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# Pathways to University from Care

## Findings Report One

# Making it to University

## Background

Accessing higher education can be an important marker of success for young people, yet research estimates that only around 12 percent of care leavers go on to study at university. In a climate of 'widening participation' in which universities encourage inclusion and student diversity, this research invited care experienced students to share their journeys through care and their transitions to university life. This report focuses particularly on the issues affecting care experienced students in their journey to and through university. The recommendations at the end of this report highlight the steps that universities can take in order to support their students through this transition and improve outcomes for their care experienced students.

## The Study

Findings in this report are based on the views and experiences of 234 care experienced students in universities across England and Wales. The project team continues to work alongside a steering group of three care experienced university students, whose advice and insights have shaped the research design and methodology. Ongoing engagement with our steering group enables continual reflection within the research process, ensuring that this report emphasises the voice of those with care experience.

Data was generated in two phases. We conducted in-depth interviews with 42 care experienced students from four universities to explore the factors that promoted access to higher education and supported a positive transition to university life. We sought the views of a larger sample of care experienced students via an online survey in order to explore the issues raised by interview participants with a wider cohort. The survey was distributed to care experienced students in 29 universities; 192 students responded. Those who participated self-identified as care experienced and were accessed via widening participation teams in their own universities.

Many care experienced students described being told by those around them that they would not achieve educationally. Therefore, making it to university was seen as a significant milestone and interviewees were understandably proud that they had beaten the odds to win their place.

> *"Making it to university would be one of the biggest things for me, even not going to university, but making it... yeah I got accepted, I got a place"* **(Gulru)**

Interviewees often reported that they had felt isolated and stigmatised as a child growing up in care. University often felt like a chance to make a 'fresh start' and to finally be like 'everybody else':

> *"You know what, the first day when I moved in the memories are so vivid still ... it was a nice afternoon ... it felt like a new chapter ... I can't describe it."* **(Agnes)**

These participants welcomed the chance to be part of a community of likeminded people. The differences that had felt prominent when they were children felt less consequential once they arrived at university. Students frequently claimed that they 'love university' and it felt on the whole a positive space:

> *"I think there's a lot of people who are from different backgrounds, like not just care leavers but I mean like disability, ethnic groups and stuff like that. And I just think at university no one cares ... Everyone just kind of gets along and accepts you for who you are sort of thing. It's been really nice."* **(Willow)**

*"I wouldn't have been where I am today if it weren't for my social workers. I wouldn't have gone to uni … my life would have totally been different"*

(Jayne)

# Understanding the Context for Care Experienced Students
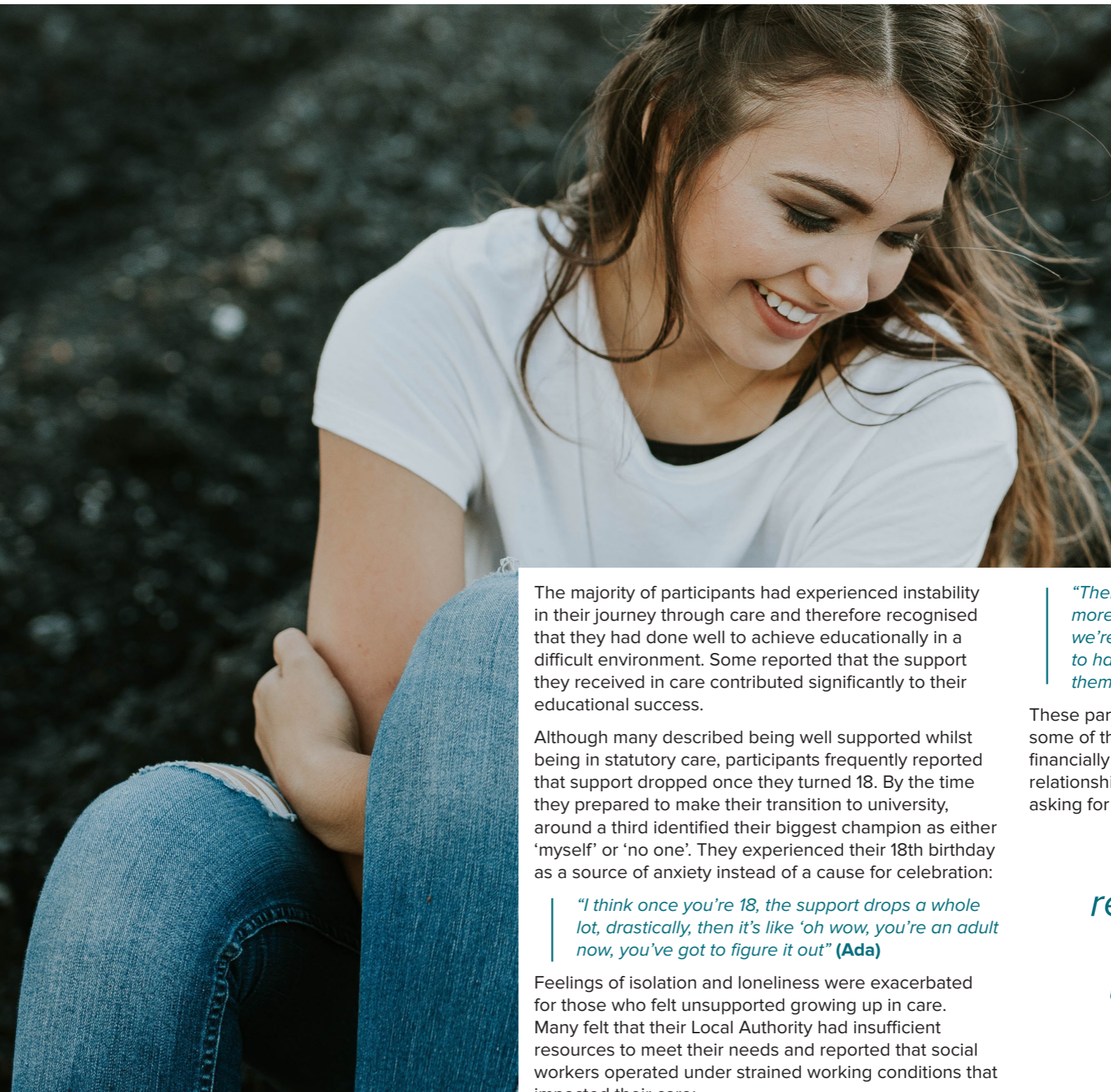
The majority of participants had experienced instability in their journey through care and therefore recognised that they had done well to achieve educationally in a difficult environment. Some reported that the support they received in care contributed significantly to their educational success.

Although many described being well supported whilst being in statutory care, participants frequently reported that support dropped once they turned 18. By the time they prepared to make their transition to university, around a third identified their biggest champion as either 'myself' or 'no one'. They experienced their 18th birthday as a source of anxiety instead of a cause for celebration:

*"I think once you're 18, the support drops a whole lot, drastically, then it's like 'oh wow, you're an adult now, you've got to figure it out"* **(Ada)**

Feelings of isolation and loneliness were exacerbated for those who felt unsupported growing up in care. Many felt that their Local Authority had insufficient resources to meet their needs and reported that social workers operated under strained working conditions that impacted their care:

*"One of the worst things that my social worker said to me when I was in care was … 'I'm sorry I've not got the job done. I've got too many caseloads to be basically dealing with you' that's what she said"* **(Charlotte)**

Almost 80 percent of survey participants had been in foster care and over half of these made use of 'Staying Put' to stay in their foster home until moving to university. Both survey respondents and interviewees were overwhelmingly positive about 'Staying Put', however, several found that it altered the dynamics of their care relationships and some were asked to make up carers' financial shortfalls by paying rent or contributing to household expenses:

*"Then when the cash got involved, they became more like a business … they was like 'yeah, but we're not getting paid for you now. So we're going to have to make up the difference'. So I had to pay them money."* **(Ben)**

These participants were dismayed by the sense that some of their most significant relationships had been financially motivated. Being disappointed by these relationships meant that students were uncomfortable asking for help once they had moved on.

*Students were reluctant to reach out for help from their university when they most needed it*

# Pre-University Support

*"I had to take my brother to school, go to my 6th form and then leave early … I'd just catch up with work, like, whenever I could"* **(Connie)**

Schools often went to great lengths to provide extra support for children in care. At its finest, effective school support was generated through good relationships with individual members of staff, who took a personal interest in looking out for young people in times of need:

*"It was my one safe place and if it hadn't been for the teachers, I wouldn't be where I was. I had one teacher at high school in year 11 and she was incredible, she was so much more than a teacher"* **(Jill)**

University summer schools acted as an important early introduction to university and students found them effective in demystifying the process of applying, and subsequently moving, to university:

*"I've been on quite a lot of summer school type things, so I had the kind of concept of university before I came … I feel I kind of knew what it was … I kind of got the vibe"* **(Connie)**

Interviewees reported significant life transitions from the ages of 16-18 and often did not achieve their predicted grades as a result. Contextual admission offers were greatly appreciated by those who received them, especially for those who struggled to juggle schoolwork alongside everyday difficulties.

# The Pathway to University

*"The council that I was from said that they'd pay my fees. Then when it came to that day, it was 'Oh no I never said that"*
**(Michael)**

Participants frequently reported feeling unsupported and adrift from services by the time they were considering applying to university. It was at this point that clear advice and information about university support and application processes would have been most helpful:

*"I didn't know I could afford university. I didn't know these things because, like, there wasn't that information given from college"* **(Joanne)**

The level of financial support offered to young people entering higher education varied both within, and between, Local Authorities. While some participants received little help, others received full funding for fees and accommodation. This higher level of financial support allowed students to stay focused on their education:

*"My course is full time, I've had to stop working as much … So my bank balance is probably – it's a bit dangerous, but … I've got quite a good package. Without the package they give me, I would have to probably quit"* **(Ben)**

Over a quarter of survey participants reported receiving inconsistent information about available financial support from their Local Authority. A number of interviewees described being denied support after being promised financial help initially.

Although UCAS forms were crucial in ensuring that students received necessary support, interviewees raised concerns about identifying themselves as care experienced, fearing that universities used this information to exclude them. Participants were unaware that their circumstances often qualified them for extra support, and that in some cases, universities would consider making allowances for lower grades achieved under difficult circumstances.

# Arriving at University

## 28%
**of care leavers arrived at university on their own**
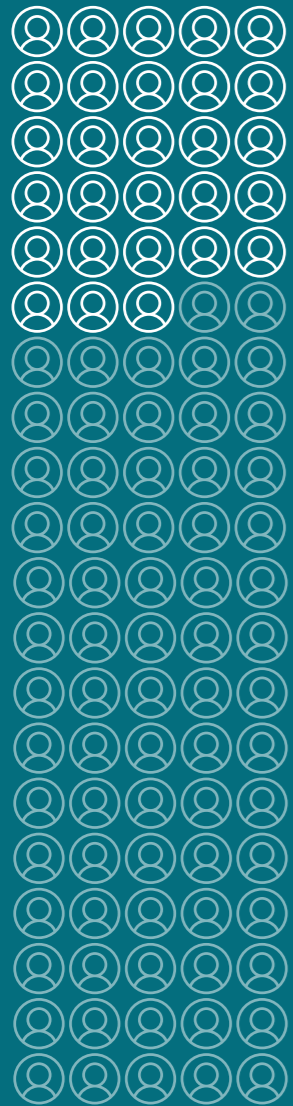
Although moving to university was seen as an exciting new start, often care experienced students had nobody with whom to share their excitement. Hence travelling to university was done independently and without support. Over a quarter of care leavers arrived on their own:

> *"I got a bus, all the way because my suitcase was too big to carry or to put on the train, so that took twelve hours ... I had a cry, because everyone was with their parents and it was really like overwhelming. I just was like well, I should have my parents here. I don't"* **(Dawn)**

While the majority of university students arrive at university with their families, and a car full of possessions, because of their limited travel options, care leavers often brought only what they could carry:

> *"It was just disappointing. I'd looked forward to moving to uni and I didn't have anything to move in, didn't have anything to unpack, didn't have anything to put up on the walls, didn't even have a TV to watch. I didn't even have food"* **(Craig)**

Some universities made an effort to help new students feel wanted and supported. Receiving a 'welcome' pack of basic items was a small gesture that helped students settle in:

> *"Uni makes it easier because they give you like all these opportunities for how to get settled in, they gave everyone a pack when they moved in and gave everyone leaflets... if you want to enquire about something and where to go to and stuff. Yeah, and they give you little tablets, washing tablets and so on"* **(Chaman)**

A number of interviewees struggled to manage financially when they arrived at university because they were not yet registered as a student and were therefore unable to access either their student loan or university based financial support. Some did not have the funds to take part in Freshers' week activities, and as a result missed out on early opportunities to develop friendships:

> *"I didn't have the money to go out ... I just made up things sometimes 'oh I can't be bothered, I'll just stay in my room' and stuff"* **(Craig)**

# University Accommodation

After the uncertainty of turning 18 and the subsequent reduction in support, university offered a place of stability. For most care experienced students, university accommodation became their only home, and it was therefore vital that they felt safe and comfortable:

> *"It's everything. So I'm really happy with that. And to be honest with you I stay in that room, for days and weeks I can stay in that room ... The room is warm and safe and stuff so I don't have to worry about it"* **(Kali)**

Three quarters of survey participants reported that suitable university accommodation was available to them 365 days a year. This removed the anxiety of finding somewhere to stay during vacation periods:

> *"I have always been able to stay in my accommodation 365 days a year, which means I've never been in a position where I have nowhere to go during holiday seasons"* **(Survey participant)**

## "It helps me feel a bit more at ease that I won't be homeless whilst studying"
**(Survey Participant)**

Year-round accommodation was particularly important given that 41 percent of survey participants were no longer in touch with their carers. Access to affordable university accommodation was a lifeline for those with no 'home' base.

Several participants, however, reported that to access 365 day accommodation they were required to move to a different campus or accommodation block during vacation periods. This created a feeling of instability, as well as practical moving and storage issues:

> *"I would have to move from campus to campus to have accommodation all year. And storage is a problem...I can't take all my things with me, but also can't leave them here"* **(Survey participant)**

Care leavers usually had no alternative but to bring all their belongings with them to university. The typical requirement to move out at the end of each academic year therefore proved difficult as taxi companies refused to undertake house moves, and removal companies were felt to be too costly:

> *"As a care leaver we always struggle with university accommodation. The contract is not flexible and moving in and out is difficult especially for care leavers with no support"* **(Survey Participant)**

## 41%
**survey participants were no longer in touch with their carers**

# University Support

71 percent of survey participants reported that they received the contact details of a member of university staff identified as a 'care leaver contact', and the majority rated this support helpful. Having this key contact gave students confidence to access help when they needed it most:

> *"[She was] a point of contact for care leavers ... I had a lot of contact with her during first year and obviously when I had this problem, and we built up a bit of a relationship. I kept in contact with her"* **(David)**

For those without a named contact willing to champion their issues on their behalf, the university felt large and faceless. Having a dedicated contact could help students navigate unfamiliar university systems, and access vital support:

> *"If I did need money for funding or something, like, I wouldn't know how to do it, I've no idea and to like expect me to be able to go on the internet and find it, like, that's difficult, I wouldn't really know what to do"* **(Jess)**

68 percent of survey participants reported that they had experienced mental health difficulties whilst at university, despite which, only 44 percent had received any type of counselling. While some were aware that counselling was available for them in their university, others worried that they would be stigmatised for accessing support.

> *"I didn't want to access services from my university because I felt like my contact with any university mental health services would be added to my academic or medical records. I guess I just didn't understand how the process worked ... I wanted to remain truly anonymous"* **(Survey Participant)**

Over half of survey participants had seriously considered dropping out of university. The most common reasons identified were a combination of health issues, money worries, personal and family issues and struggling to manage their workload. Both survey respondents and interviewees reported being unclear about the support that they were entitled to and how to access help when they most needed it:

> *"They've offered me a 'Care Leaver Package' ... even now, I ain't got a clue what it's really about, 'Care Leaver Package', what's included?"* **(Marcus)**
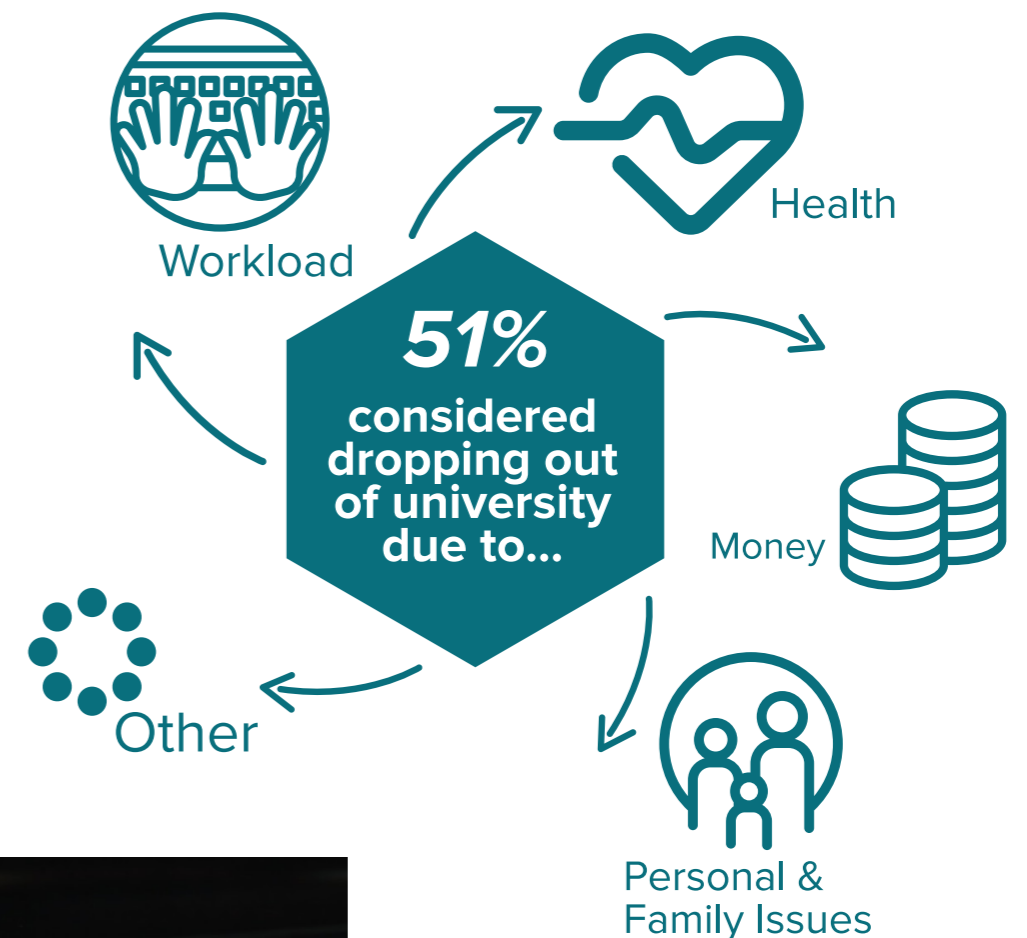
University scholarships for care leavers were limited and competitive. The majority of survey participants sought employment to make ends meet and over a quarter declared that they were poorly supported financially. While universities offered 'Care Leaver Bursaries' to supplement student loans, these were age limited and could not be claimed by students over the age of 25. Since a number of care experienced students had accessed university later in life, they had not completed their education by 25 and therefore lacked access to financial support:

> *"I have gone through life affected by circumstances beyond my control believing I was stupid. I have fought my way through this system and finished my degree with the highest first result in my year... I have come to learning late in life with very little support. There is a big gap in institutional practices for people like me who come late to learning"* **(Survey Participant)**

Students benefited most when both academic and support staff were aware of their backgrounds and understood when and why they might find university challenging. However, interviewees disclosed that staff often lacked awareness about the issues affecting care experienced students and were ill-equipped to provide support when it was most needed:

> *"I still don't know like where to stay or like what to do ... I'm already a year behind now ... I've spoken to my personal tutor who knows and she was just, like, 'oh I don't really know what to advise you', so that was a bit unhelpful"* **(Connie)**

**51% considered dropping out of university due to...**

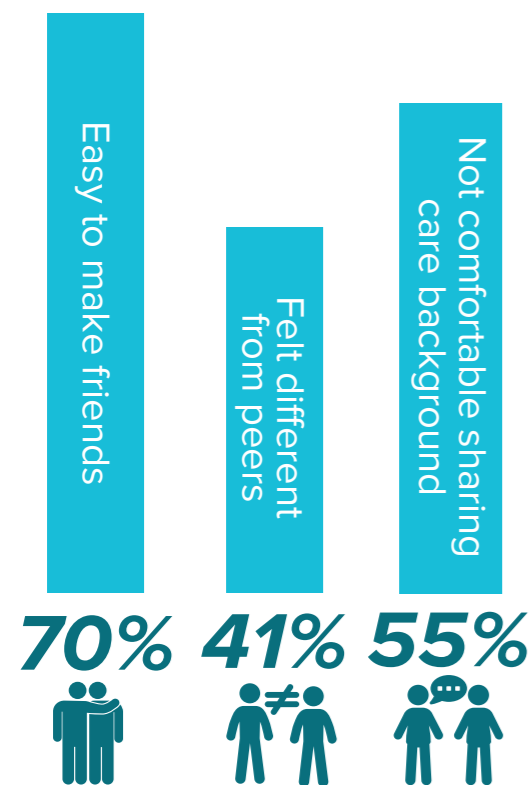Workload · Health · Money · Personal & Family Issues · Other

# University Culture

Living alongside a transient population meant that care experienced students were left alone in their accommodation during university vacations. This was reported as a source of anxiety and was upsetting for those who were left behind:

> *"[In vacations] you know, you live in that flat all by yourself ... when I stop my education here, I just stay here, I don't go anywhere.  So and, yeah, that part of it is a bit worrying ... it's a bit challenging, you know, mentally"* **(Kamran)**

70 percent of survey participants reported that they found it easy to make friends at university, however they were still acutely aware of the fact that they were different from their peers and were reluctant to discuss their care background. Over half stated that they were not comfortable in sharing the fact that they were care experienced with their university friends.

> *"Everyone's going on about their family and I just didn't know what to say! I kept silent a little bit"* **(Katya)**

Students reported an excess of drinking and drug use at university and felt that university culture was 'based solely on going out, drinking and taking drugs'. Over a quarter of survey participants reported that they were uncomfortable with the level of drinking and drug use involved in university social life. A number of interviewees reported that they did not drink at all, and felt isolated from their peers as a result:

> *"It's kind of hard to socialise at Uni without drinking or smoking or taking drugs. You kind of put yourself in a bubble"* **(Nick)**

Due to early exposure to drug and alcohol misuse, some reported that they had felt isolated and unhappy in the accommodation they were allocated as a new student:

> *"I'd come back to look at the kitchen and there'd be road signs, traffic cones, rubbish on the street, sick everywhere, pizza boxes – I was just like this is not what I want; I'm surrounded by everything that made my life crap"* **(Lydia)**

**Easy to make friends** — **70%**

**Felt different from peers** — **41%**

**Not comfortable sharing care background** — **55%**

**27%**

*Find the level of drinking and drug use involved in university social life excessive or too much for them*

# Preparing for Life After University

Despite the challenges they faced along the way, students commonly reported that they enjoyed their university experience, and felt that they found a place that they belonged:

> *"Every time I walk through the Student Union you get that vibe, I can't describe what it is, but when you walk through you feel like you belong to a community ... perhaps it's just the people, the staff, the services they have available, it comes together to make you feel like you're in an institution that feels nice"* **(Agnes)**

As graduation drew nearer, students began to reflect on how it would feel to be cut adrift from the support they received at university and described feeling anxious about their future. Leaving education meant that a number of them would be completely unsupported for the first time and many lacked information about how to access additional support.

*"You do realise, when you finish uni, your case will be closed and that's it' and to me that's a bit like, you know, you've spent four years with me. It's a bit of a miserable situation"* **(Willow)**

# Pathways to University from Care
# Recommendations

We conducted research with 234 care experienced university students in England and Wales to explore the factors that promoted access to higher education. We found that embedded support significantly aided positive transitions to university life. The following recommendations address shortfalls in support and highlight examples of best practice identified by care experienced students. We join with the Care Leaver Covenant to make the following recommendations to universities.

**1** Define who is considered a 'care leaver' for the purposes of support so that students are clear whether they are eligible. Consider using the term 'care experienced' to make support more widely available and to include those over the age of 25.

**2** Offer contextual admissions where appropriate and make this clear in the application process so that those with a care background are aware that they will receive recognition for their lived experiences.

**3** Have a designated named contact as a champion for care leavers, with specific knowledge of the needs of care experienced students and the capacity to navigate university systems and budgets. Champions should be introduced at the point of offer, and be available for advice until graduation.

**4** Be clear about the nature of 'support' on offer by using accessible language on a publically available and up-to-date Care Leavers' webpage. The webpage should include details of the named care leaver contact and examples of available support, along with clear guidelines about how support can be accessed.

**5** Offer a care leaver bursary and simplify the process of claiming additional funding by advertising how and when funds can be accessed. Offer preferential allocation of hardship funds for care experienced students, with additional financial guidance and budget management training.

**6** Offer training to Local Authorities, Personal Advisers, Schools and Colleges which includes information, advice and guidance about university admissions and funding procedures for care experienced students.

**7** Run pre-entry summer schools and homework clubs for care experienced young people to help break down some of the barriers that make university inaccessible. Consider the use of paid Care Experienced Ambassadors to support and mentor pupils.

**8** Offer support on arrival day by contacting new students to establish their transport needs and helping them to move in if necessary. For those without alternatives, provide funding to pay for appropriate transport on moving day.

**9** Provide welcome packs for students in their accommodation including practical items (i.e., duvet, pillow, pan, plate, cup) and home comforts (e.g., biscuits, chocolate, gift vouchers, etc) to help care experienced students celebrate their arrival and feel at home.

**10** Introduce early registration for care experienced students to facilitate their access to essential university level support (including financial support) immediately upon arrival.

**11** Introduce alcohol-free accommodation options in line with the recent decline in youth drinking, and consider providing alcohol-free first year accommodation for non-drinkers.

**12** Offer affordable 365-day accommodation as well as affordable pre-enrolment accommodation in the case of early arrival. Those required to move to alternative housing during vacation periods should be offered transport or financial support.

**13** Train all student-facing staff to recognise the additional needs of care experienced students and to signpost students appropriately. Create an individualised learning plan for care experienced students to mitigate extenuating circumstances as they arise.

**14** Fast track mental health support for care experienced students who request it and provide long term support if necessary.

**15** Boost support for final year students by providing enhanced careers advice, succession planning and counselling. Offer a graduation support package and bursary to assist graduates in finding appropriate accommodation when they leave university. Provide guarantor status for those who need it.

The University Of Sheffield.

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# With Thanks

We would like to thank all of the students who participated in this study, we will endeavour to share your stories in the hope of achieving change for care experienced students. We are incredibly lucky to be blessed with an amazing Steering Group and would like to thank Sophie Norris, Mojtaba Darazkan and Stef Lo, who continue to provide invaluable insights, advice and support.

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