



THE WHY NOT TRUST

One Year of Wee Campus

Review of the first year of
an online community for
care-experienced students
in higher education

2024

WEE CAMPUS



The Why Not? Trust

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About Wee Campus

Wee Campus is a supportive online community for all higher education students in Scotland who consider themselves to be care-experienced.

Wee Campus is a community shaped by the students who make it up, and is continuously adapting to the needs of its members. At Wee Campus, the emphasis is on supporting care-experienced students to form relationships and access the social support that is vital to transitioning into adulthood and succeeding in educational contexts.

Wee Campus aims to be as inclusive as possible, allowing anyone who identifies with the term “care-experienced” to join, no questions asked. We never ask for proof of care-experience, personal histories, or keep records of individuals. It is simply an open and welcoming space for care-experienced students to connect with each other, access information and resources, and get support from team members when necessary.

In trying to meet students where they already are, Wee Campus operates primarily online through a closed Facebook group and a WhatsApp group. Students can also connect with each other at any of our many online drop-ins or in-person meetups in locations most accessible to those wanting to join.

Students can come to Wee Campus for advice and support with whatever needs they have, including but not limited to:

- General information about university processes, funding, and bursaries
- Information specific to each college or university in Scotland that has been compiled by the Wee Campus team
- Signposting to relevant services, organisations, and agencies that can offer the specialised support required
- Social support from the team and other students, including advice about courses or encouragement
- Sharing of tips around studying, wellbeing, student life, and living independently
- Forming peer relationships and building their social network

Students are encouraged to offer and get support from each other, with team members there to hold the boundaries of the group, facilitate Wee Campus drop-ins and meet-ups, prompt discussions, and contribute to information sharing as needed.

Background

Why is Wee Campus needed?

Care-experienced young people face a number of barriers when transitioning to adulthood and navigating higher education. These are often put in place by the care-system itself. Perhaps the biggest obstacle facing young adults when they leave care is a **lack of a social network**. Having a social network, peer support, and adequate social capital are linked with better post-care outcomes, including benefits to educational participation.

According to a review of the importance of friendship for care-experienced young people entering adulthood, peers can be crucial motivators for care-experienced young people to pursue and remain in higher education [1]. For a care-experienced student who is just starting to live independently, and has likely lost a significant portion of the support they had while in care, peers can fill gaps left by the care system. One's peers may offer instrumental support (ex. food, a place to stay), emotional support, and/or informational support.

Having friends in university, especially those who understand the unique experience of having been in care, also reduces feelings of isolation while in college or university. Social exclusion is a key concern for undergraduate students generally, and likely even more so for those with care-experience [2] [3]. Social exclusion is further linked with poor mental health, which was found to be the top cause of student drop out [2] [4].

Mental health problems are more prevalent in young adults than any other population, and these rates are even higher for the care-experienced community, due to higher instances of adverse childhood experiences and trauma. In fact, 9 in 10 young people who have experienced ACEs will develop a mental health problem by age 18 [5]. In Scotland, 60% of university students and 54% of college students

report moderate to severe depressive symptoms [6]. Despite this, according to data from universities and colleges in Scotland, campus counselling services are in higher demand than they can accommodate, first-year students are even less likely to be able to access services, and few institutions have pathways to refer students to appropriate mental health care. Therefore, other community supports that students can access on demand are needed to fill a portion of this gap. Communities like Wee Campus that provide peer and social support, in addition to resources and activities that target wellbeing, are crucial in meeting some of the mental health needs of care-experienced students and help prevent student drop-out.

Finally, a large portion of care-experienced students (over 40% based on a 2019 report) say they are not coping financially with being in college or university [7]. Care-experienced students may have difficulty navigating complex funding and bursary procedures, as well as finding additional financial support to meet their housing and living costs. Therefore, often having someone to contact to ask questions and work alongside them to secure the needed financial support to be able to focus on their studies can make a big difference for care-experienced students.

References

- [1] Guinchard, S. (2024). The importance of friendships for young people transitioning from care: A scoping review of the literature. The Why Not Trust.
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- [3] Child, S. & Marvell, R. (2023). Care-experienced students in higher education: A case for re-figuring higher education worlds to widen access and further social justice. *British Educational Research Journal*.
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- [5] Sanders, R. (2020). Care experienced children and young people's mental health. *Iriss*.
- [6] Feeny, A. et al. (2024). University and college counselling services in Scotland: One-on-one counselling amid the student mental health crisis. *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research*.
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Our First Year In Review

Wee Campus was created toward the end of 2023, and in its first full year has seen significant growth in the community.

Over the last year, we have been trying to reach and engage with as many care-experienced students at Scottish colleges and universities as possible. We have connected directly with institutions as well as other organisations that work with care-experienced students to spread awareness of the support the community can offer.

Wee Campus currently has over 70 students in the Facebook and WhatsApp groups combined.

➔ Signposted to by universities, colleges, and key organisations such as the Rees Foundation, Care Visions, and the Unite Foundation

➔ Invited to present at events at **5 colleges & universities** and provided a workshop to university staff for Hub for Success

➔ Had meaningful contact with **26 college & universities** and the Virtual Head Teachers from **5 Scottish local authorities**

Student Engagement

Held **25 online drop-ins** and **3 in-person meetups** between August and December 2024, with the majority having 3-5 students in attendance.

Offered based on student feedback:

- Summer campus walks at University of Stirling and Queen Margaret University
- Autumn Friday online drop-ins, including a monthly themed drop-in chosen by members of the community. These have included sessions on creative writing, arts and crafts, and wellbeing support
- Christmas market walk in Glasgow
- WhatsApp group created in October 2024 as students were wanting to connect with each other beyond social media
- “Cozy Comforts” cookbook of easy and affordable meals created by compiling recipes submitted by Wee Campus students and shared for the whole community

Student Outcomes

Wee Campus students have benefitted from sharing stories with each other and getting advice when needed.

Key topics of discussion in both the Facebook and WhatsApp groups and at drop-ins have included:

- Upcoming SAAS deadlines
- Help with UCAS application
- Requirements for specific courses or qualifications
- Advice on looking for employment

- Casual conversation including holiday plans, favourite foods, weather, entertainment, exam periods
- Celebrating academic successes, such as graduations or projects
- Social support regarding personal matters and encouragement
- Sharing academic struggles and getting encouragement from others to keep going
- Sharing study and wellbeing tips
- Relationships

- Accessing emergency food packages and information about food banks
- Help accessing support from university teams

“As a student with care experience, what I've loved about the community is how we all just come together to support each other whenever we need, even if we've not all met each other in person.”

Students in Wee Campus have shared that the community has allowed them to feel they are part of a supportive group, that they have formed new relationships, and that these relationships have benefitted their wellbeing, confidence, and academic experience.

“The people [in Wee Campus] shared stories with me, told me they understood and helped me regain some confidence. I was going to give up and they helped me come to the decision to continue. I would not be on the course now if it was not for them, I'm in my third year and was ready to give it up.”

Moving Forward

Plans for Year 2

Keep Reaching Students

We have had seen a notable increase in the number of students in Wee Campus in 2024, and want to maintain this trajectory into 2025. Since starting Wee Campus, students have either found out about us directly or through organisations and universities we work with. Students have been able to request to join the private Facebook and/or WhatsApp groups. However, upon suggestion from some of our members, we've created a sign up form to streamline the process of joining Wee Campus. With that, we will be focusing on how we can work more closely with institutions and organisations that are engaging with students to circulate our information and increase sign-ups.

Boost Engagement

In addition to welcoming more students into our community, we hope to see the engagement of students within Wee Campus increase. In 2025, we will continue to make efforts to respond meaningfully to what students are asking for and themes in the support being requested. We will also prioritise creating opportunities for students to get directly involved in facilitating Wee Campus and encouraging students to take greater ownership over the space for themselves. After all, Wee Campus was created as an inclusive space for care-experienced students, *by* care-experienced students.

Increase Wellbeing Support

One theme that came up for our students in the last year was a need for wellbeing support. Increased wellbeing comes, in part, from reducing isolation and building a community, but in 2025 we want to take the wellbeing aspect of our community even further. Towards the end of 2024 and into early this year, we started holding wellbeing-themed drop-ins, creating psychoeducational content, and sharing advice and resources where possible to highlight the importance of caring for your mental health as a student, and ways of doing so. In the coming year, we plan to further develop what we offer and ensure this aligns with any struggles students are telling us they are having.

Offer More Social Opportunities

As our community grows, we want to reflect this through also growing our offering of opportunities for students to socialise. The online weekly drop-in will continue as well as other themed online group sessions based on what students are interested in. We also plan to more frequently hold in-person meetups if, when, and where students in Wee Campus are available to do so. This could include study groups or leisure activities, depending on students' requests.

Want to get involved or connect students you support with Wee Campus?

Get in Touch

Wee Campus is always welcoming opportunities to connect with more care-experienced students and grow their support network. The Wee Campus team attends events in the community and in colleges and universities where students can find out more about joining the community.

If you know a student who would benefit from being part of our inclusive community, direct them to the sign-up form so they can be added to the private groups and start connecting with other students.

We also love to hear from organisations or academic institutions that would like Wee Campus to be part of the support they are already offering to care-experienced students.

Student Sign-Up Form:



**Wee Campus
The Why Not? Trust**

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whynottrust.org/the-wee-campus/