



GETTING IT RIGHT

**FOR CARE EXPERIENCED
STUDENTS IN HIGHER
EDUCATION**

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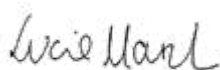
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Academics and artists from Kings College London who ran a behavioural insights project to find the most effective methods of supporting students, and Queen Mary University of London, who ran a theatre based project to articulate the experience of students with a local authority background were also very helpful to the research. Most of all we would like to thank the young people whose voices are expressed in this study, and who talked to camera to help make podcasts and short films.

FOREWORD

UCL's Access and Widening Participation team are committed to supporting students from underrepresented backgrounds, including those with care experience, to access, achieve and prosper at university. While rates of access to Higher Education have improved for some groups across the sector, care-experienced students remain much less likely to access Higher Education than their peers without care experience (Department for Education 2018, Harrison 2017). With this in mind, it is important for Higher Education institutions to understand student perspectives, enabling us to aim for an equity of experience for students who have a diverse range of experiences, and to support them in overcoming barriers to accessing, and succeeding at university.

We were delighted to commission this research by experts in the Thomas Coram Research Unit, UCL Institute of Education which has provided opportunities for us to close gaps between research, policy and practice. It has created links between practitioners, academic researchers and students, using participatory methods to engage care experienced students. Working with students themselves ensures that their voices are heard, their experiences are acknowledged and understood, and that they are involved in shaping tangible, evidence-based recommendations which we can use to ensure that UCL is a supportive place of study.



Lucie March
Head of Access and Widening Participation, UCL

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

Commissioned by UCL Access and Widening Participation Office, this research investigated the experiences of students in Higher Education when they have a background of having lived in local authority care as children. Previously known as 'care leavers', this group is now known as 'care experienced' young people. Care experienced young people are much less likely to achieve the academic qualifications, overcome the practical obstacles and reconcile the personal difficulties necessary to attend university than other young people who have not been in care, and when they do get to university, there is a relatively high chance they will withdraw early. The aim of the current study is to explore what happens at university, from the perspective of both institutional arrangements, and current and former students' experience, to encourage, or discourage, care experienced students to follow their chosen study programme.

METHODOLOGY

The research had three phases. The first was a review of relevant literature on the experiences of underrepresented groups in higher education. The review highlighted key themes and theoretical frameworks that informed subsequent phases of study. Themes such as the breadth of institutional arrangements required to support disadvantaged groups informed the second phase of the study, which was an online survey sent to all Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in England and sought to capture the institutional arrangements and services in place at HEIs to support students from care and other 'risk' backgrounds. Theoretical frameworks and concepts such as Bourdieu's capital and habitus were operationalised in the third phase which was in-depth qualitative research using two main methods. The first was a participatory walking interview (a form of mobile ethnography) where research participants evoked their university experience to researchers through visual cues, and the second was a participatory analysis workshop where care experienced former and current students worked with researchers to co-create meanings from the data and a core narrative that reflected their lived experiences.

KEY FINDINGS

The academic literature on retaining specifically care experienced students on higher education programmes is sparse. While for all widening participation groups there may be issues of integration into an unfamiliar cultural world, supporting care experienced young people at university requires attention to specific issues of relational, financial and practical support that go beyond what is required for other disadvantaged groups and may act as precipitating factors for early withdrawal from academic programmes.

The online survey results show that definitions employed, data collected and policy and practices designed to know who the care experienced student population is and deliver specific services to them varied enormously. Effective support requires contributions from and coordination between many departments of universities; there appeared to be many projects and schemes to support student retention but these were not necessarily aimed at care experienced students and not necessarily led by academic staff who are most likely to have the relational link with the students. Universities clearly differ in their institutional 'habitus' for care experienced students.

Analysis of the qualitative data found four main thematic areas of concern to care experienced students: i) enabling an informed choice, ii) continuity of support, iii) presence and flexibility, and iv) belonging.

Key Findings

ENABLING AN INFORMED CHOICE

- Enabling an informed choice referred to the importance of comprehensive and accessible information about universities, and the differences between them, available to care experienced young people at the application stage.
- Most study participants had little or no prior knowledge about university life and no one from family, friends or local authority advisors to guide them in their application and had to research HE institutions and courses without help.
- Cultural differences between universities and what they offer are marked and going to a university with the right habitus for the student can have a substantial impact on them, their sense of belonging, how well or not they settle into and integrate with their course and other students, and ultimately whether or not they stay the course at university.
- Publicly revealing prior or ongoing status as ‘care experienced’ was an important issue for study participants; there may be associated stigma of being labelled as ‘care leaver’ and of being treated differently or with prejudice, either intentional or unintentional. More work is required to ensure disclosure is not seen as stigmatising but as a positive measure that will help care experienced students during their time at university.

CONTINUITY OF SUPPORT

- Continuity of support referred to the principle of continuous relational and practical support through the transition to university and throughout the period of study to help build and sustain a sense of security and stability, as well as confidence in their ability to deal with academic work and any difficulties that might arise. Continuity is essential particularly in the areas of finance, suitable and stable accommodation, as well as academic, social, emotional and mental health support.
- Study participants reported limited or no access to consistent forms of support in daily life and only very periodic contact with their home local authority personal advisor. The role of the university in providing consistent and holistic support is thus particularly important. Without such continuity of support participants reported feelings of isolation, abandonment and anxiety about whether and how they will cope in new surroundings and circumstances.
- Specific examples of lack of support included having no one to help newly arrived students move into their accommodation. This can exacerbate feelings of loneliness and of being different right from the start and can have longer lasting effects academically and socially.
- Inadequate intra-university communication is a key obstacle to ensuring continuity of support. Study participants reported that their care status was not known to key people who might help them, such as academic staff. This can result in inadequate awareness or understanding of students’ current or emerging needs and places the onus on the student to seek out help.
- Study participants reported lack of relational support outside term times; students reported feeling very lonely during the holiday periods, when other students have gone home.

Continuity of support (continued)

- The inadequacy of financial provision and lack of affordable accommodation over the long summer period between academic years were major concerns for study participants. Financial support was reported to be, at best, just enough to cover the essentials but not to participate fully in student life or for extras like making trips home to see family or friends. Accommodation costs took up a large proportion of the financial allowance and did not cover high costs for accommodation during the summer holidays.
- Care experienced students reported deep worries about what happens after they complete their course; many have very real fears about life after university. These include being able to find good employment and feeling that post-graduate study such as Masters' degrees were not an option for them because financial assistance and other forms of support were not available as they are for undergraduate degrees.

PRESCIENCE AND FLEXIBILITY

- Prescience and flexibility referred to the variability of circumstances and needs within those who are 'care experienced' and that universities need to have the flexibility to respond to individual profiles and circumstances.
- University policies and procedures were felt to be too rigid and incompatible with the circumstances of care experienced students. Although universities have specific support policies targeting care experienced students, such as all year round accommodation and bursaries, many participants felt that they did not go far enough to meet their specific needs.
- Accessing additional financial resources where needed was a very onerous process which reinforced their sense of being different and of a different status to their peers. Having spending interrogated by local authority officers was described as making them feel different to their peers, and an additional distraction to the core purpose of their being at university.
- Study participants reported often precarious and demanding lives and circumstances and need university based support services to respond promptly and with sensitivity to evolving and challenging situations to avoid a perception of lack of support.
- Minor issues can escalate very quickly leading to consequences that can result in falling behind academically and dropping out of university. To promote retention and completion it is important for universities (and local authorities) to listen and adapt wherever possible to enable care experienced students to fulfil their academic potential.

Making friends is one of the biggest concerns amongst some care experienced students, who may have had negative and transitory experiences of peer relationships in the past.

BELONGING

- Belonging serves as an important motivator and protective factor for student engagement, retention and success. For many care experienced students a sense of belonging can take on increased importance due to the instability of their past circumstances and desire to fit in and be treated as a ‘normal’ student.
- A sense of belonging can be facilitated through fostering relationships with both peers, and with academic and professional staff.
- Making friends is one of the biggest concerns amongst some care experienced students, who may have had negative and transitory experiences of peer relationships in the past. Universities can facilitate friendships through enabling students to connect with one another before they start their course e.g. opening access to online platforms and linking students up based on their accommodation or academic courses.
- Study participants believed Widening Participation teams can play a key role in supporting care experienced students to feel a sense of belonging through social groups and buddying systems. For some care experienced students these teams felt ‘like family’ and their proactive support was welcomed.
- Some young people coming in to university may not want to self-identify as care experienced and may not choose to access a support network until they have established themselves separately to their care identity. Belonging can come through shared religious, cultural or ethnic backgrounds, political or intellectual views, aspirations and goals or through being able to identify with others coming through ‘non-traditional’ routes into higher education.
- Personal tutors and university staff have a key role to play in fostering a sense of belonging for care experienced students in terms of creating an environment where they feel a sense of academic/intellectual belonging (based on connections through shared interests), but also in creating a space where students feel they are being actively supported in their studies (e.g. through proactive discussions and open-door policies).

BEFORE GOING TO UNIVERSITY

When applying

- Information about what is on offer could be more sensitive to differences between universities. Clear and accessible information should be available to care experienced students at the point of application about the various types of support that would be available to them at that particular institution including financial provision, year round accommodation as well as academic, social and emotional support, and how it can be accessed.
- HEIs, schools, social workers and others in positions of responsibility for young people in care or leaving could address student retention by helping care experienced students to make an informed choice about the most suitable institution and course for them.
- Designated staff at prospective HEIs and/or current care experienced students within HEIs could provide ‘insider’ advice to applicants via telephone, email or social media platforms at the application stage. HEIs should also offer informal visits, open days and summer schools to provide care experienced students with an opportunity to meet key academic and WP staff but most importantly a chance to speak to current care experienced or WP students about the habitus of the HEI, how it feels to study and live there, and to get a feel of the place for themselves. HEIs should make funds available to care experienced students in case they need help with covering the travel costs for this as well as overnight student accommodation if required.
- A knowledgeable contact person at UCAS (or another agency) at the admission stages who understands the circumstances of care experienced students and can help them navigate the application process and offer specific advice about questions asked on the application forms.

Coordination of support services

- Care leavers benefit when there is good communication, inter-professional working and information sharing between local authorities’ virtual schools, personal advisors and key university personnel. With permission from young people, such communication could help ensure that a named contact coordinates an individualised package of support that is in place for when a student arrives.
- A named contact in a university should make direct contact with care experienced students prior to their arrival to discuss their particular needs and any concerns they might have and should seek to establish good communication and trust with them so that they feel comfortable to approach these people for support and advice if and when they need it.

Disclosure of care status

- Confusion about the purpose and benefits of disclosing care status on the UCAS form could be avoided if more comprehensive information was available and the implications of disclosure discussed with key professionals at the application stage. Disclosure could be promoted as something positive rather than stigmatising. Furthermore, care experienced students should be able to disclose and seek help and support at any time during their course.



WHILE AT UNIVERSITY

Finance

- Current financial arrangements put care experienced students under considerable pressure. HEIs need to review their financial offer to ensure it is student-centric and takes account of the absence of family and, in some cases, local authority back up. It should cover not just the basic costs but permit students to fully engage in their studies and student life as any other student can. Financial support should be available year round as care experienced students have acute difficulties managing outside term time. Such institutional review should feed into reviews of student finance to ensure they are realistically meeting the living costs of individual students.

Accommodation

- Where there is no-one to assist, HEIs should offer to help care experienced students move into their student accommodation and link them with a named contact to help them settle in, ideally someone who has established contact/a relationship with them prior to their arrival.
- It can take longer for care experienced students to settle into university than other students therefore HEIs should consider allowing care experienced (and other WP) students to arrive a week earlier than other students. During this time they can be supported and helped to settle in by the WP team and existing care experienced or WP students, who might act as mentors or ‘buddies’.
- During holiday periods HEIs should look to actively support and provide events for care experienced students who don’t have anywhere else to go.
- HEIs should ensure that care experienced students can remain in their student accommodation during the long summer vacation, ideally without relocating for the holiday period and incurring additional cost, or at least at standard rates.

Regular contact ('Keeping in touch') by the WP team and other key staff e.g. personal tutor, academic programme leader with care experienced students is important especially where a student hasn't sought support or seems to be ok.

While at university (continued)

Personal and academic support

- Regular contact ('Keeping in touch') by the WP team and other key staff e.g. personal tutor, academic programme leader with care experienced students is important especially where a student hasn't sought support or seems to be ok.
- HEIs should ensure that there is streamlined communication and inter professional working across the various parts of the university including WP team, finance, housing, programme leaders, lecturers, and personal tutors.
- Responsiveness is key to supporting care experienced students. They are not a homogenous group and so HEIs need to be prepared to be flexible in the light of individual needs. Where a student has disclosed their status, HEIs need to meet with them as early as possible in order to ascertain any support needs they have, but these needs may well change over time.
- HEIs should consult with their existing care experienced students on all aspects of university experience as part of their institutional reviews to identify areas in need of improvement.
- Academics and academic departments should reach out to students, facilitating networks associated with their academic interests, hosting events, forming sub-groups play an important role in fostering a sense of academic belonging.

ON GRADUATION

- Care experienced students should not be disadvantaged at the postgraduate stage. HEIs should consider introducing policies and provision that support care experienced students undertaking postgraduate degrees.
- Universities need to facilitate networking amongst care experienced students or students with similar shared experience, so they can develop their own peer support networks and sense of agency and empowerment, and networks that foster employability after graduation.

CHAPTER ONE:

INTRODUCTION

Introduction

Young people who have grown up in local authority care are highly educationally disadvantaged. Policy measures to address access to post compulsory education including university began to make an impact with the Children and Young Persons Act 2008 (in England) which required local authorities to provide financial and practical assistance to care leavers in education up to the age of 25. This measure, accompanied, from 2011, with specific guidance for universities on access arrangements that care leavers are an under-represented group, initially made a difference to the numbers of young people aged 19–21 who were defined as ‘care leavers’ for the purposes of local authority support and entering university. But participation rates have plateaued at about six percent compared to around 50 percent for those never in care (House of Commons 2019). More detailed analysis suggested that including young people up to the age of 23, the rate of university participation is actually 12 percent (Harrison, 2017). By comparison, in 2016/17, about 26 percent of young people who received free school meals as children went to university (DfE 2018).

In 2019, the incoming Office for Students reconfirmed its inclusion of care leavers within the regulatory guidance to universities on access and participation (Office for Students 2019). A very pressing issue now is participation. Approaching 20 percent of care experienced students withdraw from study programmes before completion of them (Harrison 2017). This is double the rate of early withdrawal among students from disadvantaged neighbourhoods (The Guardian 2019).

This report is of a study that addresses the ‘lived lives’ of care experienced students at university, and institutional perspectives, with the aim of identifying how the higher education sector can better support this group and so improve the chances of timely completion and subsequent livelihoods.

We take a broader definition of care leavers than the legislation specifying local authority support, which carries restrictive criteria relating to the duration of time in care and age of being in care. In line with the Office for Students (2019), who state that the legislative definition ‘does not cover all adults who have experienced care and who may need support as they enter higher education later in life’, universities and other education providers can include those who have experienced local authority care at any stage of their lives in their provision. We therefore employ the more inclusive phrase of ‘care experienced’ to refer to those who were ‘looked after’ at any time by local authorities.

Alongside basic unfairness, not attending or completing university has a negative impact on later life chances (Cameron et al., 2018). Successive studies carried out at Thomas Coram Research Unit, UCL Institute of Education, have influenced policy changes that improved information and advice about universities, financial and housing support, greater focus on stability in young people’s lives, and extending personal advisor support to the age of 25, all measures aimed at improving access to higher education (Jackson et al. 2005). The work also led to the introduction of the Buttle UK Quality Mark, awarded to universities that met criteria related to supporting care experienced students. Withdrawn in 2014, Buttle UK assessed that the Mark’s aim of raising awareness, and provision, in universities, had been achieved. Over its lifetime, 114 universities and 85 colleges achieved the Quality Mark.

The barriers to access, and experiences, of young people from public care backgrounds in further and higher education are similar across European countries (Jackson and Cameron 2014). These barriers are academic, practical and personal. Even now, despite plentiful policy initiatives, including the existence and activities of university based Access and Widening Participation teams, care experienced young people are much

less likely to achieve the academic qualifications, overcome the practical obstacles and reconcile the personal difficulties necessary to attend university than other young people who have not been in care. These difficulties, of complex lives, loss of home local authority support services, including housing issues, and ongoing disabilities and mental health problems, are reflected in higher than average withdrawal rates (Harrison, 2017; O'Neill et al. 2019).

The profile of care experienced students maps onto those of other under-represented participants in higher education including those from low income backgrounds, students with disabilities, or who are older, or from some minority ethnic or refugee/asylum seeker backgrounds; and these categories of course intersect. Arguably, this profile points to particular needs for pastoral, linguistic and practical support when arriving at university. A consistent and supportive relationship from a trusted member of staff can go a long way to retaining care experienced students on study programmes (O'Neill et al. 2019).

This study used a three part methodology to explore students', and institutional, perspectives on the experience of higher education. Alongside a review of literature and a survey of HEIs, we used a mobile ethnography 'walking interview', and an analysis workshop with young people, to enrich study findings with this very 'hard to reach' group.

There is no adequate dataset to find care experienced students at university so substantial engagement with campaigning groups and university widening participation networks was required. Our team liaised with a range of organisations in order to find study participants including Become, a charity that works to improve the everyday lives and future life chances of children in care and young care leavers by offering a range of support services; Drive Forward, which provides practical and emotional support to care leavers, helping them develop key skills, confidence and motivation for work, education or training; the National Network for the Education of Care Leavers (NNECL) which specifically works to progress and support care experienced young people in higher education; HELOA, the professional association of Higher Education staff that provides guidance, information and outreach activities to prospective higher education students, their families and guidance advisers throughout the UK; and AccessHE (Care experienced and estranged students forum). AccessHE is the pan-London organisation working to support underrepresented student groups to access, succeed in and progress out of Higher Education (HE).

These organisations were extremely generous and facilitated access to their members and regional and local networks through whom we reached out to recruit care experienced students to the study. They and their members mailed out information about the project and invitations to participate on the researchers' behalf. They invited researchers to meetings, conferences and networking events to promote the project and access potential participants. While these activities only marginally increased participant numbers, the knowledge gained and shared at the events and through day to day communications has been invaluable to gaining an understanding of the wider context.

In parallel with the extensive networking undertaken for this project we forged a preliminary collaboration with academics and artists leading two projects supporting care experienced students at Kings College London and Queen Mary University London, and with the Centre for Excellence and Equity in Higher Education (CEEHE) at the University of Newcastle, New South Wales, Australia. In the latter case, the same project methodology is being employed with a parallel group of students, enabling comparative findings to emerge in due course.

A note on terminology

This research study set out to explore the lived experiences of care experienced students at university. The term ‘care experienced’ arose in response to the strict legal definitions of ‘looked after children’ and ‘care leaver’, which excludes many that may have been in care for a relatively short period of time or at a particular age. The term ‘care experienced’ recognises that any time spent in care can have a significant impact on young people’s lives and as such provides a more inclusive definition and refers to all young people and adults who have spent any time in care.

The structure of this report

Chapter 2 provides an account of project methodology and Chapter 3 gives an overview of the findings from the literature review which drew on theory and practice in relation to widening participation of under-represented groups at university as relatively little has been written about care experienced young people in particular. Chapter 4 provides an overview of the findings of the survey of HEIs, which despite a poor response rate, raises issues of institutional variation and fragmentation of support services and add to the picture of current practice and policy. In Chapter 5 the findings are presented under four thematic headings as identified from the data and in collaboration with analysis workshop participants. Finally, Chapter 6 discusses the key messages from the research and makes recommendations for policy and practice in higher education. The main objective of this study is to find ways of overcoming disruptive experiences and enable a supportive and thriving experience while studying at university. Studies of educational inclusion are clear that inclusion for a particular group will mean inclusion for all students, and the same message comes through here. If we can get it right for care experienced students, we will be supporting all students, whatever their background.

CHAPTER TWO: METHODOLOGY

Methodology

The aim of the study was to understand how universities address the issue of retention of care experienced students from the institutional perspective and from the perspective of students and former students. Research objectives were to:

- i. identify how universities supported care experienced students;
- ii. understand how support available within universities shaped students' experience; and
- iii. identify what practical measures universities, and other organisations, might take to improve the retention of care experienced students.

We therefore designed a three-part methodology where each part helped to inform the focus of the other.

We sent named contacts information about the research and invited them to participate in an online survey about their institutions' arrangements to support student retention.

2.1 LITERATURE REVIEW

Part one involved a review of relevant recent literature on the experiences of underrepresented groups in higher education with a specific focus on care experienced students. A search of the literature was conducted using key words such as care experienced; university; higher education; retention. Studies were reviewed for findings with the aim to identify key themes in the literature to inform the development of the survey that sought to capture the institutional arrangements and services in place at Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to support students from care and other risk backgrounds. The review, whilst not extensive, also identified key theoretical frameworks underpinning research in this area that sought to understand the reasons why some students succeed in higher education and others do not. Key concepts arising out of these frameworks, which have been utilised to understand the experiences of students from disadvantaged backgrounds and minority ethnic groups, were operationalised in the qualitative part of the study to explore and understand the experiences of care experienced students in higher education.

2.2 SURVEY

Part two was an online survey of all HEIs in England. A request to participate in the survey was emailed to the 'named contact' for care leavers listed on the Propel database provided to us by the charity organisation Become (151 HEIs). We sent named contacts information about the research and invited them to participate in an online survey about their institutions' arrangements to support student retention. Several reminder emails were sent over the following weeks and months and the deadline for completing the survey was extended to allow extra time for completion and to maximise the response rate. We anticipated, and it proved to be the case, that no single job role had oversight of all the information that was being sought. Respondents said they had to liaise with colleagues in different departments to collate the information requested and examples of practice sought in order to complete the survey. This is likely to have been a significant factor in the low response rate. In total 27 HEIs participated, and there was much missing information in the completed surveys.



2.3 QUALITATIVE STRAND

In Part three, we conducted new qualitative research with current and former university students who were care experienced. After ethical approval had been granted by the UCL Institute of Education Research Ethics Committee, we developed and utilised a participatory interviewing method involving a walking interview, a form of mobile ethnography (Sheller and Urry, 2006) used to understand everyday experiences (Anderson, 2004). Recruited study participants were invited to take a researcher on a guided tour around their university campus and the surrounding area to explore their day to day lives at university. Participants were given complete control of both the route taken through the university and asked to take pictures on smartphones of places and spaces along the walk. This allowed them to manage and direct their journey, replicating, as much as possible, their ‘natural’, everyday encounters.

Throughout the walk, study participants were encouraged to talk about why they had chosen specific locations or sites around the campus, the significance of it and to recall memories associated with the places and spaces shown; as well as how their experiences of such altered during their time at university, if at all. Photographs taken along the walk were used at the end of the walking interviews as a talking point for further reflections to delve deeper into meanings of places and associated experiences. The focus of the qualitative research was very much on place and exploring the participants’ senses of place and belonging, using more directive questioning to explore their experiences in higher education and of support. Digital recordings of the walking interviews and photo elicitation conversations were later transcribed.

This participatory method was chosen to afford participants a greater degree of control over the research process than would be the case from more conventional interviews, for example, through deciding where to take the researcher and what topics to emphasise. By situating the research in the participant’s spatial context, conversations were spontaneously triggered by the surroundings and not directed by research questions as such. Anderson (2004) argues that walking interviews generate richer data, because interviewees are prompted by meanings and connections to the surrounding environment. In the current study having the participant’s narrative told in their lived environment added detail to researchers’ understanding of and insight into their university experiences. The university environment and campus locations were used as an elicitation process to generate discussion and prompt or encourage further questioning that may not occur in traditional interview – ‘room based’ – settings.

Throughout the walk, study participants were encouraged to talk about why they had chosen specific locations or sites around the campus, the significance of it and to recall memories associated with the places and spaces shown; as well as how their experiences of such altered during their time at university, if at all.

Care experienced students are an exceptionally hard group to reach. To recruit participants invitations were sent across England to all virtual school heads, all university widening participation teams, and all “named contacts” for care leavers listed in the Propel database. Information about the project was also circulated to various national and regional networks representing the interests of care leavers in higher education, including the NNECL newsletter and the HELOA fortnightly digest. We posted on social media, targeted specific online groups and reached out to organisations working with care leavers. Despite this exhaustive approach, just 19 care experienced young people got in touch expressing an interest in participating, of which seven took part in the qualitative interviews. It is interesting to note that we recruited most of the study sample via the charity Drive Forward Foundation which is concerned with helping care experienced young people develop skills, confidence and motivation for work, education or training. At the time of the interviews, Drive Forward Foundation was actively supporting young people in our sample through their outreach and mentoring services.

2.4 ANALYSIS

We adopted a participatory approach to data analysis. Researchers and participants worked together to co-create meanings from the data and a core narrative that reflected their lived experiences. The first stage of analysis involved bringing the interviews to life by creating descriptive pen portraits of each research participant’s experience of higher education. The second stage involved a participatory analysis workshop with young people who were care experienced. Three of the participants had also taken part in the walking interviews, and two participants had not. During the workshop researchers presented data to participants, giving them the opportunity to engage with the stories, identify key insights arising from the data and the stories that needed telling. The inferences that workshop participants drew from the study data informed the development of key analytical themes that captured significant meanings in the data relevant to the research objectives. Four main analytical themes were uncovered that participants considered represented the data most accurately and helped frame the key messages participants articulated at the workshop. Researchers then worked up these themes: enabling an informed choice; continuity of support; prescience and flexibility, and belonging and Chapter 5 is organised around study findings on these themes.

Participatory analysis workshop

The workshop consisted of three analysis activities. In the first, we displayed the pen portraits and we asked the workshop participants to review each one independently, making notes on post-its, which could be reflections on the pen portrait, questions about the experiences conveyed, shared experiences etc. They attached these to each pen portrait so others could review and reflect further as they rotated around each of the pen portraits. Researchers then gathered the initial overarching reflections to inform the second activity, and facilitated a brainstorming session covering the research objectives. Here, the young people validated or challenged inferences drawn from the pen portraits. In the third activity, participants devised an aggregate journey map of the different stages of a care experienced student's journey through higher education. Using the pen portrait data and the aggregated findings within the preceding brainstorm as a starting point for creating the aggregate map, we sought to bring together multiple journeys into one visual representation. The idea here was to try and capture the range of experiences in one place, highlighting key similarities and differences across common parts of the higher education experience, and discussing the reported (or potential) reasons for this. Researchers and the workshop participants also worked collaboratively to draft key messages and practice recommendations. A videographer attended this workshop, and created short films encapsulating the day and its messages to university leaders.

CHAPTER THREE: LITERATURE REVIEW



3.1 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS IDENTIFIED

Much of the research on student success and retention in higher education is underpinned by theoretical frameworks that seek to understand the reasons why some students succeed in higher education and others do not. In an era of policies to widen participation, in order to facilitate access to higher education for those groups previously under-represented, theories such as Bourdieu's social reproduction theory (Bourdieu, 1984; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992), Tinto's (1975) theory of student integration and Honneth's (1995) theory of social recognition have been operationalised to understand why, in particular, students from traditionally under-represented groups encounter difficulties with their undergraduate studies and struggle to 'fit in'. Bourdieu's work is used to highlight the fundamental differences between the background of non-traditional students and the world of higher education and middle class culture – or 'habitus' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992).

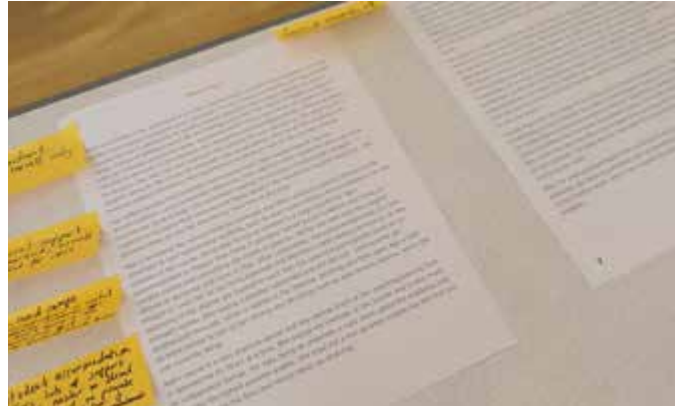
Bourdieu seeks to understand factors that influence the life course of individuals from a particular class. He uses the concept of 'capital' and articulates several forms of capital, to describe 'actual or potential resources' available to members of a group which will ultimately determine their actions and destiny. The importance of 'capital' is that the levels of access to various forms of capital are the root causes of social inequality.

Studies in the field of widening participation and access to higher education have utilised Bourdieu's theory to understand the experiences of students from disadvantaged backgrounds and minority ethnic groups. Such groups are seen to possess limited 'capital' (Thomas, 2010; Hyde-Dryden, G., 2013; West 2013; 2014) and 'habitus', making the transition into higher education difficult and unorthodox. Habitus refers to the accumulated norms and practices of a particular group/class to act in certain ways determined by early experiences. Educational institutions have an identifiable habitus (Reay, David and Ball, 2001) and students unfamiliar with such habitus may find it difficult to 'fit in' and adjust to institutional social norms putting them at risk of withdrawing from higher education. The notion of 'institutional habitus' is useful when operationalised to identify the characteristics of an institution that promotes access to and retention of students from lower socio-economic groups.

Critics of such utilisation of Bourdieu's theory point to the deterministic and rigid approach to understanding educational success and argue that alternative outcomes are possible for non-traditional groups and that a more agentic approach is needed (West 2017; Cotton et al., 2016).

Expanding on Bourdieu, Tinto (1975) sought to understand the reasons for retention and withdrawal in higher education by incorporating aspects of the academic environment (including interaction with staff), and social system (extracurricular activities and peer group integration) as significant factors in the student experience. He concludes that students who are less well integrated into academic and social settings are more likely to withdraw.

In recent years researchers have used Honneth's (1995) theory of recognition, which argues that the individual strives for recognition through developing relationships of self-confidence, self-respect and self-esteem in the family, civil society and the state, to explore how student retention and success can be affected by recognition of significant others (West 2017; Fleming and Finnegan 2014). Such research highlights the importance of human interaction and mutual recognition for success in education (West 2017) and indicate that: 'if education is to provide transformative experiences these moments [of recognition] need to be turned into pedagogical experiences of recognition – they are a precondition for transformative learning' (Fleming 2014).



3.2 EVIDENCE IN RELATION TO CARE EXPERIENCED YOUNG PEOPLE

Literature reviewed included two studies that specifically looked at the support available to widen participation in higher education among care leavers, and to improve levels of retention while in higher education (Cotton et al., 2014; Hyde-Dryden, 2013). Many HEIs engage in ‘generic’ outreach activity such as summer schools, taster days and school visits to raise aspirations of young people (Hyde-Dryden, 2013) though it is unclear from the literature what impact these activities have on widening participation among care leavers. For care leavers specifically, such activity is likely to be more effective when targeted at care leavers through collaboration with the local authority (as opposed to a broad brush approach covering all schools).

More evidence exists around the support that is put in place within HEIs once a young care leaver has commenced their course. Studies suggest that there are two key factors that help to support care leavers in completing their course:

1. Access to a ‘significant adult’ who could be a member of the academic staff or an individual with a specific role (e.g. care leaver officer or widening participation officer), who proactively shows an interest and provides tailored support to meet the needs of the student (Cotton et al., 2014; Hyde-Dryden, 2013). While local authorities continue to have a duty of care to young care leavers, this duty can be challenging to fulfil given the increased autonomy of the young person coupled with degrees of geographic separation. This has led to some suggesting that HEI representatives could act as contact points for the local authority to promote holistic and continuing support (Hyde-Dryden, 2013).
2. Access to care leaver bursaries or similar payments, and ideally 365-day accommodation (Cotton et al., 2017). In a survey, 30 out of 50 (60%) student support staff stated that their HEIs provided financial support exclusively for care leavers, in the form of a care leaver bursary, while others treated them as a priority group for other funding (Hyde-Dryden, 2013). Critical to the allocation of funding is that HEIs are aware of a young person’s care-leaver status; while bursaries may be available, without status information these may not be allocated (Cotton et al., 2014).

Financial arrangements that enable a student to live away from their ‘home’ local authority are essential to make the student experience comparable with ‘non care’ students. But funding for care leavers is complicated by relatively exclusive definitions of what constitutes a care leaver used by local authorities (Cotton et al., 2014). The legislative definition of care leaver has a minimum duration (13 weeks) and age restrictions (before age 16) to qualify for local authority support to age 25. This narrow definition is sometimes expanded by local authorities and can lead to variability in the financial support care leavers receive from their local authority. To make up for the shortfall in funds, some young people undertake paid employment alongside their studies. Blandizzi (2013, cited in Webb et al., 2017) reported increased engagement and graduation among US students not working, however there is also some evidence to the contrary (e.g. Carter, 2012 cited in Webb et al., Webb et al., 2017).

These two factors relate to the economic and social capital that would otherwise have been provided by family and are key features of the now non-operational Buttle UK Quality Mark (Buttle UK, 2011 cited in Hyde-Dryden, 2013). Almost half of HEIs (46%) report having a specific policy of support for care leavers (Hyde-Dryden, 2013) though there is some evidence that post-1992 institutions are relatively better prepared to support the widening participation agenda, with a clearer ethos around encouraging equality of access, more proactive and hands-on approaches to support, a stronger emphasis on relationships between staff and students, and a greater recognition of care leavers support needs than more ‘traditional’ universities (Hyde-Dryden, 2013).

Evidence in relation to care experienced young people (continued)

The majority of studies indicate that improving the retention and outcomes for students who may come from more disadvantaged backgrounds is best achieved through holistic activity delivered in the mainstream as part of an ongoing package of measures (Thomas et al., 2017; Thomas 2012), as opposed to support that is targeted at specific groups of young people. Successful support interventions may include:

- learning communities, which encourage collaboration and can support engagement of minority groups in particular (e.g. Lave and Wenger, 1991 cited in Webb et al., 2017; Fagioli et al. 2015, Webb et al., 2017)
- counselling, which can support young people to adjust to new environments (e.g. Lee et al., 2009, Webb et al., 2017)
- mentoring and peer support which has strong evidence of impact on confidence, engagement, retention and academic outcomes (e.g. Collings et al. 2014 cited in, Webb et al., 2017; Thomas 2012)

Avoiding the isolation of specific groups, such as disadvantaged young people (including care leavers) in any intervention speaks to a key feature identified throughout the wider literature on increasing retention within HEIs, namely a student's sense of belonging (e.g. Masika and Jones, 2016). Belonging is the sense of feeling accepted, valued, included and encouraged (Goodenow 1993 cited in Thomas 2012) and can be fostered both through relationships with trusted adults and with peers. Burke (2016: 86) suggests that tutors in particular have a key role in fostering participation and "must be appropriately supported by their institutions to develop pedagogical practices that create an environment of trust, belonging and inclusion". Technology and advances in learning analytics may support this through enabling tutors to quickly identify areas in which students may struggle, and to establish a culture of academic achievement and success (Webb et al., 2017).

Students' habitus is also relevant (Reay et al., 2001). Students whose habitus is at odds with that of their HEI – perhaps because they are targeted with special measures to support them socially, emotionally or academically – may feel that they do not fit in, resulting in early withdrawal (Thomas, 2002 cited in Thomas 2012). HEIs therefore need to ensure that all students – in particular disadvantaged groups, such as care experienced students – are aware of and have access to the range of support that can benefit their sense of belonging, and academic progress, without stigmatising specific cohorts on the basis of providing them with support as a 'special case'. However, it is critical that HEIs do raise awareness of such support among care leavers, especially as such support, while beneficial, is often only chanced upon by care leavers as a matter of 'luck' or through word of mouth. Proactiveness is key (Thomas 2012).

The main findings from this review of the literature relate to habitus and belonging, and the way that institutions set out to, or inadvertently, through dominant discourses and practices that are established over time, convey cultural characters that exclude or include certain groups of students. Habitus, and cultural capital, of both institutions and students shape belonging and this has an impact on student completion.

Institutions are however capable of change. Some universities have deliberately adopted codes of practice that are explicitly open to students from non-traditional backgrounds. For care experienced students, reliable relationships of trust with significant adults coupled with practical support that make staying at university feasible are essential features of this provision.

CHAPTER FOUR: SURVEY FINDINGS

Survey Findings

Based on the literature review, which found many gaps in evidence on what supports care leavers and avoids early withdrawal from university study programmes, the online survey was designed to address how HEIs operate to support care experienced students. We sought detail on an extensive range of questions. However, only 27 HEIs responded and because of this poor response rate and the significant amount of missing data, we report here on a summary of key, reportable findings.

How HEIs identify care leavers and other at risk and disadvantaged groups

Most participating HEIs reported that they identify care experienced students, estranged students, and those in the other Widening Participation (WP) categories we listed (e.g. students with disabilities, young carers, Black students, Gypsy/travellers), via a 2-pronged approach of both pre-entry activity and identifying students once they have enrolled. A few HEIs stated that they used data sources such as NS-SEC 4-8, IMD quintile 1, IDACI quintile at either pre-entry or once enrolled.

Number of WP and care experienced students at the HEI and the number who withdrew (2017/18 academic year)

Only four HEIs had information on the number of WP students and only two on the number who had dropped out. There was a higher data return on care experienced students: 14 out of the 27 HEIs responded to this question. Numbers of care experienced students at HEIs ranged from 5 to 82; the median number was 24 and the mean was 36. Only seven HEIs were able to provide information on the number who withdrew in the 2017/18 academic year; the number ranged from 0 to 45. Overall data on WP students and care experienced students were, according to HEIs, mostly estimates or based on limited or inaccurate data.

How HEIs define a care experienced student

Various definitions are used across HEIs, the main ones reported were:

1. "A young person that has ever been placed in care": 6 HEIs
2. "A young person who has been in the care of, or has been given accommodation by, their Local Authority for at least 13 weeks before the age of 16 (Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000)": 10 HEIs
3. Ever in care, with a threshold period (e.g. minimum of 3 months: 1 HEI; 13 weeks or more: 1 HEI)
4. Both 1 and 2 e.g. for bursary support 'Students under the age of 25 who have been in public care for a minimum of three months since the age of 11'. Some support to any student who identifies as having experienced care: 1 HEI

The most frequently mentioned measures for all students were academic support, guidance and support on managing finances/careers, student welfare/student support, counselling and transition/induction programme. The most frequently mentioned measures specifically for WP and care experienced students were financial support (e.g. bursaries, priority work opportunities, internships), a named contact and mentoring/peer support.

Where a care experienced student has disclosed their status, how is this information used?

The most common response was to share information about care status with specialist services, such as finance or accommodation (9 HEIs). Less often it is shared with course leader/tutors (2 HEIs); used to monitor progress (3 HEIs); used to plan dedicated support and welfare (7 HEIs). Eight HEIs reported that they specifically monitor care experienced students' progress and wellbeing, and two HEIs reported that they do not.

Do policies for widening participation include measures to support student retention?

There were 20 positive answers to this question and two negative. Specific measures in place to support student retention were:

Academic: Bridging courses; Induction programmes/residentials; mentoring with staff; decolonised curricula; inclusive assessment; specific staff dedicated to retention; mentoring; study skills sessions; transition programme to support new first year students.

Practical: Financial support, housing advice/support; accommodation guarantee for care leavers; paid work opportunities; hardship fund; lunchtime get-togethers; signposting to services; care experienced student specific contract and bursary.

Personal/health related: Named contact for WP students; individual contact at sensitive points in the academic year; psychological/counselling/student wellbeing and support service; welfare officers; peer mentoring; one-off wellbeing events.

The most effective measures to support student retention

HEIs gave examples of services supporting all students and some that were specifically for care experienced students and/or WP students. The most frequently mentioned measures for all students were academic support, guidance and support on managing finances/careers, student welfare/student support, counselling and transition/induction programme. The most frequently mentioned measures specifically for WP and care experienced students were financial support (e.g. bursaries, priority work opportunities, internships), a named contact and mentoring/peer support.

Measures to support student participation in university life

These were often ‘university-wide’ or specific to courses rather than focussed on WP or care experienced students. One HEI did report that ongoing consultation took place with care experienced students and another HEI operated mentoring for these students. University wide or course specific measures reported included a college parent system, peer support, transition programme, student union societies and clubs, course based societies, living at home student network, hall socials/societies, and a discretionary fund to attend study trips.

Activities to integrate students into faculties, departments and courses

The most frequently cited activities were meet ups with programme staff, introductions to a faculty or department, informal learning, social events and online learning communities. The frequency with which these activities took place varied across HEIs with some taking place more than once a term, some on a termly basis and some yearly.

Ongoing contact and communication with students throughout their course

For most HEIs who responded, WP and care experienced students are integrated into usual communication mechanisms as for all students, most commonly via VLE messages, email, drop-in sessions, personal tutors and informal or formal social events. Less common mechanisms for ongoing contact and communication reported were text messages, phone calls, internships/voluntary work in Department and paid work in Department.

Academic support and development available to students

The most commonly reported forms of academic support offered to students were study skills, personal tutoring and regular feedback, the majority of which operate at a university wide rather than at a course specific level. Most of these forms of support were for all students; only three HEIs offered anything specifically for WP groups and/or care experienced students.

Support and welfare services for students enrolled on courses

The most commonly reported types of support available to students were mental health support, careers advice and mentoring schemes (staff and peer). Some HEIs offered specific support for WP and/or care experienced students, particularly financial support and a named advisor for discussing non-academic issues. The most common mechanisms reported by HEIs for students to find out about support and welfare services offered at the HEI were signposting by course staff (12 HEIs) and personal tutors (9 HEIs). Most HEIs reported that students access these services via self-referral either to university wide services (13 HEIs) or to community services (eight HEIs). Other mechanisms of referral cited were via personal tutor, staff or departmental referral to university services.

Dedicated support available for care experienced students

The most commonly reported form of dedicated support was financial support/ bursaries (12 HEIs) followed by a named contact for care leavers (11 HEIs), 365 day accommodation (9 HEIs), careers advice (8 HEIs) and counselling/mental health support (6 HEIs). 4 HEIs had mentoring schemes for care experienced students and three had a designated support worker.

Joint working to address retention and needs of WP and/or care experienced students

Nine HEIs reported that their WP team worked with other departments on student retention, six said that they did not currently carry out joint working on this. Examples of joint working:

- WP related roles in student services, careers and the student study skills centre who act as a link to the WP team.
- Cross department meetings with WP to ensure effective joined up working.
- Joint student retention and success strategy with Education and Student Affairs VP Office.
- Outreach staff working with academic staff to identify students requiring additional support.
- Widening Participation Team providing support and training for other university depts.
- A Care Experienced and Estranged Students Working Group comprising of WP, Student Funding, Student Support Wellbeing and Accommodation, a care experienced and estranged student rep.
- Regular communication between WP and relevant staff e.g. personal tutor, finance, housing.
- A WP produced guide to working with care experienced students for university departments.

Barriers to joint working identified by HEIs

- Issues with reliability of data and data sharing across a large university; sensitivities around identifying students as WP and how this is communicated to them.
- No agreed definition of a WP student for use in data analysis.
- Identifying WP/care experienced students and their needs.
- Lack of partnership working between relevant departments e.g. WP, Student Support, Faculty.
- Small numbers of care experienced students therefore developing specific policies/practices in each department is difficult to maintain when many may not have any of these students.
- A lack of staff.
- Lack of understanding by academic staff and departments such as finance of the challenges that WP/care experienced students face and the importance of a swift response to their needs.



O'Neill et al. (2019) found that, in Scotland, a half of care experienced students had considered leaving before the end of their course but only 13 percent had actually left, which suggests that some of the support activity is making a difference and that it was likely to be the actions of individuals who create reliable trusting relationships who were helped students stay on their study programmes.

Survey findings (continued)

The survey response rate was insufficient to offer generalisability of results but, in light of the literature review findings around personal and practical support, raises some issues of concern. First, the lack of data, and agreed definitions to describe the group being offered a service, makes planning for and servicing care experienced students difficult. Second, the uses of information about being a formerly looked after child (care status) were rather few, suggesting that more strategic use of this information might be possible. Third, respondents indicated that many and varied means of supporting students from a range of backgrounds including care experienced students were in place, with some evidence of specific supports for the latter group. What we do not know is whether and how these support services act to retain care experienced students. O'Neill et al. (2019) found that, in Scotland, a half of care experienced students had considered leaving before the end of their course but only 13 percent had actually left, which suggests that some of the support activity is making a difference and that it was likely to be the actions of individuals who create reliable trusting relationships who helped students stay on their study programmes. However, given the high degree of variability uncovered, and the high degree of fragmentation of responsibility for support across academic, pastoral and administrative services, further work is needed, probably using a different methodology, to arrive at a comprehensive picture of institutional arrangements for supporting care experienced students at university.

CHAPTER FIVE: LIVED LIFES AT UNIVERSITY

Lived lives at university

In this chapter we present findings from the qualitative walking interviews in relation to care experienced students' experiences of being at university. The findings are presented under four analytical themes that capture the stories and meanings within the data. The themes were arrived at in a participatory analysis workshop in collaboration with three interview participants, and two non-interview participants – who served as additional validators of our interpretation of the data (see Chapter 3). The themes are: i) enabling an informed choice; ii) continued support; iii) prescience and flexibility; and iv) belonging. Linking back to our research objectives, we considered that day-to-day experiences, as well as academic progress, would have a significant bearing on whether or not students decided to continue with or withdraw from the programme of study. We asked questions of the data such as: What facilitates and enables care experienced students' to not only successfully complete their studies but to also have a positive and fulfilling experience throughout their time in Higher Education (HE) in comparable ways to other students? What are the issues and circumstances that can potentially disrupt their HE experience?

The concept of disruption is highly significant for care experienced students and a critical factor for their retention in HE. Care experienced students have commonly experienced major disruption throughout their lives through, for example, changes to fostering or residential placements, schools, and disrupted relationships with family, carers, professionals and social networks. Just to get to university, they have already demonstrated enormous resilience in overcoming multiple disruptions and obstacles (Jackson et al. 2005). But we found that they faced ongoing challenges and further potential disruptions that HEIs could respond to more proactively, flexibly and effectively, to provide the stability, continuity and support that is needed for young people to have a positive and successful experience in HE. For this reason, disruption is a red thread running throughout the findings reported below.



RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

Table 5.1 introduces the research participants. Three took part in the interview as well as the workshop, four did the interview only and two were involved in the workshop but not the interviews. Mostly around their early twenties, three were White-British, three Black-British and two Asian-British. One was White-European. They had attended or were still attending Russell Group, Redbrick and Post 92 universities and were undertaking or had completed degrees in a range of subjects.

Table 5.1

Pseudonyms, whether participated in interview, workshop or both and characteristics of participants including age (if known), ethnicity, pathway to university and degree domain

Name*	Interview	Workshop	Age (if known), ethnicity, pathway to university; type of university attended; student status, and degree subject domain
Allison	Yes	Yes	Black-British; went straight to HE from college; attended a 'post-92' university; had just graduated at time of interview; Art
Selena	Yes	Yes	21, White European; went straight to HE from college; attended a 'Redbrick' university; in her second year at time of interview; Sciences
Pravir	Yes	Yes	25, Asian-British; went straight to HE from college; attended a 'Russell Group' university; left university in his second year; Economics
Michael	Yes	No	21, Black-British; went straight to HE from college; attended a 'Red brick' university; in his final year at time of interview; Social Sciences
Ruth	Yes	No	23, White-British; went straight to a Russell Group university from college but left her course and started at a different Russell Group university over a year later; in her final year at time of interview; Sciences
Laila	Yes	No	Black-British; went straight to HE from college; attended a 'post-92' university; repeating her second year at time of interview; Business
Isabella	Yes	No	23, White-British; didn't go straight from college to university (year delay); attended a 'post-92' university; in her final year at time of interview; Business
Amar	No	Yes	Asian-British; went straight to HE from college; attended a 'Russell Group' university; had just completed his second year at time of workshop; interrupted during his first year and had not gained sufficient grades to progress onto the second year and was applying for another interruption. Health
Emma	No	Yes	White-British; went straight to HE from college; attended a 'Russell Group' university, in her final year at time of workshop. Health

* Names used are pseudonyms

5.1 ENABLING AN INFORMED CHOICE

The theme of enabling an informed choice is concerned with HEIs ensuring that care experienced young people have access to all the information they need, at the right time, about what going to university is like, what to expect and about the different institutions and courses available. This is vital in order for them to be able to make a fully informed decision as to whether attending HE is what they really want to do and if it is, to choose the right institution and course for them. This is about HEIs providing information and support prior to and during the application phase and understanding the potential legacy this can have for retaining their care experienced students.

Many of the study participants spoke about how going to university was conveyed to them as the ‘normative’ trajectory and of feeling pushed towards that route by teachers, social workers and carers, regardless of how the young person felt. Other options were rarely discussed or given due consideration. Concomitantly, very little information was available specifically for care experienced students whilst at college or 6th form to address their particular needs and concerns about going to HE.

One participant spoke about how he was given very poor advice while at college and of feeling “funnelled” into the HE route and into a particular course and institution. This young person ended up dropping out of his HE course after encountering a range of obstacles including a lack of flexibility and support in HE policies and procedures and not feeling like he fit in or belonged at his HEI:

“I don’t think coming to university was the right idea for me...when you’re in college that’s all you get told.... teachers don’t really give a damn about what’s best for you, whether university is the best route for you”. (Pravir, interview and workshop participant)

Often study participants were the first person in their family or social network to go to university. This meant they had little or no prior knowledge about university life, the expectations about academic study, or the practical and social aspects of being a student. In many cases, study participants had no-one close to them with whom they could share their HE experience, who could answer questions, help them in their decision making and alleviate any anxieties or concerns they might have. This was the case for nearly all of the study participants:

“Applying for uni was all very tick box, there wasn’t really any guidance on maybe this would be a better way to go or is this the best university so it was all a bit unknown and I don’t know anyone who’s already been to university” (Emma, workshop participant)

One study participant spoke about having to research HE institutions and courses on her own without any help and how this was stressful for her. Another talked about the lack of available information and support when thinking about which institution and course to apply to; and said this had contributed to a disrupted experience in HE. Prior to the HE course she was currently undertaking, she had been at another university but had dropped out. One of the main reasons she gave for this was that the institution was too big and anonymous, that the culture, characteristics and feel of the university and the city where it was located were not a good fit for her and she wasn’t able to cope with student life and studying there:

“I found the city too big and it was all too much, and all this sort of stuff. But also just that you’re sort of dropped into a sea of 1000 students, and the central student services, but it’s sort of like turn up, get assigned a person ... like going to a bank or something – it’s quite impersonal”. (Ruth, interview participant)

A key theme in the study participants’ accounts was the ‘habitus’ of HEIs, and the way they vary. Habitus refers to the culture, character, and beliefs, the feel of a place and the particular systems and ways that things work there. Since care experienced students are very often unfamiliar with university life from informal networks, they are unprepared for it (Cameron et al 2012). But what also became evident from the study was that the habitus of HEIs is far from

homogeneous. There are significant differences between institutions in terms of their ‘culture’, the make-up of the student body, how academic and professional staff engage with students academically and pastorally and the type and quality of support the HEI provides for care experienced students. Care experienced students need enough information prior to the application stage to be able to decide which HEI might be right for them. Going to a university with the right habitus for the student can have a substantial impact on them, their sense of belonging, how well or not they settle into and integrate with their course and other students, and ultimately it can determine whether or not they stay the course.

Several participants talked about the importance of open days, summer schools and shadowing schemes for helping care experienced students to make informed decisions about HE and that often it wasn’t until students visit a HEI that they can get a real sense of whether the habitus is right for them even if the written information about an HEI looks promising in terms of the course and support available.

“I went for one, [name of university] but then I went down there, I hated the town. Yeah, I just didn’t like the look of it, I didn’t like the feel of it. I’m very vibes-y, energy and stuff. They had quite good care leavers support...they had a very good care leaver service, yeah...it was just the whole town in general, I just didn’t like it at all. So as soon as I came off the train I was like ‘No I don’t want to be here’. (Laila, interview participant)

One study participant had attended a week long summer school before she started at her HEI which had been run by the university disability advisor; she spoke about how helpful this had been for her in terms of being more prepared for university life:

“that was a stepping stone, that was like the foundation of me getting in of uni lifestyle, like me getting to know people, me kind of prepping myself of the environment around there.”
(Allison, interview and workshop participant)

Study participants reported that financial support and accommodation needs to be available to care experienced students to enable them to attend open days and summer schools; some participants reported that they had not been able to afford to pay for travel and other costs to attend such events and so ended up starting at their HEI without having had a chance to visit it first.

Some study participants reported a lack of clear information both prior to applying for HE, and during their studies, about the statutory support available to them and what was offered by individual HEIs (which seemed to vary considerably). Care experienced students need to be fully informed about what support will be available at a particular HEI and how to access it; not only financial support but accommodation during and outside of term time as well as academic and pastoral support. One of the participatory analysis workshop members stated that it wasn’t until they read the pen portraits of the other study participants that they realised the range support and resources available to care experienced students at different institutions and how it contrasted with her experience:

“[For me] there was like a lack of knowledge about the support available. Cos like half the things I read, I didn’t know half of those things were available to care leavers. Like some of the financial ... like some of the bursaries and things like that. I think one of them, just thinking about getting things for uni you need when you moved in and things – I didn’t know very much about any of that”. (Emma, workshop participant)

Furthermore, study participants reported a lack of support with the actual application UCAS process and how difficult they found it because it is based on a typical student profile. Such a profile did not fit with their often complex backgrounds and present circumstances, and there were sometimes unanswerable questions in the application form, such as details about parents, or a current permanent address.



Enabling an informed choice (continued)

Disclosure of care status was an important issue raised by research participants. They talked about the reluctance of some care experienced students to admit their care status and the potential consequences of non-disclosure for receiving the support they would be entitled to and might need. Almost all of the participants in this study had disclosed their status but they understood why some might not want to due to the perceived stigma of being labelled as 'care leaver' and of being treated differently or with prejudice, either intentional or unintentional. In view of this, it is very important that care experienced students are fully informed at the application stage of the purpose and importance of disclosing, how this information will be shared and with whom, that they are given assurances around data protection and that they are helped to understand the benefits of disclosing. Local authorities, schools and HEIs need to get this information across to potential students clearly and in a way whereby disclosure is not seen as stigmatising but as a positive measure that will help them during their time at university.

“[name of university] had a specific Office for Care Leavers that they didn't advertise even though I disclosed, they have a £5500 bursary for care leavers that they don't actually announce because they're worried that people will just try and take advantage ... apparently there was loads of money put aside for these people but it wasn't publicised and the uni didn't think they had any students who needed it, so the money wasn't going to them. It wasn't advertised anywhere, no way for care leavers to know anything about it and in the meantime care Leavers are regularly dropping out because they are struggling financially.” (Amar, workshop participant)

Enabling an informed choice clearly puts the responsibility onto schools, universities and those acting as corporate parents to make comprehensive information available, about the HEIs offer to care experienced students, as well as more general characteristics of the university, well before students arrive. The first impression is clearly, for these students, a significant one.

5.2 CONTINUITY OF SUPPORT

The second theme was continuity of support in the form of a reliable and knowledgeable person to go to throughout the transition period and beyond. Study participants thought such continuity of support was very important in helping them to develop a sense of security and stability as well as confidence in their ability to deal with academic work and any difficulties that might arise. Continuity of support also helps to avoid circumstances that might cause disruption and have implications for student retention. Continuity is essential, particularly in the areas of finance, suitable and stable accommodation, as well as academic, social, emotional and mental health support. Ideally, continuity of support should parallel what parents provide for their offspring going to university.

To enable this continuity for care experienced students, effective communication and sharing of relevant information is key, as is good inter-professional working between Local authorities (LA)/Personal Advisors (PA) and the HEI, where care experienced students still want the involvement of their LA. This helps to facilitate a seamless transition of support that the student is already receiving and it ensures that the HEI is aware of emerging needs relating to the care experienced student's transition to HE as well as any support that might be required in the future. However, this is a difficult area to mandate, as those with care experience, like all students, are adults and university is seen as a time to 'break free' from the supervisory arrangements of childhood. Moreover, not all care experienced students will be eligible for support from their home local authority. In the case of concerns about student mental health, data protection regulations have been cited as a barrier to sharing information with parents (Perraudin 2019). A recent survey of students found that four fifths of respondents supported universities communicating with parents in cases where there was concern about their mental health (Neves and Hillman 2019), suggesting that universities' duty of care should be a principle in their communication with those responsible for, or caring about, particular students' wellbeing, including local authorities.

Study participants had very varied experiences in their transition to HE and of the degree of continuity of support provided to them. They highlighted that continuity is dependent on whether the care experienced student has disclosed their status (see previous section 'Enabling an informed choice') but also on whether they have a well-informed PA in their home local authority and if they are going to a HEI that has a good understanding of the experiences and needs of care experienced students with good policies, procedures and support systems in place.

Many study participants reported limited or no access to consistent forms of support in daily life and only very periodic contact with their personal advisor in home local authorities. For them, consistent and holistic support from their HEI is particularly important. Not having continuity of support can lead to feelings of isolation, abandonment and anxiety about whether and how they will cope in new surroundings and circumstances, which may lead to disruption in their HE experience.

"I was depressed, my OCD had flared up, anxiety. And that was more feeling like isolated sort of thing after a while ... I mean you've got your uni friends but it's not the same. I think I saw my PA once the whole time I was down there, which wasn't good". (Laila, interview participant)

Continuity from the start

For some study participants, continuity of support was lacking from the moment they moved to their university. Several study participants spoke about having no one to help them move their things into their accommodation or to be with them when they moved in. One student had to transport all of her belongings by herself in three train journeys. Another reported having to move with the help of a stranger because there was no-one else, and how he didn't have anyone to be with him when he arrived at university. He found this very difficult particularly because other students had their parents with them; he said that this exacerbated feelings of loneliness and of being different to other students right from the start. This early experience had longer lasting effects in that it took him much longer to unpack and settle in than for other students which in turn affected him academically and socially:

“I remember not unpacking for a month, I just tried to unpack a little bit but it sort of ate into my first term at uni because I sort of procrastinated and I didn't really settle in...I felt like I was a step back, maybe a few steps back in terms of academics and in terms of socialising and I found myself comparing the other students with myself quite a bit...I felt like I needed more time than other people to settle into uni socially and I felt I was missing a lot of advice that a lot of other students would have received from their parents I guess”.
(Amar, workshop participant)

Although all but one of the study participants had been living with either foster families or an older sibling there was a lack of social and parental support to help them settle in, to provide a safety net during that first day, and to support the transition from family / domestic environments to independent living over the following weeks and months. This presented an immediate challenge for study participants. During the early days they had doubts and questioned their ability to make it through university.

“... like I was kind of questioning myself like, I was kind of thinking can I make it through this, because it's just so overwhelming, because the pressure is high – because I want to better myself, I want to get the education that I really want, but then it's like if I fail that what do I have back home? (Allison interview and workshop participant)

“There is a very large hole for people who don't have parental support with that, so that needs to be sorted, because it puts so much pressure [on us]”. (Ruth, interview participant)

“It [going to university] was completely like a huge step up that I would have kind of liked family there if it all went a bit wrong [...] A lot of people who come to university have their parents there on the first day and they go home at the weekend – whereas I didn't really have that. It was like ... I'm completely like an independent adult now”. (Isabella, interview participant)

Some also reflected on the challenges of either having to have awkward conversations with their new peers about their home circumstances and care history, or in avoiding such conversations.

“I had a very close group of friends but they’ve graduated, so the friends I have now are more sort of ... a bit more casual, like they don’t know very much about me but we go out and do this, that and the other. ..So I haven’t told them. It’s something I try to leave quite late, but when I first got here it came up because we’d all just moved into our new like ... I don’t know flat, so everyone was talking about you know moving in, all this kind of stuff, and people kept asking me like ‘Oh why haven’t you called your parents yet, they must be wanting to know how it’s going’ and all this stuff. And they’re just like ... like obviously not mean to you, but over and over again ... and so eventually it was like quite early on that I just sort of gave a bare bones outline so that that would stop. And people were very understanding, just not something they’d encountered before I think.” (Ruth, interview participant)

Most of our study participants reported difficulties settling into life as a student, getting to know their way around campus and understanding where they needed to be and when. Open days and other mechanisms of contact prior to starting a course, such as setting up groups and forums on social media platforms, were said by participants to be incredibly important in addressing initial confusions, as they help to establish links and relationships with existing students (including current care experienced or WP students), as well as with academic and professional staff, all of which can enhance a sense of continuity of being supported and belonging to a new place. It can help care experienced students to settle in and to feel able to ask for help if they already know a few people at the HEI before they start. Allison said:

“it’s important to have at least a few people that you know at the university before you arrive maybe. So like I was introduced even via email like to a few key people – that you have some personal support and you know them before you get there”.



Continuity of support in the ‘business as usual’

By ‘business as usual’ we are referring to the everyday life of being a university student. One of the main obstacles to ensuring continuity of support is inadequate intra-university communication. Even when a student has disclosed their care status, this information is not necessarily passed on to key people, such as lecturers and tutors (see survey findings).

“I don’t think any of my lecturers knew that I was a Care Leaver and my personal tutor didn’t know til I mentioned it in my 2nd year and before then I don’t think they knew, it wasn’t passed on to them.”
(Emma, workshop participant)

Without sharing of relevant information, and/or regular contact between the care experienced students and other key HEI personnel such as the Widening Participation team, personal tutor, degree programme lead, there is every likelihood that there is inadequate awareness or understanding of students’ current or emerging needs. It also places the onus on the student to ask for and seek out help rather than the HEI being prescient and proactive. This again raises the question about the extent to which a duty of care applies to students, to what extent it is followed through, and the boundaries between a duty of care and intrusion into the personal life of an adult.

Lack of confidence in asking for help

Care experienced students can be reluctant to ask for support or additional resources that they may need because of previous negative experiences of asking for help, and a lack of confidence and trust in professionals who are meant to support them that might stem from their childhood experiences.

“I think knowing when to ask for help is like my biggest weakness in life because you don’t want to seem ... not stupid but that you can’t do it yourself.” (Isabella, interview participant)

In light of this, some study participants talked about the need for key academic and professional staff to be approachable and available, and how important regular contact and ‘keeping in touch’ with care experienced students is by a range of methods, such as face to face meetings, email, phone, Skype, and text messaging. Keeping in touch helps students to develop relationships of trust, which in turn makes it more likely that they will come forward and talk about any problems they are having, and that academic and professional staff will recognise any signs that they are struggling.

Some participants said that they hadn’t known what support was available to them during their time at university because the information was not there or because the HEI wasn’t open about it. The onus is often on the student to try and find this information which may involve having to pursue a number of different people in different job roles and then go through a protracted process of proving their eligibility and building a case for support. This can cause disruption to their academic and social life and to settling in and feeling secure. It also further compounds any feelings they may have of difference between them and their non-care experienced peers.

An open door policy

Specific needs are often triggered or emerge over the course of a care experienced student's HE journey, participants said. Such needs can include learning difficulties, and anxiety associated with academic pressure and emotional vulnerability. One area of difficulty or need can often have a knock-on effect on other areas of a student's life:

“Lots of financial issues that people in my situation can have, a lot decide to drop out of uni cos they can't cope with all the housing pressures, all the course pressures on top of that, you don't have as much network support as many other people do...a lot of anxiety issues, we have our families to deal with and other things.”
(Selena, interview and workshop participant)

Sometimes care experienced students may decline initial offers of support because they don't feel like they need it but later find they do need to access a service. In these circumstances it is vital that an 'open door' policy exists, and that flexible, responsive systems are in place that make support readily available subsequently. Flexible systems might also allow for disclosure of care status once a care experienced student has started a programme of study and can appreciate the benefits it might bring. This again highlights how important it is that HEIs ensure trusting relationships are built between care experienced students and key academic and professional staff so that students feel comfortable to disclose their status if they so choose.

Outside term times

The availability of personal support outside term times was a further important issue raised by study participants. Some study participants reported feeling very lonely during the holiday periods, when other students have gone home. A lack of social and emotional support during these vacation periods was particularly upsetting around the Christmas break:

“In the holidays it's like, what do I do? Cos everyone goes home and kinda like, well I could go to my foster carers but I don't really want to so then you end up staying, like I ended up staying at uni a lot but then there's no-one around and it's all just a bit weird, like wandering around campus alone for like 3 weeks...It would be good if there was somewhere they could go or like some kind of group where like for people, not just for care leavers, but people in general who are there for the holidays and don't have anywhere to go to... like some uni organised events”. (Emma, workshop participant)

Other practical matters were a concern outside of term time. Financial provision and accommodation were a major concern. Most study participants reported that the financial support available to them from their LA and HEI was, at best, just enough to cover the essentials but not to participate fully in student life or for extras like making trips home to see family or friends.

“it was just like not having that freedom of just being able to see my friends or just go home when I want to go home, sort of thing”.
(Laila, interview participant)

“Student finance alone barely covers living costs and the rent so to have extra finance for social which is very important especially in the first year due to peer pressure and fitting in and just all the extra things that people don’t realise like travelling back home to see your friends because they are the important people in your life as a care leaver or for emergencies like if your phone breaks.”
(Allison, interview and workshop participant)

“compared to a parent, they can lend you some money or they give it out of unconditional love you know. And the fact that you don’t have to worry about it. But with the whole system of a care leaver and the whole government funding it’s limited....there was a time when I ran out of money, I had to wait until oh next week or the week after. So I ended up using ... I end up selling some stuff of mine, or I’d go through the donated food bins”. (Allison, interview and workshop participant)

The anxiety that financial pressures can cause for care experienced students cannot be overstated. It can be a significant causal factor for disrupted HE experiences. Care experienced students often lack access to parents or family who they can call on for additional money if they need it. Several participants said that there was a lack of clear information at their HEI about what financial support was available or what extra funds might exist and how this might be accessed.

Accommodation was a major concern for study participants and particularly the issue of what happens during the long summer break. Accommodation costs took up a large proportion of their financial allowance and many participants said that there were additional charges for accommodation during the summer holidays which were very high and often unaffordable:

“my university has very steep housing prices in the summer, it would have cost me £6000 for housing throughout the summer so with your student loan you basically don’t have anything left...housing prices actually rise during the summer and the cheapest accommodation choices are not even open for renting during the summer”.
(Selena, interview and workshop participant)

Continuity of support in the transition out of HE

Study participants reported deep worries about what happens after they complete their course; many have very real fears about life after university. One of the key issues was that of post-graduate degrees such as Masters' degrees. Some participants reported feeling that this was not an option that was open to them in the way that it is for other students because financial assistance and other forms of support were not available for care experienced students as they are for undergraduate degrees.

Other concerns for study participants included finding good employment and taking the first steps to forging their way to a successful career. They reported that they very often do not have the networks, links and opportunities that other students may have to help them and so they are likely to be at a significant disadvantage in the labour market. In the absence of such social and cultural capital, the employability services of HEIs could take a much more pro-active role in helping care experienced students to access relevant work experience, to network and to access good career opportunities:

“people use family and other contacts to get jobs and opportunities that wouldn't be like available to people who might not have family links and I think care leavers, if they don't have close family links for example they might not be able to get a leg up into a firm that they otherwise might have been able to like jump into and that also applies to people from working class backgrounds or people who are first generation Brits”. (Amar, workshop participant)



5.3 PRESCIENCE AND FLEXIBILITY

The third theme was prescience and flexibility. This referred to the role of universities in being aware of the needs of care experienced students and taking proactive steps to address them but not in a blanket, uniform way.

While many university students report low level anxiety (Neves and Hillman 2019) and while for most young people university presents considerable challenges in adapting to independent living and study, for care experienced young people these challenges are exacerbated by their status and the implications this has for their resilience, social and parental support, and preparation for academic life. Interviews with study participants highlighted the importance of universities taking steps to be aware of the particular challenges, vulnerabilities and related needs of those students coming from local authority care backgrounds, and to ensure that policies and procedures were in place to enable these students to be supported throughout the course of their studies.

Through interviews with study participants it was apparent that there were a range of common issues that impacted on their settling in, academic progress, continuity and completion of studies: academic capabilities; personal mental health, confidence and resilience; financial assistance; family circumstances; and academic support. While these issues all had the potential to impact on them it should not be assumed that all are present or have the same level of influence on students' experience and academic progress. As with the wider student population, care experienced students are not a homogenous group and each person will come to university with their own unique experiences and associated set of needs. Unlike the wider student population however, care experienced students are more vulnerable with a greater degree of precariousness in their personal circumstances that can affect the continuity of their studies:

“They need to understand that not all Care Leavers are going to be coming from the same background, the same experiences, they're not going to be needing the same support so I think each Care Leaver needs some kind of like initial meeting or someone to email so they can see what support they need and even if they need any support, just specific to them because otherwise just doing it generally I think a lot of things are going to be missed”.
(Emma, workshop participant)

Study participants felt that university policies and procedures were at times too rigid and did not take into account the circumstances within which care experienced students found themselves in and were therefore unable to address their specific needs. Given the very specific challenges that care experienced students experience, the additional burden of navigating the paperwork and bureaucracy surrounding university and bursary or funding applications can present a very real barrier for these young people in accessing support at the outset of their journey into higher education. One participant recalled finding it impossible to progress through an online application for student support because she couldn't fill in the section requesting parent's details with whom she was not in contact.

“I think there's a bit of an attitude with some university staff, thinking that you know it's part of becoming ... responsible for yourself when you're 18 – all this kind of stuff, but you know a) 18 year olds – their parents either do it for them or help them, and b) their cases – tick a few boxes ... I couldn't even fill out the form because online it wouldn't let me go to the next thing with out my parents' details. at the time like it wasn't accounted for at all and like you just couldn't fill it out. They said you had to fill in like fake details and then update it later”.
(Ruth, interview participant)

Study participants reported acting as the 'go-between' their local authority and the university and the expectation to manage and drive the process to completion. This would often take longer than expected and place additional stress on them at a point where they already had a lot going on – usually around the very start of their course and then subsequently at the start of each year. If universities and local authorities were able to manage the process between themselves, this would alleviate pressure on care experienced students, leaving them to get on with 'business as usual'

“it was very difficult. Took a long time, took about 3 months to get things set up here...that’s like with student finance just constant correspondence each side because it ended up being like the most complicated version of a complicated version”... that most of the staff don’t understand, then you have to explain, they go to their manager and then ...” (Ruth, interview participant)

Flexibility was also needed at times when participants experienced extenuating circumstances. This might be related to poor physical or mental health and required time out. However, the options of having some time out of studies or a reduced or more flexible timetable and remain in student accommodation and in receipt of financial support whilst they recovered was not a option. Other students who might need a year out have parents to fall back on in terms of somewhere to live and money to tide them over during that time. For care experienced students the consequences from this can be devastating with local authorities not providing the necessary support at such moments of crisis.

“It was health for this one, it was like ... it just got to a point where it was getting too much so I moved back to [name of city] for a few months and Yeah they were very supportive but within the rules. And the rules are terrible, you know you can’t ... you’re still officially a student, you can’t get student finance, you also can’t get benefits, so you are going to be financially screwed basically. And also the rules with accommodation, if you stay on past a certain point you get charged more fees. So I got out of hospital and within 3 days I had to pack up and leave. I was still very unwell, I was seriously unwell.” (Ruth, interview participant)

Although universities have specific support policies targeting care experienced student, such as all year round accommodation and bursaries, many participants felt that they did not go far enough to meet their specific needs which could create additional barriers for study participants dependent on what they personally needed. As mentioned above, at some universities, holiday accommodation was rented out at unaffordable prices for care experienced students living on a limited budget and most bursaries were felt to be either not generous or flexible enough to address shortages in funding throughout the year.

The diversity of the characteristics of care experienced students as a group combined with their particular circumstantial vulnerability meant that a student-centred approach (adopted by both universities and local authorities) was thought by study participants to be critical in proactively addressing and eliminating obstacles that could disrupt their participation in study programmes. The challenge for universities is providing the right balance of support to enable care experienced students to feel ‘normal’ – just like their fellow students.

“I felt like I needed more time than other people to settle into uni socially and I felt I was missing a lot of advice that a lot of other students would have received from their parents I guess”. (Amar, workshop participant)

The participatory analysis workshop discussions and interviews emphasised the importance of universities and local authorities being aware of the immediate pressures faced by care experienced students and that the transition from supported to independent living may be more marked and stressful than that of other students. For universities, one of the challenges in being able to proactively address this is their knowing that a student has been looked after in the first place:

“My reason for not ticking that [looked after box on the UCAS application]... first of all I didn’t know that you’re going to get help ... or you may or may not get help you know financially or through other means, but I didn’t want that help [...] because I mean the whole reason why I didn’t tick that box is because I don’t want to be treated differently, I don’t want that special treatment you know”. (Pravi, interview and workshop participant)

Progressing through university

For most young people university is as much about learning how to live independently as it is about academic learning. However this independence is a gradual transition and, as already mentioned, there is often a parental safety net in place. For care experienced students the transition can be more pronounced and occurs alongside a set of personal (and financial) circumstances that may present challenges to a stable and 'normal' experience of university. This is similar to the 'cliff edge' that young people leaving care often encounter when support falls away on reaching a certain age (Stein 2012).

One of the key issues that arose through the interviews with care experienced students was around their financial circumstances and their lack of financial resilience due to the paucity of funds they have access to. The funding that care experienced students received was sufficient for food, clothes and accommodation, but it severely restricted their participation in many of the other elements of university life making them feel disadvantaged and different. This included both social activities and extra-curricular academic activities such as placement year out, trips abroad, exchange programmes etc.

“Sometimes you have to choose between paying your rent and seeing your friends and having to choose between having poor mental health and being able to afford stuff but I guess it’s a fact of life” (Amar, workshop participant)

Care experienced students can, and do, access additional financial resources where needed, but this requires them to jump through hoops to access these which can be onerous and reinforce their sense of being different from and of a different status to their peers. The process can involve having their spending interrogated by their local authority. While this is understandable as part of due diligence, it does present an additional barrier for care experienced students that would not be there for many of their peers, and an additional distraction to the core purpose of their being at university.

“If I needed extra money for you know holidays like getting back and that, they would do that. But they can’t really give you extra money for like ... if I’m like running low she will ask ‘Oh so what made you get to this point? Like what happened with your money?’ So it’s more like you’re getting ... I don’t like to use that word, but it’s more of getting interrogated.”
(Allison, interview and workshop participant)

Another key challenge for all young people in higher education is the transition to self-directed learning which requires strong time management and proactiveness:

“I think at the start it was a big leap because when you’re at school you’re constantly being checked up, like ‘Okay so you should have this done, let’s have a look’, ‘Tomorrow make sure you have this done’ – whereas uni it was like ‘Oh that’s due in like 2 months’ and then you don’t really know how to manage your time. You’re like ‘Oh I’ve got 2 months so it’s fine’ and then before you know it it’s like you’ve got a night to do it. So ... I think managing time and that kind of stuff, you’re kind of just thrown in”. (Isabella, interview participant)

While this is challenging for all young people, a proactive approach would mean giving particular attention to care experienced students who might benefit from more responsive support given the precariousness of their circumstances and the other challenges they have to overcome.

“I did have quite a lot of access I guess to my lecturers at the time that were convening my course, my modules. There wasn’t much difficulty in reaching them or ensuring that they like replied back and stuff... they responded well, I think that they’ve been quite supportive during my academic journey.” (Michael, interview participant)

Conversely, where universities were not as proactive in their support, this increases the importance of dealing with issues or concerns promptly to ensure that care experienced students are not faced with a situation where they feel unsupported. One participant recounted an experience where they had sent multiple emails to a course leader which were left unanswered, and it was only when their PA contacted the member of staff that a response was given. For those care experienced students who are less able to speak up for themselves a lack of responsiveness could result in real issues with their academic progression.

“They weren’t taking me seriously. I’m sending emails, I’m not getting a response and that’s why I had to get my PA involved, because I’m like I’m sending emails every day for 3 weeks and I haven’t even gotten ‘I’ve received your email, I’ll get back to you’ – nothing. I just felt like yeah okay I’m being mugged off here” (Laila, interview participant)

While we have emphasised some of the challenges that some care experienced students face through not having the same degree of parental support as other students, it should not be forgotten that many do have families and friendship groups who they care strongly for. These relationships can be hugely important. Given the circumstances of young people having been in care, they can also be volatile and distracting from the focus on learning.

“I’m always looking after my brothers and sisters...being the oldest of 8 I was always taking a mum role and being away at uni, I was quite worried about, I’ve never been away from them for so long so then it was like, how are they going to cope without me? What if they need this and I’m not around? What’s going to happen there?...I feel like even though you’re not there at home you still feel like you’re still caught up in all their drama.” (Emma, workshop participant)

“I’ve got 6 siblings all younger than me, I was always a carer rather than my own person...even though I was at uni I found I was still contacted by my parents every time they had a problem, it’s a phone call, I need this, I need that, can you help me, can you lend me this money and I’ll give it back in 2 weeks and it’s not very nice but in a way you don’t want to say no to your family because you still have that attachment...it’s really hard to escape the drama.” (Selena, interview and workshop participant)

Care experienced students encounter a wider number of hurdles during their time at university. Minor issues can often escalate very quickly leading to consequences that can result in a young person falling behind in their studies and dropping out of university. To promote retention and completion it is important for universities (and local authorities) to listen and adapt wherever possible to enable these young people to fulfil their academic potential.



5.4 BELONGING

“I still feel like I belong in terms of the university [...] I just feel included and I guess you know coming from a person that statistically shouldn't be here, I'm all the more grateful and happy that they've kind of welcomed me in that regard.”
(Michael, Interview participant)

A sense of belonging comes when someone feels a sense of connection to people and places. Within the context of higher education this sense of belonging might be to the institution or to their participation in higher education more generally, to a particular location, or to a particular group of people with some shared characteristics or interests. Belonging can be fostered in a range of ways and serves as an important motivator and protective factor for student engagement, retention and success. For many care experienced students a sense of belonging can take on increased importance due to the instability of their past circumstances and desire to fit in and be treated as a 'normal' student. It offers a fresh start and an opportunity to be (and to find) yourself.

Selena (interview and workshop participant), is a good example of what it means to feel like you belong. She was a high achiever academically and had always enjoyed learning despite being actively discouraged when she was younger. For her, a sense of belonging was felt as a connection to the university as a place of academic learning. Here she felt free to independently pursue her academic goals by studying, without restriction, day in and day out. Working within groups created a purposeful academic sense of peer-group belonging for Selena, while involvement with the Widening Participation team created a sense of a belonging to “my family”. This is the ideal scenario, where belonging is fostered on multiple levels, both self-directed and supported through university structures.

Through the conversations with care experienced students, there were two key ways in which belonging – beyond a sense of academic purpose – could be facilitated: through fostering relationships with peers, and through fostering relationships with staff.

Belonging can be fostered in a range of ways and serves as an important motivator and protective factor for student engagement, retention and success.

Fostering relationships with peers

“I think making friends definitely was like my biggest fear. I remember being at my brother’s house the night before and saying to my sister in law like ‘I’m not going to make friends, what happens if I make no friends and no one likes me and then I’m just a loner for like 3 years of uni’. She’s like ‘It’s fine, everyone’s in the same boat. Just like say hello, and before you know it you’ll all be together and it’ll be fine’.” (Isabella, interview participant)

Developing positive relationships with peers and finding ‘in-groups’ is one key way in which students can develop a feeling of belonging. Making friendships is one of the biggest concerns amongst some care experienced students because they have a different experience to most other students and may have had negative and transitory experiences of relationships in the past. Establishing new social relationships can therefore be daunting, particularly if you feel like you are different or do not belong. One way in which some universities have tried to facilitate this is through enabling students to connect with one another before they even start their course. For example, this may be opening access to online platforms and linking students up based on their accommodation or academic courses. This gave students the opportunity to reach out to each other, talk about their plans for starting university and begin forming friendships that would make those early days less anxious.

“I think making friends definitely ... that was like my biggest fear. They do like Uni Facebook pages, so it would be like a [university] freshers’ page, and some people would message you from that, I met all my housemates before basically, so I think that definitely helped. And it was nice to just have the first initial hello, and like ‘Hi, what do you do?’ I think I met the majority of my housemates before. And then one I met, and we talked like most days and stuff and we met on the very first day together which was nice to have someone there.” (Isabella, interview participant)

All universities have Widening Participation teams who play a key role in supporting care experienced students to feel a sense of belonging through social groups and buddying systems. For some these teams felt ‘like family’ and their proactive support was welcomed.

“So obviously in UCAS you would note down that you’re a care leaver so the team will contact you, and they will say you know so and so’s your spokesperson, if you need any questions they’ll introduce you. I think she introduced me during Freshers Week and said you know come along to this, I’d love to meet you and I did. So she got to know who I was and what I was studying and stuff, and she was aware of my circumstances at the time and stuff. Yeah so it was good. So very early on. Yeah very very early on. And I guess I’m grateful for that that I didn’t have to wait till longer to find her or see who I need to speak to.” (Michael, interview participant)

While Widening Participation teams do facilitate groups for care experienced students, some young people coming in to university may not be looking to self-identify as care experienced and may not choose to access such as a support network until they have established themselves separately to their care identity. Belonging can come from identifying people with shared religious, cultural or ethnic backgrounds, with shared political or intellectual views, or with shared aspirations and goals. Equally, it can come simply through being able to identify with others coming through ‘non-traditional’ routes into higher education.

“I think the fact that people doing undergrads here who start at 21 – everyone’s had a slightly different path. ..You know people have done other degrees or jobs or whatever, but it’s not like ‘I’ve left my family home for the first time, here I am’ – type thing, so it feels a bit more like ‘I’m normal’.” [Ruth, interview participant]

Care experienced students would benefit from universities ensuring that there are a wide range of informal and formal opportunities for them to identify opportunities to belong – both to the institution and to groups where there is a shared interest and bond. This may take the form of ensuring care experienced students are fully aware of and supported to participate in freshers events, facilitating contact between students living on and off campus, putting in place arrangements where care experienced students are mentored by other students, creating opportunities for sub-groups to be formed within colleges, faculties and departments.

While universities themselves can help build a sense of belonging through a wide variety of activities that are appropriate for care experienced and non-care experience students alike, there will still be occasions where the actual or perceived stigma of care negatively impacts students’ sense of belonging. This appeared to be particularly the case in the more ‘elite’ universities, and was exacerbated by the marked differences in financial circumstances, parental support and social capital between care experienced students and their peers.

“I went to a Russell Group Uni so a lot of the students are more higher class, so they’d always look down on people in care so they almost like avoided you or when they found out, like I told my flat in my first year they were like, oh, one of them actually said ‘oh I thought you were normal’ and I was like ‘well yeah I am normal!’ I don’t think people even realise, like when she said that I don’t think she even realised what she was saying.”
(Emma, workshop participant)

“There is this kind of social pressure as well, especially if you go to an elite university where people have much more money than you do and you want to kind of participate in all the social activities etc, and you can’t because you can only provide for the basics.”
(Selena, interview and workshop participant)

“Like the people at uni, they were very different – there were like high flyers there, lots of money, very like kind of ... I don’t want to say like Tory, but those kind of views where like if you don’t have money you’re not really worth anything. So just to socialise with other people is very different, I didn’t really like connect with very many people, so it all kind of had very ... like views of people who didn’t have very much money, as ‘Oh it’s your fault, like you must have done something wrong’ ‘Like well just work then, just go and get some money’.” (Emma, workshop participant)

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’.

“I was very picky about which university I chose, I didn’t want to go to a really elite university, but at the same time I wanted to go to a good university for my course. And thinking about what social backgrounds people come from is very important... you don’t just want the elites. So picking a university that’s more accepting of different people from different cultures, all the tutors, lecturers, they’re more accepting as well. And I think they are better at providing support as well, because they know the social issues more, cos more students face them basically.”
(Selena, interview and workshop participant)

“I met people who were just on a similar sort of level as me. Like I wouldn’t say it was an elite sort of thing, but I think for me I think I kind of met a whole variety of people. Like there was a lot of internationals so you know a lot of funding, but at the same time it’s like ... you know it was kind of balanced”.
(Allison, interview and workshop participant)



The role of university staff

“I found the city too big and it was all too much, and all this sort of stuff. But also just that you’re sort of dropped into a sea of 1000 students, and the central student services, but it’s sort of like turn up, get assigned a person ... like going to a bank or something – it’s quite impersonal. I had a tutor who was lovely, but quite an elderly Physics professor and not necessarily someone I’d go to with my problems”. (Ruth, interview participant)

We’ve already discussed the importance of prescience and flexibility in fostering an environment where care experienced students can succeed in their studies. This proactive and responsive approach is also important in creating an environment where care experienced students feel like they belong, like they are in the ‘right place’. Personal tutors and university staff have a key role to play in this. Not only are they important in creating an environment where care experienced students feel a sense of academic/intellectual belonging (based on connections through shared interests), but also in creating a space where students feel they are being actively supported in their studies (e.g. through proactive discussions and open-door policies).

“It’s quite good here because like with the college system it’s all quite small and like and...I have a tutor ... and at the moment I’ve got basically two who are sharing me. Things get complicated sometimes....I do get a lot of support, and there have been many problems but at least I have someone on my side trying to get through them, which is useful”. (Ruth, interview participant)

One of the challenges in providing this level of support is that there may be different staff delivering the lectures and seminars as those who act as a personal tutor. It also places a significant degree of responsibility on personal tutors to understand and respond to the needs of individual students. While not integral to developing a sense of belonging, personal tutors can play an important role, particularly for care experienced students who perhaps don’t have the confidence to proactively establish peer group relationships independently.

CHAPTER SIX: MOVING FORWARD

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Moving forward

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Widening participation activity has undoubtedly helped care experienced young people to access and integrate into universities as one of several under-represented groups. But the findings of this study show that this group, with highly complex personal lives and very limited financial and other resources, need even more tailored approaches, that last from application to graduation. Universities are large and complex organisations and care experienced students, arriving with no family or friends to help inform and fall back on, are faced with a daunting list of barriers to timely completion. In many ways, the habitus of universities and care experienced students are mismatched. The role of widening participation teams, wellbeing services, administrative systems, academic and pastoral leaders, among others, is to reach across the cultural capital gap between what is on offer and what care experienced students bring to arrive at some common ground where students feel they have a meaningful connection to the university and that it appreciates them. One possibility is that universities offer a 'navigator' to arriving students who stays with them throughout their university career. Such a navigator might help students make sense of the complex university entity and its systems, and advocate for them where systems might adopt a more flexible stance to take account of specific needs of some care experienced students (Burke, p.c).

Project findings from this small-scale, in-depth study presented in this report overlap with those of a recent survey of care experienced students in Scotland about how universities might better support them (O'Neill et al. 2019). This survey also recommended better information, more personalised support and more comprehensive financial support to avoid care experienced students leaving university prematurely. In this final chapter, we document our recommendations for changing higher educational institutional and related professional practices under three phases: application stage; while at university; and when graduating.

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BEFORE GOING TO UNIVERSITY

When applying

- Information about what is on offer could be more sensitive to differences between universities. Clear and accessible information should be available to care experienced students at the point of application about the various types of support that would be available to them at that particular institution including financial provision, year round accommodation as well as academic, social and emotional support, and how it can be accessed.
- HEIs, schools, social workers and others in positions of responsibility for young people in care or leaving could address student retention by helping care experienced students to make an informed choice about the most suitable institution and course for them.
- Designated staff at prospective HEIs and/or current care experienced students within HEIs could provide ‘insider’ advice to applicants via telephone, email or social media platforms at the application stage. HEIs should also offer informal visits, open days and summer schools to provide care experienced students with an opportunity to meet key academic and WP staff but most importantly a chance to speak to current care experienced or WP students about the habitus of the HEI, how it feels to study and live there, and to get a feel of the place for themselves. HEIs should make funds available to care experienced students in case they need help with covering the travel costs for this as well as overnight student accommodation if required.
- A knowledgeable contact person at UCAS (or another agency) at the admission stages who understands the circumstances of care experienced students and can help them navigate the application process and offer specific advice about questions asked on the application forms.

Coordination of support services

- Care leavers benefit when there is good communication, inter-professional working and information sharing between local authorities’ virtual schools, personal advisors and key university personnel. With permission from young people, such communication could help ensure that a named contact coordinates an individualised package of support that is in place for when a student arrives.
- A named contact in a university should make direct contact with care experienced students prior to their arrival to discuss their particular needs and any concerns they might have and should seek to establish good communication and trust with them so that they feel comfortable to approach these people for support and advice if and when they need it.

Disclosure of care status

- Confusion about the purpose and benefits of disclosing care status on the UCAS form could be avoided if more comprehensive information was available and the implications of disclosure discussed with key professionals at the application stage. Disclosure could be promoted as something positive rather than stigmatising. Furthermore, care experienced students should be able to disclose and seek help and support at any time during their course.

WHILE AT UNIVERSITY

Finance

- Current financial arrangements put care experienced students under considerable pressure. HEIs need to review their financial offer to ensure it is student-centric and takes account of the absence of family and, in some cases, local authority back up. It should cover not just the basic costs but permit students to fully engage in their studies and student life as any other student can. Financial support should be available year round as care experienced students have acute difficulties managing outside term time. Institutional reviews should include reviews of student finance to ensure they are realistically meeting the living costs of individual students.

Accommodation

- Where there is no-one to assist, HEIs should offer to help care experienced students move into their student accommodation and link them with a named contact to help them settle in, ideally someone who has established contact/a relationship with them prior to their arrival.
- It can take longer for care experienced students to settle into university than other students therefore HEIs should consider allowing care experienced (and other WP) students to arrive a week earlier than other students. During this time they can be supported and helped to settle in by the WP team and existing care experienced or WP students, who might act as mentors or ‘buddies’.
- During holiday periods HEIs should look to actively support and provide events for care experienced students who don’t have anywhere else to go.
- HEIs should ensure that care experienced students can remain in their student accommodation during the long summer vacation, ideally without relocating for the holiday period and incurring additional cost, or at least at standard rates.

Personal and academic support

- Regular contact by the WP team and other key staff e.g. personal tutor, academic programme leader with care experienced students is important especially where a student hasn’t sought support or seems to be ok.
- HEIs should ensure that there is streamlined communication and inter professional working across the various parts of the university including WP team, finance, housing, programme leaders, lecturers, and personal tutors.
- Responsiveness is key to supporting care experienced students. They are not a homogenous group and so HEIs need to be prepared to be flexible in the light of individual needs. Where a student has disclosed their status, HEIs need to meet with them as early as possible in order to ascertain any support needs they have, but these needs may well change over time.
- HEIs should consult with their existing care experienced students on all aspects of university experience as part of their institutional reviews to identify areas in need of improvement.
- Academics and academic departments should reach out to students, facilitating networks associated with their academic interests, hosting events, forming sub-groups play an important role in fostering a sense of academic belonging.

ON GRADUATION

- Care experienced students should not be disadvantaged at the postgraduate stage. HEIs should consider introducing policies and provision that support care experienced students undertaking postgraduate degrees.
- Universities need to facilitate networking amongst care experienced students or students with similar shared experience, so they can develop their own peer support networks and sense of agency and empowerment, and networks that foster employability after graduation.



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