

Exploring the potential of targeted career guidance interventions for care experienced individuals to widen access to higher education in Scotland

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this Masters research is to contribute to an enhanced understanding of the lived experiences of care experienced people and the influences that impact their career decision-making. The research will explore the potential of targeted career guidance interventions for care experienced individuals to widen access to higher education in Scotland.

It is well documented that care experienced people have lower attainment both in-school and post-school, fewer attend further and higher education, and a high proportion are likely to experience homelessness at some stage post-care (Scottish Government, 2019; Who Cares? Scotland, 2019). All of these issues, compounded by a lack of family support and social networks, can impact on career decision-making and progression to positive destinations (Jackson and Cameron, 2012). Recognised barriers that face care experienced people in terms of gaining access to further study or employment include leaving school in or before S4, often with fewer qualifications than their peers (Scottish Government, 2019), insecure accommodation (O'Neill et al, 2019), mental health issues (ONS, 2004), criminal record (SPS, 2016), and general stigma (Who Cares? Scotland, 2019; SCRA, 2017).

In order to explore this further, this research will focus on the experiences of care experienced students of varying age groups who have transitioned to higher education, their individual career pathways, decision-making influences, and career guidance interventions received to date.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The establishment of the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 (Scottish Parliament, 2014) marked a watershed in terms of paving the way for legislated provision of support for care experienced children and young people in Scotland. The Act moved to eradicate many of the barriers that have existed for care experienced individuals in terms of gaining entry to the workplace or higher education. It:

- extended 'corporate parent' responsibilities to 24 public bodies, including all councils, NHS, colleges and universities, Police and Skills Development Scotland.
- lengthened eligibility for care experienced people to access aftercare upon leaving care at the age of 16 up to their 26th birthday (Legislation.gov.uk, 1995).
- introduced 'continuing care', enabling care experienced people to remain in their accommodation up to the age of 21 (Scottish Parliament, 2014).

Concern over post-school and post-care destinations of care experienced individuals was raised in 1995 (Who Cares? Scotland, 1995), and again in 2004 when The Buttle Trust's research with care experienced students reported a lack of information and advice at the point of choosing courses and universities (Jackson et al, 2005). Widening participation programmes (Focus West, 2019) have offered support to care experienced school pupils to access university, however recent research suggests 55% of care experienced students consider leaving university (O'Neill et al, 2019), and only 60.9% complete their higher education (SFC, 2019). Other recent research indicates that earlier intervention is required to prepare care experienced students for the challenges linked to higher education (CELCIS, 2019; Connelly, 2018).

METHODOLOGY

In order to fully explore the lived experiences of care experienced individuals in relation to their influences and decision-making relating to attending higher education, the research will be conducted via qualitative methods. Current higher education students, who are all members of a private university care experienced Facebook group, will be invited to participate. The one-to-one interviews will explore each individual participant's personal career pathway from school to the present day, with the intention of providing an understanding of each participant's personal upbringing situation, social network, influencers and career aspiration. In addition, research will provide data for the stages and frequency that participants received career guidance, with their own viewpoint on when they believe initial career guidance intervention may have been beneficial to them, the frequency they would have desired, and the format they would have preferred.

Semi-structured interviews will be conducted using participant-centred research techniques (McCrory and O'Donnell, 2016) in order to establish a collaborative engagement with the participant and ensure that their personal narrative is understood and not misinterpreted. Interviews will be analysed to identify themes, drivers and barriers behind career decision-making, in addition to key transition points where participants identify career guidance intervention would have been useful. In order to ensure that the research is data driven, a two-stage thematic analysis, based on the method of Braun and Clarke (2006), will be utilised. Braun and Clarke's 15-point checklist of criteria will be continually referred to in order to ensure the research is valid, reliable, trustworthy and authentic.

ETHICS

One-to-one interviews are intrinsically exploratory by nature and should always be handled with sensitivity. All care experienced individuals are automatically deemed as having additional support needs, unless otherwise assessed (Scottish Government, 2017). Given that all participants within this research are care experienced, it is essential that the interview and subsequent analysis is carried out with empathy, unconditional positive regard and congruence (Rogers, 1957; McCrory and O'Donnell, 2016).

Participants will be invited to take part via an Invitation to Participate post placed upon a private university Facebook page that is for the exclusive use of care experienced students. Participants will be asked to voluntarily contact the researcher directly via the Facebook page, which will be followed up with an invitation to attend a face-to-face interview at a day and time to suit the participant. The participant will receive the Participant Information Sheet prior to the interview and will be given a reasonable amount of time to decide whether or not to take part. They will be asked to sign a copy of the Consent Form immediately before the interview takes place. Participants will be informed that there is no obligation upon them to answer any question that makes them feel distressed or uncomfortable and will also be made aware that they can withdraw at any point from the research interview without giving a reason. All of the interviews will be recorded digitally and subsequently transcribed.

The researcher is a qualified and Registered Career Guidance Professional and is experienced in conducting one-to-one interviews that explore clients' personal experiences

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