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Resilience, higher education and widening participation: generating change for care experienced students

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Abstract

Over 80,000 children in England were being looked after in Local Authority care in 2020 and a further 40,000 people were defined as ‘care leavers’. Although a significant body of research highlights the prevalence of educational low achievement in the care experienced population, official government figures show that around 13% of care experienced pupils progress to higher education by the age of 19. In a climate of ‘widening participation’ in which universities encourage inclusion and student diversity, this research invited students with a care background to discuss their experiences of settling into university life. Data was collected using in-depth interviews with 42 students from four universities and an online survey completed by 192 students in 29 universities in England and Wales. Findings revealed that although care experienced students overcome significant challenges to progress to higher education, over half considered dropping out. Others reported feeling isolated and inadequately supported, both financially and pastorally, by their institution. This paper uses a lens of resilience to consider the environmental factors that impact upon student transitions, and concludes that universities must act to balance inequalities in order to appropriately welcome and appreciate care leavers for the skills and experience they bring.

Keywords Care leavers · Higher education · Transition · Support · Resilience

Introduction

Over 80,000 children in England were looked after by the state on 31 March 2020 and a further 40,000 people were defined as ‘care leavers’ (Department for Education, 2020). Care experience has become heavily associated with disadvantage and, as such, the stigma of being a ‘looked after’ child can resonate long after state care ends (Cameron et al., 2018; Gill & Daw, 2017; Murray et al., 2020). Indeed, English government figures show that only 13% of pupils who were looked after continuously for 12 months

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or more at 31 March 2015 progressed to Higher Education by the age of 19 (2018/19) compared to 43% of all other pupils (DfE, 2020). Despite often being presented as being meritocratic, educational achievement is more frequently enjoyed by those with financial privilege (Mijs, 2016). In 2019, only 8% of children in care attended schools rated as 'outstanding' compared to 1 in 5 who attended schools which were rated as 'requires improvement' or 'inadequate' (Children's Commissioner, 2019).

Two-thirds of children in care have a background of abuse or neglect and it is therefore important to recognise that there are factors aside from being 'in care' that may affect educational attainment, such as experiences of adversity, trauma, and stress (Berridge, 2017; Driscoll, 2013). Therefore, although a significant body of research highlights the prevalence of educational low achievement in the care experienced population globally (Cameron et al., 2012; O'Higgins et al., 2015), others note that some young people in care achieve good educational outcomes (Gilligan, 2007), especially when compared to children from similar backgrounds who are not taken into care (Sebba et al., 2015; Sinclair et al., 2019).

Resilience theory has been applied to consider the outcomes of populations who appear to deliver high levels of achievement, despite difficulties stacked against them (Mahdiani & Ungar, 2021) and is frequently used within 'care' discourse as a means of explaining the ability of some to prosper where their peers did not (Hart et al., 2016; van Breda, 2018). In the case of care experienced learners, scholars have highlighted particular factors that build or enable resilient responses (Cotton et al., 2014; Driscoll, 2013; Harvey & Andrewartha, 2017; Stein, 2012). Berridge (2017) applies a resilience typology to data collected from young people taking their GCSE examinations while in care. He identifies four groups: the first, 'stressed and unresolved', who he describes as experiencing unstable care careers and difficult relationships with birth families. Berridge describes the second group as 'committed/trusted support' and reports that these participants experienced stable relationships that had enabled them to do well educationally. Participants from the third group 'private/self-reliant' were described as appearing to 'sail through their schooling apparently unaffected' (Berridge, 2017, p.91). He terms the final group as 'disengaged' and notes that these participants attended school only for its social benefits. Berridge recognises that his categories were not fixed and that, for instance, 'disengaged' young people could fit into the 'committed/trusted support' group if they found stability in future placements. Others concur that people's resilience can change over time (Bottrell, 2009; Gilligan, 2007; Hart et al., 2016) and that resilient responses can be shaped by circumstances and additional supports that may buffer disadvantage, such as achieving well at school and having a teacher who praises educational achievement.

Yet, while researchers and policymakers seek to identify factors to promote resilience, others caution against the use of resilience theory, suggesting that it places the onus onto individuals to achieve despite their obvious disadvantages (Bottrell, 2013; Garrett, 2015). In addition, scholars note that resilience theory can be used to defend structural or cultural inequalities (Mahdiani & Ungar, 2021) by instead placing responsibility upon individuals to overcome circumstances outside of their control (Liebenberg et al., 2015). Indeed James (2015) and Bracke (2016) note that resilience theory fits political ideologies which celebrate the overcoming of hardship as a testimony to self-improvement and thereby pathologises those not able to 'bounce back' from major adversity (Harrison, 2013).

Background

The Office for Students (OfS) was created in 2018 to replace the Office for Fair Access, and acts as a regulatory body for Higher Education Institutions in England. In order to charge maximum student fees, English universities must pledge appropriate support for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Care leavers are mentioned specifically by the OfS as a marginalised group and, as such, should benefit from widening participation support. Building on the Buttle Quality Mark, which first highlighted institutional support pledged by universities for students with a care background (Harrison, 2017), the needs of care leavers were presented as the forefront of policy change by the creation of the Care Leaver Covenant in 2018. The Covenant was commissioned by the Department for Education to centre the needs of care leavers as a priority group. Following the release of the policy brief, *Pathways to University from Care* (Ellis & Johnston, 2019), the National Network for the Education of Care Leavers (NNECL) launched a Quality Mark, making use of Pathways recommendations for Higher Education institutions (Ambrose et al., 2021). Spotlighting the experiences of students with a care background has resulted in an increased focus on care leavers in policy. As a result, most UK universities do now offer some form of support for these students (Harrison, 2019), the details of which are helpfully collated by the Propel website, which is hosted by the Care Leaver Charity ‘Become’.

As well as receiving increased attention in the UK (Cotton et al., 2014; Ellis & Johnston, 2019; Harrison, 2017, 2019; Stevenson et al., 2020), the views of care experienced students are becoming an international focus of study, highlighted by scholars in Ireland (Brady & Gilligan, 2019), Australia (Harvey and Andrewartha, 2017; Mendes et al., 2014), Israel (Zeira et al., 2019), and the USA (Okpych & Courtney, 2019), building a consensus that students with a care background face additional challenges in Higher Education compared with their peers. This body of international research suggests that the issues raised in seminal work by Martin and Jackson (2002) continue to blight the experiences of learners with a care background. While Martin and Jackson revealed that care leavers faced ‘severe problems’ in Higher Education, such as struggling with finance, appropriate accommodation, and loneliness, later work conducted with Australian students found that care leavers may also experience a disconnect with the wider student body, and see their student peers as having comparatively limited life experience (Harvey and Andrewartha, 2017). Harrison (2017) confirms that care leavers in England are more likely to follow a nonlinear pathway to university and are more likely to withdraw than their non-care experienced peers.

Despite these hurdles, research confirms that the academic performance of students with a care background is relatively strong (Harvey and Andrewartha, 2017) and those who complete their degree are just as likely to receive a first or a 2:1 as their non-care experienced peers (Harrison, 2017). Indeed, while the majority of care leavers are positive about their experiences of university, most are able to share examples of being disadvantaged because of their care background (Ellis & Johnston, 2019; Harrison, 2017). This paper considers the everyday challenges facing care experienced students as they settle into university life and offers a critical perspective on frequently employed iterations of resilience theory, which prioritise individual agency and undermine the focus placed upon equity, diversity, and ‘widening participation’ in Higher Education.

Methods

This paper uses the term ‘care experienced’ to refer to those who have spent any length of time in care as a child. This inclusive term acknowledges the challenges experienced by those who fall outside of statutory thresholds of being a ‘care leaver’, defined in England by the Children (Leaving Care) Act (2000) as those having spent 13 weeks or more in care, covering the period of their 16th birthday.

Data were generated using a mixed methods approach with 234 care experienced students in universities across England and Wales, in two phases. The project was supported by a steering group of three care experienced students, who were employed by the university as researchers and fed into all stages of method design, data collection, analysis, and reporting. The study received ethical clearance from the University of Sheffield at two points, to coincide with the two phases of data collection.

In phase one, 42 students from four universities took part in qualitative interviews, charting their experiences through care and subsequent transitions to university life. Students were invited to participate via their university’s widening participation team, who contacted all students who had indicated to the university that they were care experienced. Participants were invited to contact the researcher directly to gain additional information. Those who indicated an interest in taking part were sent an information sheet, a consent form and an invitation to be interviewed. Consent forms were completed at the beginning of each interview and participants were reminded that they could drop out at any time, without sharing their reasons.

Interview data was anonymised before being uploaded onto NVivo. Findings were initially coded deductively according to the themes explored in qualitative interviews, for instance, ‘going into care’, ‘placement changes’, ‘educational support’, and ‘university life’. Each code contained a series of sub-themes; for example, the code ‘university life’ contained sub-themes such as ‘settling in’, ‘university finance’, ‘making friends’, and ‘university support’. The analysis framework was modified iteratively to accommodate new codes as they emerged from the data. As such, the code of ‘university life’ acquired new sub-themes such as ‘shared living’, ‘being different’, ‘stigma’, and ‘mental health’.

In phase two, data were collected from a larger sample of care experienced students using an online survey generated through SurveyMonkey. Survey questions were formulated using thematic codes and sub-themes emerging from phase one. The survey contained open and closed questions and was shared by 29 universities across England and Wales. Surveys were circulated to all students known to their own university as being ‘care experienced’. One hundred and ninety two students responded and confirmed their consent by ticking a box at the beginning of the survey. Data from open-ended questions were analysed alongside interview data, using the themes identified above. Closed-ended questions were analysed using the analytical tool available within SurveyMonkey. Over two-thirds of participants were female (71%). Over 80% were undergraduate students, 13% were undertaking a foundation year, and 4% were studying at a postgraduate level. At the time the survey was conducted, 63% of our sample were aged between 18 and 21, 30% were aged 22–25, and 7% were aged over 26.

Findings presented here have been compiled from data analysed under the theme of ‘university life’. Quantitative survey data has been used to compile statistics, which are shared throughout the following sections. All names have been anonymised to protect the identity of participants. This paper concentrates on the everyday experiences of students with a care background settling into university life—more information about the

background of participants can be found in our policy report ‘The Journey Through Care’ (Ellis & Johnston, 2020).

Moving to university without support

While educational success is often celebrated as meritocratic, the experiences of care leavers show that as Mijs (2016) argues, education is embedded with inequality and unmatched opportunities which favour those who are already advantaged. Respondents overwhelmingly disclosed tumultuous journeys through care, with many struggling against a backdrop of disrupted education, stigmatisation, and placement upheavals. As such, participants reported being ‘proud to have made it’ and expressed a sense of optimism about the new possibilities that Higher Education provides. For many, becoming a student represented a new start, and an opportunity to be independent, away from the structures, protocols, and meetings that had governed their lives as a ‘looked after’ child. Yet excitement could be diluted by the process of arriving and moving into student accommodation without support:

I was more excited than anything ... to get out, do my own thing... have a clean slate. You can be a whole new person. I don't have to rely on anybody, it's all me [but] I remember on the first day I just sort of went into my room and it was completely empty and I just cried! (Katya).

Research has noted a lack of support for ‘looked after’ young people after the age of eighteen (Field, et al., 2021; Stein, 2012; Woodgate et al., 2017) and our study confirmed this to be the case for those attending university (Ellis & Johnston, 2020). Forty-one percent of survey respondents were no longer in touch with their carers by the time they prepared to move to university and over a quarter described their biggest champion as either ‘myself’ or ‘no one’. Over a quarter arrived at university alone, and moved into accommodation without assistance, which was made more painful by the visible presence of other students’ families:

I got a bus, all the way because my suitcase was too big to carry or to put on the train, so that took twelve hours ... I had a cry, because everyone was with their parents and it was really overwhelming (Dawn).

Students cited a number of reasons for arriving alone. While some preferred to make their own way to university to cement their newfound independence, others were without alternative options. Kamran describes travelling to university on public transport, carrying his worldly possessions with him. When commended by the researcher for being ‘brave’, he countered that he did not believe his actions to be brave, or resilient, instead he described his journey as one of necessity:

I carried my stuff [to university], you know, I put my blanket on top of my back and I brought it here. A normal person does not do that, let's be honest, a person with a family let's say ... If you have to, you will do it' (Kamran)

Providing support for young people leaving care is a fundamental duty of local authorities, yet provision is often lacking and research has shown that care leavers often do not receive help to develop or maintain supportive relationships post care (Munro et al., 2011). For those who were reluctant or unable to travel alone, attempts were made to reconnect

with previous carers or social care professionals, with limited success. Marcus petitioned his Local Authority to provide assistance, and was eventually supported by a social worker, yet the subsequent mismatch of expectations left him feeling embarrassed by his circumstances, and at a significant disadvantage to his university peers:

He was like ‘be ready for half ten on the dot, we’re going, if you’re not ready for half ten - that’s it’. He didn’t care ... he dropped me off, he took my stuff out of his boot ... and he went ... it was proper embarrassing because everyone else’s mums and dads were coming in ... it wasn’t a good start (Marcus)

When offered, ‘moving in’ support organised by individual universities was appreciated and helped new students to feel welcomed and immediately part of the university community:

They told me what was going on and helped me carry my bags up into my room and everything, which was really nice of them—I was like ‘this is good’! It was actually the first time I’d ever been to [new city] so, yeah, that was nice! (Michael).

Struggling to fit into university life

Children in care and care leavers have reported that at times they keep their background private in an attempt to overcome the potential stigma associated with being in care (Dansey et al., 2019; Rogers, 2017). This was confirmed by participants who celebrated going to university for creating opportunities to finally ‘fit in’. Although respondents arrived with high expectations of communal student living, they frequently reported that early conversations with other new students tended to focus on the homes and families that had been left behind. Such conversations were described as ‘uncomfortable’ and sometimes triggered panic about which information to disclose and to whom:

Everyone’s going on about their family and I just didn’t know what to say! I kept silent ... I don’t necessarily want to tell everyone all my secrets, especially when you first meet someone, then they question ‘oh why were you in care?’, ‘why this?’, ‘why that?’ (Katya).

Over half of participants chose to keep their care background private. Others chose to share their care leaver status, but made decisions to censor the detail of their family history by withholding the reasons for their admission or the difficult experiences they endured as a child in care. Julia describes managing to negotiate potentially difficult conversations by censoring and reshaping information about her past:

I always say that my parents are dead. And that’s not the case, but it’s just a lot easier than going into the details (Julia).

Despite initial challenges, respondents described that over time they managed to form close friendships and, like those in research by Rogers (2017), subsequently chose to share details of their care background as a way to strengthen friendships. Those who preferred to keep their personal history private described feeling relieved when, after settling in, conversations tended to focus around everyday student living instead of family life. The majority of participants reported that they had forged strong and supportive relationships with their university peers, both through their course and through shared student accommodation:

[friendships] are even stronger, because you're all going through the same thing. You know, when there's deadlines, and all the rest of it. And you have more in common ... You find people that have more similar interests to you (Julia).

Although 70% of survey respondents reported that they formed friendships without difficulty, over 40% still described feeling 'different' from their fellow students. Differences were exacerbated by the fact that some of our participants had taken nonlinear routes to Higher Education, meaning they arrived much later and with different life experiences to their peers. As a result, and also noted by Harvey and Andrewartha (2017), participants often reported that their own complex life experiences meant that their peers seemed comparatively immature. This could create challenging relationship dynamics which overshadowed the elation of becoming a student:

I'm 24 and they're 18, so they're kind of giggly kids still; and at night, when they're drunk, they just giggle. And then there's me, thinking 'stop'... it's hard to socialise at Uni (Nick).

For the majority of 'traditional' undergraduates, university represents the first taste of independence. Many of our participants described being self-sufficient long before becoming a student. Some reported that their knowledge of independent living often meant that they took on a parenting role for their student peers:

They've been quite sheltered. Like just knowing whether to mix washes, like you have to separate clothes or like how long to cook chicken or something. And to see whether it's actually ready or not. They keep asking me to see if it was ready (Kim).

Twenty-seven percent reported that they found levels of drug and alcohol use at university 'excessive' or 'too much' for them. As a result, these students sometimes felt isolated in shared accommodation, especially during the first year of study, when accommodation is often allocated centrally and not according to personal preferences. Sharing accommodation with those involved in heavy drinking or drug taking was described as being re-traumatising for those with past experiences of parental or personal substance misuse:

I was living a nightmare. They'd be waking up at 7 pm and partying until 7am ... I'd come back to look at the kitchen and there'd be road signs, traffic cones, rubbish on the street, sick everywhere, pizza boxes – I was just like this is not what I want; I'm surrounded by everything that made my life crap (Lydia).

The thought of moving to university could be overwhelming, and for students without family-member contact, staying close to trusted networks was felt to be preferential to living with other students. Similar findings were noted by Bland's (2018) work around student success and family estrangement. Though living off campus facilitated stability and support in some areas, it also isolated participants from their fellow students, and from university life:

It's been tricky. They've [peers] organised nights out or meetings and it's been hard because I live so far away. I don't really meet any of them outside of university ... finding a way to get home afterwards is my issue (Louise).

Feeling different and standing out

The stigma experienced by children in care has been acknowledged, and scholars report that sometimes children are bullied because of their care background (Dansey et al., 2019; Rogers, 2017). Our own research found that at times, there were severe financial inequalities separating care experienced students from their peers. Financial differences were exacerbated by feelings of class inequality, with a large number of interview participants reporting stark differences between themselves and other, typically middle class, peers.

I feel like I'm jumping between two worlds ... It's so different from what I'm used to ... these are very majority middle class people and sometimes jumping between them is hard. The people back home would think 'oh he's one of them now'. People up here think 'he's a chav, he's rough, he's a scally'. You can't win' (Marcus).

Our findings highlight the experiences of students who exceeded the low expectations that had been set for them and Marcus describes 'jumping between two worlds'. Yet, instead of opening new doors, he reports that his new status as a 'university student' bars him from belonging to the community he left behind. Marcus and others describe attempting to fit in by glossing over the inequality of their circumstances, which was often linked to disposable income. Lacking money for socialising was isolating and embarrassing, and tempered feelings of achievement with a sense of loneliness, being 'different', and thoughts of giving up. These emotional challenges were exacerbated by the structural inequities which left care experienced learners struggling to cope, and were further aggravated by living alongside peers who seemed to enjoy high levels of familial support. In England and Wales, student introduction week typically takes place a week before formal university registration. It is therefore difficult for students to take part unless they come to university with funding already in place. Lack of financial resources was experienced as shameful for those without adequate funds. In an attempt to perhaps protect their newly found relationships, or their own sense of worth, as demonstrated by Dansey et al. (2019), students formulated strategies to 'save face'.

It was just disappointing. I'd looked forward to moving to uni and I didn't have anything to move in, didn't have anything to unpack ... I didn't even have food at the time ... I didn't go out. That was a bit embarrassing, I didn't have the money to go out ... I just made up things sometimes 'oh no I can't be bothered' (Craig).

Although helpful in avoiding potentially embarrassing social interactions, these strategies further isolated Craig and others from key welcome events intended to promote student networking. Participants disclosed other instances that set them apart from their peers and described stark differences in background and social networks, highlighting that educational achievement is often embedded with inequality and unmatched opportunities which favour those who are already advantaged (Mijs, 2016). Introductory conversations with peers in university accommodation were often accompanied by discussions about family background, centred upon trading information about the careers of parents, prestigious schools attended, or descriptions of family homes. For care experienced students, such conversations highlighted significant inequalities in class and privilege:

My flatmate was showing me [pictures of] his house, six bedroom house and then [my other flatmate] came in and she was like 'yeah, I've got a six bedroom house' ... I

showed my house [and] they were like, 'oh that's nice actually' but you can tell in their head they're thinking that's fuckin' scummy, that's dirty, I wouldn't live there (Marcus).

While these circumstances could be challenging and shame inducing, participants noted that they had experienced greater challenges while in care and leaving care. Several expressed similar sentiments to those propagated by 'resilient' societies (Bracke, 2016), such as 'what doesn't kill you makes you stronger':

The way I've been brought up is just suck it up and just move on with it (Agnes).

Others concurred that being disadvantaged entailed extra work that other students did not have to undertake. Michael reflects:

It's more about who you know ... you can tell some people have it easier, they have a better chance of getting the best jobs and stuff. Just means I've got to work harder for it, it's alright (Michael).

Seemingly Michael and Agnes are versed in dominant narratives of meritocracy, and consider that overcoming their disadvantage will be possible, if they simply try 'harder' (Keddie, 2016). Yet while working hard, the trauma of early childhood abuse could still be triggered by the lifestyle choices made by other students, such as high levels of drinking and drug use. Such circumstances created difficulties for those struggling to manage complex feelings about their background. David explains that although university marks a new chapter, it doesn't erase the past. Others found that differences between themselves and their peers were sufficient to invoke strong feelings that were not easy to overcome:

When something bad happens, that might come back, like now, me getting upset today. Like I don't wake up upset, I don't go to bed upset, I don't live upset, but when this happens yeah I do get upset because maybe I haven't got over it yet (David).

David's confession serves as a reminder that individuals may need additional support to maintain their resilience (Bottrell, 2009). However, despite feeling different and admitting to 'standing out' from their peers, Clara and others noted that mixing with students from different backgrounds also offered new and exciting opportunities that they had not imagined before:

I was just so excited to be surrounded by people my age ... I was overwhelmed with the different opportunities ... it was probably one of the most exciting things in my life (Clara).

Reflecting upon their hopes and expectations for university life, participants reported that attending university offered access to opportunities and networks that would otherwise be beyond reach. These realisations could be empowering and engaging:

The highest job that my friends' parents had, was probably work in Sainsbury's ... then you get people like this, they think about stuff that you never heard of ... you're amongst so many smart people in here. They try to get the best out of you (Gulru).

Mixed experiences of institutional support

Local authorities and Higher Education institutions offer support to students who meet specific statutory criteria under the Children (Leaving Care) Act (2000). However, this support could be incredibly variable and often did not extend to those who were not legally defined as a 'care leaver'. While some reported that they were provided with free accommodation and a generous living allowance, others received very little or no support from either their university or local authority. These students struggled to meet the financial commitments involved in moving to university and often incurred additional debt as a result:

Oh my finances have been awful. I have so many problems. I was still paying off debt to my old landlord ... I was meant to be getting funding for my housing situation [but] they underpaid by £2,500 ... I've been paying it off slowly ever since (Chris).

Although students with care experience are more likely to follow nonlinear pathways to university (Harrison, 2017), support offered by institutions was frequently age-dependent and capped at the age of 25. Age restrictions on financial support further disadvantaged students who had already battled to make it to university:

I have gone through life affected by circumstances beyond my control believing I was stupid. I have fought my way through this system and finished my degree with the highest first result in my year... I have come to learning late in life with very little support. There is a big gap in institutional practices for people like me who come late to learning (Ash)

Research confirms that young people in care often experience educational disruption (Hanrahan et al., 2019). Thirty-seven percent of participants were over the age of 22 when they took part in the study, suggesting that they had followed nonlinear trajectories to university. Reduced support reiterated previous educational disadvantages and Ash describes having 'fought' her way through the education system due to circumstances beyond her control, with very little support. For Ash, the lack of support offered by her university confirmed 'a big gap in institutional practices'. She and others perceived age based caps on support to be restrictive, ineffective, and inequitable. Partly due to their expansive size, universities were sometimes experienced as faceless by those without named points of contact. Sometimes even participants who met the criteria and were offered institutional support were unable to locate the resources that had been promised. For instance, Marcus explained that despite having attended university for a whole term, he was unaware that he was entitled to financial assistance to pay his rent:

They've offered me a 'Care Leaver Package' ... even now, I ain't got a clue what it's really about, 'Care Leaver Package', what's included? (Marcus).

Over half of survey participants had 'seriously considered' dropping out of university. The most common reasons identified were a combination of health issues, money worries, personal and family issues, and struggling to manage workload. Research by Bland (2018) shows that student retention is linked to engagement with university staff. Braxton et al. (2014) suggest that when students perceive a high level of university commitment to their welfare, they are more likely to immerse themselves into the institution and persist with their course. For those able to access assistance from their university, support was described as a 'lifeline' which actively facilitated retention:

The wellbeing team is amazing ... they [say] 'if you need someone to talk to, just come along, we're always open, there's always someone here' ... it's the best situation I've been in (Chris).

Some universities were perceived to be genuinely supportive of their care experienced students. As Agnes exemplifies, effective support enhanced feelings of belonging and a bonded sense of university identity:

Every time I walk through the Student Union you get that vibe, I can't describe what it is, but when you walk through you feel like you belong to a community ... perhaps it's just the people, the staff, the services they have available, it comes together ... it feels nice (Agnes).

Yet despite these positive reflections on university life, participants were equally aware that support provided was limited, and would be withdrawn once their student status expired:

As soon as I'm out of uni that's it ... I am on my own... I need to be fully independent and rely on myself to live (Katya)

Discussion

Neoliberal societies consider a 'good' citizen to be one who is able to 'thrive and survive in any situation' (Bracke, 2016, p. 61). Considered in this way, the 'good' citizen must also be 'resilient', able to overcome circumstantial inequalities and lift themselves out of poverty, using sheer hard work (Keddie, 2016; Darnon et al., 2018). Celebrating resilience in this way simultaneously absolves the responsibility for under-achievement away from systemic and structural inequalities, placing responsibility instead with individuals (Bottrell, 2009; Mijs, 2016). Celebrating those who 'overcome the odds' has consequences, in that it pathologises and responsabilises those not able to enact socially acceptable notions of 'success' (Harrison, 2013). Bracke (2016) cautions that the need for resilience rests heavily on the presence of 'disaster or threat', by which we can understand that when someone is being described as 'resilient', they must have a background which disadvantages them in some way. Therefore, by celebrating the 'resilience' of those who get by, despite their disadvantages, we duly collaborate in 'irresponsibilising' the structures that create systemic disadvantage (Liebenberg et al., 2015). While resilience theory has historically focused on the strategies and 'adaptations' employed by individuals who achieve 'better than expected', it is fundamental to also consider the changes that can be enacted to environmental factors in order to enable individuals to flourish (Mahdiani & Ungar, 2021).

Care experienced students frequently overcome significant challenges to attend university and describe being 'proud' to access Higher Education. While these students are judged as representing sector success, data reveals that care experienced students face multiple disadvantages. Rather than flourishing, students describe themselves as 'coping'. Kamran explains 'if you have to, you will do it', suggesting that his response is not one of his choosing, but a demonstration of his disadvantage. Hence, celebrations of resilience can be used as a method for encouraging those who are significantly disadvantaged to 'tolerate disparity and inequality' (Mahdiani & Ungar, 2021), while simultaneously managing the risks posed by their circumstances (Liebenberg et al. 2015, p. 1008). This conception of resilience implies that individuals are personally

able to determine their own outcomes, despite their circumstances, without additional help. Thriving at university should not be a survival test for students from disadvantaged backgrounds and celebrating the resilience of those struggling to manage further serves to absolve institutions of their obligations to support individuals.

Despite initial expectations that becoming a student would provide a fresh start, arriving at university alone, and without support, reinforced feelings of difference and sometimes set participants apart from their peers. Over a quarter of participants had accepted that support would not be forthcoming and that they would have to instead rely on 'myself'. This is evidenced by those, such as Agnes, Michael, and David, who explain that in order to move forward, they must 'just suck it up' and accept that disadvantage is part of the terrain that they must navigate. As a result, students' experiences of Higher Education were marred by inequalities which meant that they continued to struggle with significant emotional, practical, and financial burdens while studying. Hart et al. (2016) and Bottrell (2009) note that resilience is not a finite resource, yet the tendency of policy and practice to celebrate individual resilience minimises the role of environmental factors in creating the barriers that limit participation. Focusing on individual agency without understanding the associated structural constraints can lead to the deeper oppression of people by unjust social systems (van Breda, 2018) and can be used to justify a lack of appropriate institutional support (Mahdiani & Ungar, 2021, p. 64). This was evidenced by age based restrictions used by institutions to limit university support, despite research demonstrating that children in care frequently experience education disruptions and often become students later than their peers (Berridge, 2017; Hanrahan et al., 2019; Harrison, 2017).

Participants explained that university represented a significant step-change for them, both culturally and academically. Katya and Craig describe feeling positively about moving to Higher Education, only to be devastated with the reality of being alone in an empty room. Dawn admits to 'having a good cry'. Thomas (2012) confirms that universities are obligated to take reasonable steps to ensure their students are successful, yet institutions were distinctly lacking in the way they communicated supports that were in place. Kuhllicke (2013) acknowledges that policies and support services are designed by those with privilege. We challenge higher education institutions to accept their role in wider systems of social disadvantage by enhancing resources for those who are otherwise unsupported. University should not become an additional burden for those already managing difficulties, for which they must draw upon emotional resources that have already been depleted. Institutions must shoulder part of the burden for tackling educational inequality by taking on responsibility for those making up the 'widening participation' populations that they actively recruit.

The outcomes of young people are more often determined by the support and resources given to them, than by 'any singular Herculean effort by one hardy young person' (Ungar, 2011, p. 1743). It is therefore the responsibility of higher education institutions to 'change the odds' currently stacked against resilient populations. We set out robust recommendations for Higher Education Institutions in our policy report 'Pathways to University from Care', proposing practicable and affordable adjustments for institutions seeking to promote inclusivity (Ellis & Johnston, 2019), which have been endorsed by UCAS, UUK, NNECL and the Office for Students, amongst others. Recommendations include providing 'welcome packs' for care experienced students, a specialised university contact to offer help and assistance, increased bursaries for care experienced students, and additional support for students over the age of 25. By making these adjustments, higher education institutions ensure that students joining from care backgrounds are supported appropriately to move

forward in line with their university peers, instead of reinforcing their positional disadvantage in a flawed and unequal system.

Conclusions

This paper considers the everyday challenges facing care experienced students in higher education and uses a critical perspective of resilience theory to explore the university as a site in which multiple forms of disadvantage intersect. We suggest that while students with a care background are considered to be resilient, celebrating their achievements in this way diminishes the failure of the systems and processes that meant they had to ‘fight’ to take (and keep) their place. Although research shows that care experienced learners make significant educational achievements under deeply challenging conditions (Harvey and Andrewartha, 2017; Stevenson et al., 2020), higher education should not be an endurance test for care leavers. We conclude that in order to evidence a genuine commitment to ‘widening participation’, Higher Education Institutions must adapt to counter the disadvantage experienced by marginalised learners.

Our research shows that there are distinct disadvantages facing those who are not in receipt of additional support, familial, or otherwise. Despite arriving with hopes that university might provide a new start, our participants reported feeling ‘different’ to their peers. Contrasts in how fellow students handled finances, independent living, and lifestyle choices highlighted gaps in privilege between participants and peers with more conventional middle class family backgrounds. Our participants demonstrated persistence and a determination to succeed, yet their efforts were rarely matched by appropriate institutional support. ‘Diversity is key to population success’ (Mahdiani & Ungar, 2021), as such Higher Education Institutions have a responsibility to promote social transformation and to provide equitable environments for their learners. While the landscape of Higher Education is shifting to increase support for care experienced students (Ambrose, et al., 2021), it remains vital to hold social and political structures to account when support is inadequate.

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Data Availability The participants of this study did not give written consent for their data to be shared publicly, so due to the sensitive nature of the research supporting data is not available.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare no competing interests.

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