

Targeted career support for care-experienced academics would help create a new 'effective pipeline,' study says

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Care-experienced academics should be given additional support by universities because of the impact their early lives have on their career pathways, a new study says.

Those who spent time in the [care system](#) as children often have high levels of self-reliance and a willingness to seek help. But the uncertainties of academia can have a strong impact on their [mental health](#) and many were skeptical about long-term [career](#) planning, according to the research.

Academics who took part in the study called for a more effective pipeline to boost the number of future care-experienced people in the profession. The first report from the study by Neil Harrison and Simon Benham-Clarke from the University of Exeter also argues that schools could do more to inspire learners and demystify professional careers, with stronger and more visible 'second opportunity' routes for [young people](#) whose education is disrupted.

Researchers interviewed 21 care-experienced people working in academia. All had been 'in care' when they were children, usually due to neglect or maltreatment within their families, and had therefore faced significant challenges in their educational journeys.

Most highlighted the disrupted nature of their schooling, although school was a place of safety and success for some. This meant the precarities and instabilities of contemporary academia were a strong constraint for participants. It could evoke earlier periods in their lives, generate

additional anxiety and risk being a deterrent.

Few participants in the study had anticipated a career in academia. More important were incremental enabling steps that each reinforced ideas of success and opened up new opportunities. Many now valued the scope their academic role gave them to help people, including students in general—but also specifically care-experienced learners and those from other marginalized groups.

Professor Harrison said, "Little attention has yet been paid to career planning for care-experienced graduates or supporting transition into postgraduate study. Care-experienced students often thrive in higher education and achieve highly, although little is currently known about those who build on this success to pursue their own academic career. This study was the first attempt to enumerate and understand the working lives of care-experienced academics."

"Participants often mentioned the absence of family 'safety nets'. This meant fewer resources to 'ride out' any periods of unemployment or provide back-up housing options. Compared to their peers, they felt at a marked disadvantage with less freedom to pursue their career. Two had recently left or were considering leaving academia because of the repeating cycle of seeking new short-term contracts and financial insecurity."

"Universities could do more to recognize and address the constraints faced by care-experienced academics and others who face challenges in building a career in higher education. It is vital that we have diversity in the profession and many of our participants had drawn on their 'expertise through experience' to become effective educators or researchers in disciplines like social work, sociology and education.

"Higher education is enriched by having more academics from different

backgrounds. Government, research funders and universities need to provide more financial stability and additional support through mentoring programs."

The paper "Climbing the ivory tower: agency, reflexivity and the career pathways of care-experienced academics in [higher education](#)" is published in the journal *Higher Education*.

More information: Neil Harrison et al, Climbing the ivory tower: agency, reflexivity and the career pathways of care-experienced academics in higher education, *Higher Education* (2024). [DOI: 10.1007/s10734-024-01214-0](#)

Provided by University of Exeter

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