

We couldn't let Arron leave us without capturing his reflections on leading NNECL from before it was even a formal charity. Thank you, Arron for your service, support and kind words.

How NNECL has grown, especially in the last couple of years, has been an immense source of pride for me, and a big part of my working life over the last fifteen years or so.

Although I am sad to be stepping down as a co-chair, I think now is the time to do so when I am confident, I am leaving it in safe hands with Denise, Sian and Mollie to grow even faster, and continue to be the leading charity in the UK in terms of care experience and estrangement in the post-16 education sector. The early days of NNECL, particularly during its pre charity status era, times were hard; although there was an immense passion for creating change from the higher education sector with little money and influence, things moved slowly.

I remember the Buttle Conference at Senate House at UCL around 2011 when a small group of us met and talked about how beneficial it would be to form a network so we could collaborate and share good practice in the area as nothing existed at the time. In these early days, we need to recognise the influence that both Sonia Jackson and her groundbreaking research report in 2005, *'Going to University from Care'* had on the sector. Before this book there were no statistics, no research and no visibility of the huge problem there was in the area of being in care and going to university. In 2001 she showed us that less than 1% of care leavers went to university, the first stat we had. A shocking fact that the next influencer, The Buttle Trust, picked up on, and created the Buttle Quality Mark in 2006 which, quite quickly gained support from a number of universities. We cannot underestimate what Sonia and the Buttle Trust had on what was to become NNECL.

After the Buttle Conference, NNECL gained its name and a group of really passionate people from universities who met quarterly to share practice and support each other. We had little support, apart from our institutions who provide free venues and lunch and all of us were doing it as an add on to our roles at the Universities we worked for.

In 2014, we were organised enough to apply for HEFCE funding for a website that allowed institutions to publish its widening participation events. This was the first time we had had funds and we used it not only to develop the website but to ensure that the organisation had a long term future, not just in the widening participation area but also in student support and to create closer links with local authorities. HEFCE funding ended in 2016 as that organisation was being phased out to be replaced by the Office for Students, which would not offer funding.

2015 to 2018 was a hard time, we were back to no funding, but we did have a website and structures in place, as well as a network of ten regional networks that were loosely connected to NNECL and its objectives. We also had a saviour in the University of Winchester, who took us under their wing to provide administrative and financial support.

We were able to continue our annual conferences which were really popular and we were able to start planning for our next stage as an independent organisation with charitable status.

In 2018 we become a charity, and we haven't looked back since then. Funding was still an issue (membership fees were all we had in these early days) so we only were able to grow slowly in terms of reach and staffing. This all changed in 2023 when we recruited Denise who has really transformed NNECL into a charity that we have now that has numerous income streams, diversified its audience and has expertly steered us into the leading charity in this area.

We launched the NNECL Quality Mark in June 2021, initially as a pilot of seven universities and three colleges. This was a big milestone for us as it had been the intention from 2014 when the Buttle Quality Mark ended to have a successor to it. However, HEFCE funding was limited to widening participation, and although there was lots of work going on behind the scenes with developing the Quality Mark framework, we needed to be sure we had sufficient resources to sustain it.

So, I am glad to say the future for NNECL is good, and with the knowledge we have funding I am happy to stand down as chair of the Board of Trustees and let a new generation take over. We have just recruited new trustees with amazing skills, many of whom are care experienced themselves, Denise has secured additional core funding from the amazing Esmée Fairbairn Foundation who have been supporting our work for many years now and there are exciting plans to diversify further.

I feel NNECL has had a huge impact on those who are central to what we do. People with care experience. The numbers entering higher education have increased substantially from that 1% in 2001, although we still have a long way to go. Through the Quality Mark we can measure impact that is evidence based for the first time, and we have been making huge inroads in influencing policymakers recently too.

There is still a lot to do, but we have a plan. The work with local authorities - and for all those that have been working in this area as post-16 providers know how many times that blockages in support in FE and HE stem from local authorities are constantly raised in regional meetings - is proceeding well. Admissions have been an area that has been lagging behind, along with the question of contextual offers, which are only good if there is a recognition that support for students is targeted and individual to ensure that those with contextual offers succeed.

For me, personally I also think that we need more work on intersectionality with care experience and estrangement - race, disability, gender, LGBTQI+, class, asylum, etc - not only why a lot of these groups have greater or different representation in the care system, but also the support for care experienced people should not be a one size fits all model as it may have been in the past.

Success, increasingly so, is fluid. It is not a tick box. At the beginning of my journey, we would always say that good practice was having a named contact and providing a guaranteed accommodation in halls. But in a fast moving world how does the increasing

uptake of AI in student support look like with a named contact? And given that less than 50% of care experienced and estranged students live in halls, is an accommodation guarantee enough? The good thing about the Quality Mark is that the people on the ground - the practitioners - are the ones to come up with innovation in their Quality Marks and this can now be measured in terms of impact and reach. The Quality Mark because of this is not static or a tick box and we learn from the practitioners, who are coming up with increasingly thoughtful and innovative ideas to support students, and that knowledge can be shared by NNECL.

Finally, as I stand down from leading NNECL, I would like to thank all those that were so instrumental in NNECL's success. There are too many to mention, but there are a few I do need to mention. My co-chair (and friend) for much of the early history of NNECL, Felicity Dunworth, I know shew is still watching NNECL from afar. Then all those early adopters and hard workers in the early days when we really needed help - Megan Lunn (Sunderland) and her successor Wendy Price, Phil Bakstad (LJMU), the now Dr Carrie Wilson (congratulations Carrie), Melissa Page (De Montfort) and Phil Dent. And, of course locally in Manchester, Emma Lewis-Kalubowila, she is one of the most passionate people I know.

And of course, most importantly the people who are going to take the organisation forward. My co-chair and soon to be chair Jon Wakefield. Denise and Sian - the most brilliant core staff possible and of course all the trustees old and new.

Good luck, like Felicity I will be watching from afar well maybe not too far.

Arron