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## Abstract

Who Cares? Scotland provides individual advocacy services to children in residential and foster care placements, campaigns more generally for the rights of children in care and collaborates with stakeholders to improve the circumstances of looked after children in Scotland. In 2010 the charity set up a scholarship programme to support young people to attend the Harvard University Secondary Summer School. The scholarship programme aims to be a high-profile demonstration of academic aspirations for children in care and to provide a special opportunity for individual young people progressing to college or university. This paper presents a case study of the programme and outlines findings from interviews with the first five scholarships award holders. The paper also discusses the young people's experiences in relation to the wider context of academic achievement of looked after children in Scotland and the wider international literature about the education of children in care.

**Keywords:** education / aspiration / children in care

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## Introduction

The education of children in care began to receive attention in Scotland following the publication of a joint report (*Learning with Care*) by school and social work inspectors in 2001 (Her Majesty's Inspectors of Schools and Social Work Services Inspectorate, 2001; Maclean & Gunion, 2003). The inspection considered only residential care settings, though the authors realised their findings and recommendations had wider implications. A more recent report, *We Can and Must Do Better*, which explicitly encompassed all care settings and considered education from early years to post-school levels, set the agenda which continues to guide current policy and practice (Scottish Executive, 2007). Readers who are interested in the detail of this work, and an assessment of its impact, will find an account in a forthcoming special issue of the *European Journal of Social Work* (Connelly & Furnivall, forthcoming).

Improving the outcomes in education (and wellbeing more generally) of looked after children and care leavers is now a major policy commitment of the Scottish Government. Evidence of this commitment is shown by the existence of a policy unit advising the Minister for Children and Young People (see: [www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/People/Young-People/protecting/lac](http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/People/Young-People/protecting/lac)), the work of the Looked After Children Strategic Implementation Group, responsible for identifying barriers and making improvements, and the formation of CELCIS within the University of Strathclyde, with a remit to engage widely with workers, young people and families (see: [www.celcis.org](http://www.celcis.org)). Further evidence of

political interest, and, it should be acknowledged, frustration at what is perceived as lack of progress, exists in the continuing Inquiry by the cross-party Education and Culture Committee of the Scottish Parliament. To access the background papers, submissions to the consultation, committee report and a report of the outcomes of an invitation-only seminar, refer to the Committee website at: [www.scottish.parliament.uk/parliamentarybusiness/CurrentCommittees/29800.aspx](http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/parliamentarybusiness/CurrentCommittees/29800.aspx).

### *Progression in post-school education*

Although many looked after children do well in education, many fare badly as a result of the cumulative effects of disadvantage, including: childhood trauma and abuse; the loss of progress as a result of frequent changes of school; high rates of exclusion from school and part-time education; variable practice in assessment and provision of additional supports; ineffective co-ordination among professionals and between agencies; and insufficient attention to recording and monitoring of needs and progress (Connelly & Chakrabarti, 2008; Jacklin, Robinson, & Torrance, 2006; Jackson & McParlin, 2006; Welbourne & Leeson, 2011).

Unsurprisingly, these challenges are implicated in the generally low attainment of looked after children at school. In turn, low attainment impacts on opportunities beyond compulsory schooling, leading to low rates of progression to post school education, as well as high risk of unemployment and homelessness. This is illustrated by the post-school destination surveys conducted annually by the career advice and skills agency, Skills Development Scotland. Table 1 shows that while 36% of all school leavers in Scotland now progress directly into higher education (undergraduate degree or Higher National Certificate/Diploma at university or higher education college), only 1% of looked after children do so. In fact this proportion is unstable, partly because of the small numbers of young people involved (it was 2.5% in the previous year) and partly because of difficulties in tracking this group. Nevertheless, the unfavourable contrast in opportunities between looked after and non-looked after young people highlighted in the table is a considerable embarrassment in a country with strong traditions of valuing access to education.

One reason for the low rate of progression is undoubtedly the relatively high proportion of looked after children who leave school (and often care) at the minimum school leaving age of 16 (Scotland's Commissioner for Children and Young People, 2008) with few or no qualifications. This contrasts with experience in Scandinavia, for example, where much higher proportions of children in care remain in school sufficiently long enough to gain qualifications required for entry to higher education (Höjer, Johansson, & Hill, 2011).

[Table 1 about here]

There are some important caveats which contextualise the data in Table 1. First, the definition of looked after children in Scotland includes those who have been placed on 'supervision' by a children's hearing<sup>1</sup> with no condition of residence, i.e. they remain at home with their family. This

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<sup>1</sup> In 1971 children's hearings took over from the courts most of the responsibility for dealing with children and young people under 16, and in some cases under 18, who commit offences or who are in need of care and protection. See [www.chscotland.gov.uk](http://www.chscotland.gov.uk) for more information.

group accounts for almost 40% of Scotland's 16,000 looked after children. It is now known that, as a group, children looked after 'at home' have lower school attendance and attainment than children looked after 'away from home' in, for example, foster care, residential homes and residential schools. They are also less visible to the social work and education agencies which have traditionally prioritised work with children in residential and foster care settings. The unfavourable comparison of Scotland with other countries in progression of looked after children from school to higher education (e.g. 7% in England), may nevertheless be in part explained by the more inclusive definition of looked after children.

A further explanation is the significance of further education colleges for young people, and adults, with more disadvantaged backgrounds, the considerable amount of higher education which is conducted in colleges, and the relative success of wider access programmes and articulation agreements between colleges and universities which facilitate easier progression from higher education certificate and diploma to full degree qualifications (Thomson, 2008). (See also [www.scottishwideraccess.org/](http://www.scottishwideraccess.org/) for more information about wider access provision in Scotland.)

The importance of further education colleges as an access route to higher education is illustrated in Table 2 which shows that of 45 applicants to the University of Strathclyde for 2012 entry who declared a looked after background, 35 were attending a further education college or other post-school educational establishment at the point of application. Applicants can declare voluntarily a looked after background through the UCAS<sup>2</sup> application procedure used throughout the UK. This arrangement was negotiated by the charity Buttle UK<sup>3</sup> that awards a Quality Mark to further and higher education institutions in England, Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland which provide additional support for care leavers. The Quality Mark was the result of one of the recommendations of the *By Degrees* study which tracked care leavers into UK higher education institutions (Jackson, Ajayi, & Quigley, 2005). (For information about the University of Strathclyde's Buttle support arrangements, see: [www.strath.ac.uk/rio/informationforcareleavers](http://www.strath.ac.uk/rio/informationforcareleavers).) Voluntary declaration allows university access co-ordinators and course selectors to offer additional support, such as the offer of visits to departments, advice about scholarships and other financial help, and to guarantee year-round accommodation.

[Table 2 about here]

Not all students from a looked after background wish to declare their status and not all students enter via the UCAS route, including those who progress from wider access programmes with guaranteed university places. It is also important to acknowledge that the educational trajectories of formerly looked after children are complex. A more longitudinal approach to care leavers in education arguably shows higher attainment than might be predicted at a younger age (Duncalf, 2010; Jahnukainen, 2007).

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<sup>2</sup> See: [www.ucas.ac.uk](http://www.ucas.ac.uk)

<sup>3</sup> See: [www.buttleuk.org](http://www.buttleuk.org)

It is important not to conflate progression to higher education with other indicators of wellbeing, such as employment, happiness, resilience and satisfying relationships. Nevertheless, there is evidence of a relationship between higher attainment among looked after children and more general stability in the life-course (Martin & Jackson, 2002). Despite low rates of participation in higher education, there is evidence that looked after children are not different from their peers in aspiring towards college or university study (Tzawa-Hayden, 2004). It is within this context of high aspiration that we describe the Who Cares? Scotland scholarship set up to enable young people from looked after backgrounds in Scotland to attend the Harvard University Summer School.

### **Who Cares? Scotland**

Who Cares? Scotland is a third sector organisation (non-profit, charity) which has its origin in a more general movement within the UK in response to an influential report published by the National Children's Bureau, *Who Cares? Young People in Care Speak Out* (Paige & Clark, 1977). Formed in 1978, Who Cares? Scotland began when young people in care got together to share their experiences in meetings facilitated by supportive adults.

Events held in different parts of Scotland followed from the success of local activity and through these events young people in care found a voice which was influential in, for example, developing a charter of rights for young people in care, and contributing significantly to the Government report on residential care, *Another Kind of Home* (Skinner, 1992), the Children (Scotland) Act 1995, and publishing consultation reports on matters raised by young people. For example, the *Let's Face It* report identified concerns of young people in residential care, of which feeling safe and protected was found to be the most important (Paterson, Watson, & Whiteford, 2003; Watson, 2004).

Who Cares? Scotland has been a partner in The Scottish Institute for Residential Child Care (SIRCC) and, more recently, the Centre for Excellence for Looked After Children in Scotland (CELCIS). (For more information see the organization's website: [www.whocaresscotland.org](http://www.whocaresscotland.org).)

### **The origins of the Harvard scholarship**

As part of its 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations in 2008, Who Cares? Scotland commissioned research to consult children and young people living in care settings about how they defined success and how their achievements were recognised and ambitions encouraged. The report of the consultation, *Caring About Success* (Siebelt, Morrison, & Cruickshank, 2008), included a recommendation to the Scottish Government and its partners to 'launch a national campaign aimed at dispelling the myths associated with being in care and to promote positive images of children and young people looked away from home, including the message that they are children and young people first and foremost' (ibid., p. 45). The recommendation was accepted and a media and advertising campaign, using the slogan, *Give Me a Chance: Be Fair to a Child in Care*, was carried out during 2010 and 2011. (The images used in the campaign and further information can be viewed on the campaign website at [www.givemeachancescotland.org](http://www.givemeachancescotland.org).)

Some of the young people consulted said they felt they were missing out on achieving success because of a lack of opportunities. As well as lobbying national and local government, the Board of Who Cares? Scotland felt the charity should set an example itself by creating opportunities which would have a deliberately high media profile and would demonstrate high ambitions for looked after young children. The general slogan, *Reaching Higher* was chosen to embrace these activities. One high profile activity was a Himalayan trek in Nepal, undertaken in collaboration with another non-profit, Community Action Nepal<sup>4</sup>, run by a veteran of Everest and many other famous climbing expeditions, Doug Scott<sup>5</sup>. Scott has since lent his name as Patron of Who Cares? Scotland. (Interested readers can access an archived blog of the trek here: [www.reaching-higher.org.uk](http://www.reaching-higher.org.uk).)

The inspiration for the Harvard Summer School Scholarship was an article in the *Sunday Herald Magazine* by a high school student, Siobhan Murray, in 2008. Searching online for a summer school experience to help her in preparing to go to university, Murray, then aged 17, came across the Harvard Summer School website<sup>6</sup>. With help from her family, she was able to raise the funds for travel and fees. Among the reflections Murray included in her account of the experience, one comment in particular impressed Board members of Who Cares? Scotland.

It still amazes me that my application was even acknowledged or considered, never mind accepted. It wasn't because I am perfect, not by a long shot, but because they believed I showed potential or perhaps more realistically, because I presented myself well on paper. Regardless of the reason, I am grateful. It just shows that opportunities are out there to be grabbed (Murray, 2008, p. 15).

Siobhan Murray was supported by her family, but how much more powerful would the advantages be if provided by corporate parents? Following research, which included making contact with Harvard University staff, the Board agreed to make arrangements to establish a scholarship programme.

The first scholarship was awarded in 2010. A further three young people were supported to attend the summer school in 2011, with funding from the Spark of Genius Trust, and one scholarship was awarded in 2012. It is estimated that the total cost of travel, fees and living costs during the seven-week summer school is £10,000 (approximately \$16,000). The value of the Who Cares? Scholarship is £6,000 (approximately \$9,500), with care agencies and young people required to find the balance. Subject to successful fundraising and applications to trusts and bequests, it is the intention to fund two scholarships per year in future.

### *Application process*

The scholarship is advertised on the Who Cares? Scotland website and information is also distributed by the organisation's workers. A short seven-minute film featuring interviews with scholarship recipients, filmed at Harvard, is available to provide further information for young people and their supporters. The application process involves submission of an application form, including a personal statement outlining the young person's perception of the value he or she would gain from attending the summer school, and a reference from a worker. Applications are then rated, blind, by a selection

<sup>4</sup> See [www.canepal.org.uk](http://www.canepal.org.uk)

<sup>5</sup> See: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Doug\\_Scott](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Doug_Scott)

<sup>6</sup> See [www.summer.harvard.edu/programs/secondary-school-program](http://www.summer.harvard.edu/programs/secondary-school-program)

committee which includes previous scholarship recipients. The successful applicant is then supported to complete the separate application to Harvard. Applicants not selected receive a personally-tailored feedback letter with advice about further opportunities.

### *Support arrangements*

Clearly there are significant safety implications for a young person in public care attending a summer school in another country and travelling alone. Important selection criteria include workers' attestation that the young person is emotionally, as well as educationally, able to cope with the demands of the programme and to be able to travel independently. Although the secondary component of the summer school is open to children aged 14 and over, the Who Cares? Scotland scholarship is offered to young people who will be at least 16 on the date of travel. Considerable support is provided in relation to course selection, rehearsal of the travel itinerary, student visa application and briefing about living and studying at Harvard.

One of the authors (GC) received financial support from the Carnegie Trust for Scottish Universities and the Glasgow School of Social Work at the University of Strathclyde to make study visits to Harvard in 2010 and 2011. This allowed us to make personal contact with key summer school staff, including the Dean, and also links with US non-profits with similar aims to Who Cares? Scotland.

### **Research component**

Ethical approval was granted by the University of Strathclyde's School of Education Ethics Committee for a longitudinal qualitative study to conduct semi-structured interviews during or soon after return from the summer school, and at least annually thereafter to follow up each young person's progress. Consent to interview is sought in the normal way and it is made clear that the young person is free to opt out of the research and that complying with the research element is not a condition of the scholarship. The young people are asked to give details of email addresses and mobile phone numbers and also invited to nominate additional people who may be contacted should their own contact details change in future.

### **Results**

This research is very much 'work-in-progress' and with only five young people so far in the study population, it is not possible to claim more than case study information emanating from the interviews. All five young people consented to initial interviews and four of these have remained in contact with the authors. Of these five, four completed the summer school programme, while one returned home as a result of not settling in. Of the five, one progressed to university, two progressed to further education colleges, one returned to a further education college, and another returned to high school and gained qualifications to take up a place at university.

It is too soon to be confident about what the interview data are telling us. So far, several themes of interest have emerged. Four are discussed in this paper.

*Encouragement to apply*

All the young people needed considerable encouragement to apply for the summer school. Family members, carers, teachers and other children in the care setting variously provided encouragement.

"Well actually I wasn't going to apply to start with and I spoke with [foster family]...they were like: 'That's an opportunity of a lifetime...just apply, just apply'. So then they helped me."

"My guidance teacher, [Mr X]. He's obviously excited by the thought of it. After I told him, every time I seen him he was like, 'So have you heard yet?'"

The influential Scottish Social Work Inspection Agency research report, *Celebrating Success: What Helps Looked After Children Succeed*, points out that adults give out powerful messages which shape children's attitudes and beliefs about themselves.

Many of the participants in the study talked about the impact on them of the expectations of others. Where important adults had high expectations of the participant, this appeared to have contributed to their success (Happer, McCreddie, & Aldgate, 2006, p. 25).

The authors also argue that shifting adults' expectations of children can be important in helping young people to overcome the barriers caused by past trauma and altering their expectations of themselves. Teachers, in particular, have contact with children in relatively short time windows (e.g. primary school age 5-11; secondary school age 11-16/17) and this narrow perspective may contribute to low expectations of children who present behavioural difficulties in classroom or low motivation for learning at school. Teachers do not routinely meet former students who were unsuccessful at school but who have later become successful in education.

*The opportunity to have a total university experience was appreciated by the young people*

The seven-week summer session provides the full experience of a university or college semester. Students live in halls and are responsible for their own laundry, not a common demand in residential and foster care. They have to make their own travel arrangements around Cambridge and Boston and get to classes and other commitments on time.

"My time at Harvard showed me a different way of life. It gave me more life experiences. I learned how to look after myself. I had to learn to do my own laundry, to study more, to budget, general life skills. I grew up a lot."

A typical feature of the looked after child's world is being transported to and from school, often by taxi. The campus experience is clearly valuable in developing a realistic awareness of college life. This feature is not unique to the longer American summer schools and is also reported in shorter programmes, such as experiential summer camps for foster youth (Kirk & Day, 2011). Kirk and Day also speculate that the social support offered by engagement with peers on campus is an important contributor to the development of resilience in preparing for college life among children in care. This aspect has also emerged in the interviews with the Harvard scholarship recipients. Relationships were not only intense during the campus experience but some have been maintained through social networking.

"I've met loads of people and I'm always with different people so that's really exciting...at home I only have like three close friends and I'm always with them. But here I'm with a lot of different people."

*There were opportunities for young people that were highly individual*

All the young people interviewed could articulate in detail the significant benefits of attending the summer school. These were variously described more generally as 'an experience of a lifetime' and in terms of the educational opportunities afforded by the wide selection of classes available and the study breaks supported by Harvard undergraduate mentors. There were also opportunities which were more individual in nature.

"I like to watch how people from different countries play football, or soccer, as they call it in America."

"...it's really diverse here because of the history, like with America and the slavery and everything. In Scotland it's not really as explored as it is here. Which is why I want to take [African American Studies] – me being from Jamaica – I wanted to know about that."

The latter comment highlights the common experience of a student or academic visiting another country and becoming more aware of their own circumstances, or their home country's culture, as a result of reflecting on comparisons with the host country. Similarly, Kirk and Day in their study of summer camps noted that the experiential process – in the case of the Michigan State University program evaluated – 'contributed to participants' perceptions of the camp as an experience that enhanced their life skills, self-concept, sense of empowerment and purpose' (*op. cit.*, p. 1179).

*There was value in providing a special experience that young people from a looked after background can present in applications and interviews for university*

The life experience of looked after children can be narrow as a result of economic disadvantage and the disruption to a nurturing and fulfilling family life which is the consequence of placement and school moves. The process of application to college or university typically involves presenting softer measures of achievement, as well as examination grades, in applications and during interviews. It is therefore important that looked after children are given opportunities which highlight their individuality and support to present these optimally in personal statements.

"When I went for interviews they said: 'Did you really go to Harvard? What was it like?' I think they would have liked to go to Harvard themselves!"

"Just the name of Harvard really has [helped me]. Like going here even for a week would help a lot."

## **Conclusion**

Looked after children typically exit school education with lower attainment than their non-looked after peers, however, they are not found to have lower aspirations to progression in post-school education. There is general acknowledgement that corporate parents have significant responsibilities to provide better support and encouragement for children in care and care leavers to grasp educational opportunities, since higher attainment appears to be an important protective factor in overcoming the disadvantage associated with being looked after.

The Harvard Summer School scholarships established by Who Cares? Scotland, are explicitly intended to demonstrate the high ambitions expected of corporate parents. The programme is at an



early stage but offers important opportunities to learn from the continuing experiences in education of its graduates.

Summer school opportunities exist closer to home, though universities in Scotland do not have the North American tradition of offering a full menu of credit-bearing courses in regular summer sessions upon which more specialist provision can be formed. Nevertheless, Who Cares? Scotland is also committed to working with other stakeholders to highlight opportunities which exist at home and to encourage agencies to support looked after children to access these<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> See: [www.whocaresscotland.org/our-campaigns/summer-schools-in-scotland/](http://www.whocaresscotland.org/our-campaigns/summer-schools-in-scotland/)

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**Table 1: Destinations of school leavers in Scotland 2010-11**

	Looked after	All school leavers	Looked after	All school leavers
HE	1	36	1	34
FE	33	27	25	25
Employment	6	19	12	23
Unemployed	36	11	47	12

**Table 2: Current education setting and age group of applicants to University of Strathclyde 2012**

At school	10
FE or other post-school	35
Under 21	17
Over 21	28
Total	45