

Insight

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Consistency needed Care experienced students and higher education

Summary

Over the past two decades, higher education has become more attuned to the needs of people who spent time in local authority care as children. Studies suggest that those who do attend university generally consider it a positive, even a transformative, experience, and are at least as successful in their careers after graduation as their peers.¹

There is more targeted information and guidance available for care experienced applicants.² Many colleges and universities³ make them adjusted offers in recognition of their often disrupted prior education. There are more specialist support staff, and some higher education providers offer tailored pastoral care. Many offer some level of financial support, and some students are eligible for a £2,000 annual bursary from their local authority. There is increased financial aid, from local authorities and providers.

There has been widespread take-up of the care leaver

covenant, which signals an organisation's commitment to helping young care leavers live independently, and the National Network for the Education of Care Leavers (NNECL) is trialling a new quality mark to support institutions to achieve the best outcomes for their care experienced students.⁴

Despite this recognition of the barriers facing care experienced people and the increased support on offer, the numbers entering higher education remain low.⁵ Of those who do, not many attend high-tariff universities.⁶ They are also much more likely than other students not to continue to a second year, to take longer than three years to complete their degree, and not to gain a 1st or 2:1.⁷ These disparities are persistent. Gaps in access and attainment remain large.

The coronavirus pandemic and its rapidly changing implications for higher education have thrown these inequalities into stark relief. While many students have been able to return to their family home

Higher education can transform the lives of students who spent time in local authority care as children. Universities and colleges are identifying various ways to help them find the support and stability they need, but there is further work to be done. This brief looks at the obstacles these students face and how they can be addressed, including examples of good practice and the recommendations of a recently commissioned report.

during national lockdowns, this option is often not open to most care experienced students. Many universities and colleges responded by distributing hardship funds, providing essential supplies, running online events, strengthening student networks, and extending accommodation leases.⁸ Much of this support has been valuable, and the best examples of it should not be lost after the

The Office for Students is the independent regulator of higher education in England. We aim to ensure that every student, whatever their background, has a fulfilling experience of higher education that enriches their lives and careers. We regulate to promote quality, choice, competition and value for money in higher education, with a particular remit to ensure access, success and progression for underrepresented and disadvantaged groups of students.

pandemic is over. It will be all the more important in the light of reports of increasing numbers of children at risk of abuse and entering care over the past year.⁹

The Office for Students (OfS) is committed to building on this good work. Our aim is to help improve outcomes for care experienced students through changes in culture and practice, and we are working to do this through a combination of regulatory pressure through access and participation plans and sharing of effective practice.

This Insight brief follows the higher education lifecycle of a care experienced student from before application through to graduation and employment. It also showcases examples of good practice from universities and colleges. The intention is not simply to highlight the barriers care experienced students face, but also to show how they might be removed, overcome and mitigated.

Background

In March 2020, there were 80,080 children in England being looked after by a local authority.¹³ These children do not have a homogeneous experience of care. Abuse or neglect are the reason most children are placed in care. Others are in care because they or their parents are disabled or they have lost their parents. Some have been in care from a young age; others enter as teenagers. Some may have only recently arrived in the country. A unifying factor for many is the experience of childhood trauma.¹⁴ They may have had foster placements, been adopted or held in secure units; lived in children's homes or in semi-independent accommodation.

Local authorities have to support looked after children beyond the age of 16. Much of this assistance now extends up to the age of 25.¹⁵ It can include a named adviser, financial aid or holiday accommodation if in further or higher education. The extent of this support is geographically uneven.¹⁶ Some

Definitions

Care experienced: This brief uses the term 'care experienced' to denote a group or person in question who has spent time in local authority care. We understand this term is preferred by many care experienced people, and also includes those who do not fall into the narrower category of 'care leaver'. There is now greater recognition that even short periods in care are associated with detrimental and long-lasting impacts on an individual's life and wellbeing.¹⁰

Care leaver: A young person aged from 16 to 25 who has been 'looked after' for at least 13 weeks by a local authority at some point since they were 14 years old, and was in care on or after their 16th birthday.¹¹

Unaccompanied asylum seeking children: Children under 18 who have applied for asylum in their own right and are separated from both parents and any other responsible adult. An increasing number of those of care leaving age are likely to be unaccompanied asylum seeking children and so may be facing both care and immigration issues.

Estranged students: Students who are 'estranged' have no communicative relationship with either of their living biological or adoptive parents, and often their wider family networks as well. Many of these students will not have had any experience of the care system and will not be entitled to support from their local authority.¹²

care experienced students in higher education receive full funding for fees and accommodation from their local authority. Others report receiving much less from theirs.¹⁷

Care experienced children tend to have poorer educational achievement than other children while at school.¹⁸ Disruption and gaps in their education emerge as major factors in low attainment at GCSE level.¹⁹ This educational disadvantage has been posited as one of the major factors in social exclusion experienced by this group as they enter adulthood.²⁰ They are also much more likely to be classified as having special educational needs and mental health conditions than their peers.²¹

This is not a universally bleak picture. Since the turn of the century, increasing numbers of

young care leavers participate in education at all levels.²² Despite issues such as language barriers and high rates of trauma, unaccompanied asylum seeking children receive GCSE results comparable to – if not better than – their care experienced peers.²³

However, the pandemic threatens to undo some of this progress. Education has been disrupted at all levels, with the most educationally and socially disadvantaged appearing to be most at risk of being detrimentally affected.²⁴

Higher education: The current picture

Higher education can be a stabilising factor and transformative experience in the lives of care experienced people. In 2016-17, there were just over 7,000 England-domiciled care

experienced students studying in UK higher education institutions, less than 1 per cent of the student body.²⁵ This means that most universities and colleges have only a small number of care experienced students. Regardless, they are a group with complex and disparate needs. For example, care leavers studying in 2016-17 were more likely to be disabled, not to be UK nationals, and to study part-time than the student body in general.²⁶

There is little evidence that these young adults are choosing not to go into higher education because of other employment and education opportunities. In 2020, 39 per cent of care leavers aged 19 to 21 were not in education or employed, compared with around 13 per cent of all young people in a broadly comparable age bracket.²⁷ Higher education can help to overcome this disadvantage. As researchers have concluded, care-experienced students enter graduate employment or further study at a rate more or less comparable with their peers, which ‘points to the transformational nature’ of higher education, affording them ‘scope to transcend the manifest disadvantages of their early lives’.²⁸

These students have lived experiences that other students might not, a diversity that should be valued in both educational and work settings. The data picture is at an early stage. We still do not know exactly how many students are care experienced, especially among those entering higher education later in life. ‘Care leaver’ for data collection purposes counts only those who were in care on or after their 16th birthday.²⁹ It does not, therefore, include students who were in care before that age. This means that universities and colleges may not be able to identify students with comparable educational, health and financial needs.

Working with the Higher Education Statistics Agency

(HESA) and sector practitioners and researchers, the OfS has proposed expanding the future record to capture a broader group of applicants with experience of care, and splitting it into a number of subcategories. This would improve the data for each subgroup at both provider and national level, and enable improved monitoring of care experienced students’ higher education outcomes, from entry through to graduation and subsequent employment.³⁰

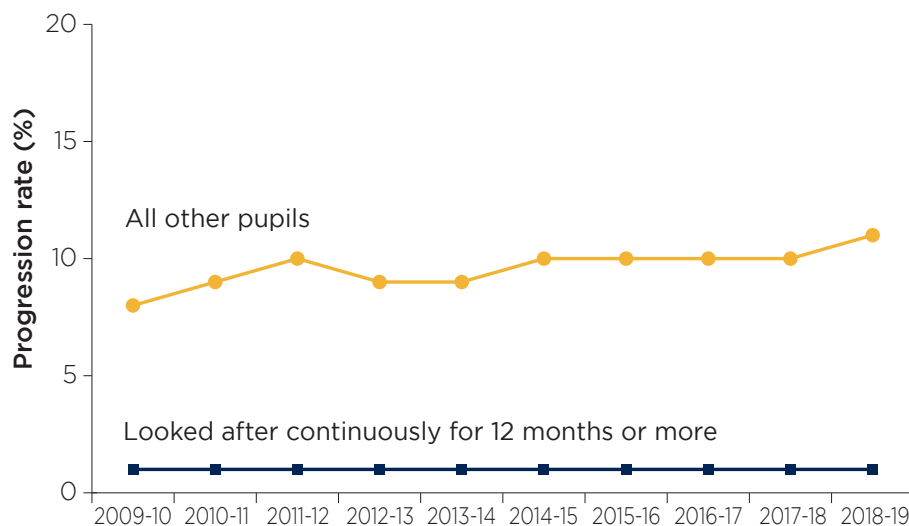
Developing effective support and pathways for a broader range of care experienced students is also likely to benefit other disadvantaged groups with similar needs. Students who are or become estranged from their families may also be in need of stable accommodation and bursaries.³¹ Those who had a social worker as a child may require transitional mental health support as they move from their home NHS services to those near their university.³² Adult refugees may benefit from some of the same support offered to unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.³³ Students who have been in informal kinship care arrangements with relatives or friends might also benefit from interventions designed for care leavers.

Access

English higher education providers are required to have an approved access and participation plan if they are registered in the Approved (fee cap) category of the OfS Register and wish to charge above the basic tuition fee limit for ‘qualifying persons’ on ‘qualifying courses’. OfS guidance requires universities and colleges to understand disparities between underrepresented groups and others at the various stages of the student lifecycle and to take steps to address them. An access and participation plan helps achieve this by setting out how they will improve equality of opportunity for underrepresented groups to access, succeed in and progress from higher education.

The OfS monitors all providers’ access and participation plans using the indicators in the access and participation dataset, reportable events, and other intelligence such as complaints. Most of the access and participation plans submitted to the OfS in 2018-19 made commitments to improve data on and understanding of care leavers, including 49 specific targets relating to care leavers. Of these, 33 were about access.³⁴ Much of the academic work and analysis by practitioners

Figure 1: Progression to high-tariff higher education by age 19 by looked after child status



Source: Department for Education (DfE), ‘Widening participation in higher education’, July 2020.

has likewise taken access as its focus.³⁵

Despite this attention, the number of care experienced people entering higher education in England remains small. In 2018-19, 13 per cent of children looked after for more than a year were in higher education by age 19, as against 43 per cent for all other school students. For the same period, 26.3 per cent of pupils who received free school meals were in higher education by 19, compared with 45.1 per cent for all other students. The proportion of care experienced students attending higher-tariff universities has remained at 1 per cent for the last decade, while for their peers who do not have experience of care, the proportion has risen by three percentage points, to 11 per cent (see Figure 1).³⁶

Family background often plays an integral role in determining whether a child goes on to study at university. For those who have been in care, the experience or background of the child's biological family is not necessarily the most important factor. There is little direct evidence of a lack of motivation or aspiration among care experienced children.³⁷ Rather, research suggests that a foster or adoptive parent with a higher education background increases the likelihood of them going. Children in stable foster placements tend to attain more highly in school, and are more likely to go on to further or higher education, than those with multiple placements or in care homes.³⁸ Disability, especially in terms of mental health and long-term illness, can be a significant barrier to this.³⁹

In the past, the OfS has stressed the need to consider the circumstances in which applicants achieve their exam results, in order to understand their potential.⁴⁰ Many universities and colleges make contextual offers – an offer one or more grades lower than standard entry – to care experienced applicants in recognition of the difficult circumstances in which they achieved their exam

Case study: Go Higher West Yorkshire

Go Higher West Yorkshire (GHWY) is a partnership of 13 diverse higher education providers that seeks to reduce inequalities in higher education access, success and progression. The partnership considers local authorities to be key partners in widening participation; it is vital that providers work with them to develop evidence-based practice in the interests of care experienced young people.

As part of its 'Care to Go Higher' work strand, GHWY delivers an innovative training programme to equip adults to support the care experienced young people they live or work with to make informed choices about their educational progression. Foster carers, children's home support workers and personal advisors across West Yorkshire are invited to attend six training sessions held on university and college campuses over six months.

The programme design is informed by several strategic principles:

- **Equipping key influencers** with high aspirations for care experienced young people alongside knowledge and experience to support them on the path to higher education.
- **A contextualised approach** to help key influencers understand the impact of experience of care on young people's circumstances, needs and identity during their transition to higher education.
- **Immersive outreach**, welcoming community influencers into local higher education campuses to help establish a feeling of belonging and situate these spaces within communities' sense of place.

Participants are introduced to the different types of higher education available on their doorstep and beyond, including college-based higher education and specialist providers as well as more traditional universities. The programme combines bespoke classroom-based learning with on-campus experience to inform first-hand perceptions and perspectives about the higher education experience and its value.

results. Others make them a priority when looking at those with borderline grades. Access courses and foundation years are available for those without the required exam results.

The issue is not simply one of getting more care experienced teenagers into higher education – indeed, a large proportion with the required A-levels or equivalent results already go – but rather about opening up other possible avenues to enter later in life.⁴¹ Recent comparative

work has shown the precarity and financial instability that this group experiences in early adulthood.⁴² They are at much greater risk of homelessness and often struggle to find long-term accommodation.⁴³ Few universities and colleges waive their fees for unaccompanied asylum seeking children, most of whom are not entitled to government loans to cover tuition fees and maintenance costs.⁴⁴ For some of these young adults, a focus on emotional wellbeing

Case study: University of Exeter

The University of Exeter has taken a three-pronged approach to supporting its increased numbers of care experienced students in recent years. Student recruitment and wellbeing teams, and the Students' Guild, work closely together, pooling specialist knowledge, expertise and resources as part of a wider 'Success for All' programme, enabling intelligence, reporting, evaluation and strategy to flow both upwards and downwards. A more consistent approach to data and monitoring has increased understanding of the impact of this work: for example, more needs to be done to understand the experience of care experienced students who interrupt or withdraw from their studies.

The university and Student's Guild provide regular brunches and (over the past year) weekly online coffee mornings to enable care experienced students to meet informally and provide feedback. For example, after students commented that lack of money meant they were unable to participate fully in Freshers' Week, welcome packs were introduced with sport and society memberships, supermarket vouchers, laundry costs and other 'home starter' basics. The university's widening participation coordinator made contact with students over the Christmas vacation, and sent them a card and gift voucher.

- to address childhood traumas and build resilience - may be a more pressing need that takes priority over education.

The straight-from-school, residential model of higher education is not best suited to

many who have experience of care. A large proportion of care experienced people who enter higher education do so with non-traditional qualifications, and later in life.⁴⁵ If more of them are to access and succeed in higher

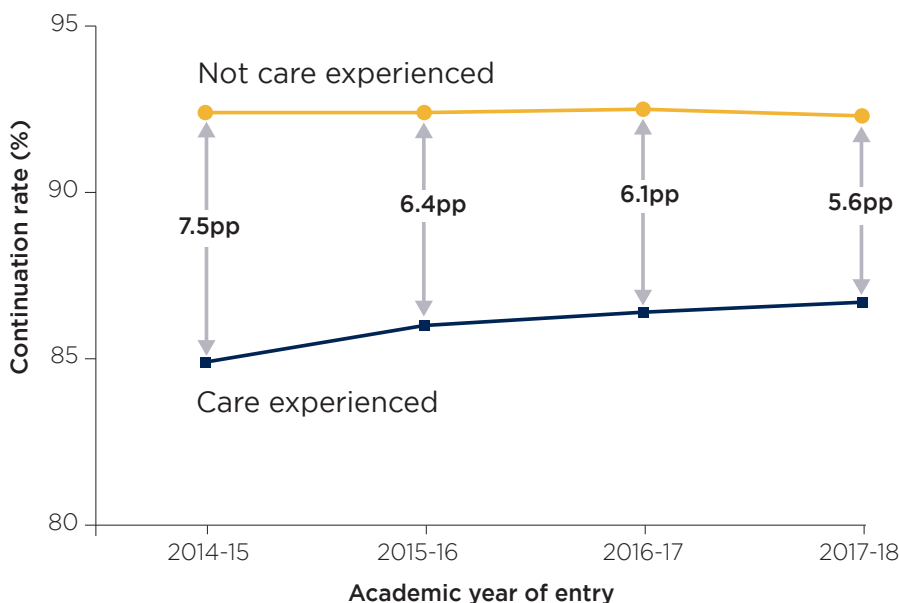
education, then opportunities to study as a mature student need to be open to them. Some bursaries for care experienced students are limited to those under the age of 25, which means that older learners are not able to benefit.⁴⁶ The government has already signalled its intention to offer lifelong learning loans to allow people to access training throughout their lives.⁴⁷ There remains a need for clear, targeted information and guidance for care experienced students about the pathways into higher education. Expanding existing pathways and opening up new ones for adult learners with experience of care, will make it more likely that a larger proportion will be able to benefit from higher education over their lifetime.

Continuation

Care experienced students are less likely to continue into the second year of their course. Last year, the OfS published outcomes statistics by care experience for the first time. This analysis showed that the continuation rate of care experienced 2017-18 entrants was 5.6 percentage points lower than the rate of other students - 86.7 per cent as opposed to 92.3 per cent. This gap is reducing year on year, and has fallen by 1.9 percentage points since 2014-15 (see Figure 2).⁴⁸ Other studies have shown that care experienced students often take longer to complete their degrees.⁴⁹ Such absences, withdrawals, and changes to part-time study are another feature of care experienced people's disrupted education journey.

It seems that care experienced students still need a smoother transition into higher education. This could include tuition support to help plug any educational gaps caused by school disruption. Access to mental health services is often important to ensure continuity of care. A 2019 survey of care experienced students saw 68 per cent of participants report mental health difficulties while

Figure 2: Continuation rate by care experience



Data population: Full-time UK-domiciled undergraduate students. Source: OfS, 'Differences in student outcomes - further characteristics', Annex B.⁵⁰

at university.⁵¹ Such difficulties could well be exacerbated by the pandemic: a high proportion of students in general have reported worsening levels of mental health and wellbeing.⁵²

Accommodation and finance are also major issues. Their higher risk of homelessness means that guaranteed accommodation for care experienced students throughout their degree (including during the holidays) is important.⁵³ Currently, only 40 per cent of universities and colleges offer help with finding somewhere to live, and just under a third offer year-round accommodation for students.⁵⁴ Financial help, in the form of bursaries, can be a lifeline. Offering year-round accommodation and facilitating access to hardship funds and bursaries would provide these students with stability in one aspect of their student experience.

Degree attainment gaps

Care experienced students are less likely to graduate with a first or upper second class degree than their peers. Of those graduating in 2018-19, only 68.2 per cent achieved a 1st or 2:1 (see Figure 3). This was 12.1 percentage points lower than for students who were not in care. There has been little work on the attainment gap for care experienced students or how to narrow it.

Previous modelling based on a single-year sample has suggested that much of this gap can be explained statistically with reference to previous educational attainment and to other student characteristics (such as ethnicity and disability).⁵⁵ More developed work on the attainment gap for black students, for example, could be of use to staff looking to close the care experienced attainment gap.⁵⁶

Many universities already provide support for graduation costs, such as bursaries, and discounted or free gown hire and photography. Some allocate additional guest tickets to students.⁵⁷ This makes it more

Case study: Royal Central School of Speech and Drama

A small specialist institution, the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama has established a tailored programme of support to give care leaver students practical assistance, financial awards and academic guidance from application through to graduation. A designated member of staff acts as a key point of contact. With the student, a bespoke programme of support is created, identifying early intervention strategies and a safe space where they can be heard.

Originally, Central gave care leaver students a £1,000 bursary in the autumn term, but this caused them longer-term budgeting issues. The bursary is now paid in separate, staggered payments, at a time agreed with the student, and budgeting sessions are available with a student advisor.

A £500 bursary is given to help care leaver students bridge the gap between studies and full-time employment, and meetings with their designated member of staff prepare them for life after graduation. Central does not have an in-house careers service, but students are referred to the Drive Forward Foundation, which supports care leavers with paid internships and other employment opportunities.

A student commented:

‘Being a care leaver can be very challenging, but Central helps you to never feel out of place. I feel like I can get support and guidance for anything that I need [...] I think the extra encouragement is really useful for someone from a difficult background like myself.’

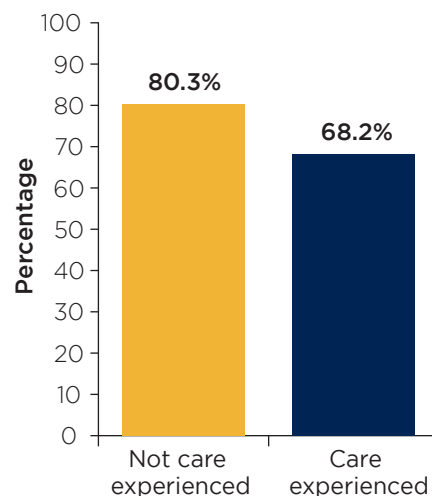
likely that these students can attend and celebrate their achievement with the people who have supported them.

Employment and further study

OfS analysis suggests that despite lower attainment at degree level, care experienced graduates have comparable employment and further study outcomes (in 2016-17, 69.5 per cent as against 69.2 per cent for other graduates).⁵⁸ Other UK-wide studies have shown slight differences. Of those who graduated in 2017, 5.5 per cent of care experienced students were unemployed compared with 4.4 per cent for other graduates. 70.7 per cent were in professional roles compared with 77.0 per cent of other graduates.⁵⁹

These differences could be due to various factors. Government loans for

Figure 3: Differences in rates of achieving a first or upper second class degree by care experience, 2018-19



Data population: Full-time UK-domiciled 2018-19 students on first degree and undergraduate degree with postgraduate components courses. Source: OfS, ‘Differences in student outcomes – further characteristics’, Annex B.⁶⁰

postgraduate education mean that further study is open to students who might previously have struggled to pay the tuition fees. Organisations such as the Drive Forward Foundation are supporting care experienced students to gain internships, work placements and jobs.⁶¹ Overall employment figures could be better because care experienced students are more likely to be under pressure to find a job immediately after graduation. They are far less likely to have a 'safety net' to fall back on if it takes them a few months to find a job in an industry they want to work in, so may have to take the first offer they receive. More positively, this trend may represent the ability of many care experienced students to thrive through higher education, despite earlier challenges.

Some universities and colleges offer post-graduation bursaries to give care experienced graduates more time to find a job in a sector they want. Other forms of support, such as tailored careers advice and summer accommodation after completing a degree, could also be valuable at this point.

What the OfS is doing to drive change

As this brief has detailed, the support a care experienced student can expect when they enter higher education can vary widely. The OfS has been working to facilitate more consistency and transparency across the sector. Through the access and participation plans we agree with universities and colleges we work to improve data and understanding about care experienced students. Alongside this, in October 2020 we commissioned NNECL to undertake a short feasibility study on the potential development of a consistent support offer across all universities and colleges for care experienced students, from application through to graduation.

That study is published alongside this Insight brief. It suggests that a consistent offer

Case study: University of Cumbria

The university has a small population of care leaver students, with numbers increasing steadily each year. The small cohort makes it difficult to generalise regarding their issues around attainment and progression. The university is committed to supporting and listening to care leavers to gain a fuller understanding of barriers to access and success, and focuses on robust evaluation to support solutions and effectively implement interventions. The package of support for these students includes:

- funded transport to the campus for an interview or visit
- an entry package
- a dedicated pre-entry and post-entry contact
- an initial meeting with a key contact including a finance meeting
- advice and guidance on applying and personal statements
- increased priority in the Cumbria Bursary scheme
- mentoring with current care leaver students themselves
- year-round accommodation at Carlisle, Lancaster and Ambleside
- an exit package including careers guidance.

Skills workshops and webinars are available and students can contact advisors with academic, library and digital skills questions, or to help them if required to resubmit an assignment. As they transition to the next level of study, the advisors can help them understand what they have achieved and need to develop.

The final year care leavers' package includes a joint newsletter. Graduating students are offered a careers coach to help search for work and with career planning support, CV and applications writing, and practice interviews. There is a specific internship opportunity.

The university is focusing increased attention on evaluation for this cohort, particularly aiming to uncover causal patterns between interventions and results, testing assumptions and taking account of context.

for care experienced students could include:

- admissions processes that take a rounded view of applicants, with contextualised offers where appropriate
- priority access to universities and colleges' support services, including wellbeing and mental health provision
- academic support
- guidance and support with postgraduate study opportunities
- enhanced careers guidance provided throughout their courses and continuing for a period of time after graduation
- access to additional funding via a specific bursary or priority access to hardship funding

- support in finding or providing suitable year-round accommodation tailored to their individual needs.

In the next phase, the OfS hopes to run a larger, multi-year project to test a consistent offer of support for care experienced students at local level. Working with students, universities and colleges, and building on existing local networks such as the Uni Connect partnerships, we want to identify the minimum level of support necessary to close the gaps for care experienced students at different stages of the student lifecycle. We will decide on our approach to this when we conclude the consultation on our broader approach to funding later in 2021.⁶²

Conclusion

A theme throughout this brief has been the instability of care experienced people's educational journeys, generally through no fault of their own. To succeed, this group often requires multiple chances, increased flexibility and greater support. As suggested by the NNECL report, a consistent support offer for all care experienced students, whichever university or college they choose to attend, will help to provide a firmer foundation for their higher education journey.

Successful delivery of this consistent support offer will depend on buy-in from a range of people and organisations: student bodies, the sector, charities and other groups and individuals involved in supporting care experienced students. To deliver this consistent offer, we will look to draw on the expertise of key professionals such as carers and social workers through the OfS-funded Uni Connect programme.

To ensure the impact of this consistent offer is measurable, we intend to work with HESA to try to improve data capture for care experienced students. We intend to work with the Centre for Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education (TASO) to highlight examples of effective practice as the project progresses. Alongside other findings, this work will inform universities' and colleges' support for care experienced students and where relevant will help them deliver the commitments in their access and participation plans.

Higher education can transform care experienced students' lives. We are working with universities and colleges to identify and deliver a consistent offer of support that will provide security and stability for all care experienced students. We hope this will allow such students a better opportunity to thrive, both personally and professionally, in higher education and beyond.

Notes

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- 2 Discover Uni, 'Student support' (<https://discoveruni.gov.uk/how-do-i-choose-course/student-support/>); UCAS, 'Support for care leavers' (<https://www.ucas.com/undergraduate/applying-university/individual-needs/ucas-undergraduate-support-care-leavers>).
- 3 In this brief, for the sake of readability, we have used 'universities and colleges', or sometimes simply 'universities', to refer to what our Regulatory framework and other more formal documents call 'higher education providers'.
- 4 Care leaver covenant, 'What is the care leaver covenant?' (<https://mycovenant.org.uk/about/>); NNECL, 'NNECL quality mark' (<https://www.nnecl.org/pages/141-nnecl-quality-mark>).
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- 11 UK Government, 'Children Act 1989' (<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1989/41/part/III/crossheading/duties-of-local-authorities-in-relation-to-children-looked-after-by-them>).
- 12 Stand Alone Pledge, 'Who are estranged students?' (<http://www.thestandalonepledge.org.uk/who-are-estranged-students>).
- 13 DfE, 'Children looked after in England including adoptions', February 2021 (<https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/children-looked-after-in-england-including-adoptions/2020>).
- 14 Evans, R, M Boffey, S MacDonald, et al, 'Care-experienced children and young people's interventions to improve mental health and well-being outcomes: Systematic review (CHIMES)', BMJ Open, 2021, (<https://bmjopen.bmj.com/content/11/1/e042815>).
- 15 UK Government, 'Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000' (<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2000/35/contents>); UK Government, 'Extending personal adviser support to age 25' (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/extending-personal-adviser-support-to-age-25>).
- 16 Coram Voice, 'What makes life good? Care leavers' views on their wellbeing', November 2020 (available at <http://www.education.ox.ac.uk/new-report-highlights-wellbeing-inequality-among-care-leavers/>), pp8-9.
- 17 Ellis, Katie, and Claire Johnston, 'Pathways to university from care', (available at https://figshare.shef.ac.uk/articles/report/Pathways_to_University_from_Care_Recommendations_for_Universities/9578930), p4.
- 18 Sebba, Judy, et al, 'The educational progress of looked after children in England: Linking care and educational data', November 2015 (available at <http://www.education.ox.ac.uk/research/linking-care-and-educational-data-the-educational-progress-of-looked-after-children-in-england/>).
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