



Briefing: Widening Access to and Participation in Higher Education for Adopted and Previously Looked After Students

- Care leavers face particular barriers to accessing HE.
- Efforts to address these barriers are being made across HE, including bursaries, provision of additional support at application and once enrolled; data is being collected; all universities must include care leavers in their access and participation plans (APPs).
- Previously looked after and adopted learners face challenges which are similar to those of many care leavers and, as a result, may also face barriers to accessing HE.
- Data is not routinely collected on the number of adopted and previously looked after students accessing HE, nor on their experiences as students, nor on outcomes from FE or HE, and universities are not required to include this cohort in APPs; consequently, we do not know for sure if there is a problem and, if there is, what the nature of the problem is, or how it might be overcome.

Background: What we know

The government's strategy for children's social care reform, 'Stable Homes Built on Love', includes a commitment to "see an improvement in the education, employment and training outcomes of children in care and care leavers" by 2027. Measures include introducing a gold standard accreditation scheme for FE providers and HEIs, to include activities to increase applications and support transition, bursaries, affordable year-round accommodation, pastoral and mental health support, dedicated staff leads and whole-staff training.

However, the focus on "children in care and care leavers" means that other care-experienced young people, including those raised in adoptive and kinship families, are excluded from these initiatives. The Office for Students notes this concern and expects providers to "consider support for all students who have experienced care at any stage of their lives, including those who have been adopted," and suggests the use of specific codes to record care-experienced status on enrolment (<https://codingmanual.hesa.ac.uk/21056/EntryProfile/field/CARELEAVER>).

The challenges faced by many adopted and previously looked after children in education begin in early childhood. Three quarters of children adopted today will have experienced abuse and neglect. All will have experienced early instability, loss of their birth family and moves through the care system.

Maltreatment during early childhood has been demonstrated to have long-term impacts on several areas of development, including threat processing, biographical memory processing, executive control, sensory processing, affect regulation, reward processing, speech and language and stress response systems, resulting in latent vulnerability to a range of mental health challenges and maladaptive behaviours later in life.

DfE figures demonstrate that looked after children are more than twice as likely to have SEND as the general population. Adoption UK research suggests that rates of SEND are at least as high in adopted children, with the most common primary area of need being social, emotional, and mental health

(SEMH) needs. However, instability during early childhood creates a further risk factor as it reduces the chance of SEND being identified and supported (EPI; 2021) due to multiple transitions and inconsistent engagement with statutory services. Progress and attainment at KS2 and KS4 is considerably lower for adopted and previously looked after children than their non-care-experienced peers. For 2021/22, the average KS4 Attainment 8 score for children with Previously Looked After Arrangements (PLAA) was 32.7, compared to 48.8 for all pupils. The average PLAA Progress 8 score was -0.74 compared to -0.03 for all pupils.

In view of the disadvantage gap faced by previously looked after children, specific support mechanisms have been introduced in 5-16 education (in England) including post-LAC pupil premium (PP+), designated teachers and virtual schools. In post-16 education, only virtual school support is available to this cohort, and this is limited to providing advice and guidance.

These factors combine to create challenges in post-16 education. Adoption UK findings (Adoption UK; 2020) based on case studies of six adopted young adults and 81 survey responses from adoptees age 16+ found that:

- 34% had been NEET at some stage between the ages of 16-25.
- 34% enrolled on the college course of their choice, based on their future goals – the rest chose what looked interesting, what was available based on their prior exam results, or the only course that offered them a place. 49% felt there were not enough relevant FE options to choose from.
- 42% said they did not cope well with assessments/interviews as part of the application process; 52% said there was not enough support to help them choose/apply for courses.
- Of the 64% who informed their college/training provider that they were adopted, 68% receive no additional support in respect of this.
- 66% said they had things going on in their lives which made it difficult to fully commit to their studies – accessing records and birth family reunions were commonly reported.
- 39% of all respondents had wanted to go on to higher education but among respondents aged 16-25 this figure was only 20% suggesting a low level of aspiration to HE.
- Among respondents aged 25 or older, 81% had gone on to higher education. However, even within this cohort of education 'success stories', only 28% felt that their exam results at 16 were a fair reflection of their abilities; only 50% felt confident about their academic ability during FE; 45% found the FE environment overwhelming; 50% found it difficult to organize themselves and work independently.

The range of challenges described by adoptees in FE suggests that there are significant barriers to going on to HE. Respondents described needing more parental support than their peers, struggling to meet expectations for independence, and finding it difficult to manage unstructured time. The proportion who dropped out within one year of leaving school (30%) compared to the dropout rate for those who enrolled (or re-enrolled) more than one year after leaving school (18%) suggests that many will take longer to navigate the education system and may come to HE (if at all) later in life.

Efforts to increase participation at HE will therefore need to begin earlier, at FE (and even at school). Adoption UK recommends:

- Enhanced careers support, transition and induction plans for all care-experienced and adopted students to support the transition to FE.
- Training for all FE staff on child development and the impact of trauma, attachment, care-experience, and adoption.

- Designated members of staff in FE to oversee the academic progress and wellbeing of care-experienced and adopted students.
- Extension of PP+ to all care-experienced students in FE (the current pilot programme and national roll out only applies to care leavers).
- Support available to students under 25 to be extended to at least 30 for care-experienced and adopted students to reflect the frequency with which this cohort access education later in life while still having additional support needs.
- Settings to collect data on care-experienced status on enrolment and use this to collate data on access to FE, attainment and drop-out rates to inform improvements in the support for this cohort.

Research opportunities: what don't we know?

- How many adopted and previously looked after young people go on to access HE (either aged 18-25 or later in life), and how do they fare in terms of drop-out rates, results and access to post-graduate and employment opportunities? How can we ensure that HE settings use the suggested OFS codes for recording this information? Data is essential.
- Is the possibility of HE even on the radar for many adopted young people? What work needs to be done for school-aged students to ensure early identification of support needs and mitigate the impact of SEMH needs on future attainment?
- How might improvements in support at FE (e.g. training for staff, extension of PP+, designated teachers, tailored careers guidance) positively impact educational outcomes and access to HE for adopted and previously looked after students? How can FE and HEI work together to ensure best outcomes for previously looked after students?
- What are the barriers faced by adopted and previously looked after young people in accessing and completing HE and how can HE settings help to mitigate these through, e.g. contextual offers, outreach to post-16 settings, access to tailored support once enrolled, distance/virtual learning?

References:

Adoption UK (2020): *Better Futures: giving adopted young people an equal chance in further education* <https://www.adoptionuk.org/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=c855be0f-f29c-4b3e-b6c9-0fe195e9490f>

EPI (2021): *Identifying pupils with special educational needs and disabilities* https://epi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/SEND-Identification_2021-EPI.pdf