

Engaging students without family support with university support services: A systematic review of the literature

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Abstract

This article presents the findings of a systematic literature review to explore best practice in engaging care-experienced and estranged students with university support services. These students are referred to collectively as 'students without family support' by the Office for Students (the regulator for Higher Education in England), and are known to experience diverse challenges in relation to access to higher education, attainment and progression to further study or graduate employment. A systematic literature search was undertaken using a modified version of the PICO framework. A total of 69 items were found. Following an abstract screening process, 26 papers, articles and reports were included in the final analysis. The review demonstrates that there is a profound deficit of understanding of how to engage students without family support with support interventions across the HE sector, with no published studies identified which explore or evaluate initiatives and strategies to increase engagement, despite widespread acknowledgement that this group of students are more likely to require additional support with finances, orientation, wellbeing and study skills and less likely to access that support than other students. Four main themes were identified in the review of literature and these are explored here with a view to identifying the factors university staff could consider and address when providing support designed for these groups (impact of past experiences, barriers and facilitators to accessing support, stigma and identity and developing a sense of belonging).

Keywords: Care experienced, estranged, family support, university students, widening participation, support services

Introduction

As a response to the concerns raised by University of Lincoln (UoL) Widening Participation Community of Practice (CoP) members, researchers from the Access and Participation Plan (APP) evaluation team proposed to review existing literature

on best practice in engaging care-experienced and estranged students, sometimes referred to as 'students without family support' (Office for Students, 2020b), with university professional support services. CoP members identified that where targeted access and participation (widening participation) interventions in support of these students had been developed, uptake was often lower than expected. The reasons for this were unclear. A failure of services to engage with students without family support could lead to adverse outcomes for those students and a failure to achieve institutional APP targets. The review was thus intended for staff designing and delivering widening participation interventions and staff delivering support services to students without family support as well as all other interested parties.

Context

Care-experienced and estranged students are generally included within the nomenclature of 'students without family support' by the regulator for Higher Education in England (Office for Students, 2020b). Education researchers have persistently identified 'care-experienced' students, that is, students with previous experience of local authority or kinship care, as a disadvantaged group across the primary, secondary and tertiary education phases. Within Higher Education (HE) in the UK, data shows gaps in access to HE (according to GOV.UK 2020, 13 per cent of pupils who were looked after continuously for 12 months or more at 31st March 2015 progressed to HE by age 19 compared to 43 per cent of all other pupils in 2018/19), continuation and course completion (in 2017/18, OfS 2020a reported that the continuation rate of care experienced students was 5.6 percent lower than the continuation rate of students who had not been in care) and attainment and progression to postgraduate education or graduate level employment (of those graduating in 2018/19, OfS 2021 reported that only 68.2 per cent achieved a 1st or 2:1, 12.1 per cent lower than for students who were not in care).

Estranged students are aged between 18 and 24, studying at university without the support and approval of a family network (Stand Alone, 2018). Research suggests that most estranged students remove themselves from a family situation without professional intervention (Bland, 2016). Estranged students are considered by OfS as a group 'that experience disadvantage' (OfS, 2019) and HE providers are encouraged to think about the types of support they provide in relation to estranged students' access, success, and participation in HE in their APPs. They are considered alongside care experienced students in this study, since while they often leave their families without intervention, a minority of them may have experienced periods in care before they turned 16 (UCAS, 2021). However, they "*would not meet the criteria to receive the same support as a care leaver, although their support*

needs are similar" in most parts of the UK (ibid., np) and as such, without this safety net, are potentially more vulnerable than those who are able to qualify as a statutory care leaver (Stand Alone, 2016).

There is no official sector data for estranged students at present (UCAS, 2021). UCAS is rolling out its 'emerging cohorts' project which includes estranged students, and there will be a question in future UCAS applications to help HEIs identify estranged students. Much of what is known about the outcomes and experiences of estranged students is from recently undertaken qualitative studies which has highlighted that in the absence of familial support, the stresses, and strains of HE are exacerbated for estranged students as they process and recover from "*hurtful and damaging family relationships*" (Spacey and Sanderson, 2021: 37). A recent experimental study by the OfS based on estranged students' data suggested that the continuation rate of entrants who were estranged from their parents was 8.2 per cent lower than students who were not estranged in 2017-18 and the attainment rate of estranged students in 2018-19 was 13.0 per cent lower than students who were not estranged (OfS, 2020). At the UoL, for example, data about estranged students has only recently begun to be collected during the enrolment process and it will therefore take some time before their outcomes can be assessed. This may be complicated by the reality that many estranged students become estranged after they have enrolled at university (Spacey and Sanderson, 2021).

Methodology

A search protocol was established using a modified version of the PICO framework in which search terms were identified for 'population' (P), 'intervention' (I), 'comparison' (C) and 'outcome' (O) developed for use in evidence-based reviews (Richardson et al., 1995). Use of such a framework as PICO represents a rigorous, transparent approach to undertaking a systematic literature search. In this case, the population was defined as 'care-experienced' and 'estranged' students (using multiple terms employed in UK contexts and internationally). The intervention was defined as terms such as 'engagement' and 'support'. The comparison compared article against article. Outcomes were aligned with APP objectives such as 'access', 'participation' and 'success'.

Over 15 major indexing websites and academic databases were searched including ERIC, EThOS, Google Scholar, JSTOR, SCOPUS, and Web of Knowledge. The websites of third sector organisations which commission independent research on supporting care-experienced young people were also searched, for example, the National Network for the Education of Care Leavers (NNECL). To increase coverage

of what is widely acknowledged to be an under-researched area, peer reviewed papers, grey literature and doctoral theses were included.

No works were identified which focussed specifically on, or which directly answered, the research question. A total of 69 works were found relating to care-experienced and estranged students' experiences, access to, and participation in HE. An abstract screening process was then undertaken, identifying 26 papers, articles and reports to include in the final analysis.

With reference to the research question, '***What is best practice for engaging care-experienced and estranged students with university support services?***', no suggestions of what might constitute 'best practice' or evaluation of approaches to targeting were found in any of the works identified. As a pragmatic response to the lack of literature on this subject, the researchers analysed the papers and reports inductively and thematically using NVivo (v.12) with a focus on understanding the barriers to engagement with support services experienced by these students. First cycle codes produced by each researcher were subsequently integrated, merging similar codes where appropriate through pattern coding (Saldaña, 2016).

Findings

Literature comprised mainly qualitative and mixed methods studies and explored the experiences of care-experienced and estranged student respondents in relation to access to HE or aspects of the student experience. Almost all of the works considered focused on care-experienced students in isolation, although a more recent focus on estranged students in academic research stimulated by the advocacy work of the charity Stand Alone (established in 2013) was evident in the later literature. These themes can be categorised as those relating to the students' past experiences and background and challenges particular to HE institutions. The themes identified relate to the difficulties experienced by care-experienced and estranged students in accessing support services. These were:

- Impact of past experiences
- Barriers and facilitators to accessing support
- Stigma and identity
- Developing a sense of belonging

It should be noted that due to the intersectional nature of these experiences, many of these barriers (for example, in relation to mental health or low income) could apply to other student groups too. The themes are presented and explored below.

Impact of past experiences

Several qualitative, phenomenological papers described the life experiences of care-experienced respondents and the ways in which these experiences impacted upon their early adult life. Multiple works described the prevalence of mental health issues and trauma arising from adverse childhood experiences such as abuse and neglect (e.g. Dixon, 2007; Harvey et al., 2017; Harrison, 2017). Struggling with mental health issues was associated with poorer employment outcomes in Dixon's study (2007), with a lower likelihood of disclosure and support seeking (Harvey et al., 2017), and with low self-confidence (Harrison, 2017). Previous experiences of instability and a lack of a family home as a 'safety net' led to a persistent fear of homelessness in one study (Stevenson et al., 2020), while insecurity in housing was associated with poorer career outcomes in another (Dixon, 2007). Housing insecurity was also identified as a stressor by both Harrison (2017) and Pinkney and Walker (2020).

Significant mental health issues are likely to emerge in early adulthood, potentially during university study, for care-experienced students (Williams et al., 2020). These considerable struggles were identified as a source of continuing stress, and a requirement to repeatedly describe them each time a different service was accessed could result in further trauma, potentially leading to an avoidance of support seeking (ibid.). Studies emphasised the need to accommodate and offer practical support to address this trauma, for example, through flexible assessment practices (Harvey et al., 2017) and trauma-appropriate mental health provision (Harvey et al., 2017; Stevenson et al., 2020). Ensuring access to support does not require repeated disclosure is likely to be helpful, as is reducing ongoing stress from housing insecurity throughout students' studies and immediately following degree completion (Atkinson and Hyde, 2019).

Numerous studies described the negative experiences some care-experienced adults may have had with authority figures such as social workers. Negative stereotypes of care-experienced students and a lack of understanding of their needs may undermine their trust in support staff (Atkinson and Hyde, 2019). Their past experiences may lead them to feel anxious or suspicious of bureaucratic processes and institutions and concerned about their privacy (Harvey et al., 2017).

Many care-experienced students have difficulty obtaining clear information about, and support with, application to HE (Marchment and Gazeley, 2018; Hauari et al., 2019) and the support available on entry. Some may find the variability between

institutions confusing (Hauari et al., 2019; Stevenson et al., 2020) while the support on arrival may appear piecemeal and bureaucratic from their perspective (Stevenson et al., 2020). Ongoing access to financial support was highlighted given the lack of a financial safety net for these students. Key issues included chronic anxiety about having enough money (Pinkney and Walker, 2020; Harrison, 2017), struggling to budget (Harrison, 2017; O'Neill et al., 2019) and the lack of financial support to go on to, and for, postgraduate study (Stevenson et al., 2020).

Suggestions to address these issues included working with local authorities and agencies to make sure that individuals working with young people are knowledgeable about the 'local offer' (Stevenson et al., 2020) and ensuring a high degree of transparency and accessible information about support entitlement is available pre- and post- arrival (Dixon, 2016; Stevenson et al., 2020). Several studies identified a preference amongst care-experienced student respondents for a named contact who could build a trusting and authentic relationship, providing stability and personalised support (Fuller, 2018; Pinkney and Walker, 2020; O'Neill et al., 2019; Atkinson and Hyde, 2019; Hiles et al., 2014). Simplifying as far as possible the application process for financial support may be useful (Harvey et al., 2017; O'Neill et al., 2019) and providing ongoing one-to-one support with the application process, if needed (Hyde-Dryden, 2012). Developing bursaries for care-experienced and estranged students in support of postgraduate study is also recommended (Stevenson et al., 2020).

Barriers and facilitators to accessing support

Many barriers were identified in the research papers and reports reviewed here which prevented or hindered students without family support from accessing institutional assistance. These included having to repeatedly disclose their situation to access support; support services which were fragmented and not joined up; the students themselves not recognising they had a legitimate need to access and make use of support, and excessive self-reliance due to past experiences. Conversely, some care-experienced students had experienced stable care environments as well as positive educational experiences and were also in receipt of on-going support and so did not necessarily need additional help to flourish in a HE context, highlighting that it is important not to assume that care-experienced students are always in need of additional help.

Multiple studies highlighted that their research with care-experienced students had uncovered individuals with high degrees of self-reliance (Harvey et al., 2017) because of their life experiences (Dixon, 2016; Harrison, 2017; Hyde-Dryden, 2012; Harvey et al., 2017; Atkinson and Hyde, 2019; Williams et al., 2020). This sometimes

meant that these respondents were reluctant to reach out for support since they felt they only had themselves to rely on even when they had been supported by others in the past (Harrison, 2017) and their experiences reinforced this as Dixon noted:

“There was also the acknowledgement that without self-motivation, support from professionals might prove fruitless, as one young person noted, ‘I chose to do this course, I did it myself, I went to college on my own and enrolled’.” (2016: 22)

While not necessarily related to accessing support, Harvey et al. (2017) suggest that this self-reliance and determination could be *“harnessed more broadly by institutions”* (5), for example, in relation to teaching and learning, care-experienced students could *“provide valuable and unique contributions to classroom discussions”* if managed sensitively by academic staff (36) and potentially in relation to students developing and delivering access and outreach interventions designed to raise the expectations of young people who are care-experienced.

A high level of self-reliance was related to the importance of providing multiple, later, ongoing chances for care-experienced students to access support (Atkinson and Hyde, 2019; Fuller, 2018). Atkinson and Hyde’s review of the literature in this field noted that some care-experienced students were open to accessing support as they grew older or as they identified the limits of self-reliance while in Fuller’s auto-ethnographic study of her role supporting care-experienced students in their first year at university she perceived that over time, students become more at ease about asking for help:

“I can see the progress of students from the start of the year when many appear uncomfortable about asking for help, instead telling me “Everything’s fine” when I ask, even if it’s clearly not, to later in the year when they will reach out to me as soon as they’re unsure about something.” (2018: 59)

As O’Neill et al. (2019) found, care-experienced students needed to be able to turn down support if it was not required in the knowledge that it would still be on offer later.

Continuing support across the student lifecycle from pre-entry to post-graduation, that was also proactive, was identified in a large number of studies (Dixon, 2016; Stevenson et al., 2020; Fuller, 2018; Harrison, 2017; Hiles et al., 2014; Hauari et al., 2017; Atkinson and Hyde, 2019; O’Neill, 2019; Williams et al., 2020), giving care-experienced students plenty of opportunities to take up the offers of support when they needed to (Atkinson and Hyde, 2019). For example, O’Neill found that care-

experienced students were more likely to accept the university offers from those institutions who took an interest in them at pre-entry stage:

“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.” (2019: 32)

Some of the research included in this review explicitly considered why care-experienced students might not make use of the support on offer (see Hyde-Dryden, 2012; Kinarsky, 2017; Harvey et al., 2017; Hauari et al., 2017). Hyde-Dryden had theorised, using a Bourdieusian framework, that care-experienced students' habitus *“makes it unlikely that they expect support to be available, or feel entitled to ask for it”* (2012: 93) and are less likely to ask for it in comparison to students from more privileged backgrounds (see also Harvey et al., 2017). However, her research did discover that care-experienced students who were aware of the support available liked it to be well-advertised at the same time as being able to access it discretely.

Stigma and identity

Many care-experienced students within the studies reported were aware of negative stereotypes about and perceptions of this identity. One student in Pinkney and Walker's study (2020), for example, spoke of the association between care experience and crime, teenage pregnancy, or drug use. Participants in Bakketeig et al. (2020)'s research similarly described having to actively distance themselves from such negative perceptions. Hyde-Dryden (2013) also describes the perceptions of stigmatisation for care-experienced people, emphasising that entering university may be the first time in a young person's life they have an option to keep this aspect of their past lives private. Some studies reported that this stigma may be compounded by a feeling of 'hypervisibility' at times, particularly when moving into or out of student accommodation which is typically assisted by family members. One student responding to Harrison's (2017) survey wrote that:

“...I felt so alone and it became really obvious that I didn't have any family or anyone who cared about me” (52).

According to O'Neill et al. (2019) this stigma may lead to reluctance to disclose care-experienced status, with some experiencing disclosure as difficult, anxiety-provoking and humiliating. This can result in help-seeking which requires such disclosure provoking feelings of shame and distress (Atkinson and Hyde, 2019). Harvey et al.

(2017) also emphasised how difficult it is for some students to share this deeply personal information about their family circumstances, and the ways this can make students feel 'other' compared to 'normal' students. Harrison (2017) has also drawn attention to the issue of low disclosure and the resulting lack of accurate data on the number of care-experienced students at institutional and sector level in HE.

There may be a strong desire to leave the 'care experienced' aspect of identity behind on entering university (Harvey et al., 2017). Some respondents in Harrison's research expressed a wish to avoid deficit conceptions associated with negative stereotypes, while Fuller (2018) reported care experienced students engaged in her project were resistant to being defined by this status. Participants in Pinkney and Walker's (2020) study described a determination to move beyond their past and contradict the stereotypes. For example, one participant said: "*I have just this burning thing that I will not let my past get in the way*" (7). These participants were reported to show considerable strength, resilience and personal agency which enabled them to overcome the barriers to success they had experienced. However, this self-reliance may sometimes prevent help-seeking. Atkinson and Hyde (2019) report that some care experienced students reject support as an act of resistance to authority, particularly where those authority figures were perceived to have let them down or treated them with a lack of respect, or simply to disassociate themselves from the care system and the associated negative stereotypes.

None of the works reviewed here could offer definitive answers to the inherent tension between the increased likelihood of care-experienced and estranged students benefitting from additional support due to the impact of their experiences and the difficulties experienced in accessing that support given the stigma, commitment to self-reliance and autonomy, desire for privacy and a fresh start documented within these studies. Tentative suggestions that increasing knowledge of the barriers and challenges faced by these students amongst staff and students could be helpful were made by Harvey et al. (2017). Targeted support is indicated, but Harvey et al. acknowledge that sensitivity is required, since any perception of pity or condescension will reduce the likelihood of interventions being utilised. Hiles et al. (2014) reflected on the "*delicate balance*" (5) needed between providing appropriate and personalised support without undermining the recipients' sense of agency and self-efficacy. The use of language is likely to be significant - some students may not identify with the label of 'care leaver' (Stevenson et al., 2020) or 'estranged' while explicit focus on outcome indicators, however well intentioned, may increase stigmatisation and the 'othering' of students without family support (Bakketeig et al., 2020; Nunn et al., 2019). These observations have implications in the context of the outcomes-driven access and participation targets.

Developing a sense of belonging

Belonging is achieved “*when someone feels a sense of connection to people and places*” (Hauari et al., 2019: 50), and it is thought to be a factor in student retention and success (O’Keeffe, 2013) and in accessing student support (Won et al., 2021). This may be a challenge for care-experienced students, and several of the works reviewed suggested that it is harder for them to develop a sense of belonging. These students are likely to lack ‘social capital’, the networks of relationships and informal resources which can be drawn upon to guide decision-making pre-entry and to navigate the academy during their studies (Hyde-Dryden, 2013; Bakketeig et al., 2020) and are more likely to experience loneliness, isolation and to struggle to feel a part of the university community (Harrison, 2017; Atkinson and Hyde, 2019; Pinkney and Walker, 2020). Marchment and Gazeley (2018) identified inconsistencies in the support available from social workers, schools, and colleges for applications to HE and for financial support.

Provision of practical help from well informed peers, teachers, HE, or local authority staff is likely to be beneficial, particularly in relation to understanding and obtaining financial support (O’Neill, 2019), and may be a significant factor in decision making about if, when and where to go to university (Williams et al., 2020). Once at university, services being visible and normalising access to support have been suggested as useful. Providing accessible information in multiple formats, for example, using social media and text alerts was suggested by Dixon (2016), while Kinarsky (2017) described increasing the marketing of relevant services including financial support for basic needs and academic development services, and of ensuring programme staff (e.g., tutors) are aware of how to signpost since they are often the intermediaries between the student and the institutional support. Stevenson et al. (2020) also emphasised the importance of signposting, particularly from named and trusted contacts at the university. This idea was developed by Fuller (2018) in the implementation of a named contact for care-experienced students as a ‘navigator’ role providing professional but informal guidance to respondents at an Australian university throughout their studies, and in encouraging participation in university clubs and societies which could help foster a sense of belonging.

Other suggestions from the research reviewed include the support being clearly communicated. O’Neill et al. (2019) recommended that the support available to care-experienced students and how to access it (this could include pledges made in APPs) be clearly communicated and transparent, for example, through dedicated web pages. Harvey et al. (2017) suggests this process of clear and transparent

communication should begin with outreach activity in schools and colleges, with a particular emphasis on financial support and accommodation whilst Hauari et al. (2019) also draw attention to the importance of pre-arrival advice in retaining students over the longer term. Helping these students to build peer support networks, for example, through induction programmes which foster new friendships are of particular significance as some may have lost their previous social networks (Pinkney and Walker, 2020). Stevenson et al. (2020) recommend developing peer and alumni networks for students without family support to provide ongoing support during university studies and beyond. One student in their study commented:

“I feel like knowing that someone else has gone through the system, been there, done that, has had the social worker visits, knowing that there are other people that you can talk to, even just peers rather than a professional, I think that’s what’s important. I don’t want it to be called a ‘support group’ because you might not need support, you might just need a friend...” (16)

Conclusion

This brief review aimed to generate practical, evidence-based recommendations for increasing engagement of students with previous experience of care and/or estrangement with university support services. The review demonstrates that there is a profound deficit of understanding of this across the sector, with no published studies identified which explore or evaluate initiatives and strategies to increase engagement despite widespread acknowledgement that this student group are more likely to require additional support with finances, orientation, wellbeing, and study skills and less likely to access that support than other students.

The studies reviewed did highlight some of the challenges experienced by students without family support. These challenges typically arose because of past experiences of abuse, neglect, and a disrupted education, or from the stigma associated with care experience, including negative stereotypes about young people who have experienced local authority care. This evidence suggests a tension for these students who often enter university seeking a fresh start and new identity but nonetheless will experience emotional and practical challenges in an HE environment which is aligned to the needs of students who are academically well-equipped and have the practical and financial support of a family to navigate this part of their educational journey.

Based on the findings of this literature review several recommendations were put forward for consideration. These included:

- *Reviewing the accessibility of information about student support services for care experienced and estranged students*

To ensure that students without family support, particularly those who have not disclosed their previous care experience or estrangement and are therefore not in receipt of targeted communications, are aware of the services and support available, information needs to be readily available through the corporate website and actively signposted on generic student facing webpages and communications if it is not already in place. This should include information about relevant institutional commitments to students without family support such as the NNECL Quality Mark and the Stand Alone Pledge. The use of different channels including text messages could be considered to maintain students' awareness of academic, financial and wellbeing support.

- *Reduce stigma around care experience, family estrangement and support-seeking*

Students may wish to disown their identity as care leavers or estranged students, but a feeling of difference can be compounded at times (for example, Open Days aimed at students and their parents, and when moving into or out of student accommodation) when other students are visibly supported by their families. Taking steps to reduce the stigma of family separation, normalising the use of support services, for example, through sharing student stories and case studies, and through sensitive marketing and communications campaigns will help to begin this process. Student facing staff, including personal tutors, are key partners since they are often the first point of contact when a student experiences a problem.

- *Review partnership working with 'corporate parents' including local third sector organisations and local authority social care services*

Many students benefit from informal knowledge about how to apply to HE gleaned from family members or peers, but care-experienced students may not have access to this so-called 'hot knowledge'. Maintaining strong links with corporate parents to ensure they are sufficiently well-informed to offer practical signposting to sources of guidance and information is likely to be beneficial. Since many care-experienced and estranged students may enter HE as mature students, guidance materials should recognise this and emphasise that the university welcomes and support students of all ages.

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