
EXPLORING SUPPORT FOR CARE-EXPERIENCED STUDENTS IN ENGLISH HIGHER EDUCATION USING THE ‘CAPABILITIES APPROACH’

EUSARF CONFERENCE 2021

NEIL HARRISON (UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD)

ZOE BAKER (SHEFFIELD HALLAM UNIVERSITY)

KATIE ELLIS (UNIVERSITY OF SHEFFIELD)

JACQUELINE STEVENSON (UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS)

neil.harrison@education.ox.ac.uk

@DrNeilHarrison @ReesCentre

<http://www.education.ox.ac.uk/rees-centre>



SETTING THE SCENE

Around 7,000 care-experienced students in higher education in England

13% of care leavers participate by age of 19 – 43% in the general population

Over half of care-experienced full-time students are aged over 20 on entry

Around 19% of care leavers withdraw early from their course – double the average

Just as likely to get 'good' degree and secure a positive graduate outcomes as peers

Sources: Harrison (2017, 2020), Harrison, Baker and Stevenson (in press) and Department for Education (2020)



TIMELINE OF KEY POLICIES

2007 'Care Matters' White Paper – bursaries and expectation of year-round accommodation while studying



2012 Roll-out of 'Staying Put' initiative to allow care leavers to remain with foster carers until the age of 25 if they are in education or training – more recently, 'Staying Close' for residential homes



2018 Launch of 'Care Leaver Covenant' to challenge universities to offer more support for care leavers and requirement on local authorities to publish their 'Local Offer' of support for care leavers



2014 Roll-out of 'Virtual Schools' – units within local authorities charged to monitor and improve school attainment for children in care and administer additional funding

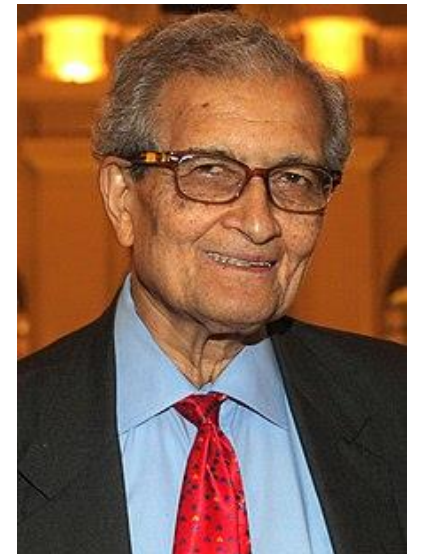


2019 Higher education providers required to monitor and report on recruitment of care-experienced students



THE CAPABILITIES APPROACH

- A normative theoretical framework for social justice
- Life as a collection of ‘functionings’ – doings and beings (e.g. Sen 2001, 2009)
- Functionings chosen or forced on people by external factors
- Concept of ‘capabilities’ as freedoms to secure functionings ‘that they value and have reason to value’ (Sen, 2001, p.291)
- Role of policymaking is to remove ‘unfreedoms’ that constrain capabilities and make valued functionings impossible



CAPABILITIES AND HIGHER EDUCATION

- Capabilities approach used to explore functionings associated with higher education – e.g. ‘being a student’, ‘being in a graduate career’
- Notable work on Black students in South Africa (e.g. Walker, 2003), but also used to explore inequalities in the UK (e.g. Wisker and Masika, 2017)
- Approach of constructing lists of capabilities to explore how best to support disadvantaged communities (Nussbaum, 2011)
- Wilson-Strydom’s (2016) implementation for higher education



A POSSIBLE CAPABILITIES LIST

	Capability	Description
1	Practical reason	Being able to make well-reasoned, informed, critical and reflective choices
2	Knowledge & imagination	Being able to gain knowledge and think critically from multiple perspectives
3	Learning disposition	Being able to have a desire for learning and confidence in one's ability
4	Social relations & social networks	Being able to form networks of friendships for learning support and leisure
5	Respect, dignity & recognition	Being able to have respect for oneself and receive respect from others
6	Emotional health	Being able to learn without anxiety or fear
7	Language competence & confidence	Being able to understand, write and speak in the language of instruction

Adapted from Wilson-Strydom (2016)



A BUSY TIME FOR RESEARCH!



- ***Moving on up: pathways of care leavers and care-experienced students into and through higher education*** – Neil Harrison (2017) – Study 1
- ***Pathways to university from care*** – Katie Ellis and Claire Johnston (2019 and 2020) – Study 2
- ***Positive impact? What factors affect access, retention and graduate outcomes for university students with a background of care or family estrangement?*** – Jacqueline Stevenson *et al.* (2020) – Study 3



CHARTING UNFREEDOMS

	Capability	Description
1	Practical reason	Being able to make well-reasoned, informed, critical and reflective choices
5	Respect, dignity & recognition	Being able to have respect for oneself and receive respect from others
6	Emotional health	Being able to learn without anxiety or fear

Adapted from Wilson-Strydom (2016)



PRACTICAL REASON

- *'I was always told ... "you'll never amount to anything, you'll end up in prison".'* [Study 2]
- *'The care home I came from had never had anyone go to university before and so had no idea at all when it came to open days and applying.'* [1]
- *'They didn't understand anything about applying to university, the help or funding available ... it has at times left me feeling quite lost.'* [2]
- *'My tutor from last year was very helpful but she left, my new tutor lacks understanding and my course leader is very unsupportive.'* [1]



RESPECT, DIGNITY AND RECOGNITION

- *‘It is difficult for me to tell friends in Uni about my circumstances, so I felt it is better to tell them that I am an international student.’ [1]*
- *‘Due to being stereotyped – for example being a care leaver is the result of coming from adversity essentially; unfortunately, because of this, regardless of academic achievement ... you are still put in this bracket that you might be emotionally unstable, have underlying mental health issues or have authority issues.’ [1]*
- *‘I thought that if I embraced that part of my past it might be used against me at some point in the future. I think that's something that's common within care experienced people.’ [3]*



EMOTIONAL HEALTH

- *'I have a few friends that they always get firsts, and I am capable of getting firsts ... when I'm in a mentally good place. If I didn't have all these issues, I'd probably be right up there ... but when I'm having a really low day, I physically can't do anything.'* [2]
- *'It's something that can hit you and it can hit you hard ... You're stuck in a cycle and if [support staff are] not available on that day for any reason it can still send someone spiralling worse.'* [3]
- *'I didn't want to access services from my university because I felt like my contact with any university mental health services would be added to my academic or medical records.'* [2]



CONCLUSIONS: REMOVING UNFREEDOMS

PRACTICAL REASON	RESPECT, DIGNITY AND RECOGNITION	EMOTIONAL HEALTH
<p>Training to raise expectations and knowledge among social workers and others.</p> <p>Consistent support for care-experienced students to navigate university systems.</p>	<p>Interventions to reduce stigma and stereotyping around care.</p> <p>Design administrative systems that avoid 'interrogating' care-experienced students.</p>	<p>Develop specialist long-term mental health support with care-experienced students in mind.</p> <p>Ensure year-round consistency of mental health and other support.</p>



GETTING IT RIGHT...?

'As soon as I arrived I got an email from [the university care leaver contact], saying 'you are care experienced, come and meet me, anything you want, I'm here for support'. He was a dedicated contact there. Like he was amazing. Building a relationship is absolutely key, particularly for care experienced people who will have had multiple people in their lives let them down. To have that dedicated contact based on our relationship is key.' [3]



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