely to declare their care status if they had previously failed to complete a course (χ^2_4=10.810, p=.029), perhaps representing an increased awareness of their support needs or familiarity with the services available.

Table 6: Propensity to declare care status and subsequent experience, by institution type (%)

	University	College (HE)	College (FE)
Chose not to declare	5	5	4
Never asked	12	26	20
Chose to declare	84	69	76
- Of these, % contacted by staff	62	50	60
- Of these, % where declaration positive	55	63	54
- Of these, % where declaration mixed	39	31	31
- Of these, % where declaration negative	6	6	15

The majority of students (59%) who did declare their care status reported being contacted by staff as a result. Students' experiences of the process of declaring their care status were variable. A small majority felt that it was positive, in some cases naming staff who they felt were excellent, but a notable minority reported that it was mixed or negative – particularly those not living in a family home or student residence (χ^2_6=14.725, p=.023) and disabled students (χ^2_2=6.613, p=.037). This suggests that the process of declaration and follow-up contact was less well considered by students with more complex support needs which may point to the need for support that is highly

attuned to the needs of individuals, the kind of support that would need careful planning and potentially liaison with care agencies.

Students with disabilities were more likely to report negative experiences of declaring their care experience than all other students. Whilst this group of students cite the same reasons as all other students for the experience of declaration being negative, disabled students discuss this more often and with higher frequency. This would suggest that having a negative experience of disclosing care status has a more profound impact on students who are also disabled.

Respondents had clear reasons for declaring their care experience. These included wanting to explain their circumstances, seeking additional support and hoping to improve care experiences for all students. For example, some students expressed the view that their non-traditional academic and personal backgrounds required an explanation in order to progress in their courses. Others reported declaring their care experience once they had discovered that additional opportunities were open to those with a care background. These included both academic and financial opportunities. Overall, it was generally considered important to declare care experience to ensure that the institution could provide additional support when circumstances meant they were struggling. As this college student explains, once the institution is made aware of their care experience, someone can work with them when they require extra understanding.

> Everyone had been so nice to me and understanding about my situation. For example, they understand that some days I don't feel the best so work with me to make me feel better. I think that's positive.
> (College higher education student)

Some respondents indicated it was important to declare their own care experience in order to improve statistics and support available for all care experienced students. One student in particular wanted to highlight the needs of care experienced students to their classmates, especially considering the content of their course.

> I was studying social work and I felt it was useful for the other students on my course to hear how I was care experienced and how that influenced my decision to study social work.
> (University student)

However, it was clear that declaring care experience did not always result in additional support or other accommodations for students. While they were, generally, aware of the potential supports available, these varied widely and were not always implemented well by colleges and universities. For those who had aged-out of standard support packages, frustrations regarding the lack of financial, practical and emotional support were reiterated time and again.

> Being told that because you are older that you are not entitled to help of any kind is difficult to hear. Care journey doesn't leave you and because it took me a little longer to switch from survival to thriving, am I really not entitled to any help? (Not just financial)
> (University student)

Some respondents found declaring their care experience difficult and uncomfortable. Alongside worries about stigma and being judged, this could be due to the information required by funding bodies, institutions and childcare providers. These procedures were considered somewhat necessary, but were often viewed negatively.

> I had to ask my previous social worker to write letters to prove I am a care leaver to be entitled to SAAS funding and childcare funding. I've had to do this for all 3 years I've been at college, it's a lot of hassle that nobody else has to deal with. It would be less stressful if there was a named person who could help me with it rather than me trying to track people down myself.
> (College higher education student)

Among those who had not declared their care experience, some cited that they did not think it would make a difference and they did not want to be treated differently. As a result, even when they were asked in their application forms, they did not feel comfortable or able to discuss their backgrounds.

> I do not want my time in care to be a factor in my receiving an education. I simply want it to be based on merit.
> (College higher education student)

Others said that they were not asked, even though they required additional supports. As they were not asked, they did not receive this support and they did not know how to acquire it. In addition, there remained some confusion about how 'care experienced' was being defined. Some students had not been aware they were care experienced, perhaps because of changes in terminology, for example, from care leaver to care experienced, or as a result of unclear legal procedures when they were looked after. Also, students who had experience of being looked after at home, which is included in the definition of care experience in Scotland, may not be aware of their entitlement to support because they do not recognise this a care experience.

> I'm not sure what counts as a 'care experience'. Growing up there was social work involvement and for some time I was placed on the at-risk register.
> (University student)

> I did not actually know I was care experienced or that I was entitled to help until after seeing a college counsellor, as I never had any extra support while I was at high school.
> (College further education student)

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Overall, the results indicate that students have a very mixed experience of declaring their care backgrounds. As well as variable supports and declaration procedures, unclear definitions and continuing stigma prevent students from being able to let their prospective institutions know about their additional needs.

3.3.6 Transition

Overall, 24% of respondents reported difficulties with their transition into college or university – see Table 6. This was significantly higher among university students (χ^2_2=16.968, p<.001), which possibly reflects the need to 'move away' to university for many, in comparison to their prior experience of school or college where they were based within a family home. Overall, students in 'other' forms of housing (χ^2_3=10.482, p=.015), men (χ^2_2=4.532, p=.033), white students (χ^2_2=4,819, p=.028) and disabled students (χ^2_2=5.707, p=.017) were significantly more likely to have reported transition issues. Unsurprisingly, there was also a close relationship between those reporting transition issues and mixed or negative assessments about the value of declaring their care status (χ^2_2=22.605, p<.001).

Table 7: Propensity to report problems with transition into university or college (%)		
	No	Yes
University	64	36
College (HE)	81	19
College (FE)	84	16
Family home	84	16
Student residence	74	26
Own house/flat	74	26
Other housing	57	43
Men	67	33
Women	78	22
White ethnicity	75	25
Minority ethnicity	95	5
Disabled	70	30
Not disabled	81	19

Asked about their transition experiences, survey respondents indicated that transitioning to their new courses was often difficult, for various reasons, such as the lack of family or wider support networks. Many students referred to moving home or relocating to a

different geographical area to undertake their new courses. During these moves, those without family support or help from other people found this experience daunting and upsetting.

> Nobody helped me move across the country to university. [Name of University] told me they could give me a place in halls all year round but didn't mention that my placement would be made up of short stays in different halls over summer - I had to move 5 times. Most of these moves, I had to be out of my accommodation by 10am but I couldn't get keys to the next flat until 12pm. I had nobody to help me do all of this, my mental health deteriorated, and nobody seemed to care. I did ask for help and point out the problems. My rent was also supposed to be paid by my council, but councils never pay on time. The university kept sending threatening letters and phoning me asking for payment despite me explaining constantly and providing details of my TCAC[22] worker. This was resolved by the care leaver coordinator.
> (University student)

Also, everyday life in the new college or university course could be affected by assumptions about the kind of support available outside the institution. Where students from traditional backgrounds are likely to have family and peer support, care experienced students do not always have people to help them when times get tough.

> It was more so the assumption that all students had support at home. Being a parent with no family for support was a huge challenge for childcare. I had to be proactive in seeking out supports. They were not offered or readily available. Staff did not seem to have understanding or empathy on the whole.
> (University student)

Where personal support, or the lack thereof, had an impact on people's transitions, financial struggles were also challenging. These struggles were compounded by the cost of moving accommodation.

> Difficulties with finance and general family support systems in terms of moving cities for Universities. I now receive two separate bursaries to help financially but in terms of moving my belongings, this is still something which I struggle with in terms of the lack of a family support system.
> (University student)

Furthermore, accommodation challenges were frequently cited as causing distress during periods of transition. While these were, at times, a result of changing accommodation

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[22] Through care and after care

and the resulting payment complications, they were also present when students stayed in their pre-college or university homes.

> It made it hard for me to keep myself focused with college because I was looked after by [local authority] in a children's home and I didn't get enough sleep to focus in college because other residents were acting up and that was still [not] resolved in any way!
> (College further education student)

Transitions were also marked with complex emotional responses. For instance, care experienced students reported feeling like they did not belong at their new institution, nor did they fit in with the other students.

> Change is rough! Feeling although you're not a uni kid and not having that belonging, and imposter syndrome was difficult to transition from full time employment into university. Some of the topics in lecturers can be triggering at times. I reckon these are things that many people experience, including my non-looked after peers.
> (University student)

This was emphasised even further when challenging topics were discussed in class.

> There was a tutorial on adult and child protection. In our groups we had to rate the types and acts of abuse from worst to the unthinkable. I was looking at the paper thinking all of these things have happened to me. I was hard to hear the discussions in class. We also had to feedback as a class where the discussion went on to how these people may act in later life and I thought " I am sitting here" as many of them were negative. I had to leave class as I found it too difficult, the lecture followed me out and discussed the tutorial with me. I then also used the experience to reflect upon for an essay which helped.
> (University student)

Students who reported having mental health difficulties found that their mental health suffered as a result of their transitions. As above, this could be due to the academic topics discussed or because of a lack of support to deal with the change in one's educational circumstances.

> My transition to university opened up emotional wounds of losing out on my childhood, the abuse received in institutions and anger towards institutions. I was advised of the opportunity to access counselling, which I am currently engaging with.
> (University student)

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Overall, transitioning to college and university appears to be a complex time for care experienced students. They face additional challenges to students from traditional backgrounds, as they have fewer people to support them as they move, acclimate to their new environment and manage their changing circumstances. This often compounded feelings of inadequacy and difference to their peers. In addition, accommodation often caused additional challenges, including financial strain. As a result, students with care experience seem to require additional support during their transition to college or university than students from traditional backgrounds.

3.4 The student experience

Students were asked to rate their experiences on the basis of six five-point Likert scales – see Figure 1. Overall, 74% of respondents felt that they were doing well at university or college, with only 10% disagreeing. Respondents were most positive

74% felt they were doing well

about having access to help with university/college work (35% strongly agreeing) and with their accommodation situation (36% strongly agreeing), although the latter also saw 9% strongly disagreeing with the statement. They were least positive about feeling part of the college/university/community, with only 52% of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing with this statement and 20% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing.

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Figure 1: Students' ratings of their experiences (%)
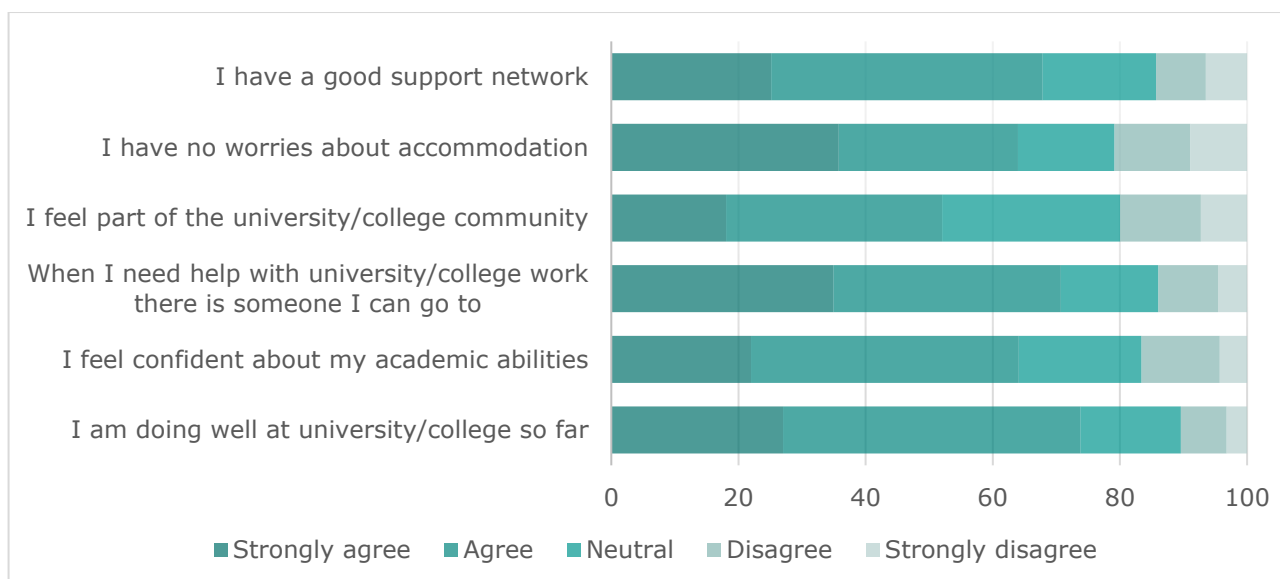
Within the overall figures, university students were significantly less likely to report feeling part of the community ($U_{247, 124}$=11668.5, p<.001) and more likely to have accommodation worries ($U_{245, 124}$=13171.5, p=.030), perhaps indicative the greater likelihood of moving away to a new place to go to university, rather than remaining in their home community.

In terms of demographics, older students were more likely to feel that they were doing well (KW_3=12.509, p=.006), men were more confident about their academic abilities ($U_{280, 74}$=7601.5, p<.001) and students from minority ethnic communities were less likely to feel that they could get help with their college/university work ($U_{22, 324}$=2642.0, p=.033). Students who declared disabilities rated their experiences significantly lower than other students across five of the six scales[23]; help with college/university work was the exception. The interaction between disabilities, particularly mental health difficulties, and the study environment is complex and while the survey results alone do not allow us to have a complete understanding, they do suggest that being both care experienced and disabled is a particular risk, indicative of the need for a high level of support.

There were also relationships between accommodation types and student experience. Students in a family home or student residence were significantly more likely to feel part of the college/university community (KW_3=11.755, p=.008), whereas those in student residences and 'other' housing were more likely to have accommodation worries (KW_3=16.555, p=.001), perhaps related to the cost of accommodation and it potentially

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[23] Doing well ($U_{164, 168}$=16768.5, p<.001), academic confidence ($U_{163, 168}$=17324.5, p<.001), membership of college/university community ($U_{163, 166}$=16831.5, p<.001), accommodation worries ($U_{162, 166}$=16163.0, p=.001) and support network ($U_{163, 165}$=16053.5, p=.001).

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not being available outside term time. Finally, those in a family home were more likely to report having a good support network ($KW_3=8.776$, p=.032).

Students who had help with their applications were more likely to feel part of the college/university community ($U_{224, 146}=14441.5$, p=.049) and to believe that they had a good support network ($U_{224, 145}=13640.0$, p=.006). Conversely, students who reported problems with transition into college or university gave significantly lower ratings across all six scales[24], underlining the importance of transition in framing later experiences.

There was no relationship between the experience ratings and the student having declared their care status, but students who had subsequently been contacted by a member of staff tended to feel that there was help available with their college/university work ($U_{119, 172}=7945.5$, p=.001) and that they had a good support network ($U_{119, 171}=8256.5$, p=.004). Furthermore, students who felt that declaring their care status was a positive experience also tended to rate their subsequent experiences more highly across all six scales[25].

3.4.1 Accommodation

While both questionnaires included questions about where students were currently living and whether they had experienced any unexpected moves, the research team decided not to ask college students about accommodation during holiday periods as the commitment to year-round accommodation has only been agreed to in universities. As a result, the questionnaire for college students did not allow for any detailed qualitative text answers. We were very aware of the risk of survey fatigue and took this decision in an effort to reduce the number of questions asked where possible.

Around one-in-five (18%) of students responding had been forced to move accommodation unexpectedly during their studies – this was more common among university students (26%) and less common among college students (13%). Unexpected moves were significantly more likely among those in their own house/flat or 'other' housing ($\chi^2_3=29.755$, p<.001), those aged between 20 and 25 ($\chi^2_3=8.164$, p=.043) and students declaring disabilities ($\chi^2_1=4.749$, p=.029); these are overlapping groups. Students who had had to change accommodation unexpectedly rated their experiences lower than others on five of the six scales[26]; academic confidence was the exception.

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[24] Doing well ($U_{282, 90}=15003.5$, p=.005), academic confidence ($U_{281, 90}=14557.0$, p=.023), help with college/university work ($U_{281, 89}=14829.0$, p=.006), membership of college/university community ($U_{281, 88}=16096.0$, p<.001), accommodation worries ($U_{280, 87}=13870.5$, p=.042) and support network ($U_{280, 88}=14993.0$, p=.001).

[25] Doing well ($KW_2=10.448$, p=.005), academic confidence ($KW_2=8.034$, p=.018), help with college/university work ($KW_2=27.056$, p<.001), membership of college/university community ($KW_2=16.474$, p<.001), accommodation worries ($KW_2=13.384$, p=.001) and support network ($KW_2=28.288$, p<.001).

[26] Doing well ($U_{308, 66}=11878.5$, p=.021), help with college/university work ($U_{306, 66}=11835.0$, p=.021), membership of college/university community ($U_{305, 66}=14037.0$, p<.001), accommodation worries ($U_{303, 66}=13999.0$, p<.001) and support network ($U_{304, 66}=12871.5$, p<.001).

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only 23% reported being offered summer accommodation

Only 23% of university students reported being offered summer accommodation, but this was higher among those in student residences (41%).

It is widely regarded as good practice for care experienced students to be offered year-round accommodation by their university. This was, for example, a requirement of the former Buttle Quality Mark, and 'accommodation we offer' is a standard heading in the listing for all colleges and universities in Propel[27]. Respondents' experiences of being offered accommodation varied greatly. Some students had been offered accommodation year-round and found this to be a positive experience, while others had experienced difficulties or had not been offered year-round accommodation. Among students who reported having a positive accommodation experience, typical comments included feeling secure and of appreciating the flexible nature of support offered.

> I was offered (eventually) full term accommodation that was invaluable because it provided me with a sense of security and one less thing I worry about, so I could focus on my studies. Financially it helped significantly.
> (University student)

Nonetheless, challenges related to year-round accommodation were common. In particular, respondents reported having to move accommodation during the summer holiday period.

> All year accommodation was provided, however, I had to move to other accommodation when holiday started.
> (University student)

For those that had not been offered year-round accommodation, many acknowledged that this was because their university made use of residences in the private sector, rather than due to a specific exclusion of care experienced students, but this lack of availability is an issue.

> It would be nice to have the option to stay longer on student accommodation. I don't really have a stable solution to accommodation over the summer.
> University student)

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[27] www.propel.org.uk

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Some students appeared to accept that the university accommodation on offer was not applicable to them, given their personal circumstances, while others reported not being offered university accommodation, but said they would know have made use of it if available.

> I did not take university accommodation as I have a dog which are not permitted. If I did not have my dog, then I would struggle with my mental health. He is part of my journey and family.
> (University student)

In summary, the experience of being offered year-round university accommodation varied greatly among the respondents to our study. Some had positive experiences, while others experienced instability and changes that were disruptive and upsetting. Others felt university accommodation was not appropriate to their circumstances.

3.4.2 Employment

Overall, 42% of respondents were working during their course. The propensity to work was highest among university students (58%) and lowest among FE students in college (30%) – see Table 7. Around one-in-four students (23%) were working over 10 hours per week, on average, of whom 10% were working over 20 hours per week.

Table 8: Propensity to work while studying (%)			
	University	College (HE)	College (FE)
None	42	58	70
Occasional or less than 10 hours per week	34	17	10
More than 10 hours per week	24	26	20

It is difficult to get comparisons to allow us to answer the question: are care experienced students more likely to work while studying than all students, and are they working more hours, so risking success in their studies? Research among higher education students in England found that 52% of full-time students and 82% of part-time students were working – the latter group including full-time employees taking part-time HE courses while working (Pollard, Hunt, Hillage, Drever, Chanfreau, Continho, & Poole, 2013).

Students who were working (and specifically those working over 10 hours per week) were significantly more likely to be those who were working prior to their course suggesting a continuity of employment, potentially in the form of work-based learning programmes (χ^2_6=48.564, p<.001). Conversely those who were doing 'other' activities[28] prior to the course were least likely to be working, with only 19% doing so. Working while studying was significantly more common among those living in student residences

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[28] Including unemployment, caring for children or other family, sick or in prison.

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or in their own house/flat (χ^2_6=15.059, p=.020). Table 8 shows the complex pattern of working by age groups, with students aged under 18 being least likely to work (χ^2_6=13.175, p=.040).

Table 9: Propensity to work while studying, by age group (%)

	No work	Less than 10 hour/week	More than 10 hours/week
Under 18	69	13	18
18 or 19	58	20	23
20 to 25	52	28	19
26 and older	58	13	30

Perhaps surprisingly, there were no relationships between propensity to work and gender, ethnicity or disability. Finally, students who were not working alongside their studies were more likely to feel part of the college/university community (KW_2=7.159, p=.028).

It is difficult to know what to conclude from these data. In some respects, our sample may be less likely to have part-time work than students generally (e.g. because of child-care responsibilities, as discussed later), and as a result may be more likely to be in financial difficulties. We might be concerned about the 10% who were working more than 20 hours per week since this may have detrimental consequences for studies. Additionally, there may be students who are on part-time courses or on work based learning (e.g. teaching or nursing), where work and study are closely integrated and these working hours would feel manageable.

3.4.3 Financial difficulties

41% are not coping financially

Students were asked whether they felt they were coping financially and 59% stated that they were coping; this was very similar across the colleges and universities. Students who declared disabilities were significantly more likely to state that they were not coping (χ^2_1=10.047, p=.002), but there were no trends by gender, age or ethnicity. Students who reporting struggling financially scored significantly lower on all six rating scales[29] presumably because of anxiety over finances having an impact on all other aspects of their lives.

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[29] Doing well ($U_{149, 224}$=12242.0, p<.001), academic confidence ($U_{148, 224}$=12269.0, p<.001), help with college/university work ($U_{148, 223}$=13040.0, p<.001), membership of college/university community ($U_{148, 222}$=12150.5, p<.001), accommodation worries ($U_{145, 223}$=10886.5, p<.001) and support network ($U_{148, 221}$=11544.5, p<.001).

There were several experiential predictors for whether or not a student was coping. Students who were at college prior to their university course were less likely to report coping, whereas those at school before college or university were more likely to do so ($\chi^2_3=9.367$, p=.025). There's insufficient information in the data to explain the reasons for this, however, whatever the explanation, it is a concern because of the importance of the college route to university in Scotland, and for care experienced students in particular.

Students who had started, but not finished, a previous course were more likely to report difficulties ($\chi^2_2=6.719$, p=.035), as were those who reported transition issues ($\chi^2_1=7.666$, p=.006), while those who had help with their applications were less likely to report difficulties ($\chi^2_1=12.711$, p<.001). Finally, financial difficulties were significantly higher among those living in their own house/flat or 'other' housing ($\chi^2_3=14.968$, p=.002) and those who had experienced an unexpected change of accommodation ($\chi^2_1=23.866$, p<.001); in the latter instance, it may have been that financial instability caused the housing change or *vice versa*. Interestingly, there was no direct relationship between coping financially and work undertaken alongside study.

For many respondents, the additional financial support available for care experienced students was very helpful during their studies. They expressed thanks for the Care Experienced Student Bursary and indicated it had made a significant impact on their ability to study.

However, it was clear that the ability of students to manage this bursary was mixed. For instance, despite 59% of respondents overall reporting that they were coping financially, the vast majority of qualitative text reflected financial challenges. Budgeting skills were highlighted as a helpful resource in helping students to cope financially, while those who struggled to budget struggled financially. Students also reported that they were coping due to making an effort to save money, or working alongside their studies. There is an important distinction to be made between coping and comfortable for this group of students. Many students who reported coping qualified this by describing specific skills that they had developed in relation to managing their finances and were clear that whilst using these skills allowed them to manage their finances effectively, they did not diminish feelings of anxiety or financial precariousness in relation to their financial circumstances.

> There is no fall back or bank of mum and dad, so you learn to ensure you have enough to get by on or life will be more difficult.
> (University student)

> Again, due to the care of education. My budgeting skills is horrendous. I can't budget at all. I was never taught how to budget in care or growing up. So, I really don't know the concept of money and trying to explain this to people is difficult as they don't understand. I have tried requesting help through housing association with budgeting but don't really get anywhere. This is something I am aware of right know and I am trying to manage my money better. But it is difficult.
> (College further education student)

Budgeting seemed particularly difficult during holiday periods, as housing costs and other bills required to be paid, but many financial supports are suspended until the academic period resumes. While the expectation is that many students work or return to live with their parents during the summer period, the responses here reflected a tendency for care experienced students to be maintaining a private tenancy and have caring responsibilities.

> During the summer months I struggle to keep the roof over my head with the kids and I am stuck between rent/benefit caps/childcare/ not allowed to apply for benefits because I am returning to study, etc, etc.
> (University student)

In these cases, respondents were not frustrated with the amount of financial support they received. Instead, they indicated that they needed to be more skilled to manage that money. As the quote above suggests, this was particularly problematic during holiday periods when financial support was suspended.

While respondents discussed the many ways that they were struggling financially, the main reason for these struggles seemed to relate to complicated family arrangements and caring responsibilities. Students who felt that their financial support was inadequate typically cited the many expenses they had to meet. These included accommodation costs, supporting family, childcare and placement expenses. While the majority (59%) said they were coping, for some students the financial support they receive does not meet all of their essential outlays.

> My rent is £550 a month and my SAAS is £650, travel to college costs £104 a month, gas and electric £110 and [Care Provider] only pay half my rent. Each month I have a struggle to pay rent, but I get it paid but am always left skint which is difficult as I have a child. My son's father and I are no longer together but tries to help with bills as much as he can but cannot rely on him forever.
>
> (College higher education student)

> I am a kinship carer for my younger brother and was also a carer for my mother who suffers from alcohol Related Brian Damage. My mum now stays in a specialised care home. I have always had to be responsible with my money. I am also financial power of attorney for my mother and manage her finances as well which includes making payments to her care home. I was never entitled to any kinship allowance for looking after my brother as he was not placed with me by local authority. I get a student loan, child benefit tax credits and a child's pension. It is not ideal, and I have to be very tight with my budget, but I cope very well as I'm used to it.
> (College higher education student)

Child-related expenses were significant for care experienced students who were parents. Some students said that being parents prevented them from being able to work and earn extra money on top of their student finances. This could result in students accessing funds from sources other than student finance.

> The money itself is enough for me, but I have a daughter with my girlfriend and I help support her but don't get any help money wise towards this as my daughter doesn't live in my house. My girlfriend has had a lot of problems with the job centre not paying her properly and it's left her struggling to get by unless I help and that puts us both in a really bad situation with money as I don't have enough to help replace her money on top of the support I already give with my daughter
> (College higher education student)

These financial challenges were sometimes compounded by other essential course costs, such as expenses incurred in doing placements.

The reported difficulties in meeting accommodation costs, bills and placement expenses were largely a result of students' personal circumstances and lack of support. Those with children of their own, wider caring responsibilities or other family commitments seemed to struggle with the finance options available to them.

A significant financial challenge for some students is meeting funding criteria. Some students did not meet the criteria set by their institution, whereas others had their bursary removed or suspended due to absence, breaks in study, or delays, and felt they had been penalised for changes in their personal circumstances.

> As I am not classed as a 'Care leaver' I am living solely off of my student bursary which is £410 a month. There is a higher rate bursary for those who are care experienced, but as I do not fit the colleges 'one-size-fits-all' criteria, I do not qualify.
> (College further education student)

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> Due to being ill and sadly when my daughter has been ill or even had dental surgery I didn't get my full bursary payment. This causes so much problems financially.
> (College higher education student)

Financial challenges could be further complicated by the lack of a financial safety net from family. Care experienced students can experience anxiety and stress as a result of not having someone to offer advice, support, or emergency funds. Some of our respondents described being in precarious financial situations, borrowing money from additional sources and dealing with threats when they have been unable to pay a bill.

> It's been really hard trying to manage a house, bills, providing for my son, travel to and from college and books etc. for college. I manage really well but it's stressful because if there's an unexpected expense then I need to go without. There's nobody I can ask for help.
> (University student)

> Have had threatening e-mails from university due to late payment of fees. However, after intervention of care experienced contact, I was supported to apply for scholarship and additional funding. I am still struggling to make ends meet - have maxed credit card, overdraft and working as much as I can just to get through to end of course.
> (University student, survey)

The survey responses suggest that there are many reasons for care experienced students to feel that they are struggling financially. While 59% of respondents stated they were coping with their finances, the 41% who are not coping have highlighted many of the complex issues that care experienced students face when attending college or university. Many report having no one to help them plan their budgets, to teach them to manage their money, or to help them when times are tough. They also face higher living costs because of complex family situations and caring responsibilities, and find the loss of financial support during holiday periods particularly difficult to manage. Care experienced students come from a variety of backgrounds and have a range of personal and life experiences. These complex factors will determine the type, quality and amount of previous and continuing support that they have received in relation to financial education and support. This variance may go some way to explaining why students who appear to be in similar situations may be coping, whilst others are not.

3.4.4 Students who had considering leaving their course

Within the sample, 55% of respondents had considered leaving; this was highest among university students (64%) and lowest among college FE students (48%) – see Table 9. Disabled students were significantly more likely to have considered leaving, with

68% having considered this option (χ^2_1=20.889, p<.001). As with financial difficulty, thinking about leaving was associated with lower ratings on all six student-experience scales[30]. Indeed, there was a strong relationship with financial difficulties, with 73% of those reporting not coping having also considered leaving (χ^2_1=33.668, p<.001).

Table 10: Propensity to report having considered leaving (%)

	No	Yes
University	36	64
College (HE)	47	53
College (FE)	52	48
Disabled	32	68
Not disabled	57	43
Coping financially	57	43
Not coping financially	27	73
No transition issues	51	49
Transition issues	27	73
No unexpected accommodation move	50	50
Unexpected accommodation move	21	79
Help with application	52	48
No help with application	40	60
Contacted by university/college staff	48	52
Not contacted by university/college staff	36	64

Students who had been at college prior to university were significantly more likely to have considered leaving (χ^2_3=8.497, p=.037), but those who got help with their application (χ^2_1=4.838, p=.028) or help from university/college staff after declaring their care status (χ^2_1=4.447, p=.035) were less likely to have done so; indeed, feeling that the declaration process was positive was associated with a lower incidence of considering leaving (χ^2_2=8.760, p=.013). Conversely, those reporting transition issues (χ^2_1=16.088,

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[30] Doing well ($U_{169, 203}$=24946.5, p<.001), academic confidence ($U_{169, 202}$=22882.5, p<.001), help with college/university work ($U_{169, 202}$=21522.5, p<.001), membership of college/university community ($U_{166, 203}$=23880.0, p<.001), accommodation worries ($U_{165, 202}$=20614.0, p<.001) and support network ($U_{165, 203}$=21960.5, p<.001).

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p<.001) or an unexpected accommodation move (χ^2_1=18.789, p<.001) were significantly more likely to have thought about leaving.

Asked if they had considered leaving their course, care experienced university and college students responded 'yes' for a number of reasons. These included academic expectations, financial strain, lack of belonging and support, illness and disability, sensitivities triggered by academic topics, and competing commitments. Academic expectations could be overwhelming for some care experienced students, who experienced struggling to manage workload with limited support.

> I have felt overwhelmed and even had a meeting with my head of department about dropping out. It's hard to cope with the stress of education alongside all of life's problems with no one to turn to for support.
> (College higher education student)

Even those students who reported being academically confident said worries about money had made them consider leaving. Financial worries could be particularly exacerbated by a perceived lack of support.

> Only because of worrying about the financial aspect and not because of my ability. I know I am capable and hardworking but if I don't have finances for fees or childcare then I simply have no choice.
> (University student)

Students who reported having an illness or disability cited their conditions as reasons for considering leaving. This may be because of lack of support to manage their illness or disability, but may also be due to the financial circumstances.

> My mental health and financial circumstances have suffered greatly due to university pressures and expectations. I would like to take a year out next year but worry I won't go back to finish my final year.
> (University student)

> I have once because of my health, I have a quite serious health conditions which mean I have to sometimes be off and began to feel like I was really falling behind but managed to sort it and am quite happy now.
> (College higher education student)

In addition, some students reported thinking about leaving as a result of their competing commitments. Having complex family arrangements and balancing paid employment with studies led some students to feel that they were 'juggling' too many different things.

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> I think for my myself, it's just outside factors that - I ended up I was staying in homeless accommodation and trying the whole on a course or at school and it's just like, it was unmanageable for me cos I couldn't even get clean clothes and stuff like that so I wasn't really going into school when I was barely struggling to make food and all that. It's just like outside factors affecting you as well.
> (John, focus group)

Some had considered leaving because course work had triggered unpleasant feelings associated with their care experience. This is likely to be more commonly associated with people-related courses such as social work programmes.

> I study social work and I found it very emotionally, physically and mentally challenging. It brought a lot of memories back from my childhood and time in care and it felt quite isolating at times. Although they have mentoring (not specifically for care experienced people) and counselling/wellbeing service, the university don't offer much for care experienced people.
> (University student)

> The course that I'm doing I am faced with work relating to things I have been through in the past, so some subjects have been harder to sit through! I continue pushing myself through because I would like to make a difference one day and hope that no children end up in the same situation as myself.
> (College further education student)

Among students who reported not having considered leaving, a common reason given for deciding to continue with their course was a strong commitment to education and their future career.

> I am studying to enhance my knowledge of the sector I am in therefore have no intention of leaving.
> (University student)

> I want to complete this course and get a career although there have been times with money worries and mental health blips that cause me to contemplate leaving the course.
> (College further education student)

Many students who had considered leaving qualified their comments with similar statements, stipulating that they would not go through with leaving, even though they were finding their studies difficult. The overall decision to continue studying, whether someone had considered leaving or not, seemed strongly associated with this commitment to education and future career opportunities.

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3.4.5 Support services

Respondents were asked to identify all the support services that they had used in their university or college and these are summarised in Table 10. Students at university were more likely to have used a mentor, disability adviser and the wellbeing/counselling service than those in colleges, perhaps due to availability, but the used of financial advisers and student associations was more evenly distributed.

Table 11: Sources of support at college or university reported by students, by institution type (%)

	University	College (HE)	College (FE)
Mentor	37	18	12
Disability adviser	29	20	14
Wellbeing or counselling service	28	17	12
Financial adviser	26	26	26
Student association	20	30	28
Equality and diversity service	7	6	-
Other staff	3	7	3

Note: Students were invited to indicate all that apply and % reflects proportion of those saying that they had help, so the columns total more than 100% – final row was a 'write-in' response and so is likely to underestimate the proportion of students gaining help through other staff.

Older students were significantly more likely to have seen a financial adviser (χ^2_3=9.744, p=.021), while those aged under 18 were less likely to have used the students' association (χ^2_3=8.332, p=.040). Unsurprisingly, students who declared disabilities were more likely to have sought support from a disability adviser (χ^2_1=19.751, p<.001), but it was perhaps surprising that only 33% of them had done so. It is worth reiterating that, in comparison to the Scottish Funding Council's Report on Widening Access 2017-2018, the proportion of care experienced students reporting a disability in our survey was much higher than the national average (Scottish Funding Council, 2019). Here, 51% of university students, 43% of college HE students and 46% of college FE students reported having a disability, compared with 14% of university students, 13% of college HE students and 20% of college FE students nationally. Overall, of the 144 participants who provided detailed answers regarding their disabilities, 47% reported having a mental health issue, 25% reported having a disability and mental health issue, and 28% were identified as having a disability alone. As such, our decision to ask students about disability and mental health in a single question means that it is possible that students who declared disabilities were seeking support from mental health or counselling services, rather than disability services.

Students who were at college prior to university were more likely than other students to have used a mentor (χ^2_3=7.951, p=.047), a disability adviser (χ^2_3=14.562, p=.002) and/or the wellbeing/counselling service (χ^2_3=15.923, p=.001). Those declaring their care status were more likely to have seen a mentor (χ^2_2=9.206, p=.010) and those

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contacted by staff after making a declaration tended to have made more use of the wellbeing/counselling service (χ^2_1=4.106, p=.043). Perhaps surprisingly, students reporting transition issues or not coping financially were no more likely to use support services than other students. There were similarly no trends by housing type, although students who had had an unexpected accommodation move were more likely to have seen a financial adviser (χ^2_1=3.974, p=.046). Finally, those who had considered leaving were more likely to have seen a mentor (χ^2_1=4.973, p=.026), but not the other support services. Overall, therefore, there was a relatively weak link between students' perceived difficulties and use of the support services available.

As part of the focus group, participants were asked to reflect on the support they received while in college and university and how this had impacted their experiences of further and higher education. Rather than discussing specific support types, as above, participants were asked about the qualities of support services that they valued most. In John's case, having staff in the institution that knew the students well and were willing to 'push' them to consider their potential was important.

> I was very fortunate I come from a small town where the lecturer knew me and she knew people in my family. When I said 'Is there anything I need to do, to sign, to leave the course', because I had it SAAS but it was all through SAAS and that, do I need to actually do anything to leave. She was like 'Why are you thinking about leaving?' and she was really understanding and that, and just having that one person that said that to me and eventually I stayed on at the course.
> (John, focus group)

Other participants suggested that having support from someone at the institution who could encourage students to continue through their course was particularly important for people who had unsupportive family members.

> I came out of care, went straight into college and one thing I've found was at home the person that was supposed to be one that motivated me was the one that was saying 'Why are you doing it' 'What's the point in you doing it?' and that was own family and it's like I want to do it to get better. And basically, got guilt tripped into dropping out because they were like my family was like 'What's the point in going? Just go out and get a job, earn some money' instead of going to college to go to university.
> (Georgia, focus group)

In general, it seemed that respondents perceived education as a support in itself, where they were able to make positive connections with staff members and fellow students that they did not necessarily have in their own home lives.

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In particular, participants in the focus group were keen to emphasise that support services should be proactive in their contact, rather than relying on students themselves to build those relationships.

> …just to have someone to go to, to have been like 'Look, I'm really struggling' would have been fine but the fact that I didn't even know who this person was, who I was meant to go to, and I was getting told by my other lecturers 'Oh you need to go and find your safeguard' and I was like 'I don't know who my safeguard is' and because it was only my safeguard that had my information all the other safeguards couldn't tell me who my safeguard was.
> (Oswald Smith, Focus Group)

> …you get assigned a personal tutor and it's sort of a bit like the tick box exercise. I've seen my personal tutor once in 5 years. It's seems like it's a tick box exercise.
> (John, focus group)

The overall response from focus group participants indicated that support services should be flexible and pro-active, they should ensure that they are available to students and communicate with people throughout the college or university to make themselves identifiable when issues arise.

3.5 Other comments

The questionnaires include a final open-ended section that invited students to tell us anything else not otherwise covered by earlier questions. Many respondents used this section to indicate positive experiences or to suggest ways in which changes in institutions' procedures could improve care experienced students' experiences. The provision of dedicated support for care experienced students was commonly cited.

> [Name of university] care leaver coordinator is excellent at listening to what I need, tailoring his work with me to how I need it to be, building a relationship, responding quickly, helpfully and in a friendly manner to my questions or concerns, and has helped me access student support services faster than my non-care experienced peers would have been able to. He was also very helpful and positive about me dropping out of university but planning to come back and kept in contact occasionally over the period I was absent. I will ask for help if I need it and I know where to go. He also links in with other people supporting me and this good holistic support has been a big part of my retention and success in university so far.
> (University student)

> I want more support for older care experienced people who don't have a partner or family for support. There are still too many barriers. I have had to be very strong and resilient to pursue my chosen career path. There is a gap for care experienced people who are parents.
> (University student)

> If it was not for the additional support from the Care Experienced Co-ordinator, I would have left university before achieving my goals. He managed to negotiate a repeat year when academic staff wanted me to just do exams only - which I would not have coped with. He intervened when they tried to pressure me.
> (University student)

> Being a student with care experience is very daunting but attending the college, they have provided me with access to groups/organisations that I never knew existed or have put things in place to help me get in touch and basically advocate for me when social services aren't fulfilling their duty! This has been a positive experience for me as I have struggled to receive any support in the past.
> (College further education student)

These responses highlight the importance of dedicated support services being available to care experienced students. They also clearly demonstrate that these support services

should be easily identifiable and work in-tandem with wider university support networks. The praise given to staff members who made positive links with others is evident throughout the survey and focus group data. Additionally, participants were keen to emphasise that care experienced support should not simply be the responsibility of care experienced advisors, but that all university staff should be familiar with the challenges of being a care experienced student, ensuring that institutions work seamlessly to provide support, rather than relying on a programme of isolated services.

Another common additional comment was to emphasise the contribution of financial difficulties as a barrier to education.

> SAAS have massively improved their service for care experienced people but more needs to be done still to help avoid financial difficulties by pacing payments out more evenly.
> (University student)

> Colleges need to learn that trauma and other factors are at play and a written letter of refusal of financial support from a spouse should mean a woman can access full child care provision which costs £300-£500 a month and the student loan is only £521 so that plus materials and a bus pass means you cannot afford to live if you don't work and my health ended up in serious decline as a result.
> (College student)

Some said that individualised financial support which is easier to access, and good personal support would reduce levels of stress and broaden their options in education. Overall, students wanted more support from their institutions to deal with daily struggles.

> It has been a very isolating experience, particularly since I have no one to go home to during the holidays. I've been grappling my mental health and my finances which has been impacting my studies, causing me to repeat a year.
> (University student)

> I don't believe all [staff members in the] university understand that some care experience young people don't know where to go when they need help or know their rights in university. So, the allocated worker in university should make themselves known to care experienced young people in their university in case young people want to contact them and just so they know there is an extra someone in the uni.
> (University student)

Some students made observations criticising the age limits applied to financial support for care experienced students.

> It's been very beneficial for me but find it frustrating that 26 is the cut off age. It's far too young. People who have been in care generally have issues and to expect these to have been resolved by 26 is madness.
> (University student)

> Just because I'm over 40 doesn't mean I don't face similar struggles. There is no one to turn to like my cohort has - parents. My carers are dead. I don't have mentors. I don't fit in the boxes. Who am I inviting to my graduation?? I didn't follow the a to b path.
> (University student)

Some students wanted better understanding of their circumstances from their teachers and greater sensitivity in relation to course work impinging on sensitive topics.

> …Since we started I've caught the flu twice in 4 months, which has left me bed ridden and with asthma problems. Also, my daughter has been ill once or twice and had dental surgery done and even though I had genuine reasons for being off I didn't receive my full bursary. I don't think it's fair if you've been signed off from attending college due to doctors' orders and not getting your bursary is not right.
> (College higher education student)

> Adjusted grade entry promise is not adhered to well. It is not uniform across universities, universities say that they follow it but actually they don't quite - particularly in vocational subjects like dentistry, medicine and law, or they tell you about all the excellent support they offer you instead of answering the question about grade entry. No bodies enforce this. There needs to be some sort of Buttle mark to inspect that universities are implementing and upholding their corporate parenting duties well.
>
> (University student)

Some students wanted to highlight things they regarded as good developments in support for care experienced students, such as the personal impact of the educational experience and overall improvement in self-image and wellbeing.

> My course finished in August 2018. I started working as a Staff Nurse at the end of August. It is my dream job in Intensive Care, caring for the sickest patients in the hospital. I am continually learning new skills and love it. I graduated with Distinction in Adult Nursing in November 2018! I did not think I would ever get to attend University and to get a Distinction was just amazing. My hard work really paid off!
> (University student)

> I'm proud now, to be a University student with care experience. I was told aged 15 by a support worker that I would be more likely to go to prison than university. I have never been to Prison. I am at University. I will stay at University and graduate. Student life here is amazing. Supportive, inclusive, diverse, and fun. It's a joy actually.
> (University student)

Typically students used the final open-ended section to highlight the important concerns of care experienced students. These tended to be about financial struggles, complex family circumstances, limited understanding by their teachers of these circumstances, and difficulties as a result of ageing out of support. They also wanted to tell us about more positive experiences. Crucially, they were asking for more understanding, flexibility to take account of their circumstances and better support.

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4. Discussion and recommendations

This research, based on more than 400 responses to an online survey, for the first time gives a comprehensive account of the experiences of going to and being at college and university of care experienced students in Scotland.

The responses are geographically representative of the college and university sectors across Scotland. Using present estimates of the population, we believe our sample represents over 40% of care experienced students attending universities and approaching 10% of those in colleges. The sample has a much higher proportion of female students than appears in the national data reported to the SFC, a higher proportion in the 20-25 age group, and a higher proportion of students declaring disabilities. The implications for further research are that our responses may not be fully representative of the issues experienced by male students from a care background and those of older students (e.g. those who may have more caring responsibilities and who do not qualify for the new bursary). While disability issues are particularly highlighted in this research, it should be borne in mind that this may be a function of the sample.

A number of key themes were identified in this research that pose possibilities for improvements in policy and practice, ensuring that care experienced students have the best opportunities at college and university. This section will discuss the findings of the research alongside wider literature to highlight key messages from the online questionnaire and focus group data. Recommendations for policy and practice changes will also be suggested. This discussion is structured using the main headings of the survey.

4.1 Going to college and university

Before going to college or university, students must decide which institutions to apply to and accept offers from. Despite research suggesting that colleges and universities can fulfil important corporate parenting roles for care experienced students (Cotton, 2014), only a minority of respondents said they were influenced in the process of applying to college or university by the services offered under institutions' corporate parenting services. This is a complex area to explore by questionnaire and it is possible than many respondents did not fully understand the questions. This finding does not negate the importance of corporate parenting plans but it indicates that the particular supports care experienced students can expect as a result of pledges contained in plans need to be clearly and prominently displayed – on web pages and other forms of communication specifically directed at care experienced students.

Prospective students took a more nuanced approach to deciding which institutions to apply to or attend, valuing support services for care experienced students. It is very helpful to know that, in addition to clearly expressing the supports care experienced students can expect from an institution, being proactively contacted by a college or university adviser who can offer help with the process is especially valued. Having a

direct link to the institution, e.g. via an individualised arranged visit or summer programme, is probably the gold standard. The responses indicated that proactive contact was a good measure of the effort that a college or university would make to support students during their studies. Research suggests that continued access to support is important to people with care experience, as they want to feel free to refuse support when they do not need it, but know that support will always be available (Rogers, 2011). Given the prominence of responses in relation to contact and support, it is recommended that colleges and universities contact prospective students who have identified themselves as care experienced at the earliest possible opportunity.

Recommendation 1

An institution's care experienced student advisor should make proactive, personal contact with every prospective student who has declared that they have care experience. Information and guidance on support services relating to learning, finance and accommodation should be offered alongside details of key contacts within the institution.

A minority of respondents (39%) said they got help to make their application to college or university. Given the complexity of the process it is not surprising that teachers and parents around the country invest considerable time and expertise in coaching and supporting prospective students in the various steps in the process of selecting a target course and applying to institutions. This is an area where applicants with care experience, often older and without family or school support are at a significant disadvantage. How to respond adequately to this need is an important area for discussion. Students who had help with their application appeared to feel part of the college or university community more than those who did not. This is an interesting finding that raises questions about the potential longer term impact of relatively simple but relational based practical support.

In relation to applying for financial support, many respondents said that the process was straightforward, especially when they had support from family members or others to complete the forms, but others reported struggling to complete applications and experiencing discomfort caused by the amount of detail required to prove care experience and getting the information required. Montserrat, Casas, & Malo (2013) argue that care experienced students are

'a group with specific educational needs', suggesting that colleges and universities need to '[take] into account their family circumstances and the traumatic experiences suffered during their lives, guaranteeing them a support even after the period of compulsory education'.

The process of applying for financial support could be improved by simplifying the burden

of proof for care experience. Students described the often 're-traumatising' effect of having to seek out professionals who they had previously worked with or documentation relating to their previous care experience. Many respondents discussed experiencing the financial application process as bureaucratic and process driven rather than relational and enabling. The importance of feeling that very personal information, circumstances and experiences are being sensitively received and held by agencies and organisations is crucial to care experienced students. Ways of working which consider how this process is administered using person centred principles would address some of the negative experiences described by respondents.

Recommendation 2

The Student Awards Agency for Scotland (SAAS), Scottish Funding Council (SFC) and colleges should review the documentation required to provide proof of care experience and develop a system which facilitates personalised discussions based on individual circumstances, if required, to resolve cases where evidence is not freely available.

Some students make the decision not to declare their care experience to their institution but apply for financial assistance in the form of the care experienced bursary. The financial application process should harness the opportunities to provide contact details of the wider supports available. Providing contact details of support services and key contacts alongside financial applications would help to address the gap between those who declare their care experience to their institution, and those who do not but still apply for financial support.

Recommendation 3

On receipt of a Care Experience Student Bursary application, the Student Awards Agency for Scotland (SAAS) should provide information, in the form of an automated return email, with a list of care experienced student contacts within each further and higher education institution. This will ensure that students who elect not to disclose their care experience during their admissions application still receive this information, should they wish to make contact at a later date.

Recommendation 4

Further and higher education institutions should provide to the Student Awards Agency for Scotland (SAAS) the name and contact details of their care experienced student contact by an agreed annual date to allow these to be compiled into a standard SAAS application acknowledgement response.

A very high proportion of our respondents opted to declare their care experience to their college or university. This is reassuring, given the efforts of recent years to encourage applicants to do so, and because it suggests that care experienced students have confidence that this will be a positive experience. The findings also indicate however, ways in which things could be improved. For example, a non-trivial minority said they had not been asked about care experience; the data suggests the number of people not being asked is higher in colleges than universities. Among those who chose to declare, only in just over half of cases did students recollect college or university staff contacting them. Disabled students and those not living with family or student residence were less likely to feel positive about follow-up contact. These findings suggest a need for a review of procedures in relation to what applicants can expect as a result of declaring care experience.

Respondents' reasons for declaring or not declaring were varied and reflected expectations regarding support, peer and institutions' reactions, potential access to wider opportunities and the desire to improve statistics or daily situations for future cohorts of care experienced people. Some of these reasons have been reported elsewhere, with researchers highlighting continuing fears of stigma and isolation (Stein, 2006) and a desire to support other people with care experience (Cotton, et al., 2014; Mayall, O'Neill, Worsley, Devereux, Ward, & Lynch 2014).

It remains clear, however, that there are substantial barriers to declaring care experience at application stage. For these reasons, it is suggested that care experienced data is collected using standardised measures and made public, in order to track the educational journeys of people with care experience. Additionally, combatting stigma and ensuring support services are tailored to students' needs, this data should be contextualised to account for the varied life experiences of students with care backgrounds.

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Recommendation 7

The Scottish Funding Council (SFC) should work with colleges and universities and care experienced students to develop a standard data set which should be used to inform future decisions regarding support for care experienced students. Universities should ensure that their HESA return accurately reflects the data they hold on care experienced students.

Most respondents said they did not experience any problems with their transition. However, for those who did, these problems centred on three key issues: moving residence, a lack of support networks and having few family and friends who could be relied on to help with the transition to college and university caused some participants to feel isolated. These feelings were intensified for people moving into student accommodation, particularly when they were moving to an unfamiliar town or city, where they felt they had no one to turn to for help. It is known that care experienced people often face housing challenges, a lack of social and emotional support, and can feel isolated (Duncalf, 2010; Hayes Piel, 2018). When preparing to transition to college and university, it appears that these issues may intensify as one settles into a new environment. Colleges and universities can take measures to improve these experiences, as can throughcare and aftercare teams and other social support organisations. Of note is the ability of supportive adults from these services to provide practical support during the moving process. Practical support, including providing transport and helping someone move their belongings into their new residence, is of particular importance given the propensity of care experienced students to be without wider family support. This support can come from many sources such as throughcare and aftercare teams, institutions themselves or local organisations.

Recommendation 8

Colleges and universities should develop a directory of local organisations and services which can provide practical support to care experienced students moving into college or university accommodation and make this available to care experienced students.

4.2 Being at college and university

Overall, when asked about their experiences as students, most respondents reported feeling positive about their time in college and university. However, students who reported having a disability or mental health problems were less likely to rate their experience as positive. In addition, university students were more likely to report concerns about their accommodation and not feeling part of their community. What this indicates is that care experienced students have very varied experiences of their time in further and higher education.

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For many respondents, their care backgrounds had left them with few people to trust rely on in times of need for practical, emotional and financial support. While college and university provided care experienced students with access to experiences and opportunities that they would not have elsewhere, students required dedicated support to be able to take these opportunities when they presented themselves. While research indicates that care experienced students may be less likely to seek support when needed (Cotton, et al., 2014), it has also been stated that support services should remain open to care experienced students indefinitely, ensuring that support will always be available should they need it (Rogers, 2011). Cashmore and Paxman (2006) identify that in order for young people leaving care to have a safety net of supports around them that they can trust and are willing to access, a sense of stability needs to be translated into a sense of security and belonging.

Recommendation 9

Institutions should ensure that dedicated support services are available for care experienced students, providing a named contact who can connect with other support services when necessary on the student's behalf. Consideration should be given to how students can access support during holiday periods to ensure continuity of support services. Particular attention should be given to Christmas and summer holiday periods as students report particular difficulties in relation to both emotional and practical support during these times.

Recommendation 10

Support services should remain available for students who have previously chosen not to use these services. It is important that students know that support services will be available to them throughout their time at college and university, regardless of how many times they choose not to use these supports.

Additionally, these support services should include provisions for year-round accommodation and minimal accommodation disruptions. Martin, et al. (2002) indicate that 45% of care experienced students in their study experienced accommodation difficulties in higher education. Accommodation is a challenge for care experienced people more generally (Duncalf, 2010), meaning that some will come to college and university with pre-existing accommodation difficulties. Cashmore and Paxman (2006,p. 239) highlight that 'Beyond care, continuity in accommodation, relationships and social support is very important but is not available to all young people leaving care'. There exist opportunities for colleges and universities to provide this crucial continuity in accommodation, relationships and social supports.

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Recommendation 11

Colleges and universities should ensure that year-round accommodation is available for all care experienced students. Where an institution does not hold their own accommodation, they should ensure that year round provision is guaranteed for care experienced students by contracting for this in any new or renewed partnership with private companies who offer accommodation on an institution's behalf.

Recommendation 12

Any accommodation changes required, particularly during the summer holiday period, should be kept to a minimum and be arranged in the least disruptive manner possible and in consultation with students. Exit from previous accommodation and entry to new accommodation should be well coordinated to prevent students from experiencing delays between moving-out and moving-in.

When asked whether they were coping with their finances or not, 59% of respondents across college and university stated that they did indeed feel they were coping. Of those who did report that they were coping, many detailed additional skills and mechanisms that they used in order to cope. These included strict weekly or monthly budgeting, saving money and working alongside studying. Whilst this type of financial management will also be true for the general student population, what was highlighted by respondents in this study is that they have no other safety net in the event that they need financial help. Many respondents discussed the need to be self-sufficient due to lack of familial financial support. Data showed that this caused or exacerbated feelings of both anxiety and isolation for some students.

The qualitative data indicated that the remaining 41% of participants who reported that they were not coping financially faced many compounding issues during their studies. These ranged from having poor budgeting skills, struggling to make ends meet, and managing increasing monthly costs while supporting their children or other family members. The main issue that appeared consistently in the data was the difficulty that care experienced students faced managing finances during holiday periods. At present, SAAS pay all of their bursaries and loans between September and May, and students are expected to be in paid employment over the summer period and/or to return home to their parents. This research indicated that suspending payments over the summer period is particularly damaging for care experienced students, who tend to remain independent and not return to their parents or families, while also managing their complex family situations. This is particularly relevant for those who cannot work during holidays because of childcare, other caring responsibilities, or reported disabilities and mental health issues.

Students who declared that they had a disability were less likely to report coping with finances. Those who reported struggling financially were less likely to be doing well, less likely to feel confident academically, feel part of their institution's community, have a support network and have help with academic work. Students with disabilities who reported not coping financially cited the same reasons as those without disabilities, however these difficulties were discussed in more depth and more often. This could indicate that not coping with finances has a greater impact on care experienced students with disabilities than those without.

Financial precariousness is an issue which can have a profound impact on a person's mental health and felt security, alongside the practical implications related to housing, physical development and social isolation. It is suggested that care experienced financial support be available year-round, rather than from September to May, to help students to manage their finances more effectively and reduce the risk of financial precariousness.

Recommendation 13

The Student Awards Agency for Scotland (SAAS) and further education providers should provide year round financial support, rather than the standard September to May package. The current value of care experienced packages may be sufficiently spread over 12 months, but we recommend this is monitored and reviewed as part of the Student Finance Review.

Providing year-round support reflects the needs of care experienced students to pay for accommodation during the summer months, when it is often expected that students from 'traditional' backgrounds return home and avoid these costs.

Recommendation 14

The Student Awards Agency for Scotland (SAAS) and colleges should offer financial advice to students who are successful in applying for the Care Experience Bursary. The Student Awards Agency for Scotland (SAAS) and colleges should agree a standard 'offer' of financial advice and guidance that is consistent across both Further and Higher Education settings but should certainly include the opportunity for students to discuss financial matters with an advisor on a one to one basis.

4.3 Leaving college and university

In total, 55% of respondents had considered leaving their course, with 64% of university students reporting that they had felt this way. In comparison, the 2017-18 retention rate for first year care experienced students in higher education in Scotland was 87.2%, meaning that 12.8% of students left their course (compared with 7.5% for all students and 10.6% for SIMD20 students) (Scottish Funding Council, 2019). Reasons for having considered leaving included academic expectations, financial strain, a lack of belonging and support, and competing commitments. Responses indicated that complexities outside

of college and university were most likely to be a factor when considering leaving. For example, those with children and family responsibilities highlighted that being in paid employment would give them more financial security. While research indicates that care experienced students are more likely to 'drop out' of university in particular (Hyde-Dryden, 2012) many participants in this study were committed to education. As such, it is possible that protective factors could be improved to allow students to remain in their courses, rather than following through with their thoughts about leaving. These measures should remind students of course flexibility, often in the ability to take leaves of absence when required. In order to better understand why care experienced students leave their courses early, it is also recommended that colleges and universities incorporate ways to collect more detailed data regarding reasons for leaving.

Recommendation 15

Colleges and universities should provide a detailed list of the variety of study options which exist for learners, and the flexibility within those options. This should include the possibilities around breaks in study, deferment, distance learning, part time learning and any other option which may support learner retention.

Recommendation 16

Where care experienced students do take the decision to leave their courses early, colleges and universities should try to ascertain the reasons for care experienced students leaving their course early, and should offer support for students who wish to return to studies. These reasons should be systematically recorded, and the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) should work closely with colleges and universities to use this data to improve completion rates and retention.

4.4 Contextualising the recommendations: 'Supportive, inclusive, diverse, and fun.'

While this report has outlined a number of areas of improvement, respondents continued to highlight things that were 'done well' and that encouraged them to continue in their studies. These have included attentive and sensitive support, access to opportunities and experiences not available elsewhere, and an overarching belief that engaging in further and higher education will improve their overall quality of life in the long run. As such, it is important to recognise that the recommendations made in this report aim to ensure that care experienced students have the most 'supportive, inclusive, diverse, and fun' (university student) time possible in college and university.

Of particular significance were the number of named individuals across institutions that participants were keen to celebrate. Research indicates that a single close relationship with a supportive, dependable adult is enough to help care experienced people manage towards interdependence and life transitions (Thompson, et al., 2016; Greeson, Usher, & Grinstein-Weiss, 2010). The responses to our survey and focus group questions indicate

that some students felt they had an adult in their college or university who fulfilled this role, and did so very successfully, whereas others seemed to be missing this person. Entering further and higher education provides a unique opportunity for care experienced people to continue to receive support, or re-engage with support, that may not be available elsewhere in their lives. Colleges and universities should, therefore, strive to provide as many supportive opportunities as possible and celebrate excellence in this area.

Recommendation 17

Colleges and universities should provide opportunities for care experienced students to give feedback on the support services available, what does not work well for them, or what staff or institutions have done particularly well. This information should be collected alongside other student satisfaction processes and used to inform improvement planning.

Recommendation 18

The Scottish Funding Council (SFC) should use existing, or create new structures and forums for Corporate Parents to work together to identify, collate, share and scale good practice in relation to effective support for care experienced students.

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5. Conclusion

This research sought the views of care experienced students in college and university through an online questionnaire and a focus group. The aim was to understand how care experienced students experience college and university in Scotland. The research was commissioned by the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) and conducted by CELCIS. The research design was benefited from the experience of the HERACLES project in England (Harrison, 2017).

The findings suggest that institutions already have policies and practices in place to support care experienced students. Many students reported positive experiences of post-school education, citing a commitment to improving their career prospects and wider wellbeing. Many were receiving committed, attuned support from staff members in colleges and universities. Where financial support was concerned, those who were receiving the Care Experienced Student Bursary felt that the current package supported them to cope financially and a helpful addition to their overall financial situation. Nonetheless, students highlighted the many complex, compounding factors that could negatively impact their time at college and university.

The results highlight some areas of concern. These are: difficulties applying for and coping with financial support; poor social support and social isolation; accommodation challenges and changes; past trauma resurfacing; complex family arrangements and caring responsibilities; an increased propensity to have a disability or mental health issues, and; struggles with academic demands in course content and structure. An important point is that all of these areas of concern were more pronounced for people who self-identified as having a disability. In these cases, care experienced students with disabilities were more likely to report difficulties with finances, support services, accommodation, past trauma, complex family lives and struggles with academic demands and structure. This highlights the intersectionality of care experienced students, where some require *even more* intensive social, emotional, academic and financial support to take account of their specific needs. This may involve different services communicating more intensively with each other, to ensure that students receive tailored support for their needs.

A duty already exists for corporate parents to collaborate with each other when exercising their corporate parenting duties[31]. The findings from this research suggest, though, that this collaboration is most successful when the support provided by corporate parents, and other relevant public sector organisations, is proactive and needs led in its approach. In order to provide the holistic, practical and emotional support that respondents to this research describe as most effective, then intentional and aspirational planning and practices are crucial to this endeavour. Recognition from all organisations

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[31] Statutory guidance on Part 9 (Corporate Parenting) of the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014

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involved in the provision of this support that these efforts are required at every stage of a students' learning journey, from application to graduation and beyond, will be important in ensuring that all care experienced students are fully supported to achieve their goals. The findings reported here inevitably pose further questions and indicate areas for future research. In this respect, we particularly highlight the need to gain a better understanding of the particular circumstances of care experienced students with disabilities and those who have caring responsibilities.

Overall, this research has highlighted a number of positive and negative experiences of college and university for care experienced students. At the heart of this report is the care experienced voice. The recommendations highlighted in Section 4 are intended to reflect student concerns and suggest ways to overcome ongoing difficulties in going to, being at and leaving college and university.

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