



Care experienced Student Bursary

Introduction

1. This paper discusses the Care-Experienced Student Bursary. The paper gives some background, Scottish Government and SFC guidance, identifies areas of good practice, and lists some ongoing issues which were raised through the CELCIS survey and from feedback from care-experienced learners through the Hub for SUCCESS and Who Cares? Scotland.

Recommendation

2. CEGG is asked to note the findings in this paper. Some questions have been identified to generate a discussion:
 - Colleges and SAAS already issue guidance on the CESB application. How can this be made clearer? Are there external agencies / organisations who may be working with care-experienced people who are thinking about studying that this could be provided to? Purpose, entitlement, the process, parameters.
 - What other areas of good practice are known?
 - How do we address some of the negative narrative that is emerging around young people's use of the funding and the colleges provision of it?
 - How can we further encourage good practice about the CESB across local authorities, and the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP)?

Background

3. The Care Experienced Student Bursary (CESB) is a non-repayable bursary for learners with care-experience. It was introduced in Academic Year (AY) 2017-18 in higher education, following on from recommendations for care experienced learners in the Commission for Widening Access (COWA) report, '[A blueprint for fairness](#)', published in March 2016.
4. The Bursary was introduced as a non-income assessed, non-repayable grant of £7,625 and was made available to both new and continuing eligible students in higher education (HE). At that time, care-experienced students in Further Education (FE) were awarded the maximum FE bursary level of £4,185.
5. The Bursary was increased to £8,100 per year and extended to students in FE from AY 2018-19 (up to the age of 26), in response to findings from the independent review of FE and HE student support, which recommended that care-experienced students across FE and HE should be able to access a bursary of £8,100 per year.

6. From AY 2020-21 the CESB will be paid to all students from a care-experienced background, regardless of age. In September 2019 the Scottish Government announced the removal of the age cap in the [Programme of Government](#).
7. While the SFC provides student support funding to colleges for students studying full-time on [further education courses](#), the Students Awards Agency Scotland (SAAS) distributes funding to students on [higher education courses](#) at college and university.

SFC Guidance

8. SFC issues national policy for all FE bursaries of which the Care-Experienced Student Bursary is one and includes [Guidance](#) to financial support advisors. The recent Guidance includes:
 - The specific categories for care-experienced: adoption, foster care, formal kinship care arrangement by the local authority, residential care, compulsory supervision order with a/no condition of residence.
 - Students should be issued with clear bursary award letters each year including a payments schedule to allow students to budget effectively.
 - Attendance: Colleges should have regard to the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 when considering the position of students with protected characteristics and care-experienced students. Colleges may exercise increased flexibility when considering attendance, specifically, the College should take into account students' wider circumstances and, as long as students are engaging in their learning, the College can allocate funding.
 - Documentation: Students who are care-experienced may have difficulty in accessing documentation where they have become estranged from their families and support networks. If a student who is care-experienced cannot access the required documentation the College may approve an award to the student at its own discretion.
 - Backdated payments: Colleges may exercise increased flexibility when considering backdated payments for groups of students impacted by legislation (e.g. care-experienced students). We recommend that Colleges extend the deadline for receipt of a complete bursary application, qualifying for backdated payments, up until the required date of SFC credit funding (1st November for FT programmes). Where possible, any large sums due to the student should be split out across a number of instalments, rather than paid all at once.
 - The offering of financial advice to students who are successful in applying for the Care-Experienced Bursary.
9. SFC works with SAAS to try to ensure the guidance to HE students is consistent with FE students at College.

Deputy First Minister letter to local authorities

10. In response to some issues raised during the first year of the CESB John Swinney MSP wrote to all Chief Executives of each local authority in Scotland in June 2019 to clarify the [intention and purpose of the Bursary](#). He clarified that the Bursary was not intended that it would be a replacement for any other financial support received by this group.
11. In the Policy Note attached to the letter it states that “Corporate Parents should therefore strive to achieve positive cultural change by:
 - Ensuring that care-experienced students, including care leavers, are in receipt of all available financial support, ensuring maximum use of discretionary powers and funds.
 - Providing ongoing person-centred, non-judgmental and non-punitive support for all care-experienced students.
 - Proactively removing financial and practical barriers for those with experience of care who wish to enter and sustain a place in FE or HE.
 - Reducing any negative impact on the financial security and wellbeing of all care-experienced students.
 - Proactively taking action to reduce the impact of financial precariousness on the emotional wellbeing of care-experienced students.
 - Aiming for consistent practice across all local authorities.
12. The summary reads:

“The Care-Experienced Bursary should be recognised as a means to remove barriers including debt and to incentivise entry into HE and FE for care-experience learners. The Care-Experienced Bursary should be seen as part of a wider suite of support that can be provided to improve outcomes for people with experience of care. As such, this award is intended to enhance rather than replace any existing financial and practical support provided by Local Authorities and other relevant Corporate Parents.”

Good practice

13. There is much good practice in the college and university sectors. [Fife College](#) has a separate webpage solely on the Bursary, others like [Forth Valley College](#), [City of Glasgow College](#) and [New College Lanarkshire](#) have a leaflet for prospective and current care-experienced students which detail the support and guidance available at the college including who to contact in an emergency. All colleges and universities have a dedicated care-experienced webpage with a named contact; the links to each one are at the foot of this [webpage](#). Some include video contents of students talking about care-experience and their educational experience like for example at [Queen Margaret University](#) and the [Royal Conservatoire](#).

14. Many colleges and universities also offer personalised financial advice as recommended in the CELCIS Survey of Care-Experienced Students. We know that some colleges prefer to signpost students to other resources for example the Money Advice Service. Other colleges are offering practical work on issues like gambling awareness. The [University of Dundee](#) has a Money Matters webpage within Student Funding with pages on Budgeting, Borrowing, Banking and [OSCAR the Pig](#), a template for financial planning.
15. SAAS, on behalf of the Scottish Government, is developing an information portal to be called Student Information Scotland, that will cover information and guidance on student finances and funding across Further and Higher education. The portal is due to be available in June 2020. It is for all students, not just for those with care-experience.

Themes from the CELCIS survey

16. A few issues regarding the Bursary were identified in the CELCIS care-experienced student's survey. We have categorised them as follows:

Differences between university and college payment schedules

17. SAAS tends to pay HE students monthly while FE students tends to be paid either weekly or fortnightly. For some students, this could be helpful and appropriate. Some (particularly older) students brought up the difficulty of most household bills having to be paid monthly and this causing a problem if they receive payments weekly.

Differences in how colleges and universities are using discretion to withhold payment - attendance

18. A couple of survey respondents highlighted that colleges were treating the bursary in the same way as EMA and requiring 100% attendance in order to receive the full bursary payment. Students described payment being 'docked' or withheld, despite providing evidence of special or extenuating circumstances.
19. In response SFC guidance is clear that flexibility and discretion should be applied and that care-experience should be treated as a protected characteristic. We need to ensure this is being adhered to consistently in practice. SFC is due to be hosting a workshop on attendance with college funding team representatives in December, which will look at best practice, including in relation to care-experienced bursary recipients.

Holiday periods

20. Survey respondents cited the issue of the bursary not covering holiday periods as a factor which caused them significant worry. CELCIS understands that this issue might be more difficult to address for college students where it is often

not clear whether they will go onto a further year of study but for university students who have enrolled on a four year degree, many said that they would welcome their payments being split evenly over 12 months to avoid the stressful summer period where they have to interact with benefits agencies or take on more employment.

21. We know SAAS is exploring the option of payments to cover a full calendar year from the date of commencement of their course rather than the academic year, however there might be complications for example if the student was to leave their course then they would have received more funding if they were being paid over 9 months than 12 months. It may also be difficult for college students as technically when their course concludes (i.e. May or June) they are no longer students at the college.

Return of adult learners

22. Whilst the demographic of college students tends to be younger at the moment, there is the possibility that with the age cap being lifted on the bursary from next year, we could see a higher number of adult returners attending college. The CELCIS research highlighted that finances are a particular concern for older students due to them being more likely to live independently, have dependents, have caring responsibilities, or a combination of these circumstances.

The HUB for SUCCESS findings

23. The [HUB for SUCCESS](#) asks their care-experienced learners about the Bursary which they generated from direct discussion across the HUB partnership. Their input is detailed in **Annex A**. Some issues identified are:

Another process, another system

24. Includes payments taking too long to process, proving care identity can be challenging, and receiving large amounts in one go can be problematic if budgeting is an issue.

Communication

25. It is reported that there should be clearer guidelines on eligibility, the parameters (how many years can it be claimed?), attendance criteria, when payments are made, what happens should the student leave their course.
26. There should be greater consistency in practice between local authorities for example regarding payment, or not, towards accommodation. Who Cares? identified an inconsistency at North Ayrshire Council whereby FE students are not be entitled to have their rent paid unlike HE students.

Who Cares? Scotland findings

27. Who Cares? Scotland's findings also mirror some of the issues that have been mentioned previously. Additional ones include:

Movement between benefits system

28. They have heard from members about the challenge of the Bursary interacting with Universal Credit. They're embarking on more evidence gathering about Universal Credit from their members, however it is currently known that the gap over the summer requires application for additional financial support and there are challenges associated with Universal Credit seeing the bursary as income.

Pressure from friends and family

29. There have been concerns from one college where pressures have been applied by family and friends to share the funds the student receives from the Bursary – there have been a few instances of students directly sharing this information with the Student Support Team, and other instances where the team has picked up that this might be the case.

Inconsistency of practice

30. SFC is aware of some incidences where the eligibility guidance has been misinterpreted in the first year of the policy, in 2018-19, which has caused confusion and disruption for returning FE students. We hope these cases are rare and are working with the college and Who Cares? Scotland on this.

Questions

31. Here are some questions for CEGG:
- Colleges and SAAS already issue guidance on the CESB application. How can this be made clearer? Are there external agencies / organisations who may be working with care-experienced people who are thinking about studying that this could be provided to? Purpose, entitlement, the process, parameters.
 - What other areas of good practice are known?
 - How do we address some of the negative narrative that is emerging around young people's use of the funding and the colleges provision of it?
 - How can we further encourage good practice about the CE Bursary across local authorities, and the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP)?

Further information

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Bursary Update November 2019

Bursary process and implementation

Processes;

- Students report the gap between application, matriculation and then payment of bursary is too long.
 - The attendance policy causes anxiety, stress, confusion. CE students find themselves caught up in *another* process– it can lead to a cycle of poverty – if full payment is not given for attendance reasons this can impact on their ability or motivation to attend.
 - If students have not been paid on time they can then receive large amounts in one go – this may not be useful for those who find budgeting difficult to manage
 - Some students who have missed or misunderstood part of the process of application and or for example not- provided the correct evidence can result in long delays in award being made.
 - Students have reported frustration of being caught in yet another system
 - Proving care identity and finding out if you are care experienced can be challenging and also impact on delays and additional trauma
 - Young people who have been granted the right to remain, cannot access the bursary if their right to remain is granted after January of the academic year they began.
- ✓ Solution – Could there be a flag on payment systems to alert finance to the fact that the student is care experienced and as such further consideration should be sought when deducting payment
 - ✓ Good corporate parenting - When alerted to issues, via the HUB - Edinburgh College has responded quickly to resolve issues raised

Communication;

Who can get the bursary?

- Clearer guidelines and clarity about who is entitled to the bursary? Who should take the lead in communicating this, how are we reaching out to those who have left care and have no contact with their LA?
- Communication to reach those students beyond the boundaries.
- Bursary is available to students, for example studying in England at HE level via SAAS - however students studying at FE level cannot access the bursary if studying out with

- Scotland – this seems like an unfair system – children can be moved across the Border through no choice of their own – why should they miss out on this vital support?
- How many years of the bursary can you access at FE level? Is there a limit to this?
 - Clear guidelines given about “repayment” of the bursary should you drop out of your course (applicable to SAAS administered bursary) i.e. at what stage of your course would this apply
 - Clear information about how and when the bursary will be paid should be available
 - Clear information on application to FE level about attendance policy and the impact of this – communicate this clearly at the outset.
 - CE students on apprenticeships and attending college e.g. 1 day per week – feel like they are missing out?
 - Clear guidelines given to the Local Authorities about the bursary – what it is intended to support and which benefits – i.e. support for accommodation for care leavers should not be affected and or means tested.
 - Bursary should not be income assessed/means tested.
 - Address inconsistency in practice across Local Authorities – some will continue to support paying towards accommodation costs for CE students studying and some don’t apply this rule?
 - The Bursary is incredible supportive, but if a young person needs a study pause and drops out – the bursary, for some is their only means of income and if it is withdrawn immediately this can have serious repercussions. If you drop out of your course then your income is gone.
 - The movement between benefits system and bursary can be confusing and worrying – especially if you have dropped out.
- ✓ Creativity -Some local authorities being creative in approaches – for example – could the SAAS summer rent costs be paid to Foster Carers no longer in receipt of payments (but still caring for CE young people). Could Through Care and After Care be more creative in who they pay accommodation costs too? I.e. if a young person has decided to stay with friends of partner’s family – could the accommodation costs be paid for these arrangements and not just the more formal arrangements – i.e. halls of residence flat share etc.?
 - ✓ How can we share good practice about the bursary across Local Authorities?
 - ✓ Can the CE bursary include those on part time placements or those wishing to studying night school and still allow them to work?
 - ✓ Ensure those students who continue to work are not penalised – i.e. are they expected to pay for accommodation costs because they are working and in receipt of the bursary – Local Authority processes
 - ✓ Some local authorities realised that the bursary was being income assessed, i.e. in financial assessments for Kinship Carers – this was addressed and monies lost repaid.
 - ✓ Positive feedback received about the CE bursary from students and foster carers – reporting positive impact.
 - ✓ Could part time Access Course be considered for the Bursary – these courses are a good route for CE learners who have left school at 16 with little or no qualifications – or often may be their only route into FE and HE.