



Commissioner
for
Fair Access



Roundtable Discussion for University Access Staff

Tuesday 24 April 2018, Insight Institute, University of Strathclyde, Glasgow

Purpose of the event

The Commissioner for Fair Access' office, CELCIS and Who Cares? Scotland led a one-day event for staff from HEIs who had a key policy role in supporting care experienced applicants and students. The aim of the event was to generate constructive discussion and share practical solutions for the implementation of the guaranteed offer for those with care experience. Free and frank conversations were encouraged on the challenges posed as well as possible solutions under the Chatham House Rule.

Representatives from nearly all HEIs (except three), Colleges Scotland, Universities Scotland, College Development Network, SFC and SAAS were present and were provided with a position paper in advance. This set the context for discussions in terms of CoWA Recommendation 21, Universities Scotland's Work to Widen Access publication (2017) and the Commissioner's Discussion Paper on Contextual Admissions (2017).

Keynote presentations

Short presentations were delivered by a range of stakeholders to set the scene for later discussion. Vonnie Sandlan (Colleges Scotland), as chair of the event, discussed her experiences as a member of the Commission on Widening Access. Fiona Burns provided the SFC's perspective giving an overview of current data on care leavers in HE and details of the SFC's national ambition that there will be no difference in outcomes of care experienced learners in comparison to their peers. Carly Telford (Who Cares? Scotland Corporate Parenting Ambassador) provided an account of her experiences in education and, in particular, in applying to college and university.

Dr Stephanie Mckendry spoke on behalf of the Commissioner for Fair Access, noting that it should be possible to quickly achieve a sector-wide approach to eligibility and to move towards guaranteed offers even before access thresholds have been decided upon. Dr Graham Connolly (CELCIS) reminded delegates of their Corporate Parenting responsibilities and how these may relate to the guaranteed offer. David Faith (Who Cares? Scotland) spoke about the experiences of care experienced learners, the ways in which their education may have been disrupted and the barriers that many face in accessing higher education.

Finally, Stacey Brash from SAAS provided an overview of the application process, eligibility criteria and evidence requirements for the Care Experienced Bursary.

Discussion 1: Shared definitions of care experience

Delegates were asked to discuss the following proposition and questions.

For coherency and transparency, it would be beneficial to determine a shared definition of 'care experienced', which is not a term defined in legislation, as well as uniform eligibility criteria. If individual institutions have their own definitions and criteria, an applicant may find they are eligible for a guaranteed offer at some HEIs but not others. It is conceivable that an applicant could be presented with different eligibility criteria and different processes for confirming eligibility for each of their five UCAS choices. Further, the way in which their contextual application is considered may differ for each (from a guaranteed offer, through to a guaranteed rate of offer to special consideration but no clarity on what that might mean in practice).

1. *What is your institution's current eligibility criteria for care experienced applicants?*
2. *Would the broad definition of 'looked after by a local authority' comprising the descriptors contained in the SAAS annex be suitable sector-wide?*
3. *Could there be broad agreement to align with the definition used by the SAAS bursary?*
4. *Should there be an upper age limit?*
5. *What might be an effective sector-wide approach to confirming eligibility?*

Eligibility criteria and definitions of care experience differed across institutions. There was broad agreement that development of a shared definition and eligibility criteria would be useful and possible across the sector, with further agreement that SAAS' definition could be adopted by institutions with removal of the upper age limit and with discretion to broaden the definition and assess eligibility for individual cases. There was understanding around why the age limit had been imposed in relation to the bursary but institutions were currently supporting many care experienced students aged 26 and over to great effect and would not wish to narrow their definition in achieving consistency. It was noted there would need to be effort to make it clear to applicants and those supporting them that, if adopted, there would be an age restriction for the bursary but not the guaranteed offer or other institutional support.

It was agreed that processes to evidence eligibility should be made as simple and streamlined as possible so that an applicant only had to complete a form once. One way forward would be for institutions to adopt the SAAS template and, where this was completed at point of application, details could be forwarded to SAAS.

Discussion 2: Shared definitions of 'guaranteed offer' and practical implementation

Delegates were asked to discuss the following proposition and questions.

As has been seen in relation to contextual admissions in general, each institution can take a different approach to both eligibility criteria and to what that eligibility entitles an applicant. Some institutions will guarantee an offer to those who meet the criteria, others guarantee the level of offer and some say it leads to additional consideration on a case by case basis.

For clarity, it is important there is understanding across the sector, and amongst potential applicants and their advisors, of what the 'guaranteed offer' for care experienced applicants will mean in practice. There will necessarily be differences in approach but if each HEI or specific programme can clearly articulate their policy this will aid transparency and raise aspirations and confidence.

1. *What is your institution's planned definition/understanding of the 'guaranteed offer'?*
2. *What guaranteed offers can be made to those with qualifications other than SQA Highers?*
3. *How will guaranteed offers be implemented for those courses with non-academic entry requirements or professional body requirements?*
4. *How will guaranteed offers be implemented for those courses with interviews and additional assessments?*

There was a great deal of variation in interpretation of the 'guaranteed offer' across institutions and disciplines. Some HEIs offered grade reductions, others adopted a case by case approach and at least one had been able to determine suitable alternative offers where applicants were unsuccessful in their first choice. Few institutions had processes in place to provide reduced or guaranteed offers for those entering with non-SQA Higher qualifications, although some institutions were assessing how they might implement this. Some provided support for additional assessments or guidance for those evaluating such assessments, others guaranteed interviews for care experienced applicants.

Proposal to SFC

Considering the discussions of university access staff and the questions and themes that have emerged, we now ask the following of SFC:

1. Decide upon the most useful shared definition of care experience that all HEIs would use and processes for evidencing care experience that can be implemented across the sector.
2. Gather cross-institutional evidence on:
 - a. Institutional definition of 'guaranteed offer' which is written in clear, accessible language
 - b. Policies surrounding guaranteed offers for applicants with qualifications other than Highers/Advanced Highers
 - c. How guaranteed offers may impact institutions and programmes that require interviews, auditions and other assessments
 - d. Policies on repeated attempts to achieve Highers around time out of education.
3. Clarify professional bodies' stance on professional requirements for entry to degree programmes and outline any flexibility that may be exercised e.g. National 5 and Higher English required to study PGDE.
4. Liaise with the National Articulation Forum in relation to guaranteed offers for articulating students.