Response to Scottish Funding Council's Consultation on the Widening Access and Retention Fund

September 2019

We welcome the opportunity to submit our views in response to the Scottish Funding Council's (SFC's) consultation on the review of the Widening Access and Retention Fund (WARF). This is part of SFC's strategy to review the best use of funds to deliver the Commission on Widening Access (COWA) recommendations, and presents an opportunity to consider how changes to the WARF could positively impact on the educational experiences and outcomes of care experienced students in Scotland.

Educational outcomes statistics[1] show that, whilst the gap has narrowed slightly in previous years in relation to attainment, exclusion, attendance and post school destinations, a persistent and unacceptable difference in outcomes between all children, and looked after children remains:

- Whilst 98% of all children leave school with one or more qualification at SCQF level 3, only 86% of looked after children do. This gap is larger at SCQF level 6 where 62% of all children compared to 12% of looked after children achieve at least one qualification at this level.
- Attendance is lower than the national average for children who are looked after across all settings except foster care. Attendance is a good proxy for attainment, therefore lower attendance at school is, in part, causally responsible for lower attainment.
- Looked after children are 6.2 times more likely to be excluded from school than all other children. This figure rises to 15 times for children looked after in residential care.
- Nine months after leaving school, 14% of school leavers who were looked after at the point of leaving school are unemployed and seeking work compared to 2% of all other school leavers
- 4% of school leavers who were looked after progressed directly to higher education, compared to 39% of all school leavers

In regards to retention rates in higher education, the [SFC Widening Access report](#) 17/18 states that:

- The overall retention rate for Scottish domiciled full-time first degree entrants completing year 1 and remaining in higher education was 92.5%, compared with 87.2% of entrants with care-experienced backgrounds remaining in higher education after year one[2]

Due to the disparity in these indicators between care experienced students and all students, it has been accepted by Scottish Government that having a care background (whether looked after 'at home' or 'away from home') constitutes being in most need of bursary support. Our recent research 'Being a student with care experience is very daunting' is Scotland's first nation-wide survey of care experienced students in our colleges and universities which received over 400 responses. Findings highlighted that this group of students also had significant difficulties with accommodation, finances and emotional and practical support before and during studying at college and university.[3] The research identified 8 key learning points which informed 18 recommendations for Corporate Parents and other public bodies. These are summarised here.

1. What access activities should an institution reasonably deliver from its core funding?

The position of students from care experienced backgrounds varies greatly. Some will have the advantage of continuing care placements or the support of through-care and leaving care advisers, or former or current carers. Others, particularly those whose care experience is not recent, have limited access to local authority or third sector support and may have little or no family support. While acknowledging that circumstances vary, many students from a care experienced background will require additional, ongoing and relationship based support in order to access and sustain further and higher education opportunities. Universities are in a privileged position to be able to provide this to their care experienced students.

The state has explicit responsibilities to uphold the rights and secure the wellbeing of looked after children, young people, and care leavers. Part 9: Corporate Parenting of the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014, (and associated statutory guidance), requires Scottish Ministers, local authorities and a range of other public sector bodies including the Student Awards Agency Scotland (SAAS) and all post-16 education bodies, to uphold particular responsibilities in all areas of their work. As corporate parents, they must promote the interests of looked after children and care leavers, and enable them to make use of supports and services they provide, working collaboratively wherever necessary.

In fulfilling these responsibilities, we would advocate that institutions provide any and all access and retention activities that would support care experienced students to engage with and sustain study opportunities from core funding, in line with statutory corporate parenting opportunities. Examples include:

- Ensuring every staff member has an awareness of the needs and rights of care experienced students, and understands their responsibilities in relation to fulfilling these obligations. Some staff will require a more specialised level of knowledge and understanding in this area, particularly support services, however, there should exist a consistent and broad understanding by staff regardless of role.

- Facilitating a programme of access and retention activities, such as the REACH Project and summer schools.
- Over and above standard programmes to improve access and retention, plan, deliver and evaluate bespoke access and retention activities based around need

To develop additional support which is the most relevant to the needs of students within the local context, robust understanding of both national data (such as the SFC Widening Access report and Scottish Government Educational Outcomes statistics), and local data is required. Local data may be ascertained from sources such as institutional corporate parenting plans and feedback from students; but importantly should be informed by knowledge of student need gleaned through relationship based practice.

2. What access activities require additional investment outwith core funding?

Complex needs can require robust additional support, which may incur additional resource costs. WARF could add value by being used to enhance the existing services and supports which should be provided through core funding.

Care experienced students face multiple and complex barriers which often cannot be supported by 'traditional' support services. Our recent research has shown that this group of students encounter particular difficulties in regards to their mental health and a lack of practical support.[4] These issues will impact on the ability of students to access and sustain higher education opportunities, if the right support is not in place at the right time. Funding for personalised support plans, through WARF, has the potential to meet the needs of these students in a timely way, which recognises the individual circumstances that create barriers to education. Care experienced students, like all students, will at times require additional support in addition to the 'core' student support offer. Institutions should strive to meet their holistic needs, in recognition of the additional barriers that they may face in accessing and sustaining education. These needs may include, but are not limited to:

- Specialist mental health support
- Travel costs or arrangements
- Accommodation support
- Financial advice and support
- Practical assistance

Any additional support provided to care experienced students should seek to **enhance, rather than replace**, supports and services which should be provided under statutory corporate parenting duties.

3. Should WARF continue?

Yes. Whilst good quality, additional support for access and retention activities for care experienced students should be delivered as a core part of institutional

activity (as part of fulfilling corporate parenting duties and responsibilities) it is important to recognise that additional resource to focus on specific circumstances and personalised plans will be important in widening access and increasing retention.

4. Should WARF be changed?
Yes

4a. If yes, please explain how it should be changed and why?
We are concerned that the current method of calculating WARF solely on the basis of SIMD is insufficient. The Commissioner for Fair Access' annual report 2019 recognised that whilst SIMD 'is currently the most suitable measure of disadvantage' (p23), additional measures could further inform decisions about individual applicants, and could be usefully incorporated into targets on a national level.[5] The Commission identified three types of additional measure - care experience, household income and school environment, which in our view should be included in the calculation of WARF.

Work in recent years, led by the SFC, to improve the collection and quality of data gathered about the number of care experienced applicants and students in further and higher education has seen a significant increase in the reported numbers of care experienced students.[6] There is broad agreement that whilst there has been an increase in the number of students with a care background applying and studying at university, the predominant reasons for the large increase in these numbers include:

- A higher number of students declaring their care experience;
- more awareness being raised by institutions and organisations about the available support for care experienced students;
- institutions working in a more collaborative and collective way to offer practical and emotional support to care experienced students; and
- data collection methods becoming more robust at both a local and national level.

The SFC care experienced governance group has agreed that it is likely that this upward trend in the numbers of care experienced students will rise as data collection methods become more sophisticated and widening access activities continue. A recent CELCIS publication 'Beyond the headlines: going to university from care' explored, in some depth, the complexities in how data relating to care experience and higher education is used and understood. We would suggest that reliable data illustrating the true number of students who may face additional barriers to education due to their care experience is only now becoming available. Therefore, previous allocation of funding in this area may not be sufficient to cover the true cost of providing appropriate and consistent support to students.

As data around care experienced students becomes more robust, there must also be a recognition that institutions who would previously have reported low numbers of care experienced students may see an increase in numbers, as more people self-declare their care status due to better systems being in place to collect and record this data. Students should not miss out on additional funding resource due to their chosen institution historically not enrolling a high number of care experienced students.

5. The questions below ask respondents to consider what WARF should focus on. Please only provide a response if this is an area you feel WARF should cover, rather than core funding.

We are concerned that 'ranking' or prioritisation of need based on the inclusion or exclusion of specific characteristics or group 'membership' is reductionist, and may be open to challenge on the basis of discrimination. Whilst a priority of CELCIS is to advocate for and work alongside people with care experience, we recognise the needs and rights of other groups, and would be reluctant to support the use of 'categories' which automatically place the needs of an individual in one category above or before another. Furthermore, these questions do not recognise the intersectionality within and between groups, and the nonlinear nature of some of the issues associated with inclusion in these categories. For example, a student could enrol in university and declare care experience but during their time at university they may experience, or recover from, mental or physical health difficulties or take on caring responsibilities. The fluid nature of this highlights the inherent complexities that students can face, and makes a ranking or a prioritisation system flawed. The level of need, and therefore priority for access of additional support, should be assessed on an individual basis, in partnership with students, based on trusting and consistent relationships.

We are surprised that this consultation does not mention the needs and rights of estranged students, in consideration of the additional support that they may require in regards to access and retention.[7]

8. Should this allocation be fixed or formulaic (and therefore subject to change and fluctuations)? Please explain:

Data should be used to understand and assess need. Robust national and local qualitative data, alongside local practitioner wisdom and insight should be used to develop, plan and evaluate evidenced based approaches to widening access and increasing retention. Data used should be aligned to national strategies, such as the approach being taken by the Commissioner for Fair Access in ensuring the full range of available data is used to assess and plan for need.

We would advocate that a formula is agreed nationally for the disbursement and allocation of WARF. This will allow fluctuation of annual amounts based on local need and national data.

10. How should the SFC monitor the impact of these funds at an institutional and sectoral level?

In regards to meeting the needs of care experienced students, this information should be reflected in corporate parenting plans. Evidence of the enactment of corporate parenting duties and the evaluation of the success, or otherwise, of selected approaches or supports should be evidenced in annual reports. Institutional improvement plans are a further important source of information regarding the impact of additional funding.

11. How should the SFC respond to institutions who are not meeting the conditions of the funding? What are the pros and cons of this approach?

It would be our aspiration that institutions would have a culture, and underpinning values, which promote and encourage the success of students from 'non-traditional' backgrounds. The inherent value led approach to ensuring equity of access for all students would support institutions to meet the conditions of this funding. Where this is not evident we would advocate that the SFC work with senior leaders to promote understanding of this culture, and provide information and access to initiatives such as the corporate parenting training provided by Who Cares? Scotland.

Our experience of supporting organisations to implement and sustain change tells us that in order for any change effort to be successful, organisations need:

- leaders who are able to lead in both a technical and adaptive way;
- good quality data collection and analytical systems;
- staff teams with the correct skills, knowledge, characteristics and qualifications; and
- an enabling and facilitative context to work within.[8]

We would hope that the SFC would be able to work alongside organisations who were not able to meet the conditions of the funding to make improvements in the required areas. More punitive measures, such as a reduction in funding, would adversely impact on students in need. Institutions who do not meet conditions of the funding are likely to be failing the students that the funding is intended to help; a reduction in funding will not rectify this situation and only disadvantage these groups of students further.

About CELCIS

CELCIS is a leading improvement and innovation centre in Scotland. We improve children's lives by supporting people and organisations to drive long-lasting change in the services they need, and the practices used by people responsible for their care.

Thank you for providing us with this opportunity to respond. We hope the feedback is helpful; we would be happy to discuss any aspect in further detail.

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[1] Scottish Government (2019) *Education outcomes for looked after children 2017-18.* Edinburgh: Scottish Government

[2] Scottish Funding Council (2019) *Report on Widening Access 2017-18.* Edinburgh: Scottish Funding Council

[3] O'Neill, L., Harrison, N., Fowler, N. & Connelly, G. (2019) *'Being a student with care experience is very daunting' Findings from a survey of care experienced students in Scottish colleges and universities.* Glasgow: CELCIS

[4] ibid

[5] Commissioner for Fair Access (2019) *Building on Progress Towards Fair Access: Annual Report 2019.* Edinburgh: Scottish Government

[6] Scottish Funding Council (2019) *Report on Widening Access 2017-18.* Edinburgh: Scottish Funding Council

[7] Stand Alone and Centre for Family Research at University of Cambridge (2015) *Hidden Voices: Family Estrangement in Students.* Accessed from https://www.standalone.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/STAND-ALONE-HIDDEN-VOICES-SINGLE-PAGES-1-2.pdf

[8] Fixsen, D., Naoom, S., Blase, K., Friedman, R., Wallace, F. (2005). *Implementation Research: A Synthesis of the Literature.* Tamps, FL: University of South Florida, Louis de la Parte Florida Mental Health Institute, National Implementation Research Network.