

**CARE EXPERIENCED  
SUSTAINED PROGRAMME  
FOR STUDENTS AND TRAIN  
THE TRAINER PROGRAMME  
FOR SUPPORTERS AND  
INFLUENCERS**

**THEORY OF CHANGE  
NARRATIVE**

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# Theory of Change Narrative: Care Experienced Sustained Programme for Students and Train the Trainer Programme for Supporters and Influencers



## Context

### **Situation**

Higher Education Progression Partnership (Hepp) is a jointly funded initiative by Sheffield Hallam University and the University of Sheffield that provides impartial advice and guidance across South Yorkshire and North East Derbyshire. Hepp aims to encourage more children, young people and adults that have experienced personal, systematic, or cultural barriers to accessing higher education (HE) to consider it as a viable option. Hepp has identified target groups for activity based on their new strategic approach, these are Mature learners, Disabled Students, Care Experienced, Kinship Care, Young Carers, Black Students and Estranged Students. Hepp also works with key stakeholders in the region that already have existing relationships with these groups.

The term 'care-experienced' refers to anyone who has been or is currently in care or from a looked-after background at any stage in their life, no matter how short, including adopted children who were previously looked-after (Adoption UK, 2020). In England the official care leaving age is 18, although young people can leave care from the age of 16, at which point they are designated care leavers. Young care leavers should receive the support of a personal adviser through their local authority until they are 25 (The Office for Students (OFS), 2023). The OFS identifies that those with care experience have significantly poorer educational and life outcomes than the general population on average and are underrepresented in HE. Access to HE is much lower for young people who have been in care. In 2018-19 only 13 per cent of pupils who were looked after continuously for 12 months or more entered HE compared to 43 per cent of all other pupils. New data shows that for 2017-18 entrants the continuation rate of care experienced students was 5.6 percentage points lower than for students who had not been in care. OFS state that all universities and colleges must consider care leavers in their access and participation plans with an expectation that providers will consider supporting all students who have experienced care at any stage of their lives, including those who have been adopted.

Hepp is perfectly positioned as an impartial provider of advice and guidance to support the access of care experienced students. Hepp has existing relationships with virtual schools, foster carer organisations and designated teachers within schools to enable Hepp to connect with students from this underrepresented group.

### **Rationale**

Hepp's main goal (40) is that its "evidence-based, universal and targeted offers are increasing engagement with HE from anyone in our region with personal, systemic, or cultural barriers to access, as directed by the two universities through the HEPP board" (taken from Hepp Theory of Change). Hepp have identified several key activities to help them reach this goal, of which five are particularly relevant to sustained activity and the necessary work with "institutions or individuals who are in positions which directly influence care experienced students". It is felt that improving

knowledge about HE across multiple stakeholder groups (train the trainer) will increase knowledge amongst the target population.

- 10. More people with barriers in our region are choosing to continue their learning beyond level 4 if it is right for them
- 20. There are effective ways to engage people in our region such that if it is right for them, they choose to continue their learning beyond level 4
- 10. Someone or some entity is doing the effective engaging
- 90. Hepp has reviewed the incidence/impact rates of groupings of individuals in their geographical region; and the evidence base for intervention and has worked out what generic content will reach the widest number of people and which groupings should be a priority for tailored intervention and receive specific content
- 100. Hepp has used the outcome of 90 and designed evidence-based, universal offers to reach the widest number of people with generic content as possible and tailored offers to reach specific audiences with specific content where the evidence suggested this is most effective and this has been agreed by the two universities

Hepp has also identified that currently stakeholders, school staff and foster carers have limited or outdated knowledge about HE. This means that they may not understand the opportunities and benefits that could come from HE for care experienced students. Therefore, if the knowledge of stakeholders is increased, they are more likely to engage potential care experienced students in conversations about HE and refer them to trusted sources for further information and guidance. Within students there is a lack of self-belief with a fear of failure both as a barrier to HE but also thinking about failing whilst studying. This is a consequence of students having some form of school disruption either by not attending school or by moving from school to school. They are less likely to hold the necessary qualifications to go onto HE (Specialist Evidence, Evaluation & Research Collaborative HE by Applied Inspiration, 2022).

## **Aim**

The strategic outreach aims to provide positive and immersive experiences of HE, providing opportunities to explore HE, focusing on early awareness and later information, providing simple key messages. This is in addition to a suite of resources and sessions to increase institutions' and individuals' (stakeholder) awareness and knowledge about HE. The information will enable them to realise HE is an option for learners of all ages and that they can confidently advise prospective students or direct them to relevant sources or organisations for more information.

## **Underpinning Theory**

### **Evidence**

The evidence about care experienced students highlights the diversity in their backgrounds, motivations to study and structural barriers they may experience. Hepp has tried various methods of engaging with care experienced students including, summer schools and days of activity for students from year 7 to year 11. All direct activity to care experienced students at times has been challenging

with there not being one point of contact to reach the care experienced students resulting in limited repeat interventions. An extensive literature review was carried out, along with a report written by Specialist Evidence, Evaluation & Research Collaborative HE by Applied Inspiration, to identify barriers care experienced students encounter when accessing HE. It is envisaged that this evidence will be used to inform the resources developed for the intervention. The evidence was identified from the research carried out using Google, Google Scholar, SHU library and reports from OFS, using key words; care experienced students and higher education. The key findings are presented below as barriers.

## **Barriers**

- Finance: Care experienced students are not aware of the financial support on offer and when completing student loan applications, they are confused by the different terminology if not officially in care (e.g., kinship, estranged) when they were in care.
- Demographics: Care experienced students are more likely to fall into one or more other underrepresented groups in HE, for example, a higher proportion suffer from mental and health related problems. As a care experienced student, they are more likely to go onto HE as a mature student with the majority being women. Access to HE is often through vocational routes and alternative pathways.
- Imposter syndrome: Care experienced students lack belonging in further education (FE) and HE. There is a fear of being judged by their background and the social stigma attached from a care background. Care experienced students may have a lack of recognition of their abilities with a large proportion having disruption either by missing school or changing schools.
- HE knowledge: Care experienced students lack knowledge about the HE application process and the different routes available for accessing HE. They may also lack knowledge about the support, accommodation, and student finance.
- Context: Care experienced students are more likely to withdraw from HE before graduation. They may have a lack of knowledge about HE so are unprepared. Local authorities/supporters are unaware of the support on offer so are unable to provide the necessary guidance to put their minds at rest. They have the additional worry about holidays and where they will go.

## **What works**

- Go Higher West Yorkshire ran a programme 'Care to Go Higher' designed to equip key influencers to support care-experienced young people to make informed choices about their educational progression. The programme was found to develop influencers' trust in HE providers, improve knowledge about HE options, raise influencers' expectations for care-experienced young people and highlight influencers' advocacy role (Aldridge, 2021).
- Support strategies which take a student lifecycle approach allow for support to be consistent from pre- to post-entry, minimise students' fears about their future, and enable the transition into postgraduate employment or further study (Stevenson et al., 2020).



## **Assumptions**

Currently, care experience students do not have access to appropriate knowledge that facilitates their transition to HE. Stakeholders, school staff and foster carers have limited or outdated knowledge about HE, so cannot support care experienced transition. This may mean that they do not understand the opportunities and benefits that could come from HE for care experienced students. Therefore, if the knowledge of stakeholders is increased, they are more likely to engage potential care experienced students in conversations about HE and refer them to trusted sources for further information and guidance.

Students may also lack self-belief and have a fear of failure which are barriers to HE, they also fear failing whilst studying. This is a consequence of students having disruptive school experiences; either not attending school or by keep moving from school to school. They are less likely to hold the necessary qualifications to go onto HE.

## **Outcomes**

The outcomes of the trainer model are focused on the impact it will have on the foster carers and stakeholders and their engagement and understanding of HE. The expected change in the foster carers and stakeholders is envisaged to benefit the target group but establishing the connection between the intervention and care experienced access and progression into HE will not be possible.

The outcomes of the sustained programme are focused on the impact it will have on the care experienced students through the activities and the students feeling informed and comfortable to make a choice about HE. Success of the programme is outlined by the students being supported by schools, supporters, and foster carers to attend multiple sessions during the three-year programme. The expected change in the students' aspirations will be supported by the thorough evaluation set out in the form of pre and post evaluation completed each academic year. The data collected and input onto HEAT will confirm whether the student progresses into HE.

## **Long**

In the long-term, stakeholders should be knowledgeable about HE opportunities for care experienced students and feel confident that they can aid prospective students to access the information and guidance they need. Crucial to the success of this intervention is the ability of stakeholders to access and use the knowledge gained through the train the trainer resources and supporting the students in attending the sustained programme.

In the long-term, students should feel more confident and reassured to make a choice about HE, whether that is progressing to HE straight from school, as a mature student or not at all.

## **Medium**

Medium-term change involves developing trust between Hepp and its partners with stakeholders and foster carers. This trust will help Hepp to develop access to care experienced students and for them to advocate for HE.

## **Short**

In the short-term, the train the trainer intervention wants to develop stakeholders in four areas, this should be measurable directly after the intervention.

- Learning: Knowledge related to HE and an understanding of options available to care experienced students through the train the trainer videos.
- Attitudinal: Stakeholders begin to have aspirations and expectations of HE for care experienced students' participation in HE.
- Skills-based: Stakeholders feel equipped to support student choices about HE.
- Experiential: Stakeholders will know where and how to access expertise in HE and support students to attend sustained activity.

In the short-term, the sustained programme wants to develop students in four areas, this should be measurable by pre and post evaluation each academic year.

- Learning: Positive and immersive experience of HE that are seen as realistic, encompassing multiple aspects of student life beyond study.
- Attitudinal: Students to develop familiarity with institutions and have a sense of belonging and choice.
- Skills-based: Activities to focus on simple key messages with flexibility for individual needs.
- Experiential: Students will know where and how to access expertise in HE and the support offered.

## **Programme Delivery**

The intervention activities are designed to meet the aims and outcomes and develop student and stakeholder knowledge and exposure to HE.

## **Inputs**

The inputs into the intervention fall into two categories established: Hepp infrastructure and specific programme resources for the intervention. The intervention will draw on existing Hepp staff, partners (HeppSY, TUoS, SHU), student ambassadors, graduate interns, schools, local authorities, foster care agencies and HeppHUB.

## **Activities**

The main activities that stakeholders and students will be able to access and engage with are:

### Stakeholders/Foster Carers:

- Video Programme: Seven short videos that address finance, support, access routes, UCAS, benefits, myths and one to support asylum seekers and refugees. These videos will be available to stakeholders for them to use in team meetings and staff development in their organisation and for foster carers to watch during group meetings put on by organisations or in their own time.
- Foster Carer Sessions: Delivered by Hepp staff to include content on finance, support, access routes, UCAS, benefits and myths during a 45-minute live session.
- Stakeholder engagement: Hepp will use current meetings and seek out new opportunities to promote resources with stakeholders.

### Sustained Programme for Students

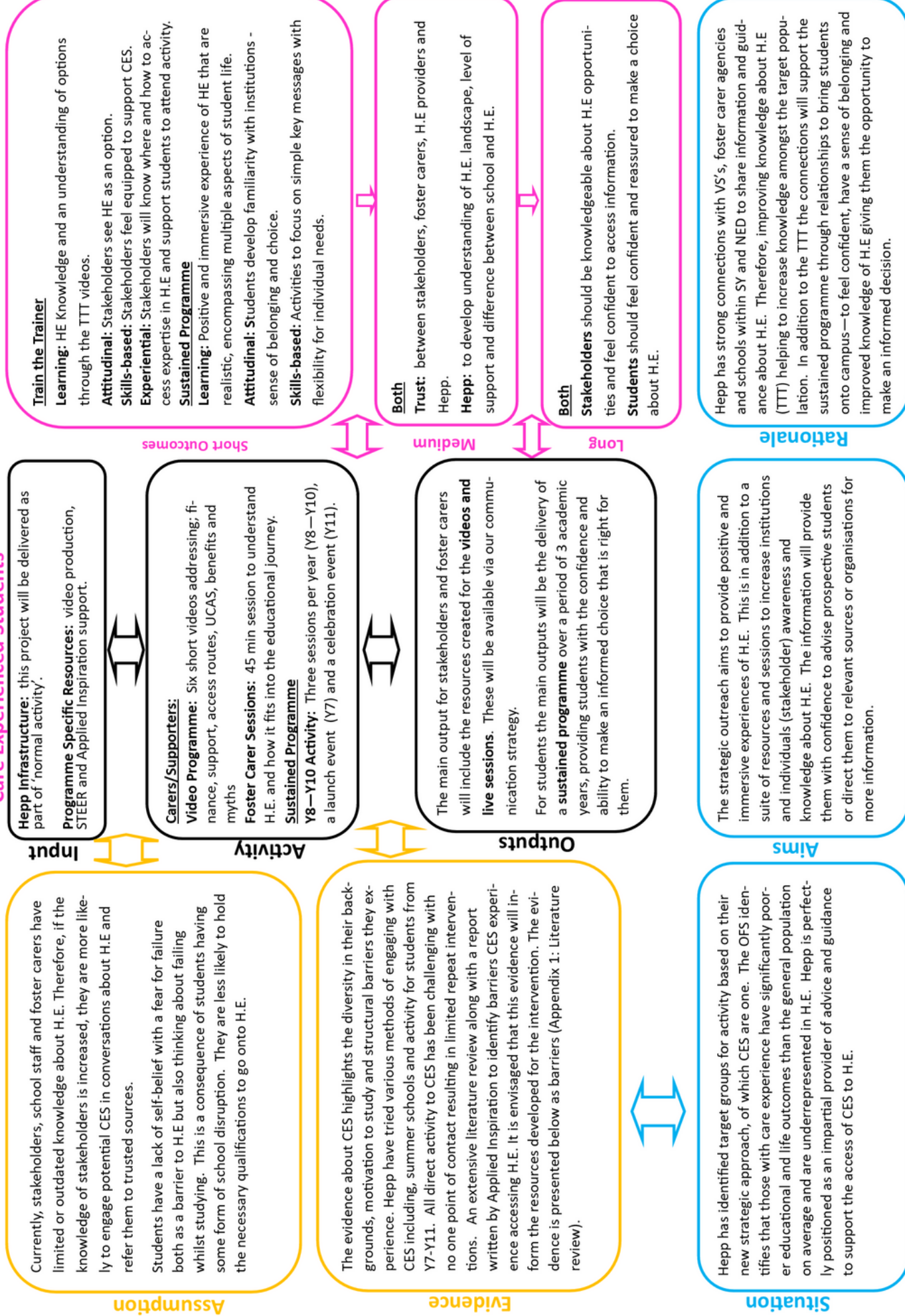
- Launch Event: An online activity to introduce the aims and objectives of the three-year programme.
- Sustained Programme: Three activities per academic year for year 8s, year 9s and year 10s – the activity will be themed and delivered on campus or virtually. The activities will include subject specific tasters, developing transferrable skills and looking at university buildings and accommodation.
- Celebration Event: In year 11 the students will come on campus with foster carers to celebrate their achievements from the sustained programme.
- Newsletter: To keep students informed about upcoming activity and any useful and helpful information to support them to make an informed choice about HE.

### **Outputs**

The main outputs for stakeholders and foster carers will include the resources created for the videos and live sessions. These will be available via our communication strategy and links with local authorities/foster carer agencies and schools.

For students the main outputs will be the delivery of a sustained programme over a period of 3 academic years, providing students with the confidence and ability to make an informed choice that is right for them.

## Care Experienced Students





## Appendix 1: Literature review

Barriers	Explanation
Financial	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Many are not aware of the financial support they can have or apply for</li> <li>• Struggle to apply for student loans or funding if not 'officially' in care (e.g., kinship)</li> </ul>
Attainment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Many do not have suitable study spaces at home</li> <li>• Less likely to hold qualifications offering entry to HE</li> <li>• Believe they will apply to university when they begin to study for public examinations in school years 9/10 but are not in HE when 19/20 years old</li> <li>• Low expectations and/or aspirations, lack of recognition of abilities</li> <li>• School disruption either by missing a great amount of school or changing schools</li> </ul>
Options	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• More likely to withdraw from HE before graduation</li> </ul>
Institutional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of support/understanding from academics</li> <li>• Difficulty accessing support at university</li> <li>• Support not adequately signposted</li> <li>• Lack of knowledge about accommodation and they can stay 365 days a year in accommodation</li> <li>• Support and direction for after graduation</li> </ul>
Social	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of belonging at FE and HE</li> <li>• Fear of being judged by their background and the social stigma attached from a care background</li> <li>• Limited access to support from family and social network</li> </ul>
Health / Wellbeing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• May have experienced mental health problems</li> <li>• May have experienced physical health problems</li> <li>• May have suffered abuse and neglect</li> <li>• May have had substance or alcohol problems</li> </ul>
Demographic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vast majority of care experienced students that go on to HE are women.</li> <li>• More likely to go on to HE as a mature student and not straight from FE</li> <li>• Often progress to HE via vocational routes and alternative pathways</li> </ul>

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**Knowledge Applied**