

Response to the Office for Students Consultation on Access and Participation – October 2018

Introduction

Become is the leading charity for children in care and young care leavers. We provide help, support, and advice to make sure care-experienced young people can unleash their potential and take control of their lives. We help make the care system work better by ensuring that young people's voices and perspectives shape policy and service provision. Until November 2016, Become was known as The Who Cares? Trust.

Become responded to the questions most relevant to our work with young care leavers and their journeys to, through and beyond higher education. Our responses are informed by recent research and draw on both what young people tell us about their experiences and what we hear from colleagues working in higher education institutions who have a responsibility for supporting care leavers.

Proposal 1: Cycle of plans

We agree with the proposal to move the approval of access and participation plans onto a more strategic timescale. At some providers, particularly those with smaller overall student populations, the small number of care leavers studying each year can lead to large proportional changes in annual assessments of access, success and progression 'performance' for this group. This can offer a misleading picture of progress or failure, and may serve to mask institutional trends which require planning and action over a longer period of time.

In addition, we believe that the proposed change would support providers to develop ambitious partnerships and activities which may not demonstrate immediate positive impact, but will ultimately better help young people with care experience to access higher education. Positive relationships between universities/colleges and virtual schools, leaving care teams and other organisations who work with care leavers can take time to establish; a more strategic timescale for plan approval may encourage providers to strengthen their expertise, resources and activity in this area and deter easier 'quick wins' which may be evidenced over a shorter period of time.

However, we are conscious that any proposed changes to the approval of plans and their accompanying targets must not hinder continual review of procedures and actions around supporting care leavers. The needs of applicants and students do not neatly align with timescales for strategic planning; providers must be clear and accountable in their provision of support to care leavers and ensure they are meeting the day-to-day requirements for students to participate happily and healthily in their courses.

Proposal 3: Targets

We welcome the development of a range of outcomes-focused targets which include both OfS-specified national priorities and provider-specified aims across the full student lifecycle. However, we have some concern about the lack of any proposed OfS-specified target which includes a commitment to improve access, success or progression for care leavers.

Within the consultation document, care leavers are referred to as both an ‘underrepresented group’ and a ‘specific target group’; the former are included within OfS-specified aims and targets whereas the latter are recognised within provider-specified aims and targets. Care leavers are the only population identified as an ‘underrepresented group’ who are not included within one of the possible OfS-specified targets suggested for inclusion.

The consultation document specifies that underrepresented groups are chosen where “data shows gaps in equality of opportunity in relation to access, success or progression”. Recent research has identified a significantly higher withdrawal rate for care leavers than for the general student population, even when entry qualifications are taken in account: care leavers are around 38% more likely to leave their course and not return¹. As such, we recommend the inclusion of an OfS-specified target around reducing the gap in non-continuation between care leavers and non-care leaver students.

Whilst we recognise the absolute smaller number of care leavers within higher education compared with other underrepresented groups (e.g. disabled students or mature students) and the variability between providers, we believe it is imperative that sufficient attention is afforded to care leavers and this is communicated clearly to providers by the sector regulator as an area of significant national importance. Establishing an OfS-specified target would help to ensure the education of care leavers remains at the top of the fair participation agenda and encourage providers to take active steps to reduce non-continuation for this group.

Proposal 7: Creating and maintaining an access and participation dataset

We agree that the development of an access and participation dataset will increase transparency and accessibility of information which identifies both sector- and provider-level challenges. Currently, the availability of accurate and comprehensive data on the educational pathways of care leavers poses a significant challenge in assessing the present picture and understanding future progress in efforts to increase participation in higher education.

We believe that the OfS, as the sector regulator with extensive strategic relationships with other relevant bodies, is in a position to argue for and help develop joined-up processes for data collection

¹ <http://www.nnecl.org/file/HERACLESFinalreport.pdf>

BECOME.

THE CHARITY FOR CHILDREN IN CARE
AND YOUNG CARE LEAVERS

and sharing. Bringing together the data owned by stakeholders including the Department for Education, UCAS, HESA, Student Loans Company and others would allow providers and other organisations to better understand the national picture.