

Care-experienced students in higher education: A case for re-figuring higher education worlds to widen access and further social justice

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Abstract

While the higher education (HE) literature highlights how the sector is designed for a typified imagined student, the issues are particularly acute for care-experienced students. The dominant HE discourse assumes that all students will be able or want to participate in 'stereotypical' aspects of student life and have stable networks to offer emotional, practical and financial support. Here, we deploy Holland et al.'s formative heuristic of *figured worlds* to interrogate how socially and culturally constructed realms and artefacts establish 'givens'. People 'figure' who they are through navigating different realms which are conceptually and materially produced. We take particular inspiration from *figured worlds*' focus on unequal power in social space; socially and institutionally endorsed understandings of how things 'should' be celebrate certain subjectivities and ways of 'doing' university while marginalising others. The paper discusses biographical-narrative interviews and collaborative analysis with six students with experience of foster, residential and kinship care, all studying at a post-1992 English university. Crucially, conversations highlighted participants' exceptional maturity, educational passion and tenacity. Yet challenges remained. This paper focuses on four domains where our participants felt forced into peripheral subjectivities: student accommodation, wellbeing support, societies and curricula. Halls became hostile spaces through high

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rents, late-night/loud drinking cultures and their transitory nature. Wellbeing services felt inimical when designed for quotidian anxiety and stress, neglecting more complex stories. Similarly, society membership fees, requisite team kits and 'cliques' materially and symbolically constricted participants. Finally, specific areas of curricula and pedagogical delivery posed problems, namely when traumatic and/or painful content (e.g. domestic violence and safeguarding) was not assumed to relate to anyone in the classroom. Despite these barriers, participants continued to navigate their HE journeys with skill and creativity. Although this paper's perspective is partial, we argue for theorising the holistic student experience through the lens of *figured worlds*. This reveals how norms and practices make dominant subject positions hard to access for care-experienced students, contradicting and undermining their obvious value. In concluding, we discuss how locating problems as structural speaks back to deficit discourses, challenging us to reimagine and reconfigure HE through alternative discourses of worth. Attention is needed within and beyond the classroom; students' lives are multifaceted and played out in multiple *figured worlds*.

KEYWORDS

care experience, higher education, students, widening participation

Key insights

What is the main issue the paper seeks to address?

This paper seeks to raise awareness of the barriers care experienced students can face in Higher Education, for example accommodation, curriculum, access to wellbeing services and opportunities to socialise and make friends.

What is the main insights that the paper provides?

In this paper we call for universities to take into account the lived experiences of care experienced people in order to put effective help in place. These changes start with the regulatory body. In order for Higher Education to prioritise the needs of this group there is a need for the regulatory body to send a stronger message on the importance of doing so. There is a need for universities to make much better use of institutional data so that they can best support care experienced students. We call for care experience to become a protected characteristic in equality legislation, shifting the focus from a moral obligation for universities to a legal requirement.

INTRODUCTION

Within the UK there are concerning and entrenched disparities in access to higher education (HE) for students from a care-experienced background,¹ calling for a need for HE to consider how this could be changed. The latest data for England (2020–2021) indicates that care-experienced students² are over three times less likely to progress to HE than 'all other students', a gap that has persisted for over 10 years (DfE, 2022). Similarly for Scotland, in 2020–2021, 1.9% of Scottish-domiciled entrants to undergraduate courses at Scotland's colleges and universities were care-experienced, which is up from 1.7% in 2018–2019. For Wales there is currently no public data available for care-experienced students in HE.

Following several decades of widening participation—with cohorts becoming increasingly diverse—there is still a limited palette of 'legitimate' HE subject positions. More familiar exclusions, for example those related to race and social class, can be compounded by a further intersection of care experience. Research indicates that care-experienced students in HE often find universities to be fragmented, marginalising and alienating because they are designed for a 'typified' student (Harrison, 2017; Stevenson et al., 2020; Ward et al., 2017). Drawing on a *figured worlds* lens (Holland et al., 1998), this paper aims to challenge (mis) understandings of care experience. The discussion highlights the dangers of structural issues and stereotypes which maintain and reinforce the marginalisation of care-experienced students in HE. Applying Holland et al.'s (1998) lens to identity formation supports alternative ways of 'sorting' people, recognising each other, valuing different outcomes and alternative ways of relating to each other. We emphasise the need to reimagine and reconfigure HE, offering alternative discourses for viewing the lived experiences of care-experienced students. The paper draws on data from a wider research project which sought to explore the following questions:

1. What are the pedagogical, social and wider experiences of care-experienced students at university?
2. How can universities best support them?
3. What (if any) barriers do they face in relation to on-course engagement, attainment and progression throughout and beyond their degree programmes?

THEORISING THE EXPERIENCES OF CARE-EXPERIENCED STUDENTS THROUGH A FIGURED WORLD LENS

In this paper, we explore the representations and experiences of care-experienced students through the lens of *figured worlds* (Holland et al., 1998). This refers to people's ability to form and be formed in collectively realised 'what if' realms. For example, if the only aim of HE was to socialise and make friends, this would add value to certain behaviours (e.g. staying out late at parties, being with lots of people) while devaluing other behaviours which do not fit with this (e.g. studying alone in silence). People have the propensity to be drawn to, recruited to and formed in these worlds, which Holland et al. (1998) explains in more detail:

Figured worlds take shape within and grant shape to the coproduction of activities, discourses, performances and artefacts. A figured world is peopled by the figures, characters, and types who carry out its tasks and who also have styles of interacting within, distinguishable perspectives on, and orientations toward it. (p. 51)

The above suggests that realms are socially, culturally and temporally specific activities and milieu which are continually produced by interactions of the people within them. When people enter these realms, this can ascribe certain roles. People also 'self-author' these roles, based on what is available to them in the *figured world(s)* in which they live (e.g. cultural tools, language). So, the individual and their social context are seen as one, or at least mutually dependent on one another. People learn how to interact with each other based on the way in which worlds are figured. Some *figured worlds* are completely inaccessible based on position, i.e. whether you are hailed into a particular *figured world* depends on who you are and your experiences. Hence, the authors call for exclusionary *figured worlds* in HE to be reconfigured to support care-experienced students to access and thrive at university.

The *figured world* lens can be a really productive tool for viewing the lives of care-experienced students. It raises awareness of how typified and narrow understandings underpinning HE practices make it more challenging for care-experienced students to thrive. Mirroring Burke et al. (2016), we argue that narrow and reductionist thinking ignores the substantial structural, systemic and cultural inequalities care-experienced students face. A recent example includes the regulatory briefing on how universities can support care-experienced students (Office for Students, 2021). It draws attention to perceived negative characteristics, such as poor exam results, mental health trauma and increased rates of special educational needs, while also emphasising the potentially transformative potential of HE in 'normalising' students. As the dominant discourse lacks an informed structural account of these dynamics, the 'problem' is implicitly individualised and located as having been in care, rather than focussed on the social conditions and judgements which care-experienced people are subjected to. This argument mirrors Ward et al. (2017), who discuss how students felt their experiences in care were viewed negatively by others and were commonly imposed as a de facto (pejorative) lens by people around them to interpret their experiences.

In this paper, we argue that the *figured world* lens helps us to understand how negative interpretations of care-experienced students can serve to make their lives more difficult. We know that care-experienced students face some of the most pronounced marginalisation (Hauari et al., 2019) resulting in many resisting this label completely or until later in their HE journey (Mayall et al., 2015; Pinkney & Walker, 2020). For the most part, this seems to be connected to the level of societal stigma attached to the label (Bluff et al., 2012). However, other reasons include receiving intentional or unintentional differential treatment (O'Neill et al., 2019) and fear of being excluded or turned down by institutions (Ellis & Johnston, 2019; Mayall et al., 2015). This is due to specific realms and understandings of people which empower those who conform to understandings of the typical student while marginalising those who deviate from these norms.

Furthermore, as Askew et al. (2016) note, care-experienced students who have chosen to share information about their background may have compassion and understanding for others who choose not to, owing to legitimate concerns about labelling. Within universities, therefore, there is a need for concerted action across the whole student body and staff. Institutional communities need a deeper understanding of what it means to be care-experienced and processes and environments which are compassionate, empathetic and validating of people's lived experiences (Ward et al., 2017). This highlights the value of the *figured world* lens in supporting understandings of different ways of thinking about care experience, moving away from dominant negative discourses to listen and value the lives of these students. Ideally, if we were to reconceptualise HE, multiple fluid discourses or 'truths' would work to empower and elevate all students, rather than empowering some and excluding others. If negative understandings were properly addressed in a constructive way, care-experienced students might feel more confident to disclose.

Within HE, there is also an assumption that the student journey to and through HE is a linear process, as demonstrated by the ending of HE and local authority care leaver's

bursaries when students reach 25. If we apply the *figured world* lens, this highlights a narrow way of thinking or realm in which the expectation is that the typified student will have progressed to university by the age of 25. We argue that this way of thinking is unhelpful as it ignores the complexity of learner trajectories, creating barriers to progressing to HE for those students who do not follow the 'typical' learner trajectory. This is particularly concerning for care-experienced students as the literature indicates that they may enter HE relatively later in life or be more likely to change course or have pauses in their journey (Harrison, 2017). However, the evidence also urges caution with interpreting this through a deficit lens. For example, interviews with social work students who had previously been in local authority care suggested that entering HE and particularly this professional pathway later in life allowed them the time to process prior (traumatic) experiences and feel emotionally prepared for a course that can 'bring up a lot of things that you sort of put in the past' (Ward et al., 2017, p. 342). Moreover, entering a programme such as social work later in life can mean having more time to gain skills, professional expertise and relevant life experiences that may allow students to thrive (Mayall et al., 2015). Gazeley and Hinton-Smith (2018) add further weight to this anti-deficit argument, suggesting that prior experiences can, later in life, resource people with a range of strategies to navigate HE and particular motivations including wanting to 'give back' or 'help others'. The *figured world* lens is therefore helpful in challenging these perceptions of linear trajectories and flagging how HE processes could be reconfigured, i.e. how financial support could support later transitions to HE.

Throughout this paper we argue the value of a *figured world* lens lies in highlighting how typified, narrow and reductionist understandings within higher education work to alienate and exclude care-experienced students. In the following discussion (across both the literature review and data analysis) we focus on four key areas our research participants considered most salient to their experiences. These comprise wellbeing, student accommodation, opportunities to socialise and build support networks, and teaching and learning.

Norms around student accommodation

Within HE there is a realm of thinking where all students are expected to live in halls for their first year and then move into shared houses for subsequent years, usually vacating housing for the holidays. However, this often excludes the needs of care-experienced students who may not have family they can stay with during the holidays, an insight identified in a number of studies (Centre for Social Justice, 2019; Ellis & Johnston, 2019; Pinkney & Walker, 2020). In addition, many care-experienced students progress to HE at a later point in life (Harrison, 2017), creating challenges in terms of fitting into a 'typified' student life. For example, some may already have their own home or a partner. Applying the *figured world lens* is helpful in highlighting how normalised understandings of students and their perceived housing needs may merely alienate and exclude care-experienced students. This lens also highlights the importance of providing care-experienced students with a wide range of housing options so that they can find accommodation that best suits their needs.

There is also an assumption within HE that all students have family support for 'between periods' such as holidays, moving accommodation and graduation (Hauari et al., 2019). However, for some care-experienced students, these periods can be a particular flashpoint of tension (O'Neill et al., 2019). For example, some may have no-one to help them move belongings, meaning multiple trips on public transport or asking strangers for help. This may be particularly difficult when other students have parents or caregivers with them (Hauari et al., 2019). In addition, Baker (2022) has highlighted the need for far more support with accommodation when care-experienced students graduate, and financial support for this transition. Moreover, Costa et al. (2020) emphasises that the prospect of homelessness

post-graduation can be a pervasive fear in light of financial instability. Although their work focuses on estranged students, there are overlaps with care experience, as some care-experienced students may also be faced with the same precarity in these transitory periods. The compound challenges students may be navigating in the current environment are highlighted in a detailed student quote in O'Neill et al. (2019):

Nobody helped me move across the country to university. [Name of University] told me they could give me a place in halls all year round but didn't mention that my placement would be made up of short stays in different halls over summer—I had to move 5 times. Most of these moves, I had to be out of my accommodation by 10 am but I couldn't get keys to the next flat until 12 pm. I had nobody to help me do all of this, my mental health deteriorated, and nobody seemed to care. I did ask for help and point out the problems. My rent was also supposed to be paid by my council, but councils never pay on time. The university kept sending threatening letters and phoning me asking for payment despite me explaining constantly and providing details of my TCAC22 worker. This was resolved by the care leaver coordinator. (p. 40)

Not having another home to go to or a place to store belongings during the holidays can draw attention to differences in students' experiences which can be a source of anxiety and distress (Ellis & Johnston, 2019; Evans, 2018; Stevenson et al., 2020). The typified figuration of HE is predicated on the assumption of family support and multiple abodes. Therefore, when campuses are extremely quiet during holiday periods—as friends, housemates and coursemates temporarily disappear—this can be especially challenging. Likewise, living off campus in private accommodation, particularly during the first year of undergraduate study, can make it harder to form networks or become part of academic or campus life, although those living in a family home may already have a good support network outside of university (O'Neill et al., 2019). This highlights the importance of applying the *figured world* lens to understand the plural and lived experiences of care-experienced students, ensuring that their circumstances are reflected and addressed in university planning.

Support networks, societies and socialising

When university is marketed to potential applicants (e.g. at university open days), social opportunities are openly and actively promoted, such as the wealth of university societies on offer and club nights usually involving alcohol. This reflects a typified understanding where all students are assumed to have the time, money and interest in engaging with these opportunities. The *figured world* lens highlights the dangers of this way of thinking in alienating care-experienced students (and others who do not fit these norms). Socialisation related to partying or alcohol may be alienating for some care-experienced students (Ellis & Johnston, 2019; Stevenson et al., 2020). Alternatively, others—particularly mature students—may be more likely to be working to support themselves through study or have other commitments, so it can be hard to find the time or money to engage in social and induction activities (Cotton et al., 2014, 2017; Ellis & Johnston, 2019; Stevenson et al., 2020). This suggests a need for universities to offer and promote a wide range of social opportunities which reflect the diversity of their students.

The wider normative topography of HE (especially in more elitist spaces) can also make it structurally harder for care-experienced students to form social connections with university peers, something which for some can be a concern. For example, in Harrison (2017), a

student commented 'I underestimated how alone and different I would feel' (p. 61). Hauari et al. (2019) also commented:

Some care-experienced students were much more aware of the potential social challenges they would face in attending a university where their peers would be of very different social backgrounds to themselves. University selections were in some cases made based on perceptions of where they would feel most comfortable socially, and therefore able to 'belong'. (p. 30)

The literature clearly evidences the importance of support networks and sense of belonging in order for students to thrive in HE (Read et al., 2020; Thomas, 2002). With particular reference to care-experienced students, the research insights are mixed—some care-experienced students have a wealth of support around them, whereas for others this can be limited (Pinkney & Walker, 2020; Stevenson et al., 2020, p. 10). There is a danger that 'even where young people have experienced stable, settled and supportive foster or care home environments, they may be quickly propelled into much more independent and isolating circumstances, leaving them vulnerable to loneliness and loss of support networks' (Pinkney & Walker, 2020, p. 6). Given the importance of social networks, this highlights the importance of universities working with care-experienced students to explore what social opportunities they would like, reconfiguring social opportunities (such as societies) to be more inclusive to the diverse needs and interests of these students.

Wellbeing

While there is increased emphasis on mental health within universities, dominant understandings underpinning mental health support fail to take into account the complexities many care-experienced students face when it comes to their own wellbeing. While it is essential not to pathologise whole groups of students, care-experienced students may be dealing with a range of emotional and mental health difficulties while in HE, including issues relating to anxiety, self-esteem, confidence and feelings of isolation (Ellis & Johnston, 2019; Hauari et al., 2019; Pinkney & Walker, 2020). This may, in part, reflect the high rates of children in care arrangements who are diagnosed with a mental health condition or special educational needs, or issued with an education, health and care plan (Centre for Social Justice, 2019; Pinkney & Walker, 2020). This can have a significant impact on experiences of HE, as 'the past can sometimes affect the present', leading to disrupted studies or potentially withdrawal from a course (Evans, 2018, p. 38).

In addition, mental wellbeing can also be undermined by factors such as particular topics of academic discussion or changes in circumstances (O'Neill et al., 2019) or when students feel their institution was not prepared for students in their situation (Harrison, 2017). While counselling and therapy are common forms of mental health support offered by universities, there are significant structural barriers: unclear referral routes, limited clinical expertise, long wait times and persistent disclosure requests (Stevenson et al., 2020). Some may also be dealing with wider issues, such as one student interviewed by Cotton et al. (2014) whose mother was diagnosed with schizophrenia, after which the student needed time away from study to be with her. Therefore, while it is important not to pathologise and assume that all care-experienced students have mental health difficulties, there is a need for universities to proactively work with students to understand how HE can best support their wellbeing. This overlaps with previous sections about the value of reconfiguring societies and university housing to best support care-experienced students to thrive, moving away from an

education system designed for typified students to a system that recognises, understands and celebrates differences amongst students.

Curricula

Higher education is frequently designed for an imagined 'ideal' student: burden-free, mobile, affluent and able to prioritise studying (Tett, 2004), producing exclusionary norms and compounding other inequalities (Burke & McManus, 2011). The *figured world* lens further draws attention to the socially constructed nature of HE as care-experienced students may not conform to constructions of HE designed for the 'ideal' student. Research indicates that care-experienced students may be dealing with additional pressures which may make this ever more complex. For example, they may be more likely to work alongside study to support themselves, sometimes many hours a week, or be managing (mental) health conditions, meaning that balancing academic work alongside other commitments can be challenging (Harrison, 2017; Stevenson et al., 2020). While universities have made strides in providing support related to finance and housing, there is a need to review curricula and pedagogy to ensure that HE is not inadvertently excluding these students (Stevenson et al., 2020) and this needs to reflect an intersectional understanding of identities. For example, research by O'Neill et al. (2019) identified that, amongst care-experienced students, older learners and men may be more likely to report a level of confidence in their academic work, while students of colour and disabled students may feel less able to ask for support or feel assured in their studies.

A further challenge can be particular topics covered as part of curricula which may be distressing. The *figured world* lens highlights the assumption that all students have experienced a smooth upbringing without any life changing and traumatic experiences, resulting in pedagogical delivery that implies that issues discussed happen to 'other people' outside of the classroom. However, Ward et al. (2017) and Mayall et al. (2015) discuss how a number of care-experienced social work students found particular aspects upsetting, including a deterministic approach to teaching attachment theory, a focus on poor outcomes from care or emphasising the negatives of corporate parenting. The students felt that such approaches consistently denigrated care experiences and portrayed them as entirely lacking. Similarly, O'Neill et al. (2019) shared the experiences of one student who explained that 'we had to rate the types and acts of abuse from worst to the unthinkable. I was looking at the paper thinking, all of these things have happened to me. It was hard to hear the discussions in classes' (p. 41). This often ran contrary to how students themselves understood their experience, instead seeing it as something which had its own challenges but also informed and enriched their work and practice (Cotton et al., 2014; Ward et al., 2017). This demonstrates the importance of universities taking the time to get to know their students, especially those from more diverse backgrounds.

METHODOLOGY

This paper draws on a wider case study at a post-1992 university in England. The larger project included both care-experienced and estranged students, aiming to better understand their journeys and (re)shape provision to meet their needs. A holistic view of university life was adopted, including teaching and learning alongside wider spatial and socioemotional dimensions (Dean & Gibbs, 2015; Staddon & Standish, 2012). The paper focuses specifically on the contributions of our care-experienced participants, centred on four aspects where they felt there was the biggest junction between their lives and the structures of HE.

This research was underpinned by an interpretivist, feminist paradigm which aimed to raise awareness of the rich, nuanced and lived experiences of students (Baxter & Eyles, 1997). Paradigmatically, this links closely to the research questions and the *figured worlds* framing. An interpretivist lens encourages a close interrogation of diverse, situated lived experiences and de/constructions of culturally specific social realms that people navigate. Simultaneously, a feminist sensibility continually draws attention to power differentials and inequalities. To activate this, the authors acknowledge the plural, subjective experiences of students and therefore knowledge production (Alcoff, 1995; hooks, 1994). This involved also questioning who is most and least heard 'to avoid being complicit in further victimising vulnerable students' (Burke, 2021, p. 432).

Research design and participants

This research focused on the lived tapestries of a purposive sample of six university care-experienced students, utilising biographical narrative interviews. Owing to the limited sample size (and therefore increased likelihood of identification) and sensitivity of some of the topics discussed, anonymity was paramount. Certain personal information has been omitted from this paper in order to preserve anonymity. However, these participants ranged from 18 to 29 years old, were a roughly equal mix of male and female students and were studying a range of undergraduate and postgraduate taught courses.

Data collection and analysis

After ethical approval was granted, fieldwork took place between February and June 2021. Data collection consisted of two phases, both conducted remotely via Zoom, recorded with permission and transcribed verbatim. The first phase used biographical-narrative interviews (Wengraf, 2001), designed to facilitate a collaborative and supportive space in line with feminist inquiry (Tamboukou et al., 2013). Participants were asked an open-ended question about their HE journey with supplementary open-ended questions based on their original response, using their vocabulary and terminology. Narrative methodologies were a productive strategy. 'Storying' is often a common means of people making sense of experience, making them a distinctly human phenomenon (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Riessman, 1993). As a result, interactions could be more empathic and conversational. Narratives also allow data collection to focus more closely on what is meaningful for participants, compared with a more researcher-prescribed approach within semi-structured interviews (Elliott, 2005; Squire et al., 2008). This helped to unsettle potential assumptions of the research team, decentre our dominance and open up unanticipated avenues of discussions.

Interim thematic analysis by the research team broadly followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) guidance in terms of immersion in the data, generating codes and searching, reviewing and naming themes. This utilised multiple transcript readings to allow an iterative coding framework to become established. We followed an abductive process, drawing deductively on insights from the literature while also allowing new ideas to emerge inductively (Fann, 1970). Transcripts were then more systematically thematically coded in NVivo, followed by an axial coding process to construct linkages and coherent themes (Saldaña, 2009). However, a mechanistic approach to thematic analysis can preclude more meaningful and/or latent insights made possible through creative processes (Finlay, 2021) and reflexivity (Braun & Clarke, 2021). So, we adopted a parallel process, inspired by Mazzei & Jackson's (2009, 2012) 'listening in the cracks' metaphor. To activate this, alongside a more structured coding strategy, freewriting was used. This is a reflexive

form of automatic writing 'aimed at enabling the temporary switching off of imagined, constraining, critical academic audience voices in order to engage in a process of filling the page with words' (Danvers et al., 2019, p. 37). As Danvers et al. (2019) and Mazanderani et al. (2022) have argued, writing—without stopping—for extended periods of time with specific prompts in mind can help 'unblock' thinking and generate new ideas. While some of Mazzei & Jackson's (2009, 2012) more radical post methodological sensibilities proved less fruitful, their ideas offered some beneficial insights. Firstly, it drew attention away from the loudest, most familiar or comfortably articulate utterances (Mazzei, 2009). It also invited us not to view 'voice' as ontologically stable and authentic, opening up alternative interpretations (Mazzei & Jackson, 2012). Finally, it encouraged us to consider insights beyond the scripted, spoken words but also think about what was unsaid, and also how out-of-field influences might shape what was said/unsaid. This aligned with the study's feminist sensibility by attending to means of expression that deviate from normative modes of expression and being heard (Arnot et al., 2004).

Early insights were collated for the participants, who were then invited to collaborate on the final analysis. Participants were provided with ideas about indicative themes and (anonymised) excerpts of raw data in a slide pack ahead of the online conversations. Individual analytical discussions gave students opportunities to comment on the data, such as gaps in the insights, different themes and wording. The authors intended that this would challenge traditional hierarchies in knowledge production and recognise lived experiences as authoritative (Walkerdine, 2021). It also reflected aspirations that the students would be able to actively shape the research insights while also acknowledging the partiality (Alcoff, 2009) and limitations of 'giving voice' (Ellsworth, 1989). The four themes present in this paper emerged directly from the final portion of the analytical discussions, which explored what students felt the biggest tensions and priorities present in the data were. Of these, wellbeing provision was rated as the top concern, although all dimensions (in combination with financial considerations, which are woven throughout the analysis) were viewed as holistically essential.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Having explained how the *figured world* lens can be applied to understand the socially and culturally defined nature of HE and how this can exclude and alienate care-experienced students, in the next section we present and reflect on the experiences of our participants. While participants were often positioned into mismatched, deficit and outsider subjectivities by prevailing discourses, they were also subject to misrecognitions which variously undervalued their strengths, ignored their plural experiences or excluded them from HE. Conversations with participants highlighted exceptional maturity, educational passion and tenacity. Yet challenges remained. This paper focuses on four domains salient to our participants where they felt forced into peripheral subjectivities.

Student accommodation

There were benefits to living in halls, with several participants finding it comforting to always have someone to talk to. For example:

It was nice just knowing, like, you always had someone to talk to. Someone would always be up for, like, going to town with you or things like that. (Abigail)

Yeah it's been nice. I mean, I share my flat with six other people ... I wouldn't describe myself, as you know, an overly party person, like, 'Let's go on a night out, get drunk' ... but I'd rather drink in the flat, you know with other people. I do enjoy having the pre drinks, as they say. So I'd go into the kitchen and be like, 'Yeah let's have a few drinks', but I do feel bad because sometimes they're like, 'Oh, do you want to come out?' and I've just been, you know, I've been too tired or I'm just not feeling it in myself to like go out. (Louise)

However despite this benefit, for Harry and Abigail, halls could be highly exclusionary, chaotic and loud:

I know that [parties] are part and parcel, but why should it have to be like that? It won't just be one person that wants that [quieter/alcohol free halls]. (Abigail)

I don't fare well with shouting, screaming and shouting, which [my halls] would very commonly have. (Harry)

Participants described struggling with 'filthy' flats when housemates did not clean:

At some points it was genuinely just me and my housemate doing all the dishes [...] we just couldn't handle it at that point, it was just too nasty, it was all building up and it was gross. (Harry)

Other participants reported feeling excluded from 'cliquey' spaces where 'everyone's been to private school'. For example, Harry explained:

You get that very obvious feeling of otherness, because you're not involved in things that other people [are] or in the same capacity. (Harry)

Accordingly, this collectively indicates that the normative 'student flat' may be unsuitable for certain care-experienced students. This builds on our earlier argument in the literature review with regard to the importance of considering how student housing could be refigured to better meet the needs of care-experienced students. For our participants, the one-size-fits-all approach of halls as a vehicle for socialising, making friends and partying was alienating for several of our participants. Applying the *figured world* lens, the social and cultural understandings around halls and the first year experience are constructed and maintained by HE and the actors in the environment, e.g. other students. However, this fails to take into account how materially and affectively uncomfortable and even dangerous these spaces may feel, for example when encountered by someone who has previous negative experiences of being around people using substances. This can exclude those students who may come to university with more diverse experiences, such as our participants.

Further, what safe and comfortable accommodation looks like is personal. Harry for example explained:

For people struggling with their mental health, they might be more prone to turning to substances, so in that sense it [alcohol-free halls] can help them control or regulate themselves a bit better, because there's no external influences from others being like, 'We're having a drink'. (Harry)

Harry's reference to the personal nature of what is considered appropriate accommodation is also highlighted in the literature (Ellis & Johnston, 2019; Harrison, 2017; Stevenson et al., 2020). This highlights the importance of taking individual circumstances and needs into account (Ambrose et al., 2021), moving away from a one size fits all approach to an offering which caters to the diversity of experiences and needs.

Our research highlighted that for many participants, the student holidays and expectations that students would move accommodation was difficult. This was not only practical, but also could carry an emotional burden, and potentially indicates HE complicity in making students more materially and affectively precarious. For example Harry commented:

It's really hard to keep moving all the time. I don't know how many others share the sentiment, but personally I found it just difficult having to move constantly. The idea of being in accommodation for a year, having to move because that's all I'm allowed and having to move again was all really overwhelming, because every time prior to that when I've had to move has been a negative experience [...] so having to keep doing that over and over again was annoying ... and re-traumatising. (Harry)

Many of the halls of residence which were open to students for longer periods tended to come with additional charges or higher rents in summer and these were often restricted to certain (more expensive) halls, limiting student choice. These dynamics mirror the problems identified in the wider literature (Hauari et al., 2019; Stevenson et al., 2020). Harry for example commented that:

With the rent, with [my halls] being the price that it was for a single bedroom in a shared flat, it wasn't fun [...] I wasn't really chuffed about that, it was the easiest thing I could sort at that point. I think accommodation, at that point they just told me I was guaranteed in halls, but beyond halls ... Like, my friends were getting houses or rooms for about £450 a month, and I was there like, 'Wow, it'd be so much cheaper'. (Harry)

Students may also need support with rent guarantees, deposits, storage for belongings and guaranteed emergency housing when needed (Centre for Social Justice, 2019; Harrison, 2017) or they have their own homes (Shotton, 2019). Given that care-experienced students may be more likely to be mature and working (as outlined in earlier sections), the additional costs participants face have the potential to exacerbate inequalities in being able to access and thrive in HE. Applying a *figured world* lens helps us to view this extra financial burden as a product of the socially and culturally constructed system where students are assumed to have family members (and the space) to be able to return 'home' in the holidays. Anyone deviating from this (e.g. our participants) faced financial penalties.

In addition to the financial burden resulting from a typified system, participants also found holidays to be a source of isolation as they were acutely aware that they were alone while peers were with family. This insight is mirrored in other research (Ellis & Johnston, 2019; Evans, 2018; Stevenson et al., 2020). Ideally, if we were to re-configure university accommodation around the needs of care-experienced students, flexibility around contract length would be the norm for all students. This could even encourage all students to consider staying in halls during summer holidays, potentially reducing the loneliness experienced by participants.

Experiences of this became more acute as a result of lockdowns during the COVID-19 pandemic. Some were isolated in small moments—feeling jarred by messages from teaching staff hoping that people were OK 'at home, with family', for example. Alternatively, Louise

discussed how during the pandemic her friends went and stayed with family, but she could not, and spoke of feeling isolated. While Louise did go and stay with her former foster carer for a week during the pandemic, she commented:

Not having those support networks, it is hard, because other people, they can go home to their family and stuff like that but with us it's like, where do we turn to? It's quite difficult when you have your friends and stuff but I don't want to put that responsibility on them. (Louise)

This further highlights the challenges outlined in the introduction, with regard to HE often being designed around assumptions that all students have social networks to 'go home' to during the holidays, reducing costs and providing companionship. As a result of these narrow social and cultural assumptions around the availability of family, Louise and others were positioned into 'outsider' roles. This highlights the importance of HE recognising that not all students have families and the need to understand and put support in place which addresses the challenges this throws up for care-experienced students.

Wellbeing support

All students reported having at least one mental health diagnosis or disability, including (complex) PTSD, anxiety, depression, ADHD, autism, disordered eating, dyspraxia and dyslexia. For example Louise who lived with an eating disorder commented:

I don't want it to get too bad. I think it is hard to say to yourself, 'Oh, you need help'. Because I think that's the stigma, people are like, 'Nah, it's not a problem', it's not an issue until it gets bad [...] you can't say you know that's never going to come up again. (Louise)

The high prevalence is coherent with the wider literature (Ellis & Johnston, 2019; Hauari et al., 2019; Harrison et al., 2021; Pinkney & Walker, 2020; Roberts et al., 2021). This may reflect the high rates of children in care arrangements with diagnosed mental health conditions or learning differences (Centre for Social Justice, 2019; Pinkney & Walker, 2020). Alternatively, many may have endured adverse childhood experiences or trauma, impacting on studies, as 'the past can sometimes affect the present', (Evans, 2018, p. 38; Simpson & Murphy, 2020). There is a need to question an apparent deficit in the way realms for meeting the needs of young people in care are socially and culturally constructed. For example, if a norm of investing sufficient central government funding in local authority and mental health replaced the current prevalent neoliberal 'efficiency' one, it is questionable whether care-experienced students in HE would be faced with the same issues that currently present.

While the high prevalence of mental health difficulties needs to be acknowledged by the university in order to ensure sufficient support, it is important that care-experienced students are not stigmatised, instead embracing more complex student identities. Again, this is about recognising and embracing the multitude of different identities, strengths and experiences rather than adopting discourses around the typical student, which then positions other groups into deviant/subordinate roles. For example, Phoenix explained:

We've been labelled as these troubled children, which, don't get me wrong, trauma is part of my identity, I know I have some trauma responses, but it's not my identity. (Phoenix)

Several students praised wellbeing and other support services at the university, explaining that 'university's actually done really good for me and my health'. Wellbeing advisers were particularly admired for their sensitive approach to catch-ups and producing key documents about how best the university can support students. However, some students felt that current provision was not meeting their needs. Some questioned whether the typical strengths-based therapeutic offer was appropriate for issues stemming from childhood trauma. Further, a more prominent issue was the number of counselling sessions offered—generally six to 10—which students argued was insufficient. As a result, some had been referred to an external counselling service but faced year-long waiting lists or were discharged without warning. There are important questions over whether responsibility sits within universities or primary care for the experiences our participants were navigating—and further questions about systematic underfunding of the NHS, now left ill-equipped (Manthorpe et al., 2022). Nonetheless, it appeared to students that their needs had not been considered, and that the *figured worlds* of university wellbeing services were not designed with students like them in mind. Signalling to students that their lives are 'atypical' and 'not our problem' can in and of itself contribute to stigma and poorer outcomes (Rudick & Dannels, 2018). Harry commented on the need for the university to adopt a more continuous proactive approach in supporting care-experienced students:

Within the care leaver population, we would expect, to some extent, for them to have gone through some traumatic events. Not all of us, but a portion of us ... When they referred me to services outside of [the university], it was kind of a 'OK, now you deal with it'. So, there is a need for continuous support, following along with the student not just dropping them. To some extent, they do [...] just refer you and go, 'There you are'. (Harry)

Owing to perceived inadequacies or poor prior experiences within in-house provision, a couple of students were paying privately for therapy or counselling which came at significant personal expense. Accordingly, several requested priority access to counselling:

If [the university] has already recognised that, 'We know you're a group with increased risk so we're going to give you more money and we're going to give you this set person' [...] surely it's easier, if you can find funds for that, to find funds for mental health as well. (Abigail)

This is an example of how narrow and normative understandings of people experiencing mental health difficulties do not allow for differing trajectories. There is a need for a more flexible approach which recognises that students experience mental health difficulties differently and will process their experiences at different rates.

Another student reported that they had been sexually assaulted on campus and felt that the university 'gave me no support'. She commented that it was 'something that happened and then no-one [at the university] cared', feeling that her experience had been forgotten about. As a result, she felt that any support that was available had been 'all external, all off my own back'. Here there is a need to recognise that some students will have more people to turn to than other people and not just assume every student has family and friends they can contact and who can advocate for them.

Societies and socialising

Within HE, the *figured world* lens highlights the assumption that all students can or want to join university social groups such as sports societies, stressing the value of doing so in

terms of the wider student experience. This reflects a perception of the typical student as having the resources (e.g. financial, time) to engage with these opportunities. However for our participants this was not the case and they reported many barriers to joining societies, including lack of affordability, pandemic-related cancellations, being unable to commit the time owing to placements and worries about fitting in. Only Michael and Ellie had experience of being part of a society. Michael's was highly positive; he had also been involved in socialising with other members outside of regular meet-ups. Alternatively, Ellie felt more isolated, describing other members as 'cliquey' and reporting that they rarely spoke to her:

We got told we had to buy all this kit, and that's another reason I was so badly, like, struggling with money, because to be a part of the team you have to have the same things, and I must have spent about £200 on kit, you had to buy the same shoes, you had to have the same uniform. (Ellie)

I don't know if it's just the girls, but like ... [...] I'm not sure if they're just really cliquey, but none of them have actually spoke to me at all. Like, when I'd go to training, I'd kind of just be stood on my own [...] like a kind of bit bitchy, I guess. (Ellie)

Phoenix also commented on his intersectional positionality, and therefore difficulties finding a society for him to fit into, speaking to a broader problem with student societies aimed at (falsely) siloed communities:

There is the mature student society [...] but I'm also part of the LGBTQIA [community] so ... there's no real space for me [...] I know I can try and make a space for me, but am I just going to be the only one there? Which, even then, is just isolating. (Phoenix)

Harry reported he could not justify the cost of joining his course society:

I have put off joining societies including, like, the society directly related to my course [...] I've held off on joining that because it's a fee that I have to pay, and I'm like, I genuinely can't put that money, consistently put away money for a society. [...] no matter how small it is, every little bit I'm trying to keep an eye on. (Harry)

Typified understandings of students created inequalities between those with the resources to engage with societies and those without, such as our participants. If we were to reconfigure university societies, they would be underpinned by a much greater awareness of the diversity of students and their needs, therefore a more diverse offering, flexible structures and removal of gatekeeping to match this understanding.

Going beyond societies, to consider general socialising, participants again reported on the financial inequalities between them and their peers and the awkwardness this created. Louise for example stated:

I mean it's quite difficult because I know as a student, a lot of people are like, they order takeaways, they go on a shopping spree like online, like order some new clothes, and I think I'm not like that. I'm the complete opposite. I'm like, well, you know that money's got to last me, you know till such and such time, so I try and budget. You know, like I ... I can't even think the last time I had a takeaway. (Louise)

This same student reflected on differing perceptions of spending owing to not having a safety net to fall back on in terms of financial help. Louise commented:

Like my flatmates that they were saying how like, 'Oh, I spent so much money this month, I had to ask my Mum for like 20 quid', or you know, 'My Mum did me a food shop'. So it's quite difficult because I think ... because I don't have that, I can't just say, 'Oh yeah Dad can, you know, can you come down and do a food shop for me and drop it off'. So, yeah, that's quite hard. (Louise)

Abigail made a similar comment:

A lot of people have like an allowance or something. And it will be like, it'll be like, ah, 'I'll just call my Dad and get him to put money in my account', and I was like, how? Like ... Yeah. And I think that was quite a shock, I literally never even thought of uni without a student loan. (Abigail)

The assumption that all students have similar financial resources excludes those who are less financially well off, positioning them in the periphery. This can also create challenges in terms of being able to relate to each other. Many of the participants commented on this, for example:

I think I found it quite cliquey and everyone's been to private school, I think that was probably one of my difficulties. I think a lot of people, they'd come from such a different world from me. Like ... and I think that's why I found it really hard at first ... I think it was just, you'd look out your window and you'd see girls and they'd all be dressed the same, like ... in this head-to-toe, in this urban outfitters style, you could tell they'd come from quite well-off families, and even move-in day, all the cars that were moving people in, it was just all very much ... You could tell these people ... It was always their parents moving them in and I think that was one thing ... Because I was kind of dropped off, we went for lunch and then they went home, so it was quite pushed in the deep end, but I think a lot of people's parents stayed for the weekend and stuff, so then that already made me feel a bit weird, because I was like, oh, their parents are still here and they're staying and they get that little bit of extra support. And I think that can sometimes be quite isolating, because you kind of realise it a bit more then, because it's such a big life change. That first night, when you're lying in your bedroom, you're like, I've moved out, have I made the right choice. And I think ... That was probably why I found it hard to settle at first as well, because in the accommodation I think I found it ... I kind of was, like, these people seem quite ... As horrible as it sounds, a lot of them seemed quite superficial, so for me ... I felt a bit out of my depth, I haven't really got anything to talk about, my parents don't have nice jobs and things like that. (Abigail)

These examples from the data again highlight a system designed for the typical student, in which care-experienced participants were on the periphery owing to a mismatched system. If we were to reconfigure HE, there would need to be a significantly increased recognition of the diversity of students and their needs and any HE practices structured to reflect this. Without doing so, care-experienced and other students who do not meet understandings of the 'typified' student will always be positioned in peripheral, outsider roles.

Curricula and pedagogical delivery

As fieldwork was conducted between February and June 2021, a key theme in the data was the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on learning, for example, a participant commented that the pandemic had ‘taken all the fun out’ of university. A big theme was the loneliness of lockdowns, with teaching staff not considering that some students do not have families to ‘go home’ to such as at Christmas. The *figured world* lens is helpful in highlighting that while other students also experienced isolation, for care-experienced students judgements had a particularly profound impact by speaking to a wider construction of ‘the student’. The perception of the typical student as having family to stay with positioned our participants into peripheral subjectivities where they were othered.

Some participants described incidents where they felt they had received effective and valuable instructional scaffolding. Abigail was initially worried about lab work but was delighted to find tutors ‘really guide you through it and you get the handbook and everything’, leading to a growth in self-efficacy. However, students described other moments where they felt unmoored and left ‘to sort of work it out for yourself’ such as being told after not passing an assignment ‘don’t contact us until you have an action plan’ which felt like ‘kind of withdrawing support’. The *figured world* lens shines a light on the assumption that all students are familiar with understanding the sometimes opaque university processes. In addition, this also highlights an assumption that all students have social connections and others that can help make sense of assignment feedback. Data from our research indicated that not all students did feel able to navigate opaque university practices effectively or have people who could support them, positioning care-experienced students into unequal, subordinate positions when compared with the majority of their peers.

Several participants had close relationships with teaching staff, especially postgraduate students and those who began their studies prior to the pandemic, with students praising individual members of staff’s empathy, warmth, humour and ‘unorthodox’ teaching practices. In such cases, participants felt more able to share a little about their background which could lead to important affective benefits including ‘added peace’:

The tutors, they had experience. In fact, one of them had even experience in foster care, so they're an ex-foster carer. Oh, I just felt incredibly comfortable, which is the first time I've ever actually felt fully comfortable on a course. (Michael)

This highlights the considerable value of lived experience in supporting engagement with care-experienced students. However, others had more mixed experiences. For several, this was down to the pandemic which meant it was harder to get to know staff on a personal basis. Others reported more fractious interactions. Although very few members of teaching staff are likely to have direct experience of being in care or fostering, this points toward the value of more connected and emotional relationships in the classroom. As hooks (1994) notes, for learning to begin in a meaningful fashion, teaching should be delivered ‘in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students’ and recognises one another’s presence (p. 13).

Support from peers—formally and informally—was pivotal for learning in HE. In the current context, WhatsApp groups had emerged as one of very few spaces to share worries and solidarities:

If you have, like, a general query on coursework or anything, you can be like, ‘Oh, guys, does anyone have any good resources for this?’ or, ‘Does anyone understand this bit?’ [...] A few people, I messaged independently quite a lot, who I wouldn't have even thought to message before, which has been really nice. (Abigail)

There was this girl which ... She was thinking of dropping out [...] Now she's feeling completely different because she's part of the group chat. (Phoenix)

Discussion of more formal peer-assisted learning schemes did not arise during the first field-work phase. However, during analysis interviews, participants mentioned the notion as a potential response to disrupted education and peer disconnections. In particular, comments highlighted a desire to connect with senior students to talk about how to navigate a degree more generally. While we acknowledge that care-experienced students do not necessarily lack social connections and emotional support, this option and platform for relationship and capacity building may, however, be really valuable for some.

All participants had emerging topics of interest in their discipline. However, placements and practical aspects were often said to be the most fulfilling aspects of programmes. In terms of curricula content, there were mixed views about inclusivity. Michael praised his tutors for producing neurodiversity content, including 'jargon busting and very clear instruction'. Others felt there was scope for improvement. For Phoenix, this meant tutors being more reflective that sensitive or traumatic topics are not objective topics but things that students in that very classroom may have experienced. Other requests related to better knowledge of diverse gender identities (e.g. non-binary) and greater use of content warnings as a tool to support learning. Finally, in a couple of isolated cases, students reported that they 'don't feel challenged at university'. In particular, frustrations emerged when students felt lectures did not expand on readings or preparatory work as this led them to feel that 'you could pretty much survive uni without going to lectures, just do the readings'. There may even be parallels between such experiences and poorer experiences of mental health, in contrast to deficit models. As Hughes (2020) has argued, regular bouts of stretch or challenge (as differentiated from stress) can be correlated with improving wellbeing.

CONCLUSION

To summarise, although this paper's perspective is partial, the authors argue the importance of focusing on the lived experiences of students from a care background and the need to place the requirements of students from these backgrounds at the heart of planning. The appalling statistics on access to HE highlight a need for urgency in addressing this. This starts with the regulatory body—the Office for Students needs to make the access and success of care-experienced students in HE a paramount priority. This will shift the focus to universities to address these disparities through their commitments outlined in their Access and Participation Plan. In addition there is a need for universities to better understand their institutional data and how they could make the support they offer more effective for those students who are currently being failed by the sector. Lastly, we argue the need for care experience to be a protected characteristic within equality legislation as we are currently reliant on universities adopting a moral obligation to support access (optional), whereby if it was a legal obligation, faster progress across the sector would be made, reducing inequalities in HE for care-experienced students.

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None of the authors have a conflict of interest that I am aware of.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared.

ETHICS STATEMENT

Ethical approval was granted by the relevant University Ethics Committee.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Any student who has experience of care, including foster care, residential care or kinship care at any point and for any duration during childhood. This is a more expansive definition than 'care leaver'.
- ² This data refers to those students who have been looked after continuously for 12 months or more.

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