

Written Evidence: Education Committee Inquiry

The Impact of Covid-19 on Education and Children's Services

This evidence has been prepared on behalf of Become, NNECL (the National Network for the Education of Care-Leavers), Spectra, Stand Alone and the Unite Foundation.

1) Introduction:

At the outset of the Covid-19 outbreak in the UK, five UK organisations working with care-leavers and estranged students began investigating the impact of the crisis on this group.

From previous research and our own experience, we were already aware that in general terms, this group are around 40% more likely to drop out of university and an estimated three times more likely to experience mental ill-health¹. This group have limited financial resources available to them if things go wrong, and are vulnerable to homelessness (for example, 1 in 6 estranged students register as homeless or consider doing so during their studies²). For these reasons we were concerned about the emotional and practical aspects of lockdown, particularly once universities moved to a distance-learning model of teaching. The instruction to "work from home" is only possible for those students who have a home to go to, and we were therefore concerned that the needs of those left behind on campus should not be overlooked.

We ask the Committee to note that care-experienced and estranged students:

- are absolutely reliant on temporary and part-time work that is no longer available in order to support their living costs;
- often have no alternative home to return to, or practical and emotional support in times of crisis or hardship, due to the lack of family networks;
- are at extremely high risk of homelessness; and
- may become reliant on local authority services that are already under extreme pressure if unable to continue in their studies.

2) Findings: Wellbeing

At the outset of the crisis, care-leavers and estranged students were most anxious about the following areas:

a) Finances

¹ <https://www.unitefoundation.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Positive-Impact-Annex-1.pdf>

² Stand Alone and Unite Foundation study "New Starts"

62% of respondents said the ability to earn money was one of the main concerns. In open-ended questions respondents reported being unable to find the type of part-time and temporary summer employment that they are reliant on to pay their basic living expenses outside of term time. Almost all full-time students are unable to access Universal Credit or other benefits, even during summer holidays.

We received a high number of comments suggesting that respondents were in significant difficulties, relying on food banks and credit cards to meet their expenses and worrying about the possibility of becoming homeless. For this reason, we conducted a further survey on financial support and challenges, which is detailed in section 3.

b) Mental Health

In our first survey, 55% of respondents stated that they were particularly worried about loneliness and isolation, having started to experience being left behind on empty campuses when friends and colleagues went home early to study from home. With up to 70% of care-leavers experiencing mental ill-health³, effective access to wellbeing and mental health support is vital not only to their continued study but to their long-term welfare.

The change to distance learning marked a change in welfare support delivery, with some institutions offering the same or similar levels of support via virtual means (such as zoom or phone consultations, phone helplines and signposting to online wellbeing resources) but others offering far less. Some institutions closed person-to-person consultations for students who weren't already receiving a plan of support, and others relied solely on online helpsheets and referring enquirers to other organisations. There were examples of impressive adaptability and innovation within the sector, including the creation of Covid phonedlines, online consultation and counselling methods, social media outreach and networking efforts and proactive work by named contacts for care-leavers and estranged students phoning all of these students to conduct a wellbeing check on a regular basis. Having good pre-existing connections with these students appears to have been an advantage at delivering effective wellbeing services during lockdown.

c) Access to facilities

When university campuses shut down, facilities such as libraries and computer suites became unavailable for all students. For this group, and other less wealthy students, access to IT suites was essential to continuing to study as they did not necessarily have adequate equipment or work space of their

³ <https://www.unitefoundation.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Positive-Impact-Annex-1.pdf>

own. In the early stages of the lockdown it appeared that few institutions had considered the impact of such changes on vulnerable students remaining on campus.

d) Information about academic progression

62% of respondents were concerned about being able to complete their studies, partially due to lack of equipment (see above) and partially due to lack of information from providers. A little over half (55%) of respondents stated that they felt informed about how Covid-19 affected their university. While this must be seen in the context of the timing of this survey in the first week of lockdown, uncertainty about assessment and awarding of grades persists.

For those without a family home to rely on if there is a delay to the continuation of a course, this is a significant source of anxiety. They are obliged to make decisions about future housing contracts at a time when there is no solid information about the future of their course delivery or availability of student finance.

e) Housing

41% of respondents stated that they felt informed about how Covid-19 affected their accommodation. Given that their student home is their only home, uncertainty over housing is a significant source of anxiety for this group.

Many respondents stated that they did not know whether, with campus closing, their residence would remain open or not. There was significant uncertainty over arrangements for payment of rent, and for signing housing contracts for the following academic year – a concern that remains.

Some larger providers and HEIs did allow students to end rental contracts early without penalty, however this was not of benefit to those who are obliged to remain in residence year-round.

3) Findings: Finances and Graduate Employment

In financial terms, care-experienced and estranged students are heavily reliant on part-time and temporary work, and relatively few had been protected from joblessness by government employment support schemes or other formal sources of financial assistance.

a) Current Students Continuing in Higher Education in 2020/21

Finances are a major source of anxiety for this group. Continuing students generally had continuing financial responsibilities with low confidence that they could meet them:

- 68% are responsible for paying all rent, utilities and food costs over the summer period.
- 99% are responsible for paying at least one of those costs.
- 55% were not confident (scoring 1-4 out of 9) that they could meet their financial needs over the summer, with 26% having very low confidence (scoring 1 or 2 out of 9).
- Only 22% were confident (scoring 6-9 out of 9) that they could meet their financial needs over the summer, with 7% scoring 8 or 9.

In terms of the sources of income that were available:

- 21% were still in full or part-time work
- 11% had been furloughed
- Only 1 respondent (<1%) had accessed the government's self-employment support
- 20% were using credit cards or other forms of debt to service their day-to-day living costs
- 14% had received money from local authority
- 29% had received money from university
- 11% had received money from friends and family
- 7% were accessing charities such as food banks
- 47% stated that they did not know how they were going to pay their bills
- 5% stated that they were likely to leave university early and claim benefits

b) Students Graduating in 2020

The graduate employment market has been devastated by the Covid-19 situation, and this group of students are experiencing extreme levels of anxiety about their current situation and future prospects.

In terms of graduate destinations, for English-domiciled students:

- Only 5% of graduates had a job that was due to start as normal.
- 11% had had the offer of a job withdrawn or delayed due to Covid.
- 67% had no job and no offer of further study.

As is commonly the case with this cohort of students, a high proportion (17%) were planning to undertake postgraduate study.

Graduates were significantly less confident about their ability to pay their bills than continuing students:

- No graduating students were very confident that they could pay their bills (scoring 8 or 9 out of 9).
- Only 8% were fairly confident (scoring 6 or 7 out of 9).
- 70% were not confident that they could pay their bills, with the majority of this group (43% of the total number of respondents) scoring the lowest 1 or 2 out of 9.

From this survey, we consider that there is a need for assistance not only for continuing students, but also for those graduating in 2020.

4) Recommendations:

- a) **That the UK Government should introduce an emergency grant for care-experienced and estranged students to cover the loss of work over the summer of 2020. This should be set at 2/10 of the annual student maintenance amount.**

There is an urgent need for action to prevent students from becoming homeless or deciding to drop out of their course to access benefits in the short term. In the longer term, the Committee may wish to examine whether a more consistent approach to bursaries across the sector would provide greater stability for these students.

- b) **That the UK Government should set an immediate end date for courses ending in summer 2020 to enable graduates to access benefits immediately. They should advertise the availability of advance payments more widely.**

In open responses, many of this year's graduates reported problems accessing Universal Credit in a timely way, either due to the complexity of evidence required or due to the fact that their course had finished early but the DWP did not recognise that to be the case. None of the respondents we spoke to were aware that advance payments were available on Universal Credit, despite having told DWP employees that they were in extreme need. Several respondents stated that their claims had not been paid within the 5 week target response time.

- c) **HEIs should ensure that hardship funds are quick to respond, easy to access, and not intrusive.**

They should balance the need for evidence with an understanding that for vulnerable students, detailed questions about the reasons they are estranged is likely to be traumatic and detrimental to that student's mental health.

- d) **The Committee might wish to assess the variance in wellbeing and mental health support available during lockdown from institution to institution.**

We welcome the action of the OfS in sharing best practice guidance and expectations on service levels, however

- e) **The Committee may wish to investigate whether the resources allocated to and by each institution for wellbeing support should be adjusted to recognise differing patterns of need in different HEIs.**

Our anecdotal evidence is that many of the universities and colleges with the highest number of vulnerable students have less funding to invest in wellbeing support than some larger institutions with lower levels of need.

- f) **There should be a statutory duty on HEIs to consider the impact of changes to campus services on those who are resident throughout the year.**

While the necessity for taking action quickly to avoid the spread of Covid-19 is recognised, it is nevertheless our experience that some institutions were slow

Commented [SM1]: ...all these students irrespective of where they are studying.

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to communicate with those remaining on campus. We ask the Committee to consider whether a firm statutory duty to consider the impact of changes in campus services on care-experienced and estranged students, perhaps in addition to other protected groups, might help ensure that changes are planned in a holistic manner.

Methodology:

Become, NNECL (the National Network for the Education of Care-Leavers), Spectra, Stand Alone and the Unite Foundation conducted two open surveys, both of which were promoted through university networks and on social media;

1. A wellbeing survey investigating mental health, access to support and financial concerns, conducted in the first full week of lockdown (week beginning 23 March 2020), and
2. A more detailed financial position survey, investigating sources of support and the availability of work, conducted in the first week of June 2020.

Notes on data availability and accuracy:

The first survey took place via an online portal in the week beginning 23 March 2020 and received 253 responses. The second survey took place via an online portal in the week beginning 1 June 2020 and received 465 responses.

While every effort has been made to be consistent in the classification of students as care-leavers, care-experienced or estranged, the availability of comparative and baseline data varies considerably between groups. For example, there is no assessment of how many young people are estranged from their family as a whole, and so we are unable to estimate what proportion of those young people attend university. Similarly, surveys of mental health and wellbeing often focus on one specific sub-group and not the cohort as a whole.

There are also issues with the comparability and accuracy of data that is available. While UCAS collect data on whether applicants are care-experienced, they do not yet ask whether applicants are estranged. Even then, that data is inaccurate as many care-experienced applicants do not acknowledge their status for fear of discrimination and negative stereotyping. The most accurate source of this data for those under 25 is likely to be the Student Loans Company, who assess students' status for the purposes of student finance. As all students 25 and over are considered independent, however, there is little to no accurate data on care-experienced or estranged students over this age.

Data Recommendation:

Improved data collection, particularly on estrangement, would improve government, HE and the third sector's ability to provide support services that meet their needs adequately. We would welcome a Committee recommendation on consistency and accuracy of data available on vulnerable groups such as care-experienced and estranged students.